

**NATIONAL REPORT OF THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA
ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE BEIJING DECLARATION
AND PLATFORM FOR ACTION,
PREPARED IN THE GLOBAL REVIEW PROCESS BEIJING +30
TO COMMEMORATE IN 2025
THE THIRTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF
FOURTH WORLD CONFERENCE ON WOMEN AND ADOPTION OF
THE BEIJING DECLARATION AND PLATFORM FOR ACTION
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First section: Highlights

The Republic of Bulgaria conducted a review at the national level of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in the last five years (second half of 2019 – first half of 2024). The national review is part of the global review process to mark in 2025 the Thirtieth anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women and adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995).

The comprehensive review process in Bulgaria is in line with the guidelines in the UN-Women document „Guidelines for comprehensive reviews at national level“ (for brevity „Guidelines“). A government-wide and multi-stakeholder approach has been implemented. Relevant sources of information are used. Publicity is provided. The process is coordinated by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, which leads the national mechanism for equality between women and men, by the relevant competent department Department of „Equal Opportunities, Anti-Discriminations and Social Assistance“ in the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. An Inter-Ministerial Working Group has been formed with the participation of 60 representatives from nearly 35 institutions and organizations, including all ministries, relevant agencies, national commissions, councils, equality, human rights and anti-discrimination bodies, social partners, academia and other stakeholders. Other institutions have been involved in the process of carrying out the review.

The participants in the working group carried out a review and prepared information on competence. The review covers all areas and areas under the set framework outlined in the „Guidelines“ and online questionnaire. Relevant institutional data, data from the National Statistical Institute and other sources are used. The national report includes the materials prepared.

The draft national report has been consulted and agreed with the National Council for the Equality of Women and Men of the Council of Ministers, in which representatives of all ministries, agencies, other bodies, local authorities, the civil sector, academia participate. Relevant comments and suggestions are taken into account.

In recent years, a number of measures have been implemented to support the full participation of women and men, as well as in support for recognition and the advancement of women in all areas of life.

The principle of equality in the labor market, equal pay for equal or equal work of men and women and its application in relation to all payments under an employment relationship are legally regulated. In Bulgaria, the trend of a smooth reduction of gender differences in pay over the years continues, reaching 13% in 2022, which shows a reduction of the difference by 1.5% compared to 2015. (15.5%). The best realization of women in high-paying sectors and of occupying leadership positions in decision-making processes, despite fluctuations over the years, manages to hold approximate values. In 2023, the positions held by women in senior positions at high level – board membership was 18.3%, in 2021 it was 21.7%. The share of women in national parliaments is growing to 24.8%, in national governments - 36.8% in 2023.

Progress is reported in the implementation of the target for 8 out of a total of 12 indicators included in the National List of Indicators to monitor progress under target 5 „Achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls“ of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

It's positive also the trend in the Gender Equality Index, which also reported progress of 6.3 points in 2023 compared to 2019.

The tracker of the Gender Equality Index can be used for a summary presentation of progress, the challenges and failures in equality to women and men in Bulgaria. The index is

lensen statistical tool for measuring progress in gender equality, developed by the European Institute for Gender Equality. This combined indicator measures equality in 6 dimensions, areas (domains): „Work“, „Money“, „Knowledge“, „Time“, „Power“ and „Health“, which are scored from 1 to 100 points (100 points – full draw). More information about the last ones results of the Index, incl. the performance of the Member States can be found on the Gender Equality Index website: <https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/gender-equality-index-2023-towards-green-transition-transport-and-energy>.

According to the 2023 Gender Equality Index Bulgaria has overcome critical gaps in gender equality. Bulgaria has a result 65.1 points (from total 100), reporting progress of 4.4 points compared to 2020 and 10.1 points compared to 2010. This ranks the country of 16th place in EU. The EU score is 70.2 points and there is an advance of 1.6 points from the previous edition of the 2022 Index. The result on our country is with 5.1 points lower from this one on EU like whole.

Despite the improvements, the country ranked lower than the European average in all sub-indicators except the power dimension. Comparing the six sub-indicators with the EU averages, Bulgaria performs well in the dimensions of power and time and not so well in the areas of money and health, lagging behind the EU average.



Bulgaria's results regarding The index for the equality between genders for 2023 d. can be found at the following Internet address:

<https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2023/country/BG>

From 2010 the result on Bulgaria increased with 10.1 points, mainly because improvements in the categories „Time“ (+ 19.9 points) and „Power“ (+ 16.9 points). From 2020 the result on Bulgaria increased with 4.4 points, which is one from the most significant improvements among the states members. This is due to increases in the categories „Time“ (+ 21.1 points) and „Money“ (+ 2.0 points). In result on this the ranking on Bulgaria in The index it's over raised with two places from 2020 this way like is reached to 16th place.

Bulgaria se se presents best in the category „Power“ (11th place from all States members), in which receives 62.7 points. From 2020 d. this way however the progress is in stagnation (– 0.3 points), which brought to decline on two places in the ranking in this one category. In the category „Power“ the country presents the mostgood in subcategory „taking on Solutions in the social sphere“ (70.6 points), in which I borrow eighth place in EU. The result on Bulgaria in this one subcategory se se is increased with 5.4 points from 2020 this way. In subcategory „taking on economically solutions“ country receives 60.9 points and it is orders on 10th place.

The district, in which is necessary the biggest an improvement for our country is „Money“, since Bulgaria se se ranks on last place among all States members po this indicator, with result from 67.0 points. From 2020 this way the result on Bulgaria in this one district is increased quite slightly (+ 2.0 points), like to this one way she saves the same ranking.

With result from 56.9 points in Bulgaria are necessary most effort for improvement in subcategory “financial resources“, where the country borrow 26th place in EU. In sub-region „economic position“ the country receives 78.9 points and se se orders on 26th place.

From 2020 this way the biggest improvement in the result on Bulgaria is at the indicator „Time“ (+21.1 points), which means, that the country se se is moved with 10 places higher, on 17th place. The main one factor for this one change is the improvement in subcategory ”deinities, related with care“ (+ 20.8 points). In result on this the state receives 76.5 points in this one subcategory, a the ranking ya se se is raised from 25th on 16th place. Bulgaria is achieved improvement and in subcategory „withocials activities“ (+ 20.6 points), in which receives 53.2 points and se se orders on 19th place in EU - with eight places further ahead in comparison with 2020.

From 2020 this way Bulgaria is got off with two places in the ranking in the category „Work“ (70.0 points) is dropped with two places, like se se is lowered to 22th place among the states-members on EU. Due to this one indicator Bulgaria fell down from 12th on 18th place po the subcategory „participation“, like the result that remains unchanged from 2020 this way. In the subcategory “segregation and quality on labor“ the ranking on the country is dropped with three seats from 2020 this way like Bulgaria is received 58.6 points and borrow 26th place in EU.

The following summary table can be used to compare the data for Bulgaria over the years:

<u>Area/Issue of the Index</u>		<u>2013.</u>	<u>2015.</u>	<u>2017.</u>	<u>2019.</u>	<u>2020.</u>	<u>2021.</u>	<u>2022.</u>
Work	Bulgaria	67.9	68.7	68.6	69.0	69.0	69.6	70.0
	EU	70.5	71.0	71.5	72.0	72.2	71.6	73.8
Money	Bulgaria	60.8	60.5	61.9	61.8	62.3	64.5	67.0
	EU	78.4	78.4	79.6	80.4	80.6	82.4	82.6
Knowledge	Bulgaria	50.4	51.9	53.3	53.2	54.9	55.2	57.8
	EU	61.8	62.8	63.4	63.5	63.6	62.7	63.6
Time	Bulgaria	43.9	47.4	42.7	42.7	42.7	42.7	63.8
	EU	66.3	68.9	65.7	65.7	65.7	64.9	68.5
Power	Bulgaria	45.8	49.4	56.0	59.9	61.5	60.2	62.7
	EU	41.9	43.5	48.5	51.9	53.5	55.0	59.1
Health	Bulgaria	75.3	75.8	76.4	77.1	77.2	77.2	77.8
	EU	87.2	87.2	87.4	88.1	88.0	87.8	88.5
TOTAL INDEX	Bulgaria	55.0	56.9	58.0	58.8	59.6	59.9	65.1
	EU	63.8	65.0	66.2	67.4	67.9	68.0	70.2

Despite the objectively established progress of the equality of women and men in Bulgaria, a number of challenges remain, and new ones are emerging, in all priority areas: equality of women and men in the labour market and an equal degree of economic independence; reducing gender gaps in pay and earnings; promoting equality of women and men in decision-making processes; fighting violence and victim protection and support; preorganization of gender stereotypes in various spheres of public life and sexism. Bulgaria continues to implement a consistent and coordinated policy to promote gender equality in all areas of life, including taking into account the specific needs of women and girls from marginalized groups who face multidimensional vulnerabilities, in accordance with the principle of leaving no one behind.

The report presents meaningful information, data and examples on the progress and challenges regarding the equality of women and men in Bulgaria over the past five years in implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

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Second section: Priorities, achievements, challenges and setbacks

Over the past five years, what have been the most important achievements, challenges and setbacks in progress towards gender equality and the empowerment of women?

Over the past five years, the Republic of Bulgaria has made a number of achievements in progress towards equality between women and men and the empowerment of women in various areas of public life.

✓ **Policy management to promote women's equality men and empower women has been strengthened and developed significantly**, through:

Legal framework. The Act on Equality between Women and Men is effectively implemented (SG No. 33 of 26.04.2016). Legislation has been improved through changes in relevant laws and regulations (eg. The Labour Code, the Protection from Domestic Violence Act, the Legal Aid Act, etc).

The national institutional mechanism for cooperation between the central and territorial bodies of the executive power, as well as with civil society, ensures consistent and integrated implementation of the policy, in the conditions of intersectoral coordination. The composition of the National Council for the Equality of Women and Men at the Council of Ministers has been expanded with new members, non-governmental organizations. The capacity and professional experience of the coordinators for equality of women and men in the national and territorial bodies of the executive power have been improved through training and participation in activities on the subject.

Strategic planning. Bulgaria developed and adopted a new strategic document outlining the policy over the next ten years – National Strategy for Promoting the Equality of Women Men 2021-2030. The strategy includes five priority policy areas, each with a set of key actions to make progress in the priority area:

- equality of women and men in the labour market and an equal degree of economic independence;
- reducing gender gaps in pay and earnings;
- promoting equality of women and men in decision-making processes;
- fighting violence and victim protection and support;
- overcoming gender stereotypes in various spheres of public life and sexism.

Two national action plans have been successfully implemented in implementation of the strategy, for the periods 2019-2020, 2021-2022. The 2023-2024 plan is in progress. Each of the plans contains about 70 measures in the priority areas submitted by institutions and organizations. The 2025-2026 plan is currently being developed.

Observation. The mechanism of monitoring the equality of women and men and the empowerment of women has been improved through basic indicators on the priority areas included in the strategy, templates for reporting the implementation of measures in national plans, national indicators under Goal 5 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the developed annual reports on the equality of women and men in the country, in which administrative information and data from institutions and organizations are summarized implementing measures from the national plan, as well as data from national statistics, European (Eurostat, European Institute for Gender Equality, etc.) and international sources.

National and international activities. A number of initiatives have been carried out to improve the equality of women and men and empower women in all areas of life – trainings, discussion forums, information events, development of thematic materials, etc. The annual competition for receiving from institutions/organizations of **Distinctive sign of significant achievements in the effective implementation of the policy on equality between women and men in the Republic of Bulgaria**. The distinguishing sign is created in accordance with The Law on Equality of Women and Men. In 2024 the procedure was held for the seventh year in a row. A total of 27 institutions/organizations from all over the country are holders of the Sign

Ministry of Labour and Social Policy coordinates the implementation of a number of international commitments of the Republic of Bulgaria in the field of equality of women and men and anti-discrimination. Representatives of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy participate in various European committees, working groups and networks on the issues of equality of women and men and anti-discrimination, in forums and initiatives and implement other activities in connection with the country's international commitments under this policy.

Bulgaria has achieved in the five priority areas for the country to promote the equality of women and men. It also notes a number of challenges. Socio-economic realities such as pandemics, military conflicts, digital transition, climate change, etc. reinforce the importance of some of them, others shift to the background, and new ones are also born. This requires coordinated actions for adaptive regulatory regulations, adequate measures, programs and practices, such as Bulgaria is conducting and making progress.

✓ **Priority area „Equality of women and men in the labor market and equal degree of economic independence“**

In order to guarantee equal opportunities and access to the labor market and the realization of it for men and women, the legal framework in force in the Republic of Bulgaria does not distinguish on the basis of „gender“ between workers, except in specific cases of protection of women during pregnancy, childbirth and caring for small children.

The realization of the right to work and the provision of equal access to employment without discrimination on grounds of sex and other grounds, in implementation of national legislation, is important priority. Appropriate mechanisms have been implemented to ensure the equal participation of women and men in the labour market and in economic life. Employment legislation has been improved in terms of reducing administrative burdens, expanding the access of disadvantaged groups to the labor market to ensure equal access to active policy instruments. Targeted measures are also being implemented to improve the employment of persons with disabilities. To increase employment and improve the quality of the workforce, training and employment programs, incentives for employers who create jobs and hire unemployed persons from vulnerable groups, measures to promote entrepreneurship, vocational training and training for the acquisition of key competences, intermediary information and employment services, etc. Advisory and information activities are carried out among those employed in individual sectors.

The implementation of measures to better reconcile professional and personal life continues, taking it into account as a significant factor in increasing the participation of women in the labor market. In addition to the possibilities of applying flexible working hours and forms of employment, and of the participation of fathers in the upbringing of children, employment is provided to unemployed persons by providing childcare and work is being done to improve services for children and dependent elderly persons. Special measures have also been introduced legislatively during the period of the pandemic.

The implementation of the various measures leads to improvements in this priority area of the policy for equality of women and men for our country, as can be seen from the data of the National Statistical Institute (NSI), such as:

The employment rate of women (aged 15-64) with at least one child under 7 has increased annually since 2020 and in 2023 was 68.4% (compared to 2020 - 59.5%, 2021 – 63.3%, 2022 – 66.5%).

The female employment rate for age group 15 - 64 has also increased annually since 2021 at 64.2%, 2022 – 67.2%, 2023 – 67.4%.

The same applies to the female employment rate for the 20 - 64 age group, which has grown annually since 2021 - 68.9%, 2022 – 72.1%, 2023 – 72.6%.

The unemployment rate in 2023 was close for men at 4.4% and for women at 4.2%.

The longterm unemployment rate for both sexes was also similar in 2023, for men it was 2.4%, for women it was 2.1%.

The relative proportion of persons aged 15–24 not employed and not participating in education and training decreased annually from 14.4% 2020 in 14.0% 2021, 12.3% 2022, to 11.4% in 2023. These data for men in the years indicated are respectively: 13.7%, 12.7%, 11.5% and 11.3%; while for women it is 15.2% 2020, 15.4% 2021, 13.1% 2022 and 11.6% 2023.

The data presented by National Statistical Institute (NSI) for monitoring and reporting on progress made under Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs), provide further information, the [Goal 5: Gender equality | National Statistical Institute \(nsi.bg\)](https://www.nsi.bg/en/Pages/Goal-5-Gender-equality.aspx). The gender employment gap in Bulgaria is 7.7 percentage points for 2022, for which data is most recently available, with Eurostat as the source indicated. A decrease from the previous year 2021 was noticed, when this difference was reported at 8.4 percentage points. Data according to the indicator „Inactive population due to caring responsibilities“, with source Eurostat, they indicate 0.90 percent of the total population, for 2022, for which data is last available.

Despite the significant progress made, a number of challenges remain in all actions in this priority area. For example, the expansion of active labor market measures, the promotion of a better balance between women and men by economic sectors and professions, and the overcoming of horizontal and vertical gender segregation in the labor market continue; stimulating the participation of women in technological and digital-based industries; achieving a better balance in reconciling work and personal life and reducing the gap in caring for children and dependent household members; reduction of unpaid work performed by women, etc.

Equal participation in the labor market and the economic independence of women and men are strongly correlated with gender pay and income, which is the next priority area of women's and men's equality policy.

✓ **Priority area „Reducing gender differences in pay and earnings“**

According to article 243, paragraph 1 of the Labour Code, women and men have the right to equal remuneration for equal or equivalent work. The provision of article 243, paragraph 2, of the Labour Code expressly introduces a legal requirement that the principle of equal pay for equal or equivalent work by a man and a woman should be applied in respect of all payments under an employment relationship. According to Art. 1, b. „a“ of Convention №100, entitled „Equal pay“, the term „pay“ for the purposes of the Convention includes the ordinary, basic or minimum wage and all other remuneration paid directly or indirectly, in cash or in kind by the employer of the worker for his work.

Employers should apply the same criteria for evaluating all staff, remuneration agreements should be understandable and transparent, and the criteria applied should take into account the nature and type of work and not contain discriminatory elements.

Given the fact that wages are negotiated individually between employees and employers, a lack of information about the individualized pay system applied by the employer is often found. This creates prerequisites for increasing pay gaps between employees at similar levels.

The challenges of the gender pay gap continue to face the policy of promoting equality between women and men, despite the implementation of existing non-discriminatory legal regulations.

The gender pay gap in Bulgaria is lower than the EU average.

This difference in Bulgaria for 2022 is 12.6% in favor of men's pay, according to National Statistical Institute data published in February 2024. [Gender pay gap | National Statistical Institute \(nsi.bg\)](#). The data for 2022 show some growth of the value of the gender pay gap indicator compared to 2021 and a break in the downward trend in previous four years (2021 – 11.8%, 2020 – 12.3%, 2019 – 13.7%, 2018. - 13.6%).

Men earn higher wages in almost all economic activities for 2022. The difference was highest in economic activity Financial and insurance activities 30.2% and lowest in Water supply; Sewerage services, waste management and recovery 5.4% and in Production and distribution of electricity and heat and gaseous fuels 5.8%. The pay for women is lower in manufacturing industry, healthcare, Information and Communication Technologies Sector sector etc. Women get more than men in Administrative and auxiliary activities by a margin of 20.0%, Construction 16.1% and Real estate operations 10.1% in favour of women's pay. [Gender pay gap | National Statistical Institute \(nsi.bg\)](#).

Data on the indicator „Pay gap by gender“ is 13.0% for 2022, with Source (primary source) - Eurostat (according to the National Statistical Institute data) presented for monitoring and reporting on progress made under Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals , the [Goal 5: Gender equality | National Statistical Institute \(nsi.bg\)](#).

Notwithstanding the small discrepancy in the above figures for 2022, some increase in the gender pay gap compared to the previous year 2021 should be noted. This breaks the downward trend of the value of this indicator since 2019.

To restore the trend of annual reduction of the gender pay gap in Bulgaria, targeted efforts are needed to change the factors determining the gender pay and income gap.

Numerous factors, mainly related to women's participation in the labour market, affect the gender pay gap.

An important factor is the education – degree and the acquired education by profession. Persons with higher education find better access and realization on the labor market. Stereotypes concerning the so-called „female“ and „male“ occupations continue to be drivers in educational choice and subsequent professional realization. Still more women are employed in economic activities where pay has traditionally been lower and/or work in lower-pay positions.

Traditional roles within the family in terms of household work and care for children and dependent members are also an obstacle to women's full integration into the labour market. Women more often than men work part-time, do unpaid work, career breaks are required. In their career development, women face greater difficulties in joining the labor market, interruptions in professional activity, due to the use of longer maternity leave, difficult balancing of work and family obligations, which slows down and hinders their professional realization horizontally and vertically.

Residence also has an impact. The economic situation in some areas of the country does not create the right conditions for women to be part of the workforce. Lack of awareness and transparency in pay is also an adverse factor.

The challenges the gender pay gap is answered through targeted measures in the labor market, increasing incomes and pensions, improving the educational structure of the population, combating gender stereotypes, attracting investments, etc. The measures applied help to overcome horizontal and vertical gender segregation in employment, to improve pay awareness.

Work is under way to strengthen women's participation in the labour market; more gender-balanced employment by economic activities; overcoming gender stereotypes regarding „female“ and „male“ occupations; vocational guidance and training; attracting women into high-paying occupations; promoting women's professional fulfilment and career development; combining professional and personal life; conditions for continuous improvement of professional qualifications; ensuring a balance between employment flexibility and worker security in new forms of employment; monitoring compliance of insurance rights in periods of imperative occupational interruptions; equalization of retirement conditions for women and men; strengthening of the role of collective bargaining; cooperation with social partners and other stakeholders. Our country is also about to transpose into national legislation the provisions of „Directive (EU) 2023/970 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 10 May 2023 to strengthen the application of the principle of equal pay for women and men for equal work or for work of equal value through transparency in pay and enforcement mechanisms“.

Bridging the gender pay gap also corresponds directly to promoting women's participation in decision-making and leadership positions, which is the other priority area of women's and men's equality policy.

✓ **Priority area „Promoting the equality of women and men in decision-making processes“**

The balanced participation of women and men in decision-making processes in all spheres of life is important for better governance, due to the diversity and consideration of different perspectives.

Despite the remaining challenges, the implementation of the various measures in this priority area is leading to improvements.

There has been an increase in women in the class of profession Executives over the years. According to NSI data, the number of women leaders was 68.0 thousand in 2023, compared to 64.8 thousand in 2022 and 59.8 thousand in 2021. However, the number of employed female executives remains traditionally lower than the number of employed male executives. The number of women is higher than that of men in the classes of occupations Specialists, Auxiliary administrative staff and Personnel engaged in services for the population, trade and security.

The lower participation of women in decision-making positions is despite the higher proportion of women with higher education than that of men. According to NSI data, the relative share of women aged 30-34 with completed higher education is higher compared to that of men in the same age group for each of the years from 2011 to the current one. In 2023, this share of women was 42.7%, and for men it was 27.7%.

The relative share of early school leavers women marked a decreasing trend from 2021 – 12.9%, 2022 – 11.4% and 2023 – 9.2%. (NSI data).

The National Statistical Institute's data on the implementation of national indicators for monitoring and reporting on progress made under Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and

empower all women and girls of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, with reference to Eurostat, Goal 5: Gender equality | National Statistical Institute (nsi.bg), shows the following:

For the indicator “Positions held by women in high-level management positions, the share of women board members increased to 18.3% for 2023 compared to 14.8% for 2022 and a slight decrease in the share of women directors 19.3% for 2023 compared to 22.0% for 2022.

For the indicator „Share of seats held by women in national parliaments“ - an increase of 24.8% for 2023 compared to 23.8% for 2022.

For the indicator „Share of seats held by women in national governments“ - 36.8% for 2023 compared to 40.3% for 2022.

Vertical segregation in employment („glass ceiling“) in all spheres of life – politics, economy, culture, etc. hinders women's equal participation in decision-making processes. The measures applied to overcome this phenomenon are expected to be supplemented by the upcoming transposition into national law of the provisions of Directive (EU) 2022/2381 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 November 2022 on improving the gender balance among directors of companies listed on the stock exchange, and related measures, in national legislation. Encouraging and supporting the introduction of the new regulation, as well as cooperation with business, institutions, social partners and civil society, can expand opportunities for equality between women and men in company management.

The balanced participation of women and men in decision-making processes in all spheres of life pit helps to improve development prospects, increase innovation and competitiveness. It helps to break down stereotypes about the roles of women and men in public life, politics, business, culture, sports, etc. It is also important for social justice, equality and cohesion in society. It helps to build a society free from discrimination and violence, which is the next priority area of the policy for equality between women and men.

✓ **Priority area „Fighting violence and victim protection and support“**

Despite the increasing attention paid to the topic of violence in its various forms and social groups, including against women, it continues to be widespread at all levels and spheres of society. Certain factors, such as lack of economic independence, health status, belonging to a minority community, early marriages and births, human trafficking, etc. may further aggravate the vulnerability of women and girls.

Presented by National Statistical Institute data to meet national indicators for monitoring and reporting progress made under Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, the [Goal 5: Gender equality | National Statistical Institute \(nsi.bg\)](#), they point to the following:

The relative proportion of women aged 16-17 who are married, according to NSI data, is 0.6% for 2022, the latest for which data is available, with a source NSI, marking a decreasing trend since 2018.

According to the indicator “Physical and sexual violence against women and girls“ - 2.9% for 2021, for which only data with source NSI are indicated (The source of the data is „Research on gender“ violence of NSI and presents the relative share of women aged 18 to 74 who have experienced physical violence (including threats) or sexual violence, by a partner orlitzis different from a partner in the 12 months before the interview.

According to the indicator „Premeditated murders and sexual crimes by legal status and gender of the affected person“:

- proportion of women victims of sexual violence – 6.70 per 100,000 population for 2021, according to data from the European Institute for Gender Equality, as it marks a downward trend of 2019 this way.

- proportion of women victims of premeditated murder – 0.79 per 100,000 population for 2021, according to data from the European Institute for Gender Equality.

Along with significant legislative changes to combat violence, and more specifically domestic violence, measures in victim support are also growing. The social services, activities delegated by the state, to which children and persons who are victims of violence can be directed on the territory of the country as of 31.12.2023 are the following:

- 20 Crisis centers for children, with a total capacity of 212 seats;
- 11 Crisis centers for persons, with a total capacity of 136 seats;
- 162 Community Support Centers, with a total capacity of 7,446 seats;
- 12 Units „Mother and baby”, with a total capacity of 75 seats.

For example, For the total number and capacity of the Crisis Centers for persons delegated by the state activities for the period 2019-2023 (as of the end of the relevant year) is as follows:

- 2019 – 6 pieces, with a total capacity of 64 seats;
- 2020 – 6 pieces, with a total capacity of 64 seats;
- 2021 – 8 pieces, with a total capacity of 94 seats;
- 2022 – 8 pieces, with a total capacity of 94 seats;
- 2023 – 11 pieces, with a total capacity of 136 seats.

As can be seen from the exported data, the number of functioning Crisis Centers increased during the specified period, and in 2023 their number increased by 5 compared to their number in 2019, and the total capacity increased by 72 places.

Crisis centers as a social service provide residential care for children and persons affected by violence, trafficking or any other form of exploitation. The Centers implement activities aimed at providing individual support, meeting daily needs and legal counseling or socio-psychological assistance, when immediate intervention is required, including through mobile crisis intervention teams.

Preventing and combating violence is a complex affair that covers various spheres of public life. That is why it is applied comprehensive multidisciplinary approach and coordinated interinstitutional cooperation for improvement of legislation, strengthening of policies and validation of more effective practices, expansion of services. Work is also underway to improve awareness, increasing sensitivity and overcoming the neglect of the problem in society. Also important are traditional and social media, as the main communication agents. False information can be spread through them the idea of the inferiority or superiority of any of the sexes or of stereotypical roles for men and women and sexist attitudes nourishing phenomenon of gender-based violence. All this and it requires the joint and constant efforts not only of institutions and media, but also of the entire society.

✓ Priority area „Overcoming gender stereotypes in various spheres of public life and sexism“

Gender stereotypes affect all areas of society and have an impact on the equality of women and men. They hinder free choice for development and realization and limit it to the lasting expectations created in relation to women and men. Thus, established life patterns for one sex and the other are repeated, and this fixes social norms for their role. Therefore, the change of gender stereotypes existing in different spheres of society it's long-term priority. The measures carried out are long-term and multisectoral. Because changing existing negative stereotypes by gender and sexism in the various spheres of public life, it is a long process and affects generations. That's why in Bulgaria is provided duration and continuity of the

implementation of confirmed measures under this priority. The renewal of efforts with up-to-date measures reflects changes in societal circumstances and needs over time, for example related to the digitization and widespread use of social media.

Below are presented **examples of achievements and challenges over the past five years in terms of progress towards gender equality and women's empowerment in Bulgaria.**

As one of the most important achievements of the last five years with regard to progress towards gender equality and women's empowerment, those adopted could be reported **legislative changes in the field of prevention and counteraction of violence, including and domestic violence.**

In the Republic of Bulgaria, a good legislative basis has been built in the fight against violence. The legislation in the Republic of Bulgaria on counteracting domestic violence includes the following acts: the Criminal Code, the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence, promulgated, SG, no. 27/2005, the Regulations for the Implementation of the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence adopted by PMS № 113/2010, published, SG, no. 45/2010, the Legal Aid Act, promulgated SG No. 79/2005, the European Protection Order Act, promulgated SG, no. 41/2015, the Law on Assistance and Financial Compensation to Victims of Crime, promulgated. SG No. 105/2006 d, incl. and The Weapons, Ammunition, Explosives and Pyrotechnic Articles Act (promulgated. SG No. 73/2010), where it is stipulated that decisions on the acquisition and/or storage of explosives and pyrotechnic articles, permits for the acquisition, storage and/or carrying and use of firearms and their ammunition are not issued to a person against which protection measures have been imposed in the last three years under the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence.

The policy of the Ministry of Justice regarding the fight against violence, including and domestic violence, its prevention and protection of victims Over the past five years, the Ministry of Justice has taken a number of actions and measures aimed at improving the legal framework in order to effectively counter violence in all its forms, including and for its prevention, for the protection of victims and for the effective prosecution of perpetrators. They are introduced legal mechanisms for the protection of victims of violence, including and free legal assistance before all courts at the expense of the state budget and to persons affected by domestic or sexual violence who do not have the means and wish to use legal protection, compensation for victims, protection services, incl. in actions with an international element. All forms of domestic violence have been criminalized, thus ensuring adequate and comprehensive criminal-legal protection from any acts of violence against women, incl. domestic violence. Measures have been taken in prosecuting and punishing perpetrators, protecting and compensating victims.

Next, in the Republic of Bulgaria, through the Ministry of Justice, actions have been taken to improving legislation in the field of protection against domestic violence and social support for victims and synchronizing it with European legislative practices.

At the beginning of 2019, significant normative amendments were made to the Criminal Code (NC) (promulgated, SG No. 16 of 2019). The main amendments are in the following directions:

➤ A definition was introduced for the cases in which the crime was committed „*in conditions of domestic violence*“. Qualifying signs were thus introduced in respect of pre-existing offences. This was done to ensure adequate and comprehensive criminal justice protection from any acts of violence over women. It was accepted that these are the cases of systematic exercise of physical, sexual or mental violence, economic dependence, forced restriction of private life,

personal freedom and personal rights of a spouse, ex-spouse, descendants or ascendants, a person with whom they live or have lived in the same household.

➤ Domestic violence has risen as a qualifying sign in the system of a number of criminal offenses – murder, bodily harm, kidnapping, illegal imprisonment, coercion, threat of crime. Thus, heavier criminal liability for murder and bodily harm was introduced with the aim of incriminating the most serious forms of domestic violence, which escalate to an attack on the life or health of individuals;

➤ All forms of systematic surveillance of another have been criminalized in order to arouse in the persecuted person a well-founded fear for his safety or that of his neighbors. As „tracking“, the Criminal Code defines any behavior of a threatening nature, which can be expressed in stalking, showing another person that they have been observed or entering into unwanted communication by any possible means;

➤ Official prosecution of all forms of domestic violence is introduced. All forms of domestic violence leading to a more serious impact on bodily integrity are prosecuted ex officio, which is an essential element of ensuring justice for victims of domestic violence by ensuring their access to court.

➤ It is provided that for average bodily injury caused to an ascendant, descendant, spouse, sibling, the criminal proceedings will be of a general nature, being initiated on the victim's complaint to the prosecutor and will not be able to be terminated afterwards at his request;

➤ Higher penalties are introduced for failure to comply with a court decision or an order for protection against domestic violence and repetition. If there has been a failure to comply with or frustrate an order for protection from domestic violence, the Penal Code, in article 296, paragraph 1, provides that the guilty person shall be punished with imprisonment for up to three years or a fine of up to five thousand BGN. In case of repetition, it is planned to impose a higher sanction, as in this case the stipulated penalty is imprisonment from one to five years.

With the Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Criminal Code, promulgated, SG No. 16/2019, an addendum to the Code of Criminal Procedure was also adopted. With the changes it is introduced obligation for the competent authorities to inform immediately the victim with specific protection needs in cases where the detained perpetrator of the violence escapes or is released temporarily or permanently.

With the Law on Supplementing the Code of Criminal Procedure, promulgated. SG No. 83 of 2019. a new Article 369 a was created, according to which, with summary judicial investigation in the cases under art. 371, item. 2 it is not allowed in case of intentional cause of death.

With a view to the introduction of Directive 2012/29/EU to establish minimum standards for the rights, support and protection of victims of crime and to replace Framework Decision 2001/220/ Justice and Home Affairs of the Council, in 2023. **the Criminal Procedure Code and the Law on Assistance and Financial Compensation to Victims of Crimes have been amended (SG, no. 48 of 2 June 2023).** The purpose of the proposed amendments is to provide appropriate measures to protect victims, which will lead to a reduction in the risk of secondary and re-victimization, intimidation and retaliation by the perpetrator and to adequate support tailored to the needs of the victim and his relatives. In accordance with the requirements of the Directive, the list of procedural rights of victims is expanded:

✓ the right to be accompanied by a person of their choice is added. The assistance and moral support that this person can provide will contribute to the better interaction of the victim with the authorities of the pre-trial proceedings during the performance of the procedural and investigative actions;

✓ it is envisaged that the questioning of child witnesses with a specific need for protection will be conducted in the presence of a pedagogue or psychologist. When necessary, the interrogation

is also conducted in the presence of the parent, guardian or guardian. In cases of domestic violence or a crime against sexual integrity, at the request of the victim, the interrogation can be carried out by a person of the same sex;

✓ it is arranged to carry out without undue delay an individual assessment of the victim after the first contact of the competent authorities with him. It should determine the physical and mental condition of the victim as a result of the crime suffered and establish the existence of specific protection needs. In this regard, amendments to the Law on Assistance and Financial Compensation to the Victim of Crimes are proposed;

✓ it is possible for the family members of the victim who have suffered property and non-property damages from crimes of a general nature to also receive assistance in accordance with the Law on Assistance and Financial Compensation to the Victim of Crimes. For greater clarity, a separate definition of „family members“ of the victim is introduced.

In the Law on Assistance and Financial Compensation to Victims of Crimes a completely new chapter has been created to regulate the procedure for carrying out the individual assessment of victims. The purpose of the individual assessment is to establish the existence of specific protection needs and to determine the measures to be taken against the victim. In accordance with Directive 2012/29/EU the procedure is based on objective criteria, taking into account in the assessment the type and nature of the crime and the circumstances related to it; the type and extent of the damages suffered; the age, intellectual development, emotional and social maturity, the education of the victim, as well as his other personal characteristics. Depending on the specifics of the case, the extended assessment can also be carried out, and the team can also include representatives of victim support organizations, the personal physician, psychologist and other specialists.

With the changes in the Criminal Code (promulgated in SG No. 67 of 2023) another serious step forward was taken regarding the criminal protection of victims, and in the definition of „a crime committed in the conditions of domestic violence“, the requirement for systematic acts of violence was dropped.

Law on Amendments to the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence (promulgated in SG No. 66 of 2023)

In 2022, the Ministry of Justice prepared a draft Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence.

It provides for the provision of prompt and effective protection for victims of domestic violence and the exercise of preventive and deterrent action on the perpetrator of the violence. The proposed regulatory amendments are implemented international standards in this field, incl. and recommendations of the European Commission and various control and monitoring mechanisms under UN conventions in the field of human rights and related to the problems of violence against women, and in particular domestic violence.

The main principles laid down in the regulatory changes were:

- **state-guaranteed protection and policy formation.** A National Council for Prevention and Protection against Domestic Violence was established under the Council of Ministers to coordinate the interaction of the competent authorities, municipalities and legal entities that provide protection, support and assistance for victims of domestic violence, to evaluate policies and measures and to propose new ones. A national information system was planned, to which the competent authorities related to the problem would have access.

- **strengthening protection measures and protection measures for victims and persons at risk.** The Ministry of Justice set out to create and shape public intolerance of the phenomenon of domestic violence by providing for the strengthening of prevention in relation to domestic violence in order to act as a deterrent to the perpetrator of the violence. A number of new measures were also planned for the protection and restoration of the victims to normal life, psychological and social work with the injured persons and children in consultative

centers, psychological work with the perpetrators to control aggression and anger. Provision is made for the establishment of sheltered housing for the emergency accommodation of persons for whom there is a direct and immediate danger to life and health.

The Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence was promulgated in Official Gazette No. 66 of 2023.

The law provides:

- expanding the subject scope of the law and formulating the main purpose of the law with a view to assessing the legality of the issued acts;
- synchronization with forms of domestic violence according to European acts, introduction of an additional mechanism for protection against domestic violence, which aim to reduce cases of domestic violence against minors and minor children inflicted by one parent before the other without the latter taking action, as well as cases of domestic violence against vulnerable persons who are in a helpless state as a result of severe disability, illness or old age or are placed under interdiction;
- ensure the obligation of the State to pursue a consistent State policy in the area of domestic violence by coordinating, implementing, monitoring and evaluating policies and measures to prevent and combat domestic violence;
- expansion of the range of legal entities to which protection is provided in accordance with the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence;
- expansion of the circle of legal entities that can initiate the initiation of proceedings for the issuance of a protection order.
- facilitating access to justice;
- the increase in measures for protection against domestic violence, which may be imposed by the competent authorities and regulation of their period of validity;
- establishment of the National Council for Prevention and Protection from Domestic Violence as a permanent collective and advisory body for the implementation of the state policy on prevention and protection from domestic violence;
- regulation of a coordination mechanism between all competent authorities, municipalities and the judiciary to create clear rules of action and coordination to ensure reliable, timely and adequate protection of persons who have suffered violence;
- regulation of a national information system for prevention and protection from domestic violence and a national register of cases of domestic violence, in which information on domestic violence is systematically collected;
- optimization of court proceedings, incl. and by expanding local jurisdiction in domestic violence cases;
- Regulation of prevention and protection programs and specialized services providing protection, assistance and support to persons who have suffered from domestic violence or at risk, providing protection from the period of domestic violence until the full recovery of the victims and their social inclusion in society, as well as specialized programs for working in perpetrators.

Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Civil Code (promulgated in SG No. 69 of 2023.). In connection with cases of domestic violence between persons who are not married or in de facto conjugal cohabitation, but are in a partnership relationship, which increased in July 2023, on August 1, 2023, a Bill was submitted to the National Assembly to amend and supplement the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence, № 49-354-01-87 by a group of people's representatives. The proposed bill aims primarily to expand the range of injured persons who can seek protection under the Protection from Domestic Violence Act by including persons who are or have been in an intimate relationship under the Act, removing the requirement of cohabitation. The bill was passed and promulgated in Official Gazette No. 69 of 2023.

Coordination mechanism for assistance and support to victims of domestic violence

At the end of 2023, the Ministry of Justice was entrusted with the preparation of a draft Coordination Mechanism for assistance and support to victims of domestic violence, which is one of the main tasks of the National Council. The coordination mechanism must regulate the main procedures of interaction between the bodies of the executive power at the central and local level, the bodies of local self-government and local administration, legal entities, providers of specialized services for protection, assistance and support or recovery programs under the Law on Social Services and the providers of specialized services for persons affected by domestic violence under the Law on Social Services. Interaction takes place in three stages: notification and referral, definition of protection measures and measures for long-term support and social inclusion after the cessation of violence. The goal is to achieve synchronization at each stage in the exchange of information and in the performance of joint actions in the event of a signal from a specific injured person.

In 2023, an inter-institutional departmental group was formed in the Ministry of Justice, which prepared a draft Coordination Mechanism. The coordination mechanism regulates the procedures from receiving information about a person who has been injured or threatened by domestic violence, through preparing a risk assessment and taking the most appropriate measures in view of the specific case, to providing long-term support after the end of the violence including psycho-social counselling and psychotherapeutic work with the victim and providing active support for her social reintegration. Depending on the risk assessment carried out, an algorithm is drawn up that indicates what to do in the event that the person is in danger of his life and health, with whom the relevant competent employee should contact immediately and what specialized services to be directed to or what measures to be determined if he is only at risk of violence.

Several annexes are provided to the Coordination Mechanism: Preliminary risk assessment card, model application for protection from domestic violence, model declaration under article 9, para. 3 of the Criminal Code for an act of domestic violence and model declaration of the circumstances related to the lack of funds. The applications aim to assist victims of domestic violence and speed up the protection process.

The coordination mechanism will ensure timely and reliable adequate protection of injured persons and help prevent fatal cases. In addition, the envisaged national information system and register will contribute to this.

It is planned to prepare a support network with contacts of those responsible by institutions and an information card on the services provided to support victims of domestic violence and to deal with the aggression of perpetrators of violence, to be provided and distributed to each contact point to which the injured person has turned, for easier referral and information.

The mobile application „Help me“, developed by the National Legal Aid Bureau, which was launched at the end of last year, is also extremely important. The appendix contains information on the coordinates of the Regional Centers for Counseling to the Bar Councils opened in the country, as well as all institutions and organizations in the Republic of Bulgaria that are related to the protection and support of persons who have suffered from domestic violence - state and non-governmental.

The coordination mechanism was presented at the first meeting of the National Council for Prevention and Protection from Domestic Violence, which was held on February 21, 2024, and was adopted at the second meeting of the National Council after reflecting the proposals received from its members, which was held on May 28, 2024.

Draft Decree amending and supplementing the Regulations for the Implementation of the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence

By Order № R-2 from 08.01.2024, an interdepartmental working group was formed of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Bulgaria under the leadership of the Deputy Minister of Justice and with the participation of representatives of the Ministry of Justice, as well as a number of other competent departments and legal entities with non-profit non-governmental organizations, carrying out activities in the field of prevention, support and protection from domestic violence, which has the task of bringing the Regulations for the Implementation of the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence into line with the Criminal Code. A draft Amendment Decree has been prepared and supplement to the Regulations for the Implementation of the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence.

In its functions as a national coordinator in the implementation of policies to counter human trafficking and protect victims, according to the Law on Combating Human Trafficking, the National Commission for Combating Human Trafficking is also the coordinator of **The National Mechanism for Referral and Assistance to Victims of Human Trafficking**. The National Mechanism for Referral and Assistance to Victims of Human Trafficking was established in 2010, and in 2016 it was adopted by a decision of the Council of Ministers, making it a document of a binding nature, which constitutes the national framework regulating the steps and procedures to be followed with a view to providing immediate and adequate assistance and support to victims of trafficking in persons.

Currently, under the guidance of the National Commission for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings and its administration, there are seven services specializing in supporting adult victims of human trafficking who can be accommodated with their children. These include – three shelters for temporary accommodation, three protection and support centers and one shelter for subsequent reintegration in the cities of Burgas, Varna and Sofia. Victims of human trafficking may also benefit from another type of social services for victims of gender-based violence and human trafficking, in connection with the Social Assistance Act.

Negative gender stereotypes in society they are multiplied in subsequent negative views that hinder the group and/or individual development of the personality. The short and high-impact messages of advertisements in television programs often tread on such stereotypes in order to achieve a faster and more effective impact on consumers of goods, without taking into account the negative impact of such communication on the overall culture and well-being of society. That is why the fight against negative gender stereotypes is a significant goal and challenge for the dynamically developing democratic society, which, while preserving its traditional family values, manages to improve the situation of its male and female members in their daily lives. The Council for Electronic Media in the period from mid-2019 to mid-2024 began to carry out focused observations on the participation of women and men in television advertising in connection with the commitments of the media regulator in the National Council for Equality of Women and Men under the Council of Ministers. This is one of the measures planned in the biennial National Action Plans to promote equality of women and men in the period.

Two monitoring exercises were carried out. Monitoring in 2020 covers television advertisements in four programs (BTV, BTV CINEMA, NOVA TELEVISION, DIEMA FAMILY) of the two largest commercial media service providers (BTV Media Group EAD and Nova Broadcasting Group EOOD) in a total of 32 hours of content. In the observed commercial messages /advertisements/, no negative gender stereotypes or the use of discriminatory practices in the commercial speech are found.

The second consecutive monitoring of advertisements from the point of view of the participation of women and men in commercial speech and the available gender stereotypes was conducted in 2022 and covers four programs (BTV, BTV LADY, NOVA TELEVISION, DIEMA FAMILY) of the same commercial media service providers for a period of three days in the prime-time time range (a total of 48 hours of production or 12 hours for each service). Monitoring does not detect in advertisements the presence of nudity, sexism, violence, ridicule, irony, dominance, addiction.

In 2023 Council for Electronic Media conducted for the first time monitoring the participation of men and women in the news and current affairs programs of the two public media service providers, the Bulgarian National Television (BNT), respectively for the BNT1 program and the Bulgarian National Radio (BNR) – for the HORIZON program.

Council for Electronic Media, as a media regulator, cooperates successfully with the self-regulatory body National Council for Self-Regulation, which decides on compliance with the National Ethical Rules for Advertising and Commercial Communication in the Republic of Bulgaria (Code of Ethics). In the period from August 2019 to July 2024. The National Council for Self-Regulation ruled on 26 cases of a different nature of commercial communication. In 2 (two) of the cases, he found a violation of the Code of Ethics in connection with incorrect exploitation of gender in the commercial speech. After the pronouncement of the National Council for Self-Regulation, the distribution of the above-mentioned advertisements was stopped.

Statistics in **the field of culture** in Bulgaria, it shows that gender equality is already observed in the production and consumption of cultural products. The Ministry of Culture provides annual financial support to creative projects in compliance with the principle of equality of both sexes in the implementation of programs for activities in the field of museum work and fine arts, related to ensuring equal access of society to cultural heritage without difference between women and men; targeted financial support of creative projects in the field of performing arts; development of diverse activities in community centers, such as the most widespread cultural institutions in the country; improving conditions in public libraries with the priority of promoting interest in reading equally among women and men; ensuring equal access to literary, literary and intangible cultural heritage.

* * *

2. Over the past five years, what have been the top five priorities for accelerating progress for women and girls in your country through laws, policies and/or programmes?

In the online survey you will be asked to select up to five priorities from the list below:

- Equality and non-discrimination under the law and access to justice
- Quality education, training and lifelong learning for women and girls
- Poverty eradication, agricultural productivity and food security
- Eliminating violence against women and girls
- Access to health care, including sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights
- Political participation and representation
- Right to work and rights at work (e.g. gender pay gap, occupational segregation, career progression, job creation)
- Women's entrepreneurship and women's enterprises
- Unpaid care and domestic work/work and family reconciliation (e.g. paid maternity, paternity or parental leave, care services)

- Gender-responsive social protection (e.g. universal health coverage, cash transfers, pensions)
- Basic services and infrastructure (water, sanitation, energy, transport, etc.)
- Strengthening women's participation in ensuring environmental sustainability
- Gender-responsive budgeting
- Digital and financial inclusion for women
- Gender-responsive disaster risk reduction and resilience-building
- Changing discriminatory social norms and gender stereotypes
- Other (please specify)
- None of the above

The five priority areas in the last five years in Bulgaria are those of the National Strategy for the Promotion of Equality of Women and Men 2021-2030, referred to in 1. Priority actions have been identified for each of the priority areas, which correspond to a large extent with the priorities in the UN-Women Guidelines.

In the reporting period, Bulgaria carried out activities on more than the five priorities indicated in the online survey.

By priority „Equality and non-discrimination within the law and access to justice“ legislation has been improved.

Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Code of Civil Procedure (promulgated, SG No. 110 of 29 December 2020), which creates rules for the exercise of procedural rights in electronic form within the framework of civil and criminal proceedings, as follows:

With the changes in the Code of Civil Procedure, the following are regulated:

➤ Rules for serving messages and summonses to an email address:

The proposed regulation provides that the service of acts of the court can be carried out at an e-mail address for service chosen by the party:

- through the single e-Justice Portal;
- through a qualified electronic registered mail service pursuant to Regulation (EU) № 910/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 July 2014 on electronic identification and authentication services in electronic transactions in the internal market and repealing Directive 1999/93/EC (OJ L 257 of 28 August 2014), hereinafter referred to as „Regulation (EU) № 910/2014“.

In the event that the party does not have registration with the single e-Justice portal or has not chosen a qualified e-mail service, but has indicated an e-mail address, service is carried out at the specified address. If it is impossible to deliver service in the specified ways, it is transferred to delivery at the current address of the party, and in the absence of such - to the permanent one.

On the other hand, service by electronic means is not entered in relation to a party that has not specified an electronic address, i.e. a party that is not interested in service under this order would not be bound by negative legal consequences.

With the changes in the Code of Civil Procedure, it is provided that the service of credit and financial institutions, including those carrying out debt collection against consumers, insurance and reinsurance companies and traders who supply energy, gas, or provide postal, electronic communication or water supply and sewage services, to notaries and private bailiffs, government institutions and municipalities is carried out only at an email address.

The service of a lawyer is carried out through the single e-justice portal or at any place where he is on duty outside his office.

It is proposed to introduce an obligation for the claimant to indicate in the claim an email address, as well as an obligation for the defendant to indicate an email address in the response to the claim, in case they have any.

➤ The ability to pay fees and other obligations to the court electronically:

In the event that the request for protection and assistance is made in electronic form pursuant to article 102e in the single e-Justice portal, the state fee payable is reduced by 15 per cent. Upon withdrawal of consent to service in this way, the difference up to the full amount of the state fee due is paid by the claimant within one week. The reduction of the state fee due would motivate the parties to choose this way of performing procedural actions in electronic form, which would significantly speed up the introduction of electronic justice.

➤ The performance of procedural actions in electronic form is regulated in a new chapter eleventh „a” of the Civil Code „Procedural actions and acts in electronic form“;

➤ The creation of a legal definition of the term „email address“, „e-mail address“ is a personalized space in the single e-justice portal through which individuals receive electronic statements, communications, summonses and papers from the courts, a qualified e-mail address, as well as an e-mail address.

With the changes in the Code of Criminal Procedure are regulated:

➤ The preparation of judicial acts in electronic form:

It is planned that the judicial acts will be prepared as an electronic document in the unified information system of the courts and will be signed with a qualified electronic signature.

➤ The exercise of procedural rights and the performance of procedural actions in electronic form by the parties:

It is envisaged that the victim, the private prosecutor, the private plaintiff, the civil plaintiff, the civil defendant, as well as the defense attorney can make requests, notes and objections, as well as be able to appeal the acts of the court electronically.

➤ The rules for summoning and notifying the victim of the progress of criminal proceedings:

An opportunity has been created for the body that initiates the pre-trial proceedings to notify the victim of this, if he has indicated, in addition to an address for summoning in the country, an email address.

➤ The rules for serving summonses, notices and papers in the judicial phase of the criminal process:

A basic principle in the electronic summons system is the principle of voluntariness on the part of the participants in the process: they should express their consent to receive summonses, communications and papers electronically, and consent can be withdrawn at any time. Service can be carried out through an electronic address for service in the single e-Justice portal, certified by a copy of the electronic record, stamped with a qualified electronic time stamp of the court.

When served through a qualified e-mail registered service, service will be deemed to be fulfilled with the withdrawal of the documents sent by the addressee. Confirmation of receipt is not required, and the electronic identification of the person will be carried out in accordance with the procedure defined in the Law on the Judiciary.

In the judicial phase, the service of summonses, notices and papers to the victim of the crime, the injured legal entity, the private plaintiff, the private prosecutor, the civil plaintiff, the civil defendant and their trustees, as well as to a witness, expert, translator, interpreter or specialist-technical assistant. Service can be made through an email address for service at the single e-Justice portal through a qualified e-mail registered service or through an e-mail address.

➤ The rules for sending a message about a crime:

A regulation has been created for sending a message about a committed crime and electronically, if it is signed with a qualified electronic signature, subject to compliance with the requirements of the law. With the message, the person has the opportunity to express his or her consent to be summoned and receive messages to the e-mail address specified by him.

➤ Creating a legal definition of the term „email address“.

Normative changes in relation to e-justice should guarantee an equal degree of efficiency of the judicial authorities and their administrations in the exercise of their competences. At the same time, they must provide at least the same level of security for the realization of the procedural rights of citizens and security of turnover in general, which has been achieved at the moment with the existing rules for the exchange of information and documents on paper.

The proposals made are tailored to the specifics of electronic notification to the parties, while sufficient guarantees have been created both for ensuring the proper service of communications and for the implementation of procedural actions and acts in electronic form.

In this way, the desired effect is achieved - on the one hand, related to the use of information and communication technologies to improve access to justice, and on the other - leading to optimization and acceleration of the judicial process, but with the mandatory observance of all guarantees for the protection of the rights of the participants in the proceedings.

The amendments to the Civil Procedure Code (CPC) (promulgated, SG No. 98 of 2020), as well as the changes with its final provisions in the Administrative Procedure Code and in the Criminal Procedure Code, which created a regulatory framework for the use of video conferencing in the civil and administrative process, as well as expanding the possibilities of using video conferencing in the criminal process, as follows:

More specifically, the amendments and additions to the Code of Civil Procedure and the Code of Civil Procedure regulate the use of video conferencing when conducting interrogations and hearings in civil and administrative proceedings, in which the administrative body or the judicial panel and witnesses, experts, parties or translators are physically located in different places on the territory of the country.

The possibilities for using the video conference as a way to collect evidence in the conduct of separate investigative actions and separate judicial actions in cases where the participants in the pre-trial proceedings, resp. the court proceedings are located in different places on the territory of the country or outside the country, in order to provide the pre-trial authorities and the court with greater flexibility in the reproduction of evidence and means of evidence in the criminal process.

The changes in the Code of Civil Procedure, the Code of Civil Procedure and the Code of Civil Procedure in the field of video conferencing are a consequence of the need to speed up civil, administrative and criminal proceedings and reduce the costs of their implementation. Last but not least is the need to modernize the legislation regarding the tools for gathering evidence. In view of the global processes and the workload of our judicial system, the implementation of videoconferencing in civil, administrative and criminal cases has serious potential.

Law on supplementing the Civil Procedure Code (promulgated, SG No. 62 of 2022), which regulates the electronic information system „National register of Confiscations“ in the Republic of Bulgaria, through which the information concerning the movable property with a registration regime, on which liens have been imposed in enforcement cases, will be centralized in one database.

The basic goals are the arrangement of an information system serving the National Register of Confiscations, including a module for electronic public sale, and the exchange of information electronically with other registers with a view to the development of electronic services that are provided to citizens and businesses - transition to a fully centralized information system and database on the occasion of seized items;

- ensuring the possibility of electronic exchange of data in connection with the provision of information between the entitled authorities and persons related to seized items;
- implementation of electronic services for automated access to the National register of Confiscations;
- providing access to databases and registers, to provide real-time up-to-date information on the description of the seized item and all elements related to the seizure that determine its imposition;
- ensuring not only the moment of surprise when a seizure is imposed (real-time entry of circumstances in the register and continuous access to the information in it), but also preventing the possibility of disposing of the thing, due to its identification as seized at the moment of the action taken by the entitled body;
- providing the possibility of real-time notification electronically to the interested parties, in case of imposition and change of circumstances regarding attachment;
- providing an opportunity to notify entitled bodies and persons when a lien is lifted, in order to take appropriate action on competence.

Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Law on Legal Aid (promulgated, SG No. 102 of 2022). In 2022, a draft Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Law on Legal Aid was prepared in the Ministry of Justice.

With the Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Law on Legal Aid adopted by the 48th National Assembly, changes were made, which are part of the measures in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria.

Main objective of these measures is improving access to justice by providing more favorable conditions for people from vulnerable groups.

The fulfillment of this goal has been achieved by adopting new rules that ensure the provision of legal aid in out-of-court proceedings as well and out-of-court dispute resolution procedures.

This includes representation in administrative criminal proceedings, proceedings for issuing an individual administrative act, proceedings for challenging an individual administrative act in administrative order, proceedings before arbitration and a mediation procedure.

Another measure that is foreseen is in the direction of expanding the circle of persons with a specific profile who will gain access to the legal aid system, namely:

- persons seeking or receiving international protection or benefiting from temporary protection in accordance with the Law on Asylum and Refugees, for whom the provision of legal aid is not due to another legal basis;
- persons whose interdiction is requested, as well as persons placed under interdiction;
- persons with disabilities receiving monthly support under the Disabled Persons Act, whose monthly income is not sufficient to authorize a lawyer, as well as
- persons who have reached the age of 21, under maintenance obligations arising before the age of 21.

An important emphasis is the exemption from court fees and costs in court proceedings and from the reimbursement of legal aid costs for persons who do not have the means to pay a lawyer, wish to have one and the interests of justice demands this. Until the changes were

adopted, it was impossible for many citizens, due to their property and financial situation, to afford to use a paid lawyer, as well as to pay court fees and costs.

The adopted changes provide quick, cheaper and adequate protection and support to citizens, as well as a reduction in court challenges.

Act of Amendment the Mediation Act (AoA of MA)

In 2022, on the occasion of a project carried out, at the same time, under the leadership role of the High Judicial Council, by the Plan, with the name „Introduction of methods for alternative dispute resolution in the judicial system in Bulgaria - pilot introduction of mandatory judicial mediation; completion of the network of judicial centers in all district regions of the country; development of a strategy for the full use of other alternative means of dispute resolution“, under the conditions of inter-institutional cooperation and interrelationship, the Ministry of Justice and the High Judicial Council prepare a draft of the Act of Amendment the Mediation Act (AoA of MA). The law was approved by Decision №851 of the Council of Ministers of October 28, 2022. The Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Law on Mediation was promulgated in SG, no. 11 of 2 February 2023. It is scheduled to take effect from July 1, 2024.

The proposed changes to the Act of Amendment the Mediation Act (AoA of MA) envisage the introduction of mandatory judicial mediation for proceedings in certain civil and commercial cases subject to the courts of district, district and appellate courts, as of July 1, 2024. The mediation procedure in such pending court cases is strictly regulated. The Act of amendment the Mediation Act (AoA of MA) also makes relevant amendments to the Civil Procedure Code, the Law on the Judiciary and other normative acts necessary to achieve the set goals.

The main changes in the Act of amendment the Mediation Act (AoA of MA) are the following:

1. Mandatory participation of the parties in a first mediation meeting is introduced as a mandatory rule in the following imperatively regulated civil and commercial cases, when a claim is brought or a request is made to the court for:

- ✓ allocation of the use of a joint property subject to article 32, paragraph 2, of the Property Act;
- ✓ monetary claims arising from co-ownership under article 30, paragraph 3, and article 31, paragraph 2, of the Property Act;
- ✓ division under Article 34 of the Law on Property - in the proceedings for the execution of the division;
- ✓ fulfillment of obligations of the owners, users or occupants of independent objects in a building in condominium mode under Article 6 of the Condominium Management Act, to reimburse costs incurred by an individual owner for the repair of common parts of the building under Article 48, paragraph 7 of the Condominium Management Act, the as well as for the annulment of an illegal decision of the general meeting or of an illegal act of the management board (manager) of the condominium under Article 40, paragraph 1 and Article 43, paragraph 1 of the Condominium Management Act;
- ✓ payment of the value of a company share upon termination of participation in a limited liability company under article 125, paragraph 3, of the Commercial Code;
- ✓ liability of a manager or of a controller of a limited liability company for damages caused to the company under article 142, paragraph 3, and article 145 of the Commercial Code.

2. An obligation is introduced for the parties to participate in a first meeting in a mediation procedure at the discretion of the court when a claim is made for:

- ✓ divorce by article 49 of the Family Code;
- ✓ resolution of disputes regarding the exercise of parental rights, the child's place of residence, personal relations with the child and his maintenance under article 127, paragraph 2, of the Family Code;
- ✓ amendment of the measures related to the exercise of parental rights, the child's place of residence, personal relations with the child and his maintenance under art. 51, para. 4 and article 59, paragraph 9, of the Family Code;
- ✓ resolution of disagreements regarding the exercise of parental rights and obligations under article 123, paragraph 2, of the Family Code;
- ✓ determination of measures for personal relations with the grandparents under article 128 of the Family Code;
- ✓ maintenance;
- ✓ monetary or non-monetary claim arising from a contract, unilateral transaction, tort, unjust enrichment or conducting someone else's work without authority with a claim price of up to BGN 25,000.;
- ✓ existence, termination, destruction or cancellation of a contract or a unilateral transaction or for the conclusion of a final contract with a claim price of up to BGN 25,000.;
- ✓ ownership and other real rights on property or for infringed possession;
- ✓ remuneration or benefits arising from employment relationships, as well as to recognize the dismissal as illegal and its cancellation and to restore the previous job;
- ✓ protection of membership rights in a commercial company under article 71 of the Commercial Code or to cancel a decision of the general meeting of the company under article 74 of the Commercial Code, as well as claims under article 58, paragraph 1, of the Cooperatives Act and more article 25, paragraph 4, of the Law on Non-Profit Legal Entities;
- ✓ protection of intellectual property rights under The Copyright and Related Rights Act, The Law on Patents and Registration of Utility Models, The Law on Trademarks and Geographical Indications, The Industrial Design Act, The Law of Integrated Circuit Topology and The Law on the Protection of New Varieties of Plants and Breeds of Animals.

3. Exceptions to the scope of mandatory judicial mediation are provided, and criteria for assessing this circumstance are also regulated.

4. It is proposed to separate the conduct of judicial mediation in judicial mediation centers.

Mediation centres attached to the courts will constitute structures that are integrated into the structure of the courts themselves and are administered by judges and judicial officers. It is planned that they will function under the district courts, and a corresponding territorial division will be opened in each district court in order to conduct mediation procedures. It is possible to open independent centers for judicial mediation at the larger and busier district courts by a decision of the judicial collegium of the High Judicial Council. The detailed regulation of the structure of the judicial mediation centers, their organization and the duties of the coordinators of the centers is intended to be regulated by a by-law issued by High Judicial Council 5. Additional selection and specialized training for judicial mediators is planned, as well as their entry in the list of mediators at the judicial mediation center.

The selection of mediators to the judicial mediation centers, the procedure for their entry and deletion from the lists to the district courts, their training, mandate and control over their activities, as well as the activities of the coordinators the centers are regulated by an ordinance adopted by High Judicial Council. The regulation regulates the amount of fees payable by the parties for the court center and the costs of the mediation procedure in pending court cases.

For the practical implementation of the reform, the following by-laws have been adopted by the High Judicial Council:

- Ordinance 11 of October 30, 2023 on the structure and organization of the activities of the judicial mediation centers, which is promulgated in SG No. 94 of November 10, 2023, para. SG No. 97 of 21 November 2023.
- Ordinance № 10 of October 30, 2023. on the selection, status and activity of mediators in judicial mediation centers, promulgated SG No. 94 of November 10, 2023.
- With 3 of the transitional and final provisions of the Ordinance amending and supplementing the Ordinance 11 of 2023 on the structure and organization of the activities of judicial mediation centers (SG No. 97 of 2023.) are provided amendments and additions to the Rules for Administration in the Courts, where the position of „coordinator – judicial mediation center is regulated (SG No. 97 of 2023.)
- The Judicial College of the High Judicial Council has issued, on the basis of article 341, paragraph 1, of the Judiciary Act, the Classifier of Positions in the Administration of Courts as in Section II. „Specialized administration“ a new position is included, as of 01.07.2024, „coordinator – judicial mediation center“.

At the same time, in connection with a submitted request to establish the unconstitutionality of the Act of Amendment the Mediation Act (AoA of MA) by the Supreme Bar Council in March 2024, with decision № 11 of July 1, 2024 under c.c № 11 of 2024. The Constitutional Court declared unconstitutional the judicial mediation, which was scheduled to take place from July 1, 2024 and precede the consideration of certain types of civil and commercial cases. The entire set of provisions in the Law on Mediation and the Civil Procedure Code, which regulated the new procedure, was declared unconstitutional. The amendment of the Law on Mediation in the direction of complying with the decision of the Constitutional Court is pending.

Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence

- As progress in the field of access to justice, the adopted changes in Act of Amendment the Mediation Act (AoA of MA), promulgated. in SG No. 66 of 2023. A number of measures are planned to facilitate access to justice, such as:
 - At the request of the injured person, the state and municipal bodies, medical institutions and legal entities that carry out activities of prevention and protection from domestic violence are obliged to forward to the relevant district court within 24 hours the request to initiate proceedings for the issuance of a protection order.
 - Also with the Draft Act amending and supplementing the Electronic Communications Act of Domestic Violence Protection Act (promulgated in SG No. 66 of 2023) they also provide additional guarantees for the protection of the rights of persons and enhanced protection of the vulnerable category of persons by the state. It is foreseen the director of the Directorate „Social Assistance“ can submit an application when the injured person is a minor or a minor and/or is in a helpless state as a result of severe disability, illness or old age or is placed under guardianship. In addition to the expansion of the circle of injured persons who can seek protection in accordance with the Domestic Violence Protection Act, it is envisaged that, when the victim cannot defend himself due to a helpless state or dependence on the perpetrator, the proceedings may also be initiated at the request of the prosecutor.
 - an obligation is introduced for the court to ex officio require for the parties inquiries about the family and/or kinship relationship between the parties, about criminal record and about measures imposed under the law, as well as other references for production purposes.

- An expanded possibility to provide free legal assistance in the proceedings under the Criminal Code is foreseen. With the transitional and final provisions of the Draft Act amending and supplementing the Electronic Communications Act of Domestic Violence Protection Act, an amendment and addition to the Law on Legal Aid are made, according to which it is allowed in proceedings under [The Protection from Domestic Violence Act](#) the court allows legal aid, taking into account a possible state of dependence of the victim on the perpetrator, leading to the impossibility of using the owned property, as well as other circumstances preventing effective legal protection.

By priority „Elimination of violence against women and girls“. In 2018 The Constitutional Court of Bulgaria adopted decision № 13 of 27.07.2018, which ruled that the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, drawn up on 11.05.2011 in the city of Istanbul (Istanbul Convention) advocates legal concepts related to the concept of „gender“, which are incompatible with basic principles of the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria. At the same time with decision of June 1, 2023 The Council of the European Union approved the accession of the Union to the Istanbul Convention), which obliges Bulgaria to implement that part of the Convention that sets the standards for protection against domestic violence and violence against women, namely: creating a legal framework for protecting women from all forms of violence as well as preventing, prosecuting and eliminating violence against women and domestic violence, the develop a comprehensive framework, policies and measures for prevention, protection and support of victims; promoting international cooperation on this matter, providing support to organizations and law enforcement agencies to cooperate to eliminate violence against women and domestic violence, the establishment of a monitoring mechanism, to ensure the effective implementation of the measures, etc.

The Republic of Bulgaria has significantly brought its legislation in the field of prevention and counteraction of domestic violence into line with the basic principles of the Istanbul Convention compatible with the basic principles of the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria.

A good legislative basis has been built in the fight against violence. The policy of the Ministry of Justice regarding the fight against violence is permanent and consistent, including and domestic violence, its prevention and protection of victims. In recent years, the Ministry of Justice has taken a number of actions and measures aimed at improving the legal framework in order to effectively counter violence in all its forms, including and for its prevention, for the protection of victims and for the effective prosecution of perpetrators. They are introduced legal mechanisms for the protection of victims of violence, including and free legal assistance before all courts at the expense of the state budget and to persons affected by domestic or sexual violence who do not have the means and wish to use legal protection, compensation for victims, protection services, incl. in actions with an international element. All forms of domestic violence have been criminalized, thus ensuring adequate and comprehensive criminal-legal protection from any acts of violence against women, incl. domestic violence. Measures have been taken in prosecuting and punishing perpetrators, protecting and compensating victims.

Next, in the Republic of Bulgaria, through the Ministry of Justice, actions have been taken to improving legislation in the field of protection against domestic violence and social support for victims and synchronizing it with European legislative practices. The specific ones made in the period 2019-2024 normative amendments to the Criminal Code, The Code of Criminal Procedure, The Law on Assistance and Financial Compensation to Victims of Crimes, the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence, the established Coordination Mechanism for Assistance and Support to Victims of Domestic Violence, the changes in the Regulations for

the Implementation of the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence, which are under development and are yet to be adopted, are described above.

It is also important to note that in the last five years there have been funded projects of non-profit legal entities in accordance with the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence. It's for the purpose in accordance with the law on the state budget of the Republic of Bulgaria for the relevant calendar year under the budget of the Ministry of Justice funds in the amount of BGN 450,000 are determined. More information on this activity is available below on question 19 in the report.

Human trafficking it is a serious crime against the person and one of the most brutal violations of human rights and dignity, which, unfortunately, is also largely a gender-based crime, affecting mainly young women and girls who are involved in sexual exploitation.

Bulgaria is primarily a country of origin for victims of human trafficking, and sexual exploitation continues to be the most common form, followed by forced labor and labor exploitation.

Our State is a party to all significant international legal instruments relating to trafficking in persons, and national policy in the field is regulated in the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act (ABT), adopted in 2003, which sets out the national institutional framework for responding to the crime and the policies relating to overcoming its consequences. The National Commission for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings is part of this institutional framework.

By priority „Right to work and rights at work“

The Republic of Bulgaria is developing legislation providing legal guarantees to prevent discrimination and to create equal opportunities in all areas of public life. The protection against discrimination in the exercise of the right to work, regulated in Chapter 2, Section 1 of the Law on Protection against Discrimination, covers both the stage of vacancy announcement and employment, as well as the entire period of existence of the employment relationship and its termination. This protection also applies to workers in public sector employment relationships (art. 28).

The Labor Code, which regulates labor relations, also affirms the principle of non-discrimination, incl. based on gender. It is expressly regulated that women and men have the right to equal remuneration for equal or equal work (article 243, paragraph 1, of the Labor code). The Law on Protection against Discrimination provides for an obligation for employers to ensure equal working conditions without regard to signs of discrimination (Article 13 of the Law on Protection against Discrimination) and states that the obligation to pay equal remuneration for equal or equivalent work covers all remuneration paid directly or indirectly, in cash or in kind, regardless of the term of the employment contract and the duration of working hours. The criteria for evaluating labor in determining wages and evaluating labor performance are the same for all workers and employees and are determined by collective labor agreements or by internal rules for the salary, or by the legally established conditions and procedure for evaluating employees in the state administration without regard to signs of discrimination (Article 14 of the Law on Protection against Discrimination).

The organization of wages in enterprises is regulated in internal rules for wages, which are approved by the employer and cannot contradict the normative acts and the conditions agreed in the collective labor agreement. The employer is obliged to invite the bodies of trade union organizations in the enterprise to participate in the preparation of the project of the internal rules for the salary. The internal rules for the salary necessarily include general provisions on the organization of the salary in the enterprise, determination and distribution of

the means of salary, determination of minimum values or ranges of basic salaries at job levels, the order and manner of determination and amendment of additional wages. The negotiation of the individual basic wage in employment contracts is based on the assessment and grading of jobs and positions. In the assessment of the workplace, the following are taken into account: the complexity of work, the responsibility of work, the burden of work and the parameters of the working environment (Regulation on the structure and organization of wages).

Given the above, national legislation largely guarantees pay transparency within a company or institution. This also leads to a significant reduction in the pay gap between men and women. According to Eurostat statistics, the pay gap between men and women in Bulgaria in 2022 is 13%, which is at the average level for the EU.

NSI's annual data on the average annual salary of employed persons for the years from 2019 to 2023 – in total and by gender, as well as a brief comment on the data. NSI's annual data on the average annual salary of employed persons are:

Year	the average annual salary (SGRZ) of employed persons, in BGN.			Pay differences, in %		
				SGRZ of men in relation to the total amount of SGRZ	SGRZ of women in relation to the total amount of SGRZ	SGRZ of women compared to SGRZ of men
	Total	Men	Women			
2023	24,147	26,446	21,855	109.5%	90.5%	82.6%
2022	21,242	23,424	19,001	110.3%	89.5%	81.1%
2021	18,733	20,515	16,887	109.5%	90.1%	82.3%
2020	16,687	18,339	14,967	109.9%	89.7%	81.6%
2019	15,209	16,845	13,528	110.8%	88.9%	80.3%

Source: : <https://nsi.bg/bg/content/3958/%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%BD%D0%BE-%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B2%D0%BE-%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%BC%D0%B8%D1%87%D0%B5%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8-%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%B9%D0%BD%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8-%D1%84%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BC%D0-%B0-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D1%81%D0%BE%D0%B1%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BB> and

https://nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/data/timeseries/Labour_2.2.1.xls

To track trends in the pay gap between men and women, NSI data were taken from the monitoring of the average annual salary of employed persons for the years from 2019 to 2023. There has been a gradual reduction in the difference in the average annual salary of employed women and men. In 2019, the average annual salary of women was 80.3% of that of men, and in 2023, it reached 82.6% of the average annual salary of men. The data also indicate an approximation of the average annual salary of women to total average annual wage – from 88.9% in 2019 to 90.5% in 2023. It is of interest to note that in economic activity „Administrative and auxiliary activities“ the average annual salary of employed women exceeds that of men, with the excess running from 16.2% in 2019 to 5.3% in 2023.

By priority „Quality education, training and lifelong learning for women and girls“. Ministry of Education and Science implements the state policy in the field of preschool and school education in accordance with the current regulations and The Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning in the Republic of Bulgaria (2021–2030), Strategy for the Development of Higher Education in the Republic of Bulgaria 2021–2030, National Strategy for the Development of Scientific Research in the Republic of Bulgaria 2017–2030, National Development Program „Bulgaria 2030“.

Strategic documents in the field of preschool and school education do not create prerequisites for the division and inequality of women and men. In the implementation of these documents, the Ministry of Education and Science encourages all participants in the process to respect and implement the principle of gender equality and to support gender equality in education. This is also reflected in the curricula for the various subjects.

In the curricula of civic education (General education preparation and revision for grades 11 and 12) and of philosophy (profiled preparation for grades 11 and 12) there are topics and expected results (competences) addressing gender discrimination and women's rights. In *civic education* students are expected to recognise cases of gender discrimination and to assess the justifiability of combating discrimination. In *philosophy* there is a separate topic „Sexuality and cultural manifestations of gender“, in which attitudes are formed from students about intolerance to sexual violence and about awareness of the importance of gender for personal identity. Students explore the historical factors that influence the establishment of cultural manifestations of gender.

Information technology is one of the fastest growing technologies in everyday life. They constantly impose new standards and opportunities for development in the digital world. In response to the dynamic development of technologies and the introduction of artificial intelligence, the curricula for *information technology* for grades VIII, IX and X, a new theme „Programming and artificial intelligence“ has been added. The topic includes various activities according to the stage of student training, such as building skills for creating a search query when interacting with a "smart" agent, setting queries to artificial intelligence tools; working with sensors in digital devices and applications that generate large amounts of data that are used to train artificial intelligence systems. The competences set out in the curricula reflect the 4th dimension of the European Digital Competence Framework DigComp 2.2, with all five areas of competence fully covered by the information technology curricula.

The national policy for adult education prioritizes increasing the quality of the workforce by increasing opportunities and investments in training and qualification, developing skills and key competences in accordance with the needs of jobs caused by the processes of restructuring the economy, digitalization and the green transition.

Training of unemployed women for vocational qualifications is carried out at the request of employers, who then have a commitment to provision of subsequent employment, or by occupations in demand on the labor market, which are determined by preliminary annual surveys of employers' labor force needs and developed forecasts for the development of the labor market in the medium and long term. Annual surveys of employers' workforce needs are conducted by the Employment Agency in the form of a survey among employers and aim to collect and analyze up-to-date information on the professions, competences, knowledge and skills of the personnel sought by employers. The information collected refers to the demand for labor in the upcoming 12 months and for the next 3-5 years. By order of the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, medium- and long-term forecasts for the development of the labor market in Bulgaria have been developed, and the latest updated forecast has a time horizon of 2034. Long-term forecasting is carried out on the basis of a developed prognostic macroeconomic model, which is owned by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy and is updated periodically. The forecasts provide information on labour demand by 120 occupations, 35 economic activities, 28 districts, 3 educational levels, gender and 6 age groups. The information is published on the specially developed online platform for analyzes and forecasts for the development of the labor market in Bulgaria.

In implementation of the Employment Promotion Act, which sets out the normative framework of employment policy, annually the nationally representative organizations of the social partners propose for financing and inclusion in the National Employment Action Plan

projects to provide training and employment to unemployed persons in a disadvantaged position in the labor market. Women from these groups are actively involved in training. In the projects of the social partners, a complex approach is applied, in which trainings for the acquisition of professional qualifications, trainings for key competences necessary for the successful performance of the profession and support the start of work are provided in accordance with a preliminary study of the needs of employers for a workforce with certain qualifications and skills. The projects are financed under the National Action Plan for Employment with resources from the State budget for an active labour market policy.

During the period covered by the national report, financial support was provided for training sessions for unemployed persons for professional qualifications requested by employers with readiness for their employment under an employment contract, for a period of not less than 6 months after the successful completion of the training. In the case of trainings at the request of an employer, the employer has the right to indicate the training organization. Funds from the state budget for an active labor market policy cover the costs of training the unemployed, and individuals are also provided with funds for a scholarship and for transport and accommodation costs for the duration of training. The amounts of funds for training, scholarships and transport and accommodation expenses are determined annually by the National Action Plan for Employment.

Financial support has been provided for training sessions on key competences requested by employers for employed women from micro, small and medium-sized enterprises. The financing of the training is carried out with equal participation of the Employment Agency and the employer, who has a commitment to preserve the employment of the persons who successfully completed the training for a period not shorter than 6 months. The trainings are held within the framework of the approved National Employment Action Plan for the respective year.

Measures under the Employment Promotion Act to encourage employers to take on unemployed persons for on-the-job training in the form of on an internship for the acquisition of practical skills and experience for persons with education and qualifications and without an internship in the profession, apprenticeship under the guidance of a mentor for persons without education and qualifications for the acquisition of professional knowledge and skills, training through work (dual form of training), which is implemented in cooperation between a training institution for conducting theoretical training and an employer for practical training in a specific workplace.

In 2022, new opportunities are introduced in the Employment Promotion Act that facilitate access to vocational training, increase the flexibility of training opportunities and shorten training time. An opportunity has been introduced for both women and men over 16 without education and qualifications to participate in literacy training combined at the same time as training to acquire a first-degree qualification, thus not applying the entry level requirement.

In order to encourage unemployed women to validate professional knowledge and skills acquired through informal means, a legal possibility has been introduced with funds from the State budget for an active labour market policy to finance the expenses of individuals for participation in validation procedures, as well as to provide funds for scholarships and transport expenses for the days of participation in the validation procedure. The range of intermediary services provided by the Employment Agency has been expanded, including a new service for directing unemployed and employed persons to procedures in accordance with the Law on Vocational Education and Training for the validation of professional knowledge and skills acquired through an informal path.

To promote participation in training, including for women, a training funding voucher mechanism is implemented, where training funds are provided directly to individuals in the

form of training vouchers. Persons have the right to choose the type of training and the training organization. By the Decree of the Council of Ministers № 48 of 04.04.2023, the Regulations for determining the terms and conditions for the provision of training vouchers under the Program „Development of Human Resources“ 2021-2027, the National Recovery and Sustainability Plan and the Just Transition Fund were adopted. According to the Regulations, unemployed, employed and inactive persons are entitled to training vouchers. Training vouchers are provided for inclusion in training to acquire key competences and to acquire a professional qualification. Only the Employment Agency has the right to provide training vouchers, and the vouchers are digital documents with a unique identification digital code that allows its individualization and tracking.

The training of adults (persons over 16 outside the education system), incl. of women is financed with funds from the state budget for active labor market policy, with funds from the ESF+ through the Program „Development of Human Resources“ and funds under the Recovery and Sustainability Mechanism through the National Recovery and Sustainability Plan. The implementation of training and employment measures and programmes under the Employment Promotion Act, the parameters of which are determined annually by the National Employment Promotion Plan, is financed.

By priority „Digital and financial inclusion of women“

The National Roadmap for Digital Transformation of Bulgaria until 2030 includes a package of measures aimed at education and training of various groups in our society aimed at increasing digital skills and the share of specialists in the field of ICT (information and communication technologies) with promoting access of women and girls to this area while increasing the number of information and communication technologies graduates. Activities aimed at building and upgrading an educational cloud environment and creating resources, as well as sharing and integrating already existing and nationally and internationally proven resources. Skill formation is encouraged in students to become digital creators, model, program and develop digital creativity. Efforts are focused on introducing specialized software solutions for analysis and evaluation of educational results.

Regarding the share of women specialists in the field of Information and Communication Technologies our country reports a relatively high level (28.9%) compared to the pan-European level (18.9%). This result is an incentive for the continuation of measures and activities in this area, including private and non-governmental organizations, such as the Bulgarian „Digital National Coalition“, academies for training information and communication technologies experts, etc.

A priority area related to increasing the digital skills of citizens aged 16-74 are measures aimed at the labor market. In today's world, one of the major challenges facing the labor market is the deepening shortage of labor, including those with appropriate skills. Adapting the workforce to a rapidly changing work environment, training in digital skills and the increasing use of digital technologies in the economy are fundamental to the implementation of the overall objective of the „Digital Decade“ 2030 programme: „strengthening the collective resilience of Member States and bridging the digital divide, the achieving gender and geographical balance by promoting lasting opportunities for all individuals, developing basic and in-depth digital skills and competences, including through specialized and professional training and lifelong learning, and promoting the development of highly effective digital knowledge and skills within horizontal education and training systems.“

Among the challenges is the inclusion of the elderly in educational programs, especially in the 65+ group. Funds are planned for targeted measures to increase the skills of the workforce, through additional educational courses, leading to increased access to a range of

programs, including in the field of information technology and the development of digital tools. At the same time, financial support is also provided for persons registered with the Employment Offices. Among the objectives of the measures is to contribute also to the reduction of the imbalance in skill-building at regional level.

The total number of measures set out in the country's Digital Transformation Roadmap to 2030 that are aimed at enhancing digital skills on persons aged 16-74 and those skilled in the art of Information and Communication Technologies is 19 measures and four additional, *hasshti* indirect influence peakin achieving digital goals <https://egov.government.bg/wps/portal/ministry-meu/strategies-policies/digital.transformation/itis-national-strategic-documents/national.strategic.document.digital.transformation>.

By priority „Unpaid care and domestic work/work and family reconciliation“.

For the reporting reference period, namely 2019 – 2024, changes in legislation have taken place that extended the rights of fathers (adoptive parents) with additional parental leave up to the age of 8, with a guaranteed right to monetary compensation from the state social insurance during this period. By ensuring an individual right of the father (adoptive father) to take parental leave, an opportunity is created for a balanced participation of parents in caring for the child in a family environment. The fathers who are 1,370 benefited from this type of compensation for the period from August 1 to December 31, 2022. In 2023, – 3,501 and for the first three months of 2024 – 863 individuals.

By priority „Gender-responsive social protection (eg universal health coverage, cash transfers, pensions)“.The implementation of the adopted amendments to the Social Security Code continues as early as 2015, through which the parameters of the pension system have been updated and stabilized. The more important of these, which have the effect of encouraging longer participation in the labour market by wage-earners and equalising the pensionable age of men and women, are as follows:

- Smoothly increasing the required age for granting a pension under Article 68, paragraphs 1-2 of the Social Security Code for women and men until reaching the age of 65 - for men in 2029, and for women in 2037.
- Smoothly increasing the required insurance period for granting a pension under Article 68, paragraphs 1-2 of the Social Security Code until reaching 37 years of insurance period for women and 40 years of insurance period for men in 2027.

By priority „Political participation and representation“. In the reporting period (from mid-2019 to mid-2024), there were 11 elections in the Republic of Bulgaria – for the National Assembly, President, local authorities, European Parliament. The Electronic Media Council conducts for each election campaign specialized monitoring of the audio and audiovisual content of media services, with the aim of monitoring compliance with the Electoral Code and the Law on Radio and Television. Within the framework of monitoring, the participation of men and women in the campaign itself and in the media content is taken into account. For each election, the The Electronic Media Council requests from the Central Election Commission a report on the participation of men and women in the political race. Thanks to the search for this data, the Central Election Commission has started and established a practice of announcing them publicly to the media and society. More information about the results of the conducted monitoring is available under item. 22.

By priority „Changing discriminatory social norms and gender stereotypes“. The Law on Protection from Discrimination contains explicit provisions governing equality in the

exercise of the right to work, outlined in Chapter II from the Law on Protection against Discrimination, imputing to the employer obligations related to ensuring equal working conditions; equal remuneration for equal or equivalent work; provision of equal opportunities for professional training and improvement of professional qualifications and retraining, as well as for professional growth and growth in a position or rank when applying criteria in the evaluation of their activity, etc. In this regard **Commission for Protection against Discrimination** and the applicable national anti-discrimination regulations provide comprehensive protection against discrimination, including the application of the principles of gender equality, as well as the promotion of positive measures according to established European and international standards and commitments in this field.

During the reporting period, the Commission for Protection against Discrimination implemented the project „Improving the prevention of discrimination in the labor market through the modernization and strengthening of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination“ – „Non“ of discrimination“, which is implemented with the financial support of the European Social Fund Plus under the program "Development of human resources" 2021-2027.

Among the main activities are: conducting campaigns to improve citizens' awareness of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Protection from Discrimination. Promotion and strengthening of the "Employer without discrimination" procedure, including through its electronicization in order to involve a greater number of employers. In addition, the trainings aim to attract employees of administrations related to the labor market, such as the Employment Agency, the Main Labor Inspectorate, incl. their territorial structures, employees in municipal and regional administrations /incl. the coordinators for equality and non-discrimination/ who, in partnership with the regional representatives of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination, can carry out even more effective protection of the participants in the labor market. The complaint form will also be electronicized, as well as the register of effective decisions of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination, and for this purpose a new website of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination will be developed.

The procedure „Employer without discrimination“ is related to certification and introduction of a non-discrimination standard in the field of employment aimed at employers. The commission, after selecting employers in the participation procedure, specifies the candidates, according to the conditions, among which:

1. To establish internal rules for protection in the exercise of the right to work and ensuring equal opportunities in the labor market, with which they are familiar during the training and provided in a training package.

2. To designate a person to comply with the implementation of the policy of non-discrimination in the workplace.

The presence of employees with the relevant employer, be it from the private or public sector, contributes to the prevention and non-discrimination in the workplace.

„Employer without discrimination“ is an open procedure with 25 certified employers to date and will continue to be carried out in the future as it is related to the Commission's activities.

During the reporting period, on the initiative of the Bulgarian Forum of Business Leaders and the Center for the Study of Democracy, in cooperation with the Commission for Protection against Discrimination, workshops were held annually to exchange good corporate practices in order to promote policies of respect and acceptance of differences. The discussion forums in question also aim to promote the awarded companies in the special category „Diversity in the workplace“ at the authoritative Annual Awards for Responsible Business of the Bulgarian Forum of Business Leaders. The aim is to turn such discussions and initiatives

into a platform for the exchange of useful information and working ideas, practical experience and achieved successes.

In 2024, at the invitation of the Management Board of the Bulgarian Forum of Business Leaders, the Commission for Protection against Discrimination took part in an official ceremony for awarding the certificates to 27 companies that signed the Charter of Diversity in Bulgaria. A charter is a document voluntarily signed by a company or public institution to take steps to implement diversity and equality policies in the workplace regardless of individual characteristics.

A key element of the information campaigns of the regional representatives of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination is the elimination of stereotypes, which are a prerequisite for the unequal treatment of women and girls. More detailed information on their activity is included on question № 26.

Ministry of Culture, as a Program Operator of the Programme „Cultural Entrepreneurship, Heritage and Cooperation“, financed under the Financial Mechanism of the European Economic Area 2014-2021, in the period 2019- 2021 announced 5 calls for project proposals on three outcomes. 53 contracts with a total value of EUR 11.08 million were concluded, the implementation of which will be assessed at the end of 2024. The beneficiaries are both public organizations – municipalities and cultural institutes, as well as NGO's from Bulgaria, with partners from Bulgaria, Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein. At the project level, all principles of social development, social sustainability and prevention of discrimination are ensured through the implementation of several indicators, also reported by gender, on job creation, trained employees, projects aimed at large groups or minorities, etc. The evaluation of project proposals took into account the relevant standards of the Council of Europe for the protection of human rights and good governance, as well as the National Strategy for the Promotion of Equality of Women and Men (2021-2030).

The program implements: 17 projects under Result 1 „Improved management of cultural heritage“, 20 projects under Result 2 „Improved access to arts and culture“ and 16 projects under Result 3 „Improved awareness of arts and culture of ethnic and cultural minorities (focus on Roma). The agreed funds amount to 85% of the European Economic Space Financial Mechanism, 15% have national co-financing, with BGN 11,973,273 agreed under Result 1, BGN 2 – 6,679,360 agreed under Result 3 - BGN 1,300,000.

Output 3 of the Program “Cultural entrepreneurship, heritage and cooperation“, finances projects allowing the organization of diverse artistic and creative events, festivals, performances, exhibitions and educational initiatives that revitalize peripheral spaces and show the contribution of ethnic and cultural minorities to the cultural life of smaller communities, enrich cultural life in smaller towns and villages, as well as form and engage new audiences. The inclusion of partners from donor countries (Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein) within the funded projects leads to a stronger emphasis on Europe's rich artistic identity as well as cultural diversity.

* * *

3. Over the past five years, what specific actions have you taken to prevent discrimination and promote the rights of marginalized groups of women and girls?

In the online survey you will be asked to select the marginalized groups of women and girls which your country has taken measures from the list below, as appropriate in your national context:

- Women and girls living in remote and rural areas
- Indigenous women and girls
- Women and girls marginalized on account of race, ethnicity and/or caste
- Religious minority of women and girls
- Women and girls with disabilities
- Women and girls living with HIV/AIDS
- People with diverse sexual orientation, gender identities or expressions, or sex characteristics
- Younger women
- Older women
- Migrant women and girls
- Refugee and internally displaced women and girls
- Women and girls in humanitarian settings
- Other, please specify
- None of the above

Bulgaria shares the importance and need for effective measures and consolidated efforts of the interested parties for preventing discrimination and promoting the rights of marginalized groups of women and girls. These groups are the focus of policy attention. An approach combining universal and targeted measures is applied. Targeted measures are being carried out for marginalized groups of women and girls. At the same time, they benefit from measures that are universal for the entire population. Examples are listed below by groups of women and girls.

Younger women

The realization of young people in the labor market is a prerequisite for their successful integration into social, social and economic life. One of the leading priorities of the employment policy in Bulgaria is the creation of conditions and opportunities to increase employment and reduce inactivity and unemployment among young people, incl. young women. The efforts of the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy are aimed at promoting the active behavior of young people, increasing their employability, supporting their initiative and entrepreneurship, increasing their motivation for work and their successful integration into employment.

In order to support the transitions from unemployment and inactivity to employment and from education to employment, young people, incl. young women registered in the directorates „Labor Bureau“, a wide range of mediation services are offered such as information, counseling, labor mediation for employment in the primary labor market, as well as in subsidized jobs, inclusion in qualification and retraining courses. Young women are involved in programmes, projects and incentive measures financed with resources from the State budget. Employment in subsidized jobs enables young women up to 29 (incl) years of age to acquire work experience, skills and competences, to form work habits, which makes them in demand by employers. Young women are also provided with intermediary services, not directly related to their employment, but important for acquiring specific skills (for job search, for appearing before an employer, for preparing documents, for forming confident behavior), which they learn through their participation in Job Search Studios. Psychologists working in employment offices in the country provides young women with individual and

group psychological support, and case managers assist them in contact with other institutions to overcome obstacles to starting work.

A successful tool for attracting young women to the labor market is the specialized labor exchanges conducted by the Employment Agency. They enable a direct meeting between unemployed/inactive young people and employers. Activation information campaigns are being conducted. Support is provided through targeted offering and provision of the services „Family Work Consultant“ and „Consultation and mentoring after starting work“.

The activation of inactive persons is among the main priorities in the work of the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy. A number of activities have been implemented to activate the economically inactive persons of working age, financed both from the state budget and with European funds. Activities with inactive young women in Bulgaria are implemented in the context of the EU Council Recommendation „Bridge to jobs – strengthening the youth guarantee“. Proposals are made for employment, training or return to the education system.

The National Program „Activation of Inactive Persons“ is successfully implemented, the main goal of which is to activate and include in the labor market inactive persons, including young women up to 29 years of age (incl.) who do not work, study and are not registered in Directorates „Bureau of Labor“. Roma and youth mediators, community service organizers, psychologists and case managers (case managers) work to work with the inactive persons under the program, who before their appointment are registered as unemployed persons. Youth mediators appointed in municipalities with a large number of inactive youth are an effective approach to activating young people who are not studying or working. Youth mediators support inactive young women to gain confidence, motivate themselves to study and work, assist them in their job search or inclusion in training. The work with the young people from the NEETs group is also carried out through the implementation of the procedure „I start work“ – Component 1 „Activation“ under the Human Resources Development Programme. The aim is to provide a comprehensive package of measures related to the integration into the labor market of inactive persons from 16 to 65 years of age with an emphasis on disadvantaged persons. To achieve this goal, various activities are implemented within the project, including: implementation of innovative approaches and activities to identify, inform and motivate inactive persons for active behavior in the labor market; training of „activators“ from local communities, preparation for work with the target group; organization of events, campaigns, incl. in social networks; formation of mobile teams for the purpose of informing, activation and establishment of connections with inactive persons; testing of complex support services, through the creation of activation clubs; conducting „workshops for job search, psychological support, professional guidance; organization of labor exchanges, as well as referral to appropriate training, education, validation and employment measures tailored to the individual profile of individuals.

Under the project „Youth Employment+“, which is aimed at increasing the competitiveness of young people, three employment options are provided:

- Inclusion of young people, including young women, in internship with an employer, for a period of up to 9 months – with mentors determined by the employer, and the internship contract cannot be for a period shorter than 6 m.

- Involvement of young people in on-the-job training for a period of 6 months with an employer with mentors designated by him.

- Ensuring supported employment of persons from the target group in positions falling within the scope of single groups of professions from 2nd to 9th grade of the National classification of professions and occupations 2011, for a period of up to 9 months with an insured mentor.

Older women

Women of pre-retirement age need real opportunities to find work and maintain employment as the risk of unemployment increases with age. Measures by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy in support of older women are targeted in several priority areas:

- Provision of individualized services to promote active labor market behavior, information mediation and employment of vacancies advertised in the real sector, inclusion in training and employment programmes and measures, schemes under European programmes;
- Expanded opportunities and provision of access to training to increase professional qualifications and acquire key competences, in accordance with the needs of employers for a workforce with a certain qualification;
- Stimulation of companies that provide employment to unemployed persons of pre-retirement age.

During the period under consideration in the national report, unemployed women over the age of 50, as well as unemployed men, are one of the priority groups in employment promotion policy. Targeted programs and measures have been implemented for them – the National program „Retirement allowance“ and the incentive measure to support unemployed persons over 55 years of age. The national program „Retirement allowance“ supports the transition from unemployment to work or retirement of unemployed persons of pre-retirement age. Employers are provided with funds from the state budget for remuneration and insurance for a period of 3 to 24 months. Under the terms of a specific incentive measure under article 55 a of the Employment Promotion Act (converted by legislative changes effective January 2024.) labor costs of employers who provided employment to persons from the target group for a period of up to 6 months have been financed.

Unemployed persons of pre-retirement age are a priority group in a wide range of programs and projects financed with funds from the state budget and European funds – National program for training and employment of long-term unemployed persons, National program for employment and training of people with permanent disabilities, Regional programs for employment, incentive measures for long-term unemployed persons for „green jobs“, etc.

Older women can supplement their pension income by working. Investments in safe and healthy working conditions have a positive effect on the employment of persons from this group due to the greater probability of diseases, opportunities to participate in training due to rapid changes related to digitization and effective intermediary services for employment. The Employment Promotion Act regulates intermediary services that support pensioners to find work. Women, as well as men who have acquired the right to a pension, can register at employment offices and use the following services: information on advertised vacancies, mediation in information and employment, and psychological assistance. Working pensioners with skills are a valuable resource for employers. In this context, older people are important women possess a wide range of skills to stay longer at work. Improving access to and developing on-the-job training opportunities that allow work and training to be combined create the conditions for high levels of participation in the labor market.

Action to promote the experience and good practices of employers to exploit the potential of older workers, including women, and to pass on the experience gained to younger workers also plays an important role.

Women and girls with disabilities

During the period 01.01.2019 d - 31.12.2023 d. The Agency for People with Disabilities implements employment programs for people with disabilities with the following results:

1. Encouraging employers to ensure equal access when hiring women and men with permanent disabilities in a regular work environment under the National program for employment of people with disabilities, according to Art. 44 of The Persons with Disabilities

Act . Main cel of the program is to encourage and support employers, respectively the appointing authorities, to create conditions for employment, employment and/or increase the employability of people with permanent disabilities. Eligible activities: Providing access to a workplace for a person with a permanent disability; Adaptation and equipment at a workplace for a person with a permanent disability; Qualification and retraining, respectively training for professional and official development of a person with a permanent disability. As a result of the successfully implemented projects, 125 employers have been supported. New jobs have been created for people with permanent disabilities in a normal working environment and suitable working conditions have been provided for 324 persons with permanent disabilities, of which for 169 women with permanent disabilities is Frsecure sustainable employment;

2. Encouraging employers to ensure health and safety working conditions, and equal access when hiring women and men with permanent disabilities in a specialized working environment, according to Art. 49 of the Law on Health.

Through the achieved project goals, the working conditions of 180 have been improved0 employees, of whom about 50% are permanently disabled. The implemented projects supported the goals set in them for the long-term creation of healthy and safe working conditions for those working in specialized enterprises and cooperatives and provided access to their workplaces, sanitary facilities and recreation facilities for the employed 850 women with permanent disabilities.

After the implemented activities aimed at increasing professional competences and creating a favorable social climate for exercising work in specialized enterprises, a total of 125 persons with permanent disabilities are qualified, of which 75 women have undergone training to improve their qualifications in the field of digital competences and sewing production.

In the successfully reported business-oriented projects, 160 jobs were equipped and created and long-term unemployed persons with permanent disabilities were employed, of which 72 were women.

Vocational training on the one hand and the technological renewal of specialized enterprises and cooperatives of people with disabilities on the other hand, had an impact on the labor productivity of working women with permanent disabilities and contributed to their full inclusion in public life.

3. Encouraging employers to ensure equal access when hiring women and men with multiple permanent disabilities, with mental disorders and/or intellectual disabilities, in a protected working environment, according to Art. 51. from the Disability Act.

Under the program „Creation of sheltered employment centers for people with multiple permanent disabilities”, direct activities are implemented in four established Sheltered Employment Centers. They employ 60 persons with multiple permanent disabilities with mental disorders and/or intellectual disabilities, of whom 29 are women.

- Project „Center for sheltered employment „Sveti Naum“ from "Labor and Healing Economy" EOOD provides training and employment in bookbinding activities to 15 persons with multiple permanent disabilities, mental disorders and/or intellectual disabilities;
- Project "Creation of an accessible experimental garden for labor rehabilitation and integration of people with disabilities", city. Bozhurishte. As a result 15 persons with multiple permanent disabilities with mental disorders and/or intellectual disabilities are assigned for the first time in their lives to employment contracts in „Accessible experimental garden for occupational rehabilitation and integration of people with disabilities“;
- Project "Club for sustainable nutrition and protected employment "Credo" of Akademika - VUM OOD. Varna, provides an opportunity for 15 persons with multiple permanent disabilities, with intellectual disabilities and/or mental disorders, to carry out work activities, when providing a package of personal support services related to jobs, to support the creation and maintenance of the protected employment. A „Club for healthy eating and

sheltered employment - Credo“ was created, and it functions as a fast food restaurant type „Bistro“;

- Project „ECO Center for Protected Employment“ of "Family Center with Maria" EOOD, village Kranevo, municipality Balchik, and at the end of December 2022 the investment part of the project was completed. The overall goal of the project is to build an accessible and protected workplace for 15 persons with multiple permanent disabilities within a sustainable social business enterprise.

With the presentation of the Annual Reports on their activities and the assessments of the professional suitability of those working in the sheltered employment centres, it is evident that 60 persons with multiple permanent disabilities, of whom 29 are women, have shown a sustained positive attitude towards their professional duties and increased motivation to work. They have mastered new knowledge, skills and work habits. They have built skills to achieve independence in the performance of work tasks and an understanding of work discipline. All this has had a beneficial effect on their mental and physical health. The activities they participate in are tailored to their individual needs and job opportunities. The successfully achieved goals of the projects under this program support the full inclusion in public life of employed people with multiple permanent disabilities, with mental disorders and/or with intellectual disabilities.

4. Promotion of women with permanent disabilities (entrepreneurs) for active participation in the programme for the start-up of independent economic activities of the Agency for the Disabled, pursuant to article 46 of the Law on Health.

The programme is regulated by law in article 46 of the Law on Persons with Disabilities and article 36 of the Regulations for its implementation. With the implemented projects in the reporting period ensured real social inclusion, in the economic and public life of the country, for 73 persons with permanent disabilities, of whom 38 were women. The desired effect of the implementation of the program has been achieved - the number of unemployed persons with disabilities and those receiving social benefits has decreased. All beneficiaries of the program show sustainable development of the started independent activity, which contributes to the full inclusion of each of them in public life.

Women and girls marginalized because of ethnicity

Ministry of Education and Science actively and consistently implements measures to ensure access to education in several areas:

- coverage and retention in the education system for children and pupils of compulsory preschool and school age;
- inclusion of children in the preschool education system by providing support for personal development, including by providing additional training in the Bulgarian language;
- additional training, interest classes, career guidance and counseling for students for whom the Bulgarian language is not their mother tongue and who have gaps or have difficulties in learning the educational content;
- support for children, students and parents whose mother tongue is different from Bulgarian in educational institutions by appointing educational mediators and social workers.

The position exists in the Bulgarian education system „**educational mediator**“. The educational mediator organizes and carries out activities, ensuring regular attendance at school and kindergarten and full participation of children and students in the educational process. It is actively involved in involving parents and local communities in the educational and social life of children and students of kindergartens and schools.

The educational mediator has established his effectiveness in working with different communities and his social functions are used not only among vulnerable groups, but also

among persons granted temporary protection by Ukraine of compulsory preschool and school age to support their access to education.

With an amendment to the Ordinance on the financing of institutions in the preschool and school education system from 01.01.2018, additional funds are provided from the state budget for working with children and students from vulnerable groups. Among the main criteria for providing additional funds for educational institutions with a concentration of children and students from vulnerable groups is the low educational status of parents, measuring the percentage of parents with less than secondary or primary education (primary stage), or of parents without education. With the funds, costs can be incurred for additional remuneration for employees included in the teams for coverage and retention in the education system of children and students of compulsory preschool and school age, for payment of additional lessons in Bulgarian in schools and additional modules for children who do not speak Bulgarian, in kindergartens, as well as for staff, committed to measures to support access to education and prevent the risk of children and students from vulnerable groups dropping out of the preschool and school education system.

With new amendments to the Regulation on the financing of institutions in the preschool and school education system of 2023, Article 52 provides funds for the appointment of educational mediators, social workers and/or teachers' assistants separately on purpose. This resource has been made available on the basis of the number of children and students and of the group in which educational institutions fall, according to the concentration of vulnerable groups.

According to paragraph 8 of article 52 a (which, however, will apply to the funds for 2024), the funds dealing with children and students from vulnerable groups for the respective year will be reduced by the amount of unspent funds provided from the State budget on the same basis in the previous year. This change has been made to ensure the use of additional funds specifically to ensure the work of educational mediators, as well as the efficient and effective use of funds related to their work.

The allocation of funds under Article 52 a for the budget year to kindergartens and schools is approved by order of the Minister of Education and Science and published on the website of the Ministry of Education and Science. According to Order № RD09-948/12.04.2024, approved by the Minister of Education and Science, the amount of funds for one employee (educational mediator, social worker and/or teacher's assistant) with a normal length of the working day for 2024 is BGN 18,000, which brings the monthly remuneration to BGN 1,500.

The purpose of the amendments made to the Ordinance on the financing of institutions in the preschool and school education system is also to guarantee the sustainability of the activities of educational mediators. Funds for vulnerable groups in 2021 amount to BGN 30,651,041, for 2022 – BGN 34,723,800, for 2023 the amount is BGN 36,078,916, and for 2024 the amount of funds is BGN 48,601,057.

According to data from the Center for Information Provision of Education, the number of appointed educational mediators for the academic year 2023/2024 at the end of the month December 2023 was 1,184, with 71 of them employed in more than one educational institution.

Educational mediators can be appointed both by employment and non-employment legal relationship, to support access to education and prevent the risk of children and students from vulnerable groups dropping out of the preschool and school education system. The appointment of educational mediators can be carried out with funds from the budgets of the institutions – kindergartens and schools, as well as with earmarked funds from national and European programs and projects, when demarcating the sources of the funds.

Under project BG05M2OP001-3.005 „Active inclusion in the preschool education system“, a total of 223 pedagogical and 612 non-teaching specialists were appointed and paid

remuneration, of which 72 were educational mediators. In implementation of this activity already as Activity 6 until 31.12.2023 under project BG05M2OP001-5.001-0001 „Equal access to school education in crisis“, financed under Operational Program „Science and Education for Smart Growth“, remuneration has been appointed and paid to a total of 226 pedagogical and 577 non-teaching specialists, of which 72 are educational mediators.

According to the project „Success for you“, launched on 27.01.2023, as of 30.09.2023, 487 educational mediators/social workers have been employed in 386 schools.

- 482 persons are employed with daily employment under the project every 4 hours.
- 5 persons are employed with a daily employment of 2 hours under the project.

The national program to overcome the identification of educational institutions on ethnic grounds enables the municipalities approved for funding under it to appoint educational mediators and other non-teaching staff. In 2021, 28 educational mediators and other non-teaching staff were involved in activities under the program, and in 2022 – 26. In 2023, the project proposals of 8 municipalities were approved under the national program, and the number of appointed educational mediators working under the national program is 27.

On the basis of article 289, paragraph 1, of the Preschool and School Education Act (PSEA), the directors of public and municipal schools, as well as kindergartens implementing a system of delegated budget, have the right to: dispose of the school/kindergarten funds; to make compensated changes to the revenue and expenditure plan; to determine the number of staff, individual remuneration, teaching workload, number of groups and/or the classes and the number of students in them. Directors exercise these powers in accordance with the approved budget of the school and in compliance with the regulations, necessarily ensuring the implementation of the curriculum. In this regard, a workplace for the specific position, including and for the appointment of an educational mediator, is opened by the director according to the needs of the institution and the possibilities of the budget.

Trainings for educational mediators under the „Education“ program are to take place in 2024. Under the project „Strong Start“, which started on 12.02.2024, training is planned for over 3,500 pedagogical and non-pedagogical specialists (mediators and social workers) who provide expert-methodical assistance on personal development activities. The launched new project „Success for you“ under the program „Education“ – 2021-2027, co-financed by the EU, will enable schools with a complex of activities to help students improve their educational results. The project also includes training for over 4,000 pedagogical specialists and non-pedagogical staff. Educational mediators, social workers and other non-teaching staff are also included here.

By project „Social and educational inclusion“ of Center for Educational Integration of Children and Students from Ethnic Minorities trainings are held for trainers – teachers from pedagogical faculties, pedagogical specialists from the preschool and school education system, youth workers and educational mediators – Roma, to acquire competences to deal with discriminatory manifestations, with harassment, violence and social exclusion

Center for Educational Integration of Children and Students from Ethnic Minorities in partnership with Sofia University „St. Kliment Ohridski“ in 2023 continued the implementation of the project „Capacity building for educational and social inclusion“, financed under the program „Local development, poverty reduction and improved inclusion of vulnerable groups“. Performance period – 2021-2023. The total budget is 487,628 euros. On 14.08.2023. Ministru of Education and Science and Center for Educational Integration of Children and Students from Ethnic Minorities concluded an additional agreement № D03-80/14.08.2023, changing the project implementation period to 31 months and the total budget amount to 584,933 euros.

In implementation of the project „Building capacity for educational and social inclusion“ for the period 2022-2023, the following indicators have been achieved: trained

Roma educational mediators to become trainers of Roma educational mediators – 10; trained Roma educational mediators – 55; trained pedagogical specialists – 35; trained non-teaching staff – 34; trained municipal employees – 51; members of the management teams of the youth centers participated in the exchange of experience and good practices – 24; university professors participated in the exchange of experience and good practices – 8; trained pedagogical specialists for key competences „Personal, social and learning skills” – 10; trained non-teaching staff for key competences „Personal, social and learning skills” – 23.

To ensure the successful work of **health mediators** and building on policies aimed at marginalized communities **Ministry of Health** it has undertaken updating of strategic and normative documents, as well as implementation of projects.

In the two programming periods 2022-2023 and 2024-2027 of the National Action Plan to the National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for Equality, Inclusion and Participation of Roma 2022-2030 the objective "Development of the concept of health mediation" is included.

In 2022 The Ministry of Health decided to finance 17 new jobs for health mediators. Thus, after in 2021 health mediators numbered 290 in 148 municipalities, in 2022 their number increased to 307 in 150 municipalities. For 2023 are secured funds for 322 mediators in 153 municipalities compared to 332 health mediators in 156 municipalities for 2024.

In the Ministry of Health the register of certified health mediators is updated on an annual basis.

Health mediators are assigned to work for municipalities through a delegated budget and serve neighborhoods and/or settlements where vulnerable communities live. Health mediators speak the language of the community (most often Roma or Turkish), are selected with a transparent selection procedure and undergo training at a medical university to acquire a professional qualification. Since 2019, their activities have been included in the Health Act (art. 29), and in 2020. The Ministry of Health also adopted Ordinance № 1 on the requirements for the activity of health mediators.

In an attempt to address the question of how to reduce turnover among health mediators, to compensate for constantly increasing demands and tasks and to increase their motivation to work, an update of their salaries was adopted in April 2022 at the proposal of the Ministry of Health to the Ministry of Finance. Until now, they were appointed to the minimum wage.

With *Decision № 50/03.02.2022. to adopt standards for state-delegated activities with natural and value indicators in 2022.* the financial standard of BGN 11,810 has been increased to BGN 13,523 for 1 state per health mediator for 12 months. At the moment according to *Decision № 847/28.11.2023 of the Council of Ministers amending and supplementing Decision № 346 of the Council of Ministers of 2023 on the adoption of standards for activities delegated by the state with natural and value indicators* through In 2024, financial resources were provided for 1 state per health mediator for 12 months, BGN 17,903 or about 14% above the minimum wage.

In 2022 The Ministry of Health has started the implementation of the project „Health for all“, financed under the Norwegian Financial Mechanism, in partnership with the National Network of Health Mediators. Health mediators from 6 municipalities were involved in the activities and made a detailed mapping of the health situation with a focus on maternal and child health, sexually transmitted infections and family planning among the most marginalized Roma communities in the municipalities of Burgas, Novi Pazar, Kazanlak, Samokov, Dupnitsa and Dimitrovgrad.

At the end of 2022, 23 health mediators from the municipalities of Burgas, Dimitrovgrad, Dupnitsa, Novi Pazar, Kazanlak, Samokov, Blagoevgrad and Kozloduy underwent upgrading training for working in a hospital according to a training module specially

developed within the project. As of February 2023, 21 of them work in medical facilities in the municipalities listed above, with the exception of the municipality of Kozloduy. During the regular annual training of new health mediators for 2023, all of them have successfully met the requirements of the add-on module and, as of now, 60 health mediators hold certificates attesting that they are prepared to assist in attending to patients from vulnerable and minority communities.

Within the framework of the Project, an electronic system for reporting and monitoring the activities of health mediators has been developed and implemented, trainings have been held to work with it and the system has been working in its full functionality since November 2023. The total value of the planned project funding also includes funds for the provision of portable computers for health mediators in order to effectively use the electronic system and achieve sustainability of the results of the implementation of the project activities.

Within the framework of the program period, the joint program of the EU and the Council of Europe "Access of Roma women to justice" was held, JUSTROM3, in which **Commission for Protection against Discrimination** is an associate partner in Bulgaria. The objectives of the program are:

- address multiple discrimination and improve the related access to justice of Roma women by supporting the empowerment of Roma women by increasing their awareness of discrimination, complaint mechanisms, the justice system and human rights protection institutions/bodies;
- improving professional resources used at national level by the judiciary, law enforcement authorities and NGO's/human rights advocates, with regard to the implementation of anti-discrimination standards with a focus on multiple discrimination, gender equality and Roma women;
- increasing interaction between the institutional frameworks of the European Union and the Council of Europe, including through the National Roma Contact Centers and the "Roma Expert Group" of the Council of Europe, as well as with national and local authorities regarding national strategies for Roma integration and civil society regarding access to justice.

JUSTROM3 is implemented in several countries – Bulgaria, Greece, Italy and Romania. The Commission for Protection against Discrimination participates in the activities included in the project, including through prevention, which aims to increase institutional and public sensitivity and intolerance to manifestations of discrimination and hate speech. At the final seminar in 2022. „The role of equality bodies and national human rights institutions in improving Roma women's access to justice“ main topics discussed are „Promoting Roma women's rights through the EU strategic framework „Roma for equality, inclusion and participation for 2020-2030“ and „The role of equality bodies in the project, the implementation and development of national strategic frameworks for Roma“.

In 2019 The Commission for Protection against Discrimination participates in the implementation of the international project “Parents at work“ under the Program: Rights, Equality and Citizenship of the EU; REC- AG-2018. The Commission for Protection against Discrimination is a partner with the leading Institute for the Prevention of Discrimination - Belgium. The remaining project partners are the Commissions of Portugal and Estonia (described in question №6).

Also, the regional representatives of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination regularly participate in awareness campaigns on the territory of 24 regions in the country, through which they inform the public in the person of citizens and interested persons such as local state and municipal representatives of institutions. The activities of the

representatives of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination include conducting consultations and providing information on the rights of marginalized groups of women and girls in order to protect and prevent discrimination and promote equality of treatment.

In the last five years, there has been no significant change regarding the risk profiles of the groups vulnerable to involvement in human trafficking and exploitation – people with low or no education; living in conditions of extreme poverty, in regions with high unemployment rates; suffering from various disabilities or mental illnesses; victims of domestic violence; suffering from various forms of dependence; mired in debt; lacking social, work and life experience, as well as a supportive family environment, easily amenable to manipulation. High-risk groups include children and youth, marginalized representatives of ethnic minorities, the permanently unemployed, people who do not have a home and live in places that are not safe to live in, those working in the field of providing sexual services, illegal migrants or representatives of LGBTI+ communities.

In order to inform and empower the most vulnerable groups to human trafficking, the administration of the National Commission for Combating Human Trafficking partner institutions, international and non-governmental organizations, part of the Permanent Working Group of the National Commission for Combating Human Trafficking, annually lay down measures related to prevention, both in terms of public awareness of the existence of the problem as well as targeted prevention and direct information activities among different groups.

Some of the highlights of the activities carried out include:

- 2020 – campaign for the prevention of trafficking in pregnant women for the purpose of selling the newborn, organized by National Commission for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings and Local Commission for Combating Human Trafficking Burgas, including the production and distribution of a short animated video, as well as screenings and information sessions in the Roma community, with the assistance of Roma mediators and other organizations working in the community. Local Commission for Combating Human Trafficking Montana held two information and empowerment sessions for 40 women from the Roma community.
- 2021 – in the kamapia for the prevention of human trafficking for the purpose of tourwater exploitation under the title „Free lunch no“, as a target group third-country nationals are also included, including those seeking a legal form of employment. Over 5,000 people applying for a temporary employment permit in Bulgaria have been formed with the assistance of consular services in the former Soviet republics.
- Since 2022, the „Dignita“ Foundation, a member of the Permanent Working Group, in partnership with National Commission for Combating Human Trafficking and Local Commission for Combating Human Trafficking, conducts women's circles – information sessions for women from Ukraine, in focus on the prevention of human trafficking for the purpose of sexual and labor exploitation. To date, over 10 such events have been held, covering more than 200 participants.
- Local Commission for Combating Human Trafficking Sliven periodically conducts information sessions with women deprived of liberty in the Prison in the city of. Sliven.
- 2022–2023 – IOM Bulgaria, together with National Commission for Combating Human Trafficking and Local Commission for Combating Human Trafficking held 73 information sessions with 2148 representatives of the Roma community.

The National Mechanism for Referral and Assistance to Victims of Human Trafficking (NMN) applies in cases of citizens of Bulgaria, the EU or third countries, without separation on grounds related to sexual orientation or gender identity.

During the period 2019-2024, four male victims of human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation received protection and support in specialized services for victims of human trafficking.

The National Commission for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings and the organizations that are members of the Permanent Working Group partner with the State Agency for Refugees in conducting information sessions on the risks of involvement in human trafficking with third-country nationals, as well as in increasing the requirements of employees regarding the identification and referral of cases of human trafficking.

Migrant women and girls

In the last 5 years, there has been a significant increase in foreigners who have sought international protection in Bulgaria, some of them from single mothers with many children, unaccompanied minors and pregnant foreigners.

After identification of the needs /for each individual case of a foreign woman seeking protection/, actions are taken to ensure the most suitable living conditions in relation to the vulnerable category in which she falls.

For foreign women seeking international protection, pregnant or single mothers arriving in the country with minor children under 3 years of age, actions are taken to place them in a social service in the community, namely – Unit „Mother and baby“. Their placement is carried out by referral from the „Child Protection“ department to the Social Assistance Directorates. On the territory of unit „Mother and baby“, foreign women seeking international protection have independent living space and the necessary furniture to lead a normal lifestyle; they receive support from social workers in units to monitor their health status, as well as that of their children.

As for unaccompanied minor girls, the main activities to ensure their best interest are carried out by the Department „Child Protection“.

On the territory of the registration and reception centers of **State Agency for Refugees**, unaccompanied minor girls are placed in the designated safe areas for children.

Employment Agency implements a policy for the integration of displaced persons from Ukraine who have temporary protection status through Project BG05M9OP001-6.006-0001 „Solidarity“, implemented under Operational Program „Development of Human Resources“ 2014-2020, priority axis 6 „Support for overcoming the consequences of the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and preparation for ecological, digital and sustainable recovery of the economy“.

The aim of the project is to provide timely support to 2,500 displaced persons from Ukraine and their families who arrived in Bulgaria after 24.02.2022, with ensured access to the labor market and with the status of temporary protection, for rapid integration into the labor market.

Eligible project activities are:

1. Psychological support, professional guidance, labor counseling, motivation;
2. Inclusion in employment with a real sector employer;
3. Provision of assistance for an integration supplement for accommodation;
4. Provision of mentors who will support the appointed persons for a period of up to 3 months;
5. Provide incentives for employers in case they maintain the employment of employees after the subsidized employment expires.

On 06.06.2022, the acceptance of applications from representatives of the target group of the project and employers wishing to participate in the project activities began.

On 29.03.2023, the proposed changes to the Criteria for the selection of operation „Solidarity“ were approved, and on 10.04.2023 a bilateral Additional Agreement to the Administrative Agreement was signed.

As of 25.07.2023, the acceptance of applications and conclusion of contracts with employers has been suspended.

By 25.07.2023, a total of 1,510 applications had been received from employers to create 11,155 jobs, with 451 of the applications for 2,956 jobs cancelled. A total of 1,059 applications from employers for the creation of 8,199 jobs are active as of 29.09.2023.

A total of 934 contracts for providing employment under the project were signed.

One of the problems for the completion of the Project is the lack of interest on the part of the persons from the target group and the inability of the employees from the Directorates „Labor Bureau to direct Ukrainian citizens to the employers.

From the launch of the project until the end of 31.07.2023, which is the deadline for financing the employment of the persons involved, 3 839 persons have started work on the project „Solidarity“.

Most jobs are claimed in the sectors: „Hotel and restaurant industry“; „Transport, storage and post“; „Retail trade, excluding motor and motorcycle trade“.

The funds disbursed so far under the project are: BGN 11,087,023.80.

According to an agreement with the Ministry of Tourism dated 29.08.2022. The Employment Agency sends a monthly list of the persons from the target group of the project who have requested the use of an integration supplement for accommodation.

People of different sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or gender characteristics

During the reporting period, the Commission for Protection against Discrimination, as a national equality body, also considered proceedings related to complaints of discrimination on the basis of a legally protected „sexual orientation“. There have been a total of 21 proceedings initiated before the Commission for Protection against Discrimination on this basis for the last five years, with half of the cases involving multiple discrimination in combination with other protected signs. In order to prevent discrimination and promote the rights of the LGBTI community, the Commission for Protection against Discrimination actively participates in numerous formats to discuss problems related to their unequal treatment, along with informing and engaging the wider public to build tolerant societies that take into account LGBTI rights as part of general human rights. In this regard, some of the campaigns and events conducted are the following:

- Forum „Values in Action: Sustainable Civil Sector for a Democratic and European Bulgaria“, organized by the Bulgarian Fund for Women. The event discussed opportunities for projects regarding the sustainability of civil organizations within the framework of a three-year partnership initiative of the Bulgarian Fund for Women, the Bulgarian Center for Non-Profit Law and the Impact Drive Foundation, supported by the European Commission. Topics related to gender equality, the rights of migrants and LGBTI people are highlighted. Opportunities to improve the capacity of NGO-organizations through financial instruments from the European Commission were discussed.

The event „Values in Action“ enables representatives of civil organizations working to protect human rights, the rule of law, freedom and the achievement of equality to present their experiences and successes, as well as the challenges they face in their quest to achieve social change.

- Participation of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination in the information session of the Fundamental Rights Agency to the EU on „FRA Data Explorer: a key tool for national institutions“ and the use of resources on topics such as violence against

women, Roma and travelers, minorities and discrimination, discrimination and hate crimes against Jews or LGBTI.

Regarding legal provisions, even if the European Convention on Human Rights does not explicitly state „sexual orientation“ as a protective feature, the practice of the European Court of Human Rights strongly indicates that it considers it as one falling under Art. 14, in the category „other“. Moreover, the national legislation of the Republic of Bulgaria explicitly states „sexual orientation“ in the protected characteristics specified in Art. 4, para. 1 of the Protection against Discrimination Act, which points to an even stricter national legal framework, preventing unequal treatment on the basis of this basis.

* * *

4. Over the past five years, how has the confluence of different crises affected the implementation of the BPfA (Beijing Platform for Action) in your country, and what measures have you taken to prevent their negative impact on progress for women and girls?

In the online survey you will be asked to select the crises that have affected the implementation of the BPfA in your country over the past five years:

- COVID-19 and other pandemics
- Food and fuel crisis
- Debt crisis
- Armed conflict
- Climate crisis
- Care crisis
- Backlash on gender equality
- Other crises, please specify
- None of the above

As in all countries, the crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on the socio-economic life of Bulgaria. The armed conflict in Ukraine also has negative consequences, as it does throughout the EU.

For example, the contraction of activity and the closure of businesses has led to the release of staff and unemployment. Women's domestic workload increased during the pandemic, alongside their frontline service to benefit society in health, social services and education systems. The confinement of people to homes has led to an increase in the incidence of violence prevalent against women.

Simultaneously, the crisis created new opportunities. Digitization has accelerated in all areas. New services have been digitized. Remote online forms of learning and work, which continued to be applied after the crisis, became widespread. Digital competences and the digital environment have improved.

Bulgaria has taken prompt and adequate measures in various areas of life to deal with the effects of crises. This alleviated their adverse impact on the advancement of women and girls.

Examples of the timely and effective measures taken by the state are presented below.

COVID-19 and other pandemics

In connection with the COVID pandemic, changes were made to the legislation, which aimed to preserve the employment relations of workers and their wages. Specifically:

- the Labor Code regulates the right to use paid annual leave or unpaid leave in the event of a declared state of emergency or a declared emergency epidemic situation at the request of several categories of persons, incl. pregnant worker or employee, as well as a worker or employee in an advanced stage of in-vitro treatment, a mother or adoptive mother of a child up to the age of 12 or of a child with a disability regardless of age, a worker or employee who is a single father or adoptive father of a child up to the age of 12 or of a child with a disability regardless of age. In this case, the employer is obliged to allow the leave, i.e. has no right to refuse or postpone the use of leave. The time during which leave is taken is recognized as length of service. (Article 173 a LC).
- the amount of unpaid leave, which is recognized as work and insurance experience, has been increased. In this connection, according to article 160, paragraph 3, of the Labour Code, unpaid leave of up to 30 working days in a calendar year, and more than 30 working days - only if this is provided for in the Labour Code, in another law or in an act of the Council of Ministers - is considered as work experience. Pursuant to article 9, paragraph 2, item 3, of the Social Security Code, the time of unpaid leave of up to 30 working days during a calendar year is counted for insurance service without making social security contributions. In the period of the pandemic and the introduced state of emergency and extraordinary epidemic situation in the country, unpaid leave of up to 60 working days taken in 2020, up to 90 working days in 2021 and 2022 is considered for work experience and insurance experience.
- the obligation for employers to preserve the income of employed persons when the enterprise ceases to work is explicitly regulated, guaranteeing the right of workers to the gross remuneration (Article 267 a of the Civil Code).

As a measure to deal with the adverse consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and to achieve compliance with the requirement provided for in the legislation to care for children up to 12 years of age, in 2022 changes were adopted in the Labor Code and in the Social Security Code, which provides the opportunity for parents who are insured persons to take leave in case of temporary incapacity for work (hospital) and to receive monetary compensation from the state social insurance when they take care of children up to the age of 12, regardless of whether they are returned from a children's institution or returned from school due to imposed quarantine on the institution or the school, or a separate group or class in it. For these periods of absence from work, the Social Security Code also provides for the relevant benefits that replace the missing income of persons from work. Before the adoption of these amendments, only parents - insured persons who take care of healthy children, returned from a childcare facility (but not from a school) due to imposed quarantine of the facility - had the right to leave and monetary compensation in case of temporary incapacity for work. One of the goals of the introduced changes is to guarantee the full care of children up to 12 years old, who are prevented from attending school due to imposed quarantine, incl. and because of COVID-19, and at the same time to regulate the labor and insurance rights of their caregivers during the quarantine period.

In order to limit the negative effects of the COVID 19 crisis in 2020, timely and effective support is provided to enterprises and people to preserve employment and income through measures in the social field. Working women, as well as working men in enterprises affected by the crisis, are assisted under the terms and conditions of the measure, which has gained publicity as „60/40“ – to finance 60 percent of the amount of the insured income of the persons and the insurance contributions due at the expense of the insurer. The measure was introduced in April 2020 and has subsequently been refined to make income and employment support more effective.

Under project „Short-term employment support in response to the COVID-19 pandemic with a beneficiary, the Employment Agency has provided funds to employers

carrying out economic activity in sectors affected by the crisis to preserve the employment of both women and men. The compensations are for part of the salary and the tax and insurance contributions due at the expense of the insurer and the insured person.

The support is also supplemented by a measure for the payment of compensation to workers and employees, including those insured in economic activities, for which temporary restrictions have been imposed by an act of a state body. The conditions and procedure for paying compensation are regulated in C. №325 of November 26, 2020. The list of codes of economic activities for which temporary restrictions on the implementation of the activity have been introduced is determined by an order of the Minister of Labor and Social Policy, which is bound by the orders of the Minister of Health to introduce anti-epidemic measures to suspend certain activities, in order to limit the infection.

Under the anti-crisis measure – project „Employment for you“, support is also provided for the recruitment of both unemployed women and unemployed men. Under the project, funds were provided to employers for remuneration, additional remuneration under labor legislation and insurance for a period initially up to 3, and after 27.11.2020 up to 6 months. The project was implemented by the Employment Agency with financial resources under the Operational Program „Development of Human Resources“.

For **facilitating access to justice** legislative changes have been made, which creates rules for the exercise of procedural rights in electronic form within the framework of civil and criminal proceedings, as follows:

With the changes in the Code of Civil Procedure, the following are regulated:

- Rules for serving messages and summonses to an email address:

The proposed regulation provides that the service of acts of the court can be carried out at an e-mail address for service chosen by the party:

- through the single e-Justice Portal;
- through a qualified electronic registered mail service pursuant to Regulation (EU) № 910/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 July 2014 on electronic identification and authentication services in electronic transactions in the internal market and repealing Directive 1999/93/EC (OJ L 257 of 28 August 2014), hereinafter referred to as „Regulation (EU) № 910/2014“.

In the event that the party does not have registration with the single e-Justice portal or has not chosen a qualified e-mail service, but has indicated an e-mail address, service is carried out at the specified address. If it is impossible to deliver service in the specified ways, it is transferred to delivery at the current address of the party, and in the absence of such - to the permanent one.

On the other hand, service by electronic means is not entered in relation to a party that has not specified an electronic address, i.e. a party that is not interested in service under this order would not be bound by negative legal consequences.

With the changes in the Code of Civil Procedure, it is provided that the service of credit and financial institutions, including those carrying out debt collection against consumers, insurance and reinsurance companies and traders who supply energy, gas, or provide postal, electronic communication or water supply and sewage services, to notaries and private bailiffs, government institutions and municipalities is carried out only at an email address.

The service of a lawyer is carried out through the single e-justice portal or at any place where he is on duty outside his office.

It is proposed to introduce an obligation for the claimant to indicate in the claim an email address, as well as an obligation for the defendant to indicate an email address in the response to the claim, in case they have any.

- The ability to pay fees and other obligations to the court electronically:

In case that the request for protection and assistance was made in electronic form pursuant to article 102 in the single e-Justice portal, the state fee payable is reduced by 15 per cent. Upon withdrawal of consent to service in this way, the difference to the full amount of the state fee due is brought by the claimant within one week. The reduction of the state fee due would motivate the parties to choose this way of performing procedural actions in electronic form, which would significantly speed up the introduction of electronic justice.

- The performance of procedural actions in electronic form is regulated in a new chapter eleventh „a” of the Civil Code „Procedural actions and acts in electronic form“;
- The creation of a legal definition of the term „email address“, „e-mail address“ is a personalized space in the single e-justice portal through which individuals receive electronic statements, communications, summonses and papers from the courts, a qualified e-mail address, as well as an e-mail address.

With the changes in the Code of Civil Procedure are regulated:

- The preparation of judicial acts in electronic form:

It is planned that the judicial acts will be prepared as an electronic document in the unified information system of the courts and will be signed with a qualified electronic signature.

- The exercise of procedural rights and the performance of procedural actions in electronic form by the parties:

It is envisaged that the victim, the private prosecutor, the private plaintiff, the civil plaintiff, the civil defendant, as well as the defense attorney can make requests, notes and objections, as well as be able to appeal the acts of the court electronically.

- The rules for summoning and notifying the victim of the progress of criminal proceedings:

An opportunity has been created for the body that initiates the pre-trial proceedings to notify the victim of this, if he has indicated, in addition to an address for summoning in the country, an email address.

- The rules for serving summonses, notices and papers in the judicial phase of the criminal process:

A basic principle in the electronic summons system is the principle of voluntariness on the part of the participants in the process: they should express their consent to receive summonses, communications and papers electronically, and consent can be withdrawn at any time. Service can be carried out through an electronic address for service in the single e-Justice portal, certified by a copy of the electronic record, stamped with a qualified electronic time stamp of the court.

When served through a qualified e-mail registered service, service will be deemed to be fulfilled with the withdrawal of the documents sent by the addressee. Confirmation of receipt is not required, and the electronic identification of the person will be carried out in accordance with the procedure defined in the Law on the Judiciary.

In the judicial phase, the service of summonses, notices and papers to the victim of the crime, the injured legal entity, the private plaintiff, the private prosecutor, the civil plaintiff, the civil defendant and their trustees, as well as to a witness, expert, translator, interpreter or specialist-technical assistant. Service can be made through an email address for service at the single e-Justice portal, through a qualified e-mail registered service or through an e-mail address.

- The rules for sending a message about a crime:

A regulation has been created for sending a message about a committed crime and electronically, if it is signed with a qualified electronic signature, subject to compliance with the requirements of the law. With the message, the person has the opportunity to express his consent to be summoned and receive messages at the e-mail address specified by him.

- Creating a legal definition of the term „email address“.

➤ Normative changes in relation to e-justice should guarantee an equal degree of efficiency of the judicial authorities and their administrations in the exercise of their competences. At the same time, they must provide at least the same level of security for the realization of the procedural rights of citizens and security of turnover in general, which has been achieved at the moment with the existing rules for the exchange of information and documents on paper.

The proposals made are tailored to the specifics of electronic notification to the parties, while sufficient guarantees have been created both for ensuring the proper service of communications and for the implementation of procedural actions and acts in electronic form.

In this way, the desired effect will be achieved - on the one hand, related to the use of information and communication technologies to improve access to justice, and on the other - leading to the optimization and acceleration of the judicial process, but with the mandatory observance of all guarantees for the protection of the rights of the participants in the proceedings.

Civil Procedure Code Amendment Act (promulgated, SG No. 98 of 2020), as well as the changes with its final provisions in the Administrative Procedure Code (APC) and in the Criminal Procedure Code, which created a regulatory framework for the use of video conferencing in the civil and administrative process, as well as expanding the possibilities of using video conferencing in the criminal process, as follows:

More specifically, the amendments and additions to the Code of Civil Procedure and the Code of Civil Procedure regulate the use of video conferencing when conducting interrogations and hearings in civil and administrative proceedings, in which the administrative body or the judicial panel and witnesses, experts, parties or translators are physically located in different places on the territory of the country.

The possibilities for using the video conference as a way to collect evidence in the conduct of separate investigative actions and separate judicial actions in cases where the participants in the pre-trial proceedings, resp. the court proceedings are located in different places on the territory of the country or outside the country, in order to provide the pre-trial authorities and the court with greater flexibility in the reproduction of evidence and means of evidence in the criminal process.

The changes in the Code of Civil Procedure, the Code of Civil Procedure and the Code of Civil Procedure in the field of video conferencing are a consequence of the need to speed up civil, administrative and criminal proceedings and reduce the costs of their implementation. Last but not least is the need to modernize the legislation regarding the tools for gathering evidence. In view of the global processes and the workload of our judicial system, the implementation of videoconferencing in civil, administrative and criminal cases has serious potential.

Law on supplementing the Civil Procedure Code (promulgated. SG No. 62 of 2022), which regulates the electronic information system „National Register of Garnish“ in the Republic of Bulgaria, through which the information touchesmovable property with a registration regime, on which attachments have been imposed in enforcement cases, will be centralized in one database.

The main objectives are the arrangement of an information system serving the National Register of Confirmations, including a module for electronic public sale, and the exchange of information electronically with other registers with a view to the development of electronic services that are provided to citizens and businesses - transition to a fully centralized information system and database on the occasion of seized items;

- ensuring the possibility of electronic exchange of data in connection with the provision of information between the entitled authorities and persons related to seized items;

- implementation of electronic services for automated access to the National Register of Attachments;
- providing access to databases and registers, to provide real-time up-to-date information on the description of the seized item and all elements related to the seizure that determine its imposition;
- ensuring not only the moment of surprise when a seizure is imposed (real-time entry of circumstances in the register and continuous access to the information in it), but also preventing the possibility of disposing of the thing, due to its identification as seized at the moment of the action taken by the entitled body;
- providing the possibility of real-time notification electronically to the interested parties, in case of imposition and change of circumstances regarding attachment;
- providing an opportunity to notify entitled bodies and persons when a lien is lifted, in order to take appropriate action on competence.

In 2020, with the declaration of a state of emergency in our country, due to an epidemiological crisis, the State Agency for Child Protection undertook a number of **actions to support children and their families**, as some of them are:

- A special column „Ask here COVID-19“ has been created on the website of the State Agency for Child Protection. This is the place for children and their parents or caregivers to ask questions about the pandemic and the place for them to receive competent answers from specialists. The column is active and has been operating since 18.03.2020.
- The State Agency for Child Protection initiated the creation of the „Child“ section of the Unified Information Portal COVID-19, which contains useful information materials for children and parents.
- National Children's Helpline 116 111 has been operational with increased day-to-day support so that the line is continuously available to all children and their families who need to be consulted. Working specialists constantly listened, supported and directed callers on all issues that concern them.
- In order to guarantee the rights and interests of every single child at risk in a pandemic situation, the State Agency for Child Protection has created new, situation-adequate rules for carrying out checks (remote/non-attendance) to respect the rights of the child.
- In connection with the pandemic, the State Agency for Child Protection informed the mayors of all municipalities on the territory of the country, in which they were appealed for increased vigilance of the mental and physical health of children, with an emphasis on the heads of residential services. The recommendation to them is to strengthen the measures through social distance, high personal hygiene and disinfection. The letter contains a message about the readiness of the State Agency for Child Protection to provide assistance and support, at any moment.
- The State Agency for Child Protection made a request to the mayors of the municipalities to share difficulties, challenges, good practices, as well as to provide feedback on children's access to distance learning.
- The State Agency for Child Protection also appealed to the regional administrations of education and the directors of Educational boarding school and Social boarding school to support children, to share the difficulties and challenges under the conditions of the declared state of emergency.
- In support of all children, the State Agency for Child Protection Facebook page contained a message from a child – member of the Children's Council, which aimed to instill faith and courage in children and their parents, to motivate them to strictly follow the rules to limit the spread of the virus.

- The State Agency for Child Protection prepared an address to parents where separation has occurred and a parental rights dispute is available or in conflict, in the context of regulated child-parent contacts. The address is posted on the agency's official website and calls on parents to be patient and encourages them to actively use all alternative options to personal contact for communication with their children: Skype, telephone, Viber, messenger, etc.
- Contact was made with the crisis headquarters of the municipalities where the agency's offices are located in places (namely: Ruse, Vratsa, Varna, Burgas and Plovdiv), with assurance of the readiness of the employees for inclusion, in activities to support and support children, their parents, the citizens of the specific municipality.
- In relation to the pandemic, action has been taken to develop a methodological and practical guidance for crisis action aimed at institutions of the Violence Coordination Mechanism to support children and families.
- In view of the difficulties caused by social isolation and distance, related to finding adequate solutions to preserve the relationship of children and young people with their parents, relatives, close friends and classmates, as well as to guarantee access to distance learning, SAPD developed a survey that sent to a total of 316 social services for residential children and specialized institutions. The aim is to investigate the functioning and taking of specific measures by social services for residential children and specialized institutions in conditions of emergency. The analysis produced clearly outlined the difficulties and challenges, both of users and staff. In this regard, proposals have been made by the State Agency for Child Protection to the Minister of Labor and Social Policy, the Minister of Health, mayors, the executive director of the Social Assistance Agency and heads of regional education departments.
- The State Agency for Child Protection translated and sent the public appeal of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in connection with the pandemic to the attention of the National Operational Headquarters, Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education and Science, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Youth and Sports, Social Assistance Agency, National Association of Municipalities in the Republic of Bulgaria.
- In connection with cases of forced eviction of persons from certain settlements, a letter has been sent by the State Agency for Child Protection to all mayors of municipalities with instructions regarding the actions to be taken with a view to respecting the rights of children, with specific reference to the Guidelines of the United Nations in eviction.

Armed conflict

The following actions have been taken by the Employment Agency against asylum seekers from the war in Ukraine:

- A Rubric has been created on the official page of AZ „Job opportunities for Ukrainian citizens” in Bulgaria, which aims to provide information about access to the labor market and living and working conditions in Bulgaria, etc. <https://www.az.government.bg/pages/vazmozhnosti-za-rabota-na-ukrainski-grazhdani/>
- A survey was also published for:
 - survey of job-seeking attitudes of Ukrainian citizens.
 - 2,888 persons filled out the survey form of AZ to study their readiness to start work, and 2,049 /71%/ of them stated that they were ready to start work immediately.
 - employers wishing to employ Ukrainian citizens. 343 surveys submitted by employers. Of these, 254 /74 %/ expressed their willingness to immediately hire Ukrainian citizens.

Brochures and informational materials have been prepared about the rights and opportunities of asylum seekers in Bulgaria, including in both Russian and Ukrainian, which

are provided to Ukrainian citizens and employers (including by providing created QR codes for easy and quick access to surveys via mobile devices).

For the convenience of employers, a link to the electronic submission of a request for SRM has been published, and for Ukrainian citizens, a – link to the vacancies announced at the labor offices has been published <https://www.az.government.bg/pages/vazmozhnosti-za-rabota-na-ukrainski-grazhdani/>.

From December 12, 2022 The Employment Agency launched an inter-institutional survey among Ukrainian citizens residing in Bulgaria. The goal is for state institutions to receive up-to-date information about their job opportunities in Bulgaria in the coming months through it. Their attitudes towards independent living, raising children and education, as well as providing health care for older relatives and friends with whom they reside here, are also being studied.

The survey is carried out through an online form, which is published on the official website of the Employment Agency and can also be reached through a QR code for mobile devices or a link. The mobile teams of employees of the Employment Agency in the regions of Burgas, Varna, Dobrich and other regions visit the accommodation bases with a larger number of Ukrainian citizens in order to assist them on the spot in the distribution and completion of the survey. The survey in Ukrainian is available through the section „Job opportunities of Ukrainian citizens” on the official website of the Employment Agency. About 1,541 Ukrainian citizens granted temporary protection completed the survey, 41% of whom stated that they do not intend to register at labor offices, and 47% indicated that they do not have and do not expect to need work in the next 3 months.

Since the outbreak of the armed conflict in Ukraine, there have been 93,761 women granted temporary protection and 93,406 women citizens of Ukraine granted temporary protection.

For the same period of time, girls granted temporary protection were 28,952, respectively girls, citizens of Ukraine granted temporary protection were 28,894.

On the part of the State Agency for Refugees, actions have been taken to provide the necessary number of employees competent to provide temporary protection at all busy border points in the country.

Immediately after the start of the military conflict in Ukraine, those seeking salvation from hostilities have been identified as a high-risk group regarding involvement in human trafficking and various forms of exploitation.

The National Commission for Combating Human Trafficking administration participated in the preparation of a General Action Plan prepared by the representatives of the EU member states, under the leadership of the EU Coordinator for Combating Human Trafficking. The recommendations of the Group of Experts on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings to the Council of Europe Convention, as well as those of the Special Representative and Coordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, were disseminated.

The National Commission for Combating Human Trafficking administration actively participates in the working groups addressing the needs of displaced persons. In partnership with various institutions and organizations, a number of initiatives have been held to raise awareness – information and empowerment sessions, trainings for volunteers providing support to those fleeing the war, events to increase the capacity of professionals, preparation and distribution of offline and online information materials, as well as a short guide for identification, with a focus on Ukrainians seeking protection on the territory of the country.

The Ministry of Defense implements NATO's Policy on Prevention and Response in Cases of Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse. It is applicable when planning and conducting missions, operations and other activities led by NATO. Politics is published on the website of the Ministry of Defense https://www.mod.bg/bg/doc/ravnopostavenost/20200626_BG_NATO_%20Policy.pdf

In the Military Medical Academy, scientific publications are developed in the area of violence from equality policies, as follows: „Psychometric characteristics of a questionnaire to study the perception of the presence of sexual harassment in the workplace“ (authors: Dr. B. Ruseva, Captain Dr. A. Mitkova, Assoc. AND. Marinov, MD), „Dynamics of processes and mechanisms in the implementation of mental harassment in the workplace“ (author captain Dr. A. Mitkova), „Mental harassment in the workplace“ (author Dr. B. Ruseva). „Psychometric characteristics of a questionnaire to investigate psychosomatic complaints related to the workplace“, „Questionnaire on mental harassment in the workplace“ (authors: Dr. B. Ruseva, Captain Dr. A. Mitkova) and others. which are about to be implemented in the country's defense system.

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5. What are the priorities for accelerating the advancement of women and girls in your country through laws, policies and/or programmes over the next five years?

In the online survey you will be asked to select up to five priorities from the list below:

- Equality and non-discrimination under the law and access to justice
- Quality education, training and lifelong learning for women and girls
- Poverty eradication, agricultural productivity and food security
- Eliminating violence against women and girls
- Access to affordable quality health care, including sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights
- Political participation and representation
- Right to work and rights at work (e.g. gender pay gap, occupational segregation, career progression, job creation)
- Women's entrepreneurship and women's enterprises
- Unpaid care and domestic work/work and family conciliation (e.g. paid maternity, paternity or parental leave, care services)
- Gender-responsive social protection (e.g. universal health coverage, cash transfers, pensions)
- Basic services and infrastructure (water, sanitation, hygiene, energy, transport, communications, etc.)
- Promoting gender equality as part of strategies for environmental sustainability, climate change adaptation and mitigation
- Gender-responsive budgeting
- Digital and financial inclusion for women
- Gender-responsive disaster risk prevention, reduction and resilience building
- Changing discriminatory social norms and gender stereotypes
- Other, please specify
- None of the above

The priority areas for accelerating the advancement of women and girls in Bulgaria through laws, policies and/or programmes over the next five years are the same as defined in the National Strategy for the Promotion of Equality for Women and Men 2021-2030:

- equality of women and men in the labour market and an equal degree of economic independence;

- reducing gender gaps in pay and earnings;
- promoting equality of women and men in decision-making processes;
- fighting violence and victim protection and support;
- overcoming gender stereotypes in various spheres of public life and sexism.

Within each of the priority areas, priority actions will be carried out, which are laid down in the National Strategy, to lead to progress in the respective area. The specific measures are proposed by the institutions and organizations involved and become part of the national action plan to promote the equality of women and men. For example:

Actions continue in the direction of strengthening **equality and non-discrimination within the law and access to justice and the elimination of violence** through necessary legislative changes and effective enforcement.

The Commission for Protection against Discrimination is a national equality body that was established in accordance with the provisions of the Law on Protection against Discrimination. to prevent discrimination, protect against discrimination and ensure equality of opportunity. Due to the fact that discrimination could manifest itself in all spheres of life, Law on Protection against Discrimination. provides protection regardless of the area in which discrimination has taken place – labor relations, education, provision of services, health care, as well as any other area of public life. The prohibition of discrimination applies to all persons on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria in the exercise of their rights and legal interests. Law on Protection against Discrimination. covers both natural persons on Bulgarian territory – Bulgarian and foreign citizens and stateless persons, as well as legal entities and civil associations when their members and employees are unequally treated.

The Commission examines complaints and reports on protection against discrimination, and in its decisions establishes whether there has been a violation of the Criminal Code. and other laws governing equality of treatment. In the event that such is established, the Commission decrees the prevention and cessation of the violation and the restoration of the initial situation, and the law provides for the possibility of imposing sanctions and applying administrative coercion measures, as well as giving mandatory prescriptions with a view to compliance with the Law on Protection against Discrimination. Proceedings before the Commission for Protection against Discrimination do not include the payment of state fees and are at the expense of the Commission's budget, which facilitates access to the institution for complainants and whistleblowers with complaints of discrimination.

Elimination of violence against women and girls.

With the Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence (promulgated. SG No. 66 of 2023) the forms of domestic violence according to European acts were synchronized, the obligation of the State to conduct a consistent State policy in the field of domestic violence was guaranteed by coordinating, implementing, monitoring and evaluating policies and measures to prevent and combat domestic violence, the circle of legal entities to which protection is provided was expanded, as well as those which can initiate the initiation of proceedings for the issuance of a protection order under the law, the measures for protection against domestic violence that can be imposed by the competent authorities have increased, programs for the prevention and protection of victims and specialized programs for working with perpetrators have been regulated, as well

as the establishment of the National Council for Prevention and Protection from Domestic Violence as a permanent collective and advisory body for the implementation of the state policy on prevention and protection from domestic violence.

The National Council for Prevention and Protection from Domestic Violence was established under the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria, as a collective body and its members are representatives of the executive and judicial authorities, as well as representatives of non-profit legal entities (NGOs) that carry out activities on prevention and protection from domestic violence. The President of the National Council is the Deputy Prime Minister. The administrative, technical, organizational, expert and financial services of the National Council are provided by the Administration of the Council of Ministers, through a new unit under the Secretary General – Prevention and protection from domestic violence, cooperation on ethnic and integration issues and interaction with civil society. The unit is the Secretariat of the National Council.

Actions have been taken to prepare Regulations for the implementation of the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence, a Coordination Mechanism for assistance and support to victims of domestic violence, building and maintaining a National Information System for Prevention and Protection from Domestic Violence, which is particularly important for the interaction between the National Council, the various responsible institutions and NGOs in implementing the policy for prevention and protection from domestic violence, as well as the National Telephone Helpline for Persons Victims of Domestic Violence and at Risk, with a single harmonized number of social significance 116 016. Also, a National Telephone Line for Victims of Domestic Violence is currently operating, which is administered by the non-governmental organization - "Association Animus" Foundation. The line is financed with state funds from the administration of the Council of Ministers.

Pursuant to the provisions of the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence, the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria adopts a three-year national program for prevention and protection from domestic violence by March 31 of the relevant year. In 2024. The National Council approved the National Program for Prevention and Protection from domestic violence for the period 2024–2026. (The national program). The program is in the procedure for approval by the Development Council of the Council of Ministers. The national programme will include all bodies, institutions and non-governmental organizations that will provide programmes for the prevention of domestic violence, specialized services to provide protection, assistance and support to victims of domestic violence and specialized programmes to overcome aggression and deal with anger for perpetrators of domestic violence.

The national program for the period 2024-2026 includes measures for prevention and protection from domestic violence as follows:

On the part of the executive and judicial authorities:

- work with judicial authorities, including training related to professional development of judges, prosecutors and investigators to work on domestic violence cases in accordance with international standards;
- working with the authorities of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, including training police officers and other law enforcement officers in identifying cases of domestic violence, under response protocols and implementing the relevant legislation;
- training in schools to prevent domestic violence and promote gender equality and respect;
- training of persons providing prevention and protection by law;
- monitoring of law enforcement;
- preparation and implementation of information campaigns, seminars and conferences.

On the part of legal entities that carry out activities under the law:

- specialized services to provide protection, assistance and support to victims of domestic violence or persons at risk, which include social, psychological and legal counseling and specialized programs for the recovery and/or protection of persons or children, victims of domestic violence or witnesses in a counseling center and in sheltered housing.

- specialized programs to overcome aggression and deal with anger for perpetrators of domestic violence, which include socio-psychological counseling.

The funds for financing the implementation of the obligations under the National Program for the period 2024–2026 are determined on the basis of the medium-term three-year financial forecasts prepared by the relevant executive authorities involved in the implementation of the activities under the program.

The right to work and rights at work they will continue to be the focus of the policy on equality between women and men and the empowerment of women. The set legal measures will be applied, as well as projects financed with funds from the state budget and under programs and projects, such as those specified below, which have been implemented in the past five years, when the following measures are implemented with funding from the state budget:

- Training and employment of unemployed persons from disadvantaged groups in the labour market (measure under article 31, paragraph 1, of the Labour Code);
- Encouraging employers to open workplaces for on-the-job training in the form of work placement for persons with qualifications and without work experience in the profession (measure under Article 46 of the Civil Code);
- Encouraging employers to create training jobs through work - a dual system of training (measure under Article 46 a of the Employment Promotion Act);
- Encourage employers to open apprenticeship jobs under the guidance of a mentor for persons with primary and lower education and without qualifications (measure under article 55 of the Penal Code);
- Increasing the employability of unemployed persons through inclusion in training for the acquisition of professional qualifications and key competences in the Centre for Human Resource Development and Regional Initiatives

The following projects related to the provision of training to the workforce are implemented with funding under the 2021-2027 Human Resources Development Programme:

- „I start work“ – Component 2 „Trainings“ aimed at providing trainings for the acquisition or improvement of professional qualifications or for the acquisition of key competences of inactive and unemployed persons;
- „Qualification, skills and career development of employed persons“, in which trainings are provided for the acquisition or improvement of professional qualifications or for the acquisition of skills in key competences of employed and self-employed persons.
- „Digital Skills“ enables training with vouchers for general digital skills at basic and/or intermediate level for inactive persons and training for advanced and highly specialized level for unemployed persons, incl. with permanent disabilities. Opportunities are also provided to take the exam directly and certify digital skills that have been acquired through independent learning.

In addition, the Employment Agency implements „Component 2: Training for DI-GI skills and competencies“ from investment C1.I3 – „Provision of trainings for digital skills and creation of a platform for training adults“, implemented within the framework of the National Plan for Recovery and Sustainability of the Republic of Bulgaria, aimed at increasing the digital skills and competences of the population, collects applications from individuals for inclusion in free trainings in order to acquire basic (level 1-2 according to DigComp) and additional (level 3-4 according to DigComp) digital skills.

„Employer without discrimination“ is an open procedure with 25 certified employers to date and will continue to be carried out by the Commission for Protection from discrimination for the future, as it is related to the activities of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination.

The digital transition also places policies in the lens **digital inclusion for women**. The strategic document Digital Transformation of Bulgaria for the period 2024 – 2030 and the National Roadmap for Digital Transformation of Bulgaria until 2030 aim to bridge the digital divide, strengthen digital inclusion and digital literacy, ensuring that all people have equal access to digital technologies. Digital transformation puts people at the center and among the measures is increasing citizens' digital skills to achieve technological development.

The declaration, on digital rights and principles for the digital decade is part of the EU-level document package that promotes a strengthening of the democratic framework for digital transformation that benefits all people. The Declaration ensures that, in the design, development, implementation and use of technological solutions, fundamental rights are respected, their exercise is enabled and solidarity and inclusion are promoted. The focus is placed on all market participants taking advantage of the digital transformation to shoulder their social responsibilities and contribute fairly and proportionately to the cost of public goods, services and infrastructures for the benefit of the people. Achieving gender equality, including the elderly, people from all regions of the country, people from vulnerable groups in society, as well as promoting the affirmation of cultural and linguistic diversity is a priority in carrying out the process of digital transformation.

Actions aimed at **changing discriminatory social norms and gender stereotypes**.

A key element of the information campaigns of the regional representatives of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination is the elimination of stereotypes, which are a prerequisite for the unequal treatment of women and girls.

Monitoring of the media, of the equal participation of women and men, of commercial advertisements and other broadcasts for the existence of sexist and stereotypical representation of women and men will continue.

In 2024. The Ministry of Culture, the Council for Electronic Media, Public Radio and Television, the commercial media represented by a branch organization and the Coalition for Media Literacy –, the leading organization of the civil sector in the field of media literacy –, for the first time concluded a memorandum of cooperation in conducting a campaign for media literacy. The memorandum, initiated by the Ministry of Culture, envisages conducting a comprehensive awareness campaign in the media, which will reach citizens from all settlements of all social groups, accompanied by related initiatives. The Ministry of Culture is starting the implementation of the media and information literacy program, which will enable public libraries in the Republic of Bulgaria to develop their own programs and activities for the general public by financing them from the state budget. The program covers 27 regional libraries and 16 municipal libraries on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria, as well as the National Library „St. St. Cyril and Methodius“.

Considering the strong feminization of the teaching profession among the employees of libraries, community centers and cultural centers in Bulgaria, efforts to increase the media literacy of citizens by engaging the key stakeholders – educational and cultural institutions, including through training, reach mostly women. In this way, women employed in professions in the field of school and preschool education and librarianship not only acquire a key role in the effective implementation of media literacy policy, but are empowered by increasing their competence in relation to the media and the media environment.

Bulgaria will continue to implement measures adequate to national specificities and needs to promote the equality of women and men and empower women and girls in all areas of life.

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Section Three: Progress across the 12 critical areas of concern

Inclusive development, shared prosperity and decent work

Critical areas of concern:

Women and poverty
Women and the economy
Human rights of women
The child-girl

6. Over the past five years, what actions has your country taken to advance gender equality in the world of work (including informal and non-standard employment as well as entrepreneurship)?

In the online survey you will be asked to select specific actions from the list below:

- Strengthened/enforced laws and workplace policies and practices that prohibit discrimination in the recruitment, retention and promotion of women in the public and private sectors, and equal pay legislation
- Introduced/strengthened gender-responsive job creation and active labour market policies (e.g. education and training, skills, subsidies)
- Measures taken to prevent sexual harassment, including in the workplace
- Strengthened land rights and tenure security
- Improved financial inclusion and access to credit, including for self-employed women
- Improved access to modern technologies (including climate-smart technologies), infrastructure and services (including agricultural extensions)
- Supported the transition from informal to formal work, including legal and policy measures that benefit women in informal employment
- Devised mechanisms for women's equal participation in economic decision-making bodies (e.g. in ministries of trade and finance, central banks, national economic commissions)
- Other, please specify:
- None of the above

Promotion of **the equality of women and men in the field of work** it is among the priorities of Bulgaria's national policy for gender equality. During the reporting five-year period, mid-2019-2024. Bulgaria conducts consistent measures for equality of women and men in the labor market, equal degree of economic independence, reduction of gender differences in pay and income, etc.

Laws and workplace policies and practices that prohibit discrimination apply in the recruitment, retention and promotion of women in the public and private sectors, as well as equal pay legislation.

In order to guarantee equal opportunities and access to the labor market and the realization of it for men and women, the legal framework in force in the Republic of Bulgaria does not distinguish on the basis of „gender“ between workers, except in specific cases of protection of women during pregnancy, childbirth and caring for small children.

The provisions of the Labor Code and the Anti-Discrimination Act in force in the Republic of Bulgaria require equal pay for equal work between representatives of different groups, as well as prohibit any form of discrimination in labor relations, as well as sexual harassment in the workplace.

The Employment Promotion Act, which regulates public relations in the promotion and preservation of employment, vocational guidance and training of adults and mediation in information and employment, implements norms that prohibit discrimination. According to article 2, in the exercise of rights and obligations under the same Act, direct or indirect discrimination, privileges or restrictions based on nationality, origin, ethnicity, personal status, sex, sexual orientation, race, colour, age, political and religious beliefs, membership in trade unions and other public organizations and movements, family, social and material status and presence of mental and physical disabilities are not permitted.

Guarantees of equal access and opportunities for men and women in the labour market are also laid down in the provision of article 23 of the Employment Promotion Act, according to which, when jobs are advertised, employers are not allowed to determine conditions based on gender, age, nationality, ethnicity and health status. Exceptions are allowed only in relation to gender, age and reduced working capacity, when, as a result of the nature of the work, gender, respectively age or state of health, is an essential element of it.

According to article 243, paragraph 1, of the Labour Code, women and men have the right to equal remuneration for equal or equivalent work. The provision of article 243, paragraph 2, of the Labour Code expressly introduces a legal requirement that the principle of equal pay for equal or equivalent work by a man and a woman should be applied in respect of all payments under an employment relationship. According to Art. 1, b. „a” of Convention № 100, entitled „Equal pay“, the term „pay” for the purposes of the Convention includes the ordinary, basic or minimum wage and all other remuneration paid directly or indirectly, in cash or in kind by the employer of the worker for his work.

Employers should apply the same criteria for evaluating all staff, remuneration agreements should be understandable and transparent, and the criteria applied should take into account the nature and type of work and not contain discriminatory elements.

Given the fact that wages are negotiated individually between employees and employers, a lack of information about the individualized pay system applied by the employer is often found. This creates prerequisites for increasing pay gaps between employees at similar levels.

Article 2 of Directive 75/117/EEC expressly provides for an obligation for Member States to introduce into their national legal systems the measures necessary to enable all workers or employees who consider themselves to be harmed by the non-application of the principle of equal pay to bring their claims by court order after the possible referral to other competent authorities. Such a possibility is guaranteed in Bulgarian legislation by the Law on Protection from Discrimination. Section I of Chapter II of the Civil Code is dedicated to the protection against discrimination in the exercise of the right to work. The provision of article 71, paragraph 1, of the Criminal Code provides that, apart from the cases referred to in section I of the Criminal Code, any person whose rights under this or other laws governing equality of treatment have been violated may bring a claim before the district court, requesting the establishment of the violation, ordering the defendant to cease the violation and to restore the situation before the violation, as well as to refrain in the future from further violations or compensation for damages.

They are introduced/reinforced in the country **policies for job creation and an active labour market**, gender-responsive (eg education and training, skills, subsidies)

Employment promotion policies, which cover a wide range of instruments such as employment and training programmes, recruitment incentives, upskilling and skills measures, job creation measures and the promotion of entrepreneurship, provide opportunities for effective support, for both men and women. Incentives for employment, the provision of opportunities to acquire skills that meet the requirements of new jobs effectively promote transitions in the labor market for women from vulnerable groups. Measures that promote entrepreneurship are also essential.

One of the key reforms of the labor market during the period is related to changes in the Employment Promotion Act in 2022 to regulate the activation activities of economically inactive persons. The new regulations provide for activities with economically inactive women and men to be carried out at the local level by the territorial divisions of the Employment Agency, together with the regional employment authorities (regional administrations, local self-government bodies, territorial divisions of ministries, organizations and social partners). Specific activities for working with economically inactive persons, tailored to the specifics of the region and the individual needs of the persons, are included in cooperation agreements concluded at the local level between the territorial divisions of the Employment Agency and the regional employment authorities. To implement the activities, provision has been made for the establishment of inter-agency teams with the participation of the parties to local cooperation agreements.

With amendments to the Employment Promotion Act passed by the National Assembly in September 2023, steps have been taken to reduce the administrative burden. It is possible for job seekers, including women, to use intermediary information and employment services in all directorates „Employment Bureau, regardless of the place of registration.

In the last five years, actions on strengthening **the active labour market policy relating to equality of women and men**, the as follows:

In the Employment Promotion Act under the introduced specific measure – Art. 53 a providing financial incentives for employers who create jobs and employ full-time or part-time single parents/adoptive parents and/or mothers/adoptive mothers with children up to 5 years of age, as well as offering vocational training opportunities. The financial parameters of the incentive measure are determined annually through the National Employment Action Plan. During the period, under the terms of the measure, part of the employers' expenses for labor remuneration, additional payments under labor legislation and insurances that are at the expense of the employer for a period of up to 6 months were financed. It is the duty of employers to provide employment to individuals for an additional period equal to the period of subsidization. Opportunities for upgrading vocational training are also provided.

As a result of the changes made in the Law on the Promotion of Employment and in force, the – (Article 53 a of the Employment Promotion Act) actions are carried out on the incentive measures:

- An incentive measure under Article 53 of the Employment Promotion Act concerning encouragement to employers to employ unemployed persons – single parents (adoptive parents) and/or adoptive mothers with children up to the age of 3;
- An incentive measure under article 53 a of the Employment Promotion Act concerning the encouragement of employers to employ unemployed adoptive mothers with children aged 3 to 5.

During the period 2019 – 2023. 756 mothers with young children and 151 single parents are included in employment under the conditions of the incentive measures. With funds from

the state budget, they were financed for a period of up to 6 months and part of the labor costs of employers who created jobs and provided employment to persons for a period of up to 6 months.

The Employment Agency promotes, through financial incentives, entrepreneurial initiatives of unemployed persons.

- On encouraging a measure, in accordance with article 47 of the Employment Promotion Act, makes it possible for an unemployed person to receive all or the remainder of the cash benefit due to which he is entitled at once. The aim is to assist the unemployed person with these funds in starting an economic activity independently or together with other persons. In addition, the person can also receive additional funds from the state budget in the amount of BGN 2,600 (according to the 2021 National employment action plans), in case he hires another unemployed person without the right to cash unemployment benefit under the approved business project.
- On encouraging measure, in order of art. 49 of the Employment Promotion Act, supports the unemployed who want to start their own business as a micro-enterprise. Through it, funds in the amount of up to BGN 4,000 are provided for the reimbursement of the costs incurred by the person for starting the business, including for registering economic activity, initial purchase of raw materials and materials, for the purchase, rental or ongoing repair of premises, production equipment, equipment, etc. In addition, the start-up person can be reimbursed the costs of minimum amounts for the paid insurance contributions for the fund “Pensions”, Supplementary compulsory pension insurance and National Health Insurance Fund for a period of up to 1 year after the start of the activity.

For the period 2019–2023. 661 women were included in the measure Promoting entrepreneurship of unemployed persons.

The employment exchanges organized by the Employment Agency with the participation of various employers also have a positive effect on women's employment. Women are also supported by participating in the conduct of Job search workshops for the acquisition of skills in various aspects in the search for work, indicating support in the preparation of application documents, upon presentation to an employer.

The Commission for Protection against Discrimination participates in the implementation of the international project “Parents at work“ under the Program: Rights, Equality and Citizenship of the EU; REC- AG-2018 Commission for Protection against Discrimination is a partner with the leading Institute for the Prevention of Discrimination - Belgium. The other project partners are the Commissions for Protection against Discrimination of Portugal and Estonia. The duration of the project is 24 months, with implementation starting in October 2019.

The specific objectives of the project are mutual learning between partners:

- raising awareness and informing employers about the rights of pregnant women and parents in relation to work-life balance measures;
- improvement of investigative techniques in cases of discrimination during pregnancy/parenthood;
- raising the awareness of labour inspectorates on discrimination against pregnant women/parents;
- improving the visibility of equality bodies;
- 4 partner meetings and bimonthly online meetings;
- developing a long-term strategy;
- 3 mutual trainings to gather good practices for engaging employers;
- gathering good practice at national level;
- development of toolkit and teaching material for employers;

- development of a guide to engaging employers;

Project results are:

- increased awareness;
- enhanced enforcement of workers' rights;
- increased awareness and knowledge of employers/employers' organisations about the

measures;

- increased visibility, knowledge and number of results to produce;

• increased awareness of competent authorities at national and EU level, and of improving the effective implementation of workers' rights: The training of labour inspectorates as well as the exchange of practices, techniques and identification of innovative practices between inspectorates and equality bodies in different EU Member States strengthen the monitoring of discrimination at work and the detection of discrimination. This in the long term leads to more effective implementation of EU legislation, which is one of the objectives of the project.

• minimizing workplace discrimination due to pregnancy or parenthood: Actions targeting employers reduce and prevent workplace discrimination in the long term. Actions aimed at inspectorates increase the effective monitoring and detection of discrimination in the workplace. This motivates employers to comply with the law and look for other alternatives when working with pregnant women/parents.

Implemented project activities are:

Exchange of good practices at EU level on pregnancy, maternity and work-life balance and employer engagement;

Raising employers' awareness at national level and collecting and disseminating good practice as regards balance during pregnancy, maternity/parental and working life;

Exchange of good practices at EU level regarding research and detection of cases of discrimination against parents, incl. number pregnant.

Measures are being taken to **supporting the transition from informal to formal employment**, including legal and policy measures in favour of women in informal employment.

Based on various studies, it can be argued that in recent years there has been a permanent tendency to reduce the percentage of undeclared work in Bulgaria. According to a survey conducted, the informal economy in the country as of 2022 is 21.42%, and in the last 10 years there has been an increase in the share of the formal economy by 12.05%.

The fight against the informal economy is among the main priorities in state policy. The holistic approach is being used in the country to address the problem. The measures can be divided into three interrelated types - legislative; control (inspection) and informational.

A number of legislative measures have been taken over the years aimed at preventing and combating undeclared work. Legislative measures are both preventive and encouraging.

Preventive legislative measures are related to a clear regulation of the requirements to conclude a written employment contract, its mandatory elements (including the amount of labor remuneration and the duration of working hours) and to register it before starting work. The deadlines for declaring to the state authorities the wages received and the social security contributions due are expressly regulated.

Criminal liability has been established for failure to pay health and social security contributions in large amounts, with the aim of preventing this type of violation.

In order to formalize labor in the agricultural sector, the Labor Code of 2015 regulates a special type of employment contract for short-term seasonal agricultural work. In 2020, tobacco production is also included in the scope of activities for which this type of employment contract can be concluded. A characteristic feature of it is that the employer pays the due taxes

and insurance contributions in advance for the relevant day. This type of employment contract has led to a significant increase in legal work in the agricultural sector, and in the last three years the number of concluded employment contracts in one day is over 200 thousand per year.

In order to improve the control activity, legislative changes were undertaken in 2020, which expand the possibilities for effective control activity and the system of foreseen sanctions in case of non-declaration of work. The regulatory framework regarding the provided administrative sanctions in case of violation of labor legislation has been improved, which aims to achieve better prevention against the commission of repeated and systematic violations related to undeclared work. In case of repeated and systematic violation related to undeclared work, the amount of sanctions has been significantly increased.

The powers of the Labor Inspectorate as a control body for compliance with labor legislation are explicitly regulated in the Labor Code, including at declaration of the existence of the employment relationship. According to the provision of Art. 405 a of the Labour Inspectorate's control bodies have the legal possibility to declare by decree the existence of an employment relationship when it is established that the labour force is provided in violation of article 1, paragraph 2, of the Labour Code. The powers of the Labor Inspectorate, related to the declaration of the existence of the employment relationship, can be exercised only in cases where the labor inspectors establish that the worker or employee is at work and is working at the time of the inspection by the control body.

When the subject of the concluded contract is the prestige of labor power and the following conditions are met: the worker or employee has certain working hours, workplace and remuneration; the work is carried out through the personal labor of the worker or employee; the work that is carried out is related to the subject of activity of the contracting authority; the worker or employee fulfills the employer's instructions on when, where and how to work; the work is carried out according to the order and sequence determined by the employer, there is an employment relationship (employment contract), which is regulated under the CT.

Work done under an employment relationship is always remunerated. The remuneration received is a mandatory and constitutive element of the employment relationship. It is the labor remuneration that is the consideration by the employer of the worker or employee for the labor force provided to him for disposal and use. It is such an essential element of the employment relationship that there cannot be an employment relationship under which work is performed and no remuneration is due.

In combination with legislative measures, inspection campaigns and regular planned inspections are also carried out. The Labour Inspectorate plans to carry out inspections annually, taking into account risk activities where there may be violations related to undeclared work. Special inspection campaigns are also carried out in sectors where high levels of undeclared work have been identified – tourism, agriculture and construction. It is planned to carry out repeated (follow up) checks in enterprises where a violation related to undeclared work has been established. Thus, it is possible to counteract the repeated and systematic commission of such a type of violation. Joint inspections are carried out with the tax authorities (National Revenue Agency), for which purpose an agreement has been signed and a procedure developed between the relevant institutions.

To address the problems posed by undeclared work, partnership between all institutions (Labour Inspectorate, the National Revenue Agency and the National Insurance Institute) is of utmost importance, as is partnership between the State and nationally representative trade union and employers' organizations. In this regard, cooperation agreements have been signed between state institutions, as well as an agreement between the labor inspectorate and the two nationally representative trade unions in the state.

As a member state of the EU, Bulgaria actively participates in activities aimed at dealing with undeclared work with a cross-border element. In this regard, an intensive partnership has been established with the European Labor Authority and with the relevant control institutions in the other Member States, thanks to which a significant number of joint and coordinated inspections are carried out on the territory of more than one country.

In addition to administrative and legislative measures, the handling of undeclared work is also carried out by carrying out awareness campaigns aimed at society aiming to build intolerance to this phenomenon. Information campaigns that aim to make employers and employees aware of the rights and obligations they have are conducted on a continuous basis. For example, the National Revenue Agency, with the support of the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy and the Labor Inspectorate, conducts an information campaign „Salary in envelope“. The campaign is national, with the main goal being to demonstrate to citizens what losses they suffer from this practice in the long term. In this regard, a special website has been created with a built-in calculator, on which anyone who wishes can make calculations of what their real losses are from not declaring the full amount of their remuneration. A short film (advertisement) was also broadcast in the national media, with which to reach a large coverage of society.

The Labour Inspectorate participated in the pan-European declared work campaign #EUforFairWork, conducting various information activities. As an example, the trainings carried out for students before leaving school can be cited, to which the benefits of declared work and their labor rights were explained. Information campaigns are carried out annually before the start of the agricultural season to promote one-day employment contracts.

The Labour Inspectorate conducts information campaigns independently, which aim at making workers aware of their rights and at presenting the benefits of declared work. In addition to the usual methods – brochures and meetings, information campaigns also use various other types of materials in order to make information easier and clearer to target groups. For example, there is a special campaign with video information about the basic rights and obligations in the implementation of labor relations, which consists of short animated videos. An interactive self-assessment tool has also been published, through which everyone can check whether they are working declaredly, and through it, in addition to information about rights, it is also possible to directly report to the labor inspectorate.

The social partners, with financial support from the state, also conduct independent projects in relation to undeclared work. For example, the Association of Industrial Capital in Bulgaria (one of the nationally recognized employers' organizations) has been conducting research for more than 10 years to determine the composite index „Economy of light“. The results of research and proposed measures to deal with certain aspects of undeclared work are presented to public consultation and to the responsible institutions. Unions also campaign against undeclared work, as an example can be given the „Gray Kills“ campaign project of Confederation of Independent Trade Unions in Bulgaria, within which, in addition to informational materials, a VOX KNSB mobile application has been made, through which irregularities can be reported.

The Ministry of Culture, through the Program „Cultural Entrepreneurship, Heritage and Cooperation“, financed under the Financial Mechanism of the European Economic Area, strengthens the policy for job creation, training and improved access to modern technologies, achieving the following indicators:

Indicators by Result 1 „Improved management of the cultural heritage“ of the Program:

- „Number of jobs created“ – as of the end of 2023, 27 new jobs were reported, with 20 occupied by women, 7 by men.

- „Number of trained employees“ – as of the end of 2023, it reported 152 trained employees, of which 104 were women, 48 men;

Score indicator 2 „Improved access to arts and culture“ of the Program:

- „Number of trained professional employees“ - as of the end of 2023, it reported 375 trained employees, of which 253 were women, 122 men;

Indicators from the Fund for Bilateral Relations at the Programme Level:

- „Number of employees from beneficiary countries in exchange“ - as of the end of 2023, it reported 194 employees who participated in exchange of experience (physical and online), of which 127 were women, 67 men;

- „Number of employees from donor countries in exchange“ - as of the end of 2023, it reported 82 employees who participated in exchange of experience (physical and online), of which 41 were women, 41 were men.

* * *

7. In the past five years, what actions has your country taken to recognize, reduce and/or redistribute unpaid care and domestic work, promote work-life and family balance and strengthen the rights of paid care workers?

In the online survey you will be asked to select specific actions from the list below:

- Included unpaid care and domestic work in national statistics and accounting (e.g. time-use surveys, valuation exercises, satellite accounts)
- Expanded childcare services or made existing services more affordable
- Expanded support for older persons, persons with disabilities and others needing intense forms of care
- Introduced or strengthened maternity/paternity/parental leave or other types of family leave
- Invested in time - and labour-saving infrastructure, such as public transport, electricity, water and sanitation, to reduce the burden of unpaid care and domestic work on women
- Promoted decent work for paid care workers, including migrant workers
- Conducted campaigns or awareness raising activities to encourage participation of men and boys in unpaid care and domestic work
- Introduced legal changes regarding the division of marital assets or pension entitlements after divorce that acknowledge women's unpaid contribution to the family during marriage
- Other
- None of the above

In Bulgaria, the implementation of measures for a better reconciliation of professional and family life continues, taking it into account as a significant factor for improvement women's participation in the labour market. In addition to the possibilities of applying flexible working hours and forms of employment, and of the participation of fathers in the upbringing of children, employment is provided to unemployed persons by providing childcare and work is being done to improve services for children and dependent elderly persons.

Conduct **time use studies** are carried out from national statistics. In the period 2022–2023. The National Statistical Institute conducted the observation „Time Budget“ - a sample survey among households, a source of information on unpaid care and domestic work of the population. The survey is part of the program of the Population Censuses and is conducted

every ten years. The research is conducted according to harmonized guidelines of the European Commission (Eurostat). Its results will be available by the end of 2024.

Legal changes are introduced regarding the increase of **maternity/paternity/parental leave or other family leave**

The Republic of Bulgaria is developing legislation providing legal guarantees to create equal opportunities for men and women in all areas of public life, including equal participation in caring for their families. The labour legislation regulates paid holidays for male and female employees for caring for children in early childhood and for caring for sick members of their families.

In Bulgaria, one of the longest paid leave for pregnancy and childbirth is regulated. The Labor Code provides for paid leave for pregnancy and childbirth (maternity) in the amount of 410 days, of which 45 days before the birth of the child (art. 163 LC), as well as paid leave for raising a child up to the age of 2 (art. 164 LC), to which the child's mother is entitled. With her consent, after the child reaches the age of 6 months, these leaves can be used instead by the father (even if he is not married to the mother) or by one of the mother's parents or the father when they work under an employment relationship. Special leave for a period of 365 days from the day the child is handed over for adoption, but no later than the child reaches the age of 5, is also regulated for adoptive parents (art. 164b LC). When the child is adopted by spouses, the leave with the consent of the adoptive mother can be used instead by the adoptive father or one of the parents of the adoptive mother or the adoptive father after the expiration of 6 months from the day of handing over the child for adoption. For fathers (adoptive parents), leave at the birth/adoption of a child is regulated in the amount of 15 calendar days from the day of the child's discharge from the medical facility/delivery to the child for adoption. In addition, the right of each of the parents to take unpaid leave in the amount of 6 months for raising a child until the age of 8, which can be used after the use of maternity leave and leave for raising a child up to the age of 2, is provided. Each of the parents can use up to 5 months of the other parent's leave with his consent.

In 2020, in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic, the right to use paid annual leave or unpaid leave in the event of a declared state of emergency or a declared emergency epidemic situation was regulated at the request of several categories of persons, incl. a pregnant worker or employee, as well as a worker or employee in an advanced stage of in-vitro treatment, a mother or adoptive mother of a child up to the age of 12 or of a child with a disability regardless of his age, a worker or employee who is a single father or adoptive mother of a child up to the age of 12 or of a child with a disability regardless of his age, in which case the employer is obliged to allow the leave, i.e. has no right to refuse or postpone the use of leave (art. 173a, para. 2 CT). The time during which leave is taken is recognized as length of service.

In 2022, amendments were adopted to the Labor Code to introduce the requirements of Directive (EU) 2019/1158 regarding the work-life balance of parents and carers, which further encouraged the involvement of fathers in family care. An individual right to paid parental leave has been regulated for fathers to raise a child up to the age of 8 in the amount of 2 months, in the event that they have not used leave to raise a child up to the age of 2 in this amount (Article 164 in the Civil Code). A legal possibility has also been arranged for workers who are the parents (adoptive parents) of a child up to the age of 8 or who provide care for a parent, child, spouse, sibling and parent of the other spouse or other direct relatives for serious medical reasons to propose to the employer an amendment for a certain time to the duration and distribution of his working hours, to switch to telework and other amendments to the employment relationship that facilitate the reconciliation of work and family responsibilities (art. 167b LC).

All paid and unpaid maternity, adoption, childcare and temporary incapacity leave for caring for and accompanying a sick family member shall be counted as work and insurance

experience without making social security contributions, and these shall be taken into account when determining entitlement to and the amount of benefits and pensions from the State social insurance.

Operation "Parents in Employment" supports caregiving in raising children in order to return their parents to employment. Both in the previous program periods and in the period 2021-2027 within the framework of the Human Resources Development program „gender equality is a horizontal principle in the program and no specific targeted measures are planned for women and men. Specific objective 3 of Priority 1 of the program is aimed precisely at promoting balanced gender participation in the labor market, equal working conditions and work-life balance, including through financially accessible care for children and dependent persons, for which almost BGN 48 million have been set aside. The planned measures will support key actions to achieve progress in the field of gender equality. A focus has been placed on restoring work activity, especially for women, and on increasing the quality of life of people raising children at home or caring for a dependent family member. Access to career development services for target groups will be improved. The measures cover achieving a better balance between professional and personal life, practices for introducing flexible forms of employment, professional guidance and promoting the participation of women in technological and digital-based industries.

It is within this priority that the implementation of an operation started in 2023 "Parents in employment" with a budget of 24 million BGN, showing support for caregiving in child rearing in order to return their parents to employment.

The main purpose of the procedure is to ensure a better balance between the personal and professional lives of single and large parents, as well as parents with small children. The activities of the measure provide care for children not attending nurseries, kindergartens and preschool groups. Women and men should have equal opportunities and fully participate in the labor market, grow professionally and careerally, have quality employment, be economically independent, combine professional and personal life.

The beneficiary of the project is the Employment Agency, and the main activities are:

- Provision of care for children aged 0 to 5, including those not attending nurseries, establishments and pre-school groups, to employed and unemployed parents (care is permissible up to 8 hours a day). For employed babysitters, remuneration is assumed in the amount of the minimum wage established for the country, incl. insurance contributions charged at the expense of the employer, according to LC and Social Security Code (as well as all co-payments under the applicable national legislation) for babysitters caring for one child up to 8 hours a day. Additional remuneration of ½ of the minimum wage established for the country for a babysitter in case he cares for second or more children of the family.

- Provision of care for children aged 0 to 12 inclusive, attending nurseries, establishments, as well as school, to parents with many children and single parents (care is permissible for up to 4 hours per day). The eligible costs for the babysitter are related to the provision of wages in the amount of ½ the minimum wage established for the country, incl. insurance contributions charged at the expense of the employer, according to LC and SCC (as well as all co-payments under the applicable national legislation) for a babysitter caring for one child up to 4 hours a day. Additional remuneration of ¼ of the minimum wage established for the country for the person in case he cares for second or more children of the family.

Persons eligible as childminders under the project are unemployed jobseekers who do not receive a retirement pension. Those wishing to become babysitters can submit their applications for inclusion in the project only electronically by submitting an electronic application, which is uploaded to the website of the Employment Agency. In the Application, applicants declare that they meet the following requirements: - good health; - they do not have

an effective sentence for crimes of a general nature; - they are not placed under interdiction; - they do not have imposed prohibitions on the performance of a profession and/or holding the position of „babysitter”, etc.

After approval by the parents, the babysitter concludes an employment contract with the employer, the Employment Agency, for a period of up to 18 months or until the child reaches the age of 5-/12. The Employment Agency, through the employment offices, together with the parents will select unemployed/inactive persons who will take care of children under the project.

Through the implementation of the procedure, it is planned to cover more than 1,900 parents with small children.

To date, 1,341 persons have been included in operation „Parents in employment“.

They expand **childcare services** and the accessibility of existing services is increased. It expands **support for the elderly, disabled and other persons**, in need of intensive care.

The reform of the social services sector is among the priorities of the social policy and its basis was laid with the adoption of The Social Services Act in March 2019, which is in force from 01.07.2020. The law regulates all key issues relevant to the social services sector related to the mechanisms for planning, provision, financing, control and monitoring of social services, with the aim of increasing their quality, efficiency and sustainability. All persons who need support have the right to social services, and which can be provided through social services, not just persons from vulnerable groups. Social services are provided only according to the wishes and personal choices of the persons. When granting them, violations of the rights, freedoms, dignity and personal integrity of individuals are not allowed, as well as direct or indirect discrimination based on any signs established by law or in an international treaty to which the Republic of Bulgaria is a party. Depending on the main groups of activities, the types there are 10 social services - information and counselling, advocacy and mediation, community work, therapy and rehabilitation, skills training, support for the acquisition of work skills, day care, residential care, shelter provision and assistant support. Social services can also be profiled according to various characteristics such as goals, functions, users (depending on age, they can be for children and adults), specific needs, duration and method of use, environment, organization.

The Social Services Act for the first time introduced planning at the national level of social services financed from the state budget by developing a National Map of Social Services (the Map), adopted by Decision of the Council of Ministers № 574 of 08.08.2024. In this way, the State undertakes to establish a full network of social services throughout the country in the long term. The map guarantees predictability and sustainability of social services, and a territorial balance will be achieved in their distribution and availability. At the same time, it is planned to put into operation an Integrated Information System of the social services financed from the state budget, as well as the adoption and implementation of workload standards for: the employees of the provider carrying out the activity of providing social services, as well as the employees from the Directorate „Social Assistance“ and the municipalities that carry out the activity of referral for the use of social services.

In 2019, there were 620 social services for children in the country, activities delegated by the state, and as of June 2024, there were 750, supporting more than 20,000 children and families.

Since 2021, the municipalities also provide the assistant support service provided for in the Social Services Act with funding from the state budget. Its purpose is to guarantee the right of every person to support living in a home environment and in the community. Assistant support is provided to persons of overworking age who are unable to provide self-care, who do not have a degree of reduced working capacity determined in the relevant order, and to children

with permanent disabilities and adults with permanent disabilities with certain foreign assistance, who do not use assistant support, assistance to provide assistant support or for whom assistance for care in a home environment is not received in accordance with another law. The service includes support from an assistant for self-care, movement and movement, changing and maintaining the position of the body, performing daily and household activities, communication, not limited to the home environment of individuals. Referral for the use of assistant support, which is financed from the state and municipal budgets, is carried out only by the municipality that provides the service.

The social service assistant support as of 31.06.2024 is provided by 263 municipalities for more than 18,768 users. Some of these users are children with permanent disabilities with certain foreign assistance. Currently, the service is free for persons who use it.

The vision for the policy in the field of long-term care is fully developed in the National Strategy for Long-Term Care (The Strategy), adopted with Decision of the Council of Ministers № 2 dated 07.01.2014. Its main goal is to create conditions for an independent and dignified life for the elderly and people with disabilities through the provision of quality, affordable and sustainable long-term care services according to their individual needs, while achieving a better balance between the quality of services and their effective and efficient provision. Serious emphasis in the Strategy is placed on the deinstitutionalization of care for people with disabilities and the elderly, the development of services in a home environment and the support of families with increased responsibility towards the care of dependent family members. According to the Action Plan for the period 2018-2021 for the implementation of the National Strategy for Long-Term Care, adopted with Decision of the Council of Ministers № 28 of 19.01.2018, almost all the measures and activities laid down have been implemented. Based on it, the first stage of the process of deinstitutionalization of care for the elderly and people with disabilities is realized (part of the measures have been implemented until the end of 2023). The second Action Plan for the period 2022-2027 adopted in July 2022 for the implementation of the National Strategy for Long-Term Care is currently in the process of implementation. The plan is in line with the Common European Guidelines for the Transition from Institutional Care to Community Care, as well as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Measures during the second stage of the implementation of the process of deinstitutionalization of care for persons with disabilities and the elderly and increasing the effectiveness of the long-term care system are covered. The plan includes key measures and activities to provide support in the home environment, develop quality and affordable social and integrated health and social services, close 41 homes for people with disabilities and reform 82 existing homes for the elderly, increase the effectiveness of the long-term care system and build the necessary infrastructure to provide the services. In addition to the state budget, the reform is also supported through the Program „Development of Human Resources“ (BGN 632 million) and the Program „Development of Regions“ (up to BGN 139.7 million). According to the National Plan for Recovery and Sustainability, the investments amount to BGN 753 million and include the creation of 250 new social and integrated health and social services for residential care and specialized social services to provide care and support for 7,500 people with disabilities, the reform of homes for the elderly through construction activities, equipment and furniture, as well as activities for energy efficiency, rehabilitation, renovation, equipment and furnishings for part of the existing social services financed from the state budget.

In Bulgaria, the Law on Personal Assistance has been in force since January 01, 2019 Personal Assistance Act, which regulates the terms and conditions for providing and using personal assistance to persons with permanent disabilities, regulated as a mechanism for providing assistant care, which is based on state-guaranteed financial support, individual needs and personal choice of users.

According to the regulatory requirements, persons with permanent disabilities have the right to use personal assistance under the Personal Assistance Act with a certain number of hours, according to the needs defined in an individual assessment prepared by directorates „Social assistance“ to the Social Assistance Agency at the current address of the person with a disability.

The purpose of providing personal assistance as a mechanism to improve the autonomy of people with permanent disabilities in need of foreign assistance is to help users exercise their basic rights, have choices and lead an independent lifestyle, active inclusion and participation in the community and access to various services and activities. The implementation of this type of support puts the person with a disability in a more active position and enables him in a responsible way to choose and manage the processes of use of care or relevant activities that contribute to increasing his autonomy.

The provider of personal assistance according to the Personal Assistance Act is the municipality at the user's current address. The disabled person who wishes to be provided with personal assistance submits personally, through a person authorized by him/her or through his/her legal representative, an application – declaration according to the model for the provision of personal assistance, in which he declares that he does not receive other support to satisfy the same needs and indicates an assistant. When no assistant is specified in the application, the personal assistance provider may suggest an assistant. An assistant is a natural person chosen by the user, a person authorized by him/her or through his/her legal representative, who provides personal assistance based on an employment contract with the personal assistance provider. According to the requirements of the Personal Assistance Act, an assistant cannot be a person who has been placed under interdiction or has been convicted of an intentional crime of a general nature and no protection measures have been imposed on him as a perpetrator of domestic violence under the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence on a user of personal assistance.

The data for the period from 2019-2023 show a constantly growing and increasing interest in the mechanism of personal assistance and, accordingly, a growth in its costs, as follows:

Information on the average monthly number of users of the personal assistance mechanism and the funds spent under it for the period 2019-2023.

Indicator/Year	2019.	2020.	2021.	2022.	2023.
Average monthly number of users	9,092	25,997	37,532	43,534	51 855
Funds spent(BGN.)	18,909,341	202 172 542	280,540,376	439 448 116	597 431 738

For the first half of 2024, BGN 485,203,981 was spent under the personal assistance mechanism for an average of 61,005 monthly users. Under the mechanism, personal assistance in the 2024 budget is included BGN 793,714,100.

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8. In the past five years, what actions has your country taken to reduce the gender digital divide?

In the online survey you will be asked to select specific actions from the list below:

- Mainstreaming gender perspectives into national digital policies
- Introduced or strengthened programmes to provide universal meaningful connectivity for women and girls, especially for underserved areas

- Measures taken to remove discriminatory barriers faced by women and girls to access, use and design digital tools (e.g. device and data, lack of skills, safety, restrictive social norms)
- Measures taken to support the creation and expansion of safe, affordable, accessible, relevant and inclusive public and private digital tools and services
- Introduced or strengthened programmes to increase the digital literacy and skills of women and girls
- Measures taken to promote gender-responsive STEM education
- Measures taken to create the conditions for a gender-responsive digital learning environments
- Applied gender-responsive and human rights-based standards for data collection, use, sharing, archiving and deletion
- Other, please specify: thematic studies
- None of the above

They are introduced and strengthened **digital literacy programs** and skills of women and girls.

In the context of the digital transition and the low level of digital skills of Bulgarian citizens, the national employment policy prioritizes increasing investments and ensuring wide access to training for the acquisition of basic and higher digital skills. A large-scale investment worth 194 million euros, financed with funds under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, is in the process of implementation, within which by mid-2026 it is planned to train 500 thousand unemployed and employed persons to acquire basic and/or average level of general digital skills. Uniform curricula, training resources and assessment tools by digital skill levels have been developed in line with the European Digital Competence Framework Dig Comp 2.1. The training of unemployed and employed women for digital skills is at the expense of the project budget „Provision of training for digital skills and creation of a platform for training adults“, and for the duration of the training, unemployed persons are also provided with funds for scholarship and transport costs. The trainings are implemented through vouchers, and the amount of funds for training one person for each of the levels of digital skills is determined in the Decree of the Council of Ministers № 48/ 04.04.2023 on the adoption of Regulations for determining the terms and conditions for providing training vouchers under the Human Resources Development program „2021-2027, The National Recovery and Resilience Plan and the Just Transition Fund. Certification of digital skills of unemployed and employed persons acquired through non-formal learning and independent learning is free for persons.

Investments in digital skills training have also been set under the Human Resources Development „Programme 2021-2027, and with ESF“ funds it is planned to train over 160,000 individuals to increase their level of digital skills.

Targeted studies of skill needs are also carried out. Within the framework of projects implemented in the period 2022 – mid-2023 by the social partners in partnership with Ministry of Labour and Social Policy under the procedure „Development of digital skills“ under Human Resources Development Programme, sectoral analyzes were carried out to establish the level of digitization of Bulgarian enterprises and identification of the need for digital skills in the workplace. Unified profiles of the general and specific digital skills needed to successfully perform key positions and professions in economic activities, sectoral qualification frameworks of digital skills and non-formal learning learning content for specific digital skills have been developed.

Example: The program „Women in Tech – Women in technology“, aimed at online training of women to develop digital skills. The program is implemented in partnership under the Memorandum of Cooperation between Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the Higher School of Telecommunications and Posts and Huawei Technologies Bulgaria, concluded on 6.12.2023. The trainings are held at the Higher School of Telecommunications and Posts, together with Huawei Technologies Bulgaria, which provide equipment and training resources. As part of its initiatives, Ministry of Labour and Social Policy provides information to unemployed women about the opportunities for ICT training organized by the Higher School of Telecommunications and Posts and Huawei Technologies Bulgaria. Training is within the 45 study hours. In order to be convenient and in line with the commitments of the participants, it is held on Saturdays and Sundays. The training program includes acquiring basic knowledge and skills for the computer such as hardware and peripherals, creating files and folders, online browsing and data search, e-mail, cloud environment, creating digital content through MS Word, Excel Power Point, Google Docs, device security settings and e-mail. Successful completion of trainings is certified by a certificate. Trainings under the „Women in Tech – Women in Technology“ Program are free and available to any woman who wishes to learn basic digital skills – regardless of her labor market status, education or social status. As of July 2024, about 200 women have been trained.

The Ministry of Education and Science implements the state policy in the field of education in accordance with current regulations. The Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria, with article 6, paragraph 2, regulates equality before the law and the non-admission of any restrictions on rights or privileges based on race, nationality, ethnicity, sex, origin, religion, education, beliefs, political affiliation, personal and social status or property status.

Example: „Unified electronic platform for educational services and content“ – „Digital backpack“. Under the project „Education for tomorrow“, financed under OP „Science and education for smart growth“, a „Unified electronic platform for educational services and content“ has been built – „Digital backpack“. The platform represents the next step in the digitalization of education that has begun and precedes the introduction of personalized learning. With it, all students have access to a repository of digital learning content. The platform enables teachers to create digital learning content themselves – lessons, exercises, tests using a huge volume of available electronic resources – texts, images, interactive presentations, 3 D models, video and audio clips, virtual and augmented reality.

Measures have been taken to **promoting STEM education**, gender-responsive

In the implementation of the state policy in the field of preschool and school education, aimed at providing education and personal development to all children and students, at promoting innovation, STEM education and digitization in educational institutions, full compliance with the principle of equality is guaranteed and ensured, with equal rights and equal opportunities for boys and girls, without allowing gender-based inequalities.

Measures have been taken to **creating conditions for a digital learning environment**, gender-sensitive.

Under the National Program „Information and Communication Technologies in Preschool and School Education“ of the Ministry of Education and Science is aimed provision of Internet connectivity to schools and the backbone network of the Regional Departments of Education; provision of a modern educational environment that guarantees a unified approach in the application of key competences in the field of formal education, non-formal learning and informal learning; access to cloud ICT educational resources - supporting the preschool education system by implementing modern means of training, provision and management of

cloud services in a hybrid environment; purchase of innovative hardware and modern equipment, construction of new Wi-Fi zones, etc.; Provision of educational electronic resources, cloud services, professional training software, software products for administration and management of the learning process for the needs of the education system.

In the period 2018-2023 more than 115,000 units have been provided by the Ministry of Education and Science. the laptop for students and teachers and over 38 000 pcs. the tablet.

Programmes are being introduced and strengthened to **ensuring universal meaningful connectivity** for women and girls, especially in underserved areas. Mainstreaming gender perspectives into national digital policies.

An important prerequisite for sustainable growth, innovation and the provision of a wide range of digital services based on the rapid exchange of large volumes of data is the availability of modern infrastructure. This infrastructure must be able to support rapidly increasing traffic, providing coverage with sufficient capacity and the ability to transmit data at the volume, speed and reliability necessary to meet the needs of modern life. Improved connectivity will play a crucial role in increasing innovation and productivity, as well as enabling everyone, regardless of their location, to make full use of digital services and benefit from participation in the digital economy.

Broadband Internet access represents one of the cornerstones of the digital revolution. Non-discriminatory, safe and effective Internet access must be provided as a service in the public interest so that everyone can participate in economic and public life. Broadband access is recognized by the European Commission as one of the main tools for improving the economic and social well-being of the population. It is becoming an increasingly important factor not only for the competitiveness of enterprises, but also for supporting social inclusion and enabling the development and use of digital governance services.

Due to the increasing digital integration of social and economic processes, mobile use of the Internet is growing significantly. The fifth generation 5G digital network is a key technology in this field. Higher speeds, low time lag and a large number of connected end devices will enable the development of a wide range of new business models in areas such as autonomous driving, Industry 4.0, digital agriculture, trade and crafts, energy, digital learning, digital management, digital healthcare and logistics.

Digital transformation requires significant improvement of the currently existing infrastructure. The full economic and social benefits of digital transformation will be achieved if widespread deployment and use of very high capacity networks is ensured. Therefore, 5G networks and in the future 6 G as well as optical networks will be among the most important building blocks of our digital economy and society by 2030. Expectations for 5G networks are definitely high. However, their deployment also poses challenges in terms of the availability of free radio spectrum for civilian needs, the implementation of standards, the construction of short-range wireless access points (small cells), facilitating innovation and new use cases, mobilizing investment and mitigating the risk of digital divide. By 2030, the government is ambitious to provide gigabit connectivity for all major socio-economic drivers such as schools, transport hubs and major public service providers, as well as digitally intensive enterprises. Support to connect these drivers of digital growth will significantly improve the business environment for operators by driving demand and lowering the cost of deploying networks. And last but not least, all market participants benefiting from the digital transformation should shoulder their social responsibilities and make a fair and proportionate contribution to public goods, services and infrastructures for the benefit of all citizens in the Union.

Digital connectivity is defined as the core of digital transformation. Measures in this area are concentrated in improving access to high-speed Internet in less populated regions and

its active use by the population and businesses, as well as in the development of high-speed mobile Internet in the country.

Connectivity has been identified as a key factor in digital transformation in [The National Recovery and Resilience Plan](#). It includes component 2.C.1 „Digital connectivity“, which aims to build a modern and secure digital infrastructure and overcome territorial imbalances related to the spread of broadband access. A broadband project is under preparation and will be funded under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NPSU) and could be reported in 2027. [The National Plan for Next Generation Broadband Access Infrastructure „Connected Bulgaria“](#) aims to provide high-speed mobile Internet throughout the country, accelerated construction of broadband infrastructure, incl. for the needs of the state administration, creating conditions for the deployment of very high capacity networks, efficient use of radio frequency spectrum, improving coverage in settlements located in peripheral, sparsely populated and rural areas, bridging the digital divide and network security.

Measures have been taken to support **the creation and expansion of** safe, accessible, affordable, relevant and inclusive public and private **digital tools and services**.

To meet the growing demand for public e-services by citizens **in recent years, the government has made progress in providing online public services**. With significant EU support, investments have been made to build and improve digital infrastructure and shared digital platforms to create opportunity for easier access to various online services. The Government has been able to improve the mobile-friendly and user interface of the services. The introduction of electronic and mobile identification and authentication mechanisms has increased security and convenience in accessing electronic services. Citizens can now access information using their mobile devices and conduct various transactions online, eliminating the need for physical visits to government offices. The integration of online payment systems has made transactions more convenient and streamlined, benefiting government and citizens.

Several Bulgarian institutions have taken steps towards digital transformation by developing and implementing new solutions to improve service delivery. For example, the Ministry of Health implemented a new electronic system that allows hospital administrators to remotely access patients' medical records. This technology has improved communication between health care providers and improved efficiency in the provision of medical services. Also, the National Revenue Agency has launched an online tax filing and payment platform. This platform led to a reduction in the number of taxpayers' errors and reduced the processing time of tax refunds.

Digital public services in Bulgarian municipalities face significant challenges. Many municipalities in remote areas still have insufficient or unreliable access to high speed the Internet, which makes it difficult to make full use of digital services for residents and civil servants. This digital divide hinders the implementation of digital initiatives management and it does not allow municipalities to provide efficient and convenient services to their citizens. The big challenge is the limited digital skills of the staff and low digital literacy among the population. Many elderly residents and those with less education are unfamiliar with the use of digital technologies or lack the basic skills needed to fully engage with digital government services. This creates an obstacle to their access to important government information and services online and puts them at a disadvantage compared to their urban partners.

The government [Portal for electronic services](#) is the shared platform where each administrative electronic service provider updates the content of its data. The portal is being upgraded with new functionalities aimed at achieving the goal of digital a decade the EU for 100% online provision of key public services for citizens and businesses. Service taxonomy improved, service catalog aligned with a common data model for describing public services. Available electronic services with and organized in episodes of life for more convenience for

users. In addition, a centralized system for managing profiles of citizens, companies and administrative bodies and structures for access to services and electronic forms and procedures for registering users with e-identification and e-authentication is provided. To ensure secure access to the portal, in 2019, a cloud-based electronic signature for electronic identification was introduced in addition to existing options (Qualified electronic signature, social security number of the National Revenue Agency and National Insurance Institute unique access code of the. In addition, the portal meets accessibility requirements for people with disabilities, in accordance with EU Directive 2016/2102 on the accessibility of websites and mobile applications of public sector bodies (EU DESI 2022). Other new functionalities allow users to send their suggestions, complaints and alerts and to have access to statistics on electronic services.

The e-services portal is integrated with other shared digital platforms such as electronic authentication system, electronic delivery platform and electronic payment portal. The system [eAuthentication](#) serves the process of electronic identification and authentication of individuals and legal entities by providing Single Sign-On. For cross-border electronic identification, eIDAS Node has been developed in accordance with the EU Regulation integrated with the eAuthentication system, which connects and tests with the nodes of other EU Member States. [The Platform eDelivery](#) enables electronic applications/requests for public electronic services and receipt of electronic notifications po email or by text message (SMS). The platform also supports the exchange of electronic documents and electronic messages between government institutions and supports long-term storage of electronic documents and information about sent and received documents and messages. Communication through the eDelivery system replaces the delivery of paper mail. This is the electronic equivalent of the registered letter with return receipt. Since 2018, all institutions are obliged to exchange documents only electronically. All administrations can integrate the eDelivery module into their information systems or use it through a user interface on the shared platform. The system is integrated with the e-Authentication system and it provides an opportunity for automated use of authentication and reference information from information systems of administrative bodies, as well as systems of third parties. The system is also integrated with the system [ePayment](#), which in turn it enables users to pay electronically for the administrative services requested through the single portal for electronic services and/or through the portals for electronic services of individual departments or local administrations. The platform provides a help section for users with guidance information on how to make electronic payments for electronic services. Users can provide their feedback on questions, suggestions or technical issues.

[The Interregister Exchange Environment \(RegiX\)](#) it was created to reduce the administrative burden for citizens and businesses by removing the requirement to submit paper documents. RegiX allows automated interconnections between different registries maintained by government authorities. Public institutions, civil servants and public service organizations can access the registers integrated into RegiX with the approval of the register owner. To help government institutions connect to RegiX, APIs have been developed and published. Authorized users can automatically extract data from basic registers such as National Population Register, BULSTAT Register, Property Register, Commercial Register, Debt Register at the Customs Administration, Register of Personal Data Administrators, Register of Bulgarian Identity Documents, Unified Register of Foreigners, Register of Secondary Schools, students, etc. [RegiX usage statistics](#) it is available in real time.

[The single electronic communications network](#) the state administration has an integrated network with access points in 28 regional cities. Administrations are provided with online access to the procedures for establishing, terminating and changing connections from the single electronic communication network and forms for requesting services and virtual resources.

Government institutions are beginning to use emerging technologies. According to the World Bank study, 16.2% of its participating organizations already use the Internet of Things

(IoT), 5.4% of them use blockchain technologies and artificial intelligence, machine learning technologies, and others plan to start the use of emerging technologies. Unfortunately, the proportion of those ministries, departments and municipalities that do not use or have no plans to use such technologies remains large.

They apply **standards for data collection, use, sharing, archiving and deletion**, gender and human rights

In accordance with the development trends in the new decade, as an essential priority in the digital transformation of the public sector, the data that are defined as key capital for society are presented. Digital data has the potential to become an engine of economic development, innovation and overcoming a number of societal challenges. Having more and more digital data and improving the way it is managed and used is essential to address challenges in the demographic, socio-economic and administrative, climate and environmental spheres, contributing to a healthier, prosperous and more sustainable society. The vision and initiatives at the European level define a new comprehensive approach to the „data economy“, which aims to increase the demand and use of digital data and the services, products and processes based on them within the Single European Market. According to The European Data Strategy envisages the creation of a Single European Data Area and the implementation of new models for data collection, processing, use and reuse, storage and security.

In order to be in tune with European and global digital development, our country has taken initiatives to completely change and reverse the approach to digitization of the public sector. Therefore, at the beginning of 2021, the vision for the development of e-government in our country was updated, with the data being placed at the basis of the digital transformation of the public sector. To achieve specific goals, work is being done in the direction of: coordinated planning and implementation of projects and activities at national and local level – from self-serving initiatives to the realization of clearly defined priorities; building „**digital administration**” – administration structured in accordance with modern management technologies and the achievements of information and communication technologies with an emphasis on the development and optimization of shared resources of e-government; ensuring equal and wide access to effective, quality and secure information society services for citizens, businesses and state administration, as well as equal opportunities to acquire skills for their use and others.

Project “Digital divide and social inequalities: levels, actors and interactions” is an interdisciplinary project of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology (IFS), financed by the „Scientific Research“ Fund under contract KP-06 PN55/7 from 2021 with a three-year implementation period. The scientific team includes: sociologists, political scientists, public relations specialists from IFS, SU „St. Kliment Ohridski”, UNWE and Burgas Free University.

The purpose of the project is to explore the possibilities of expanding the actually derived offline benefits, of improving the life chances for different categories of users, of reducing socio-economic and socio-demographic inequalities through the technological transition to digitization.

A secondary analysis of individual quantitative data in an international aspect was conducted based on the European Social Survey and the International Social Research Program on the topics of the impact of digitization on *participation in additional courses and trainings*. It has been established that, in an international, comparative aspect, Bulgaria has the strongest dependence of readiness to participate in additional training on the possibility that the training will lead to higher pay. A higher level of digitization in Europe leads to better chances for women to participate in additional training, as well as for low-skilled employees where there are more women and for workers where there are more men.

The theoretical model for the study of digital inequalities considers the importance of positions in stratification for the benefits derived from digitization and for inequalities in terms of people's life chances. Three groups of social inequalities are distinguished. In view of the present report, of interest is the group of socio-cultural inequalities based on individual characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, age, health status, which carry a socially constructed character. This feature leads to the attribution of roles and behavior, to the existence of stereotypes and prejudices that play the role of a barrier to access to online services. Social and cultural barriers are a major cause of inequalities in the use of digital technologies.

Third-level digital divide studies have traditionally focused on the relationships between demographic characteristics, technological attitudes, the skills and differentiated use of the Internet, on the one hand, and derived offline benefits on the other. However, some authors are of the opinion that emerging new technologies require different topics to be taken into account, such as „digital fingerprints“ - the information that is kept for users online also has consequences for themselves. Disadvantaged groups suffer most from large-scale surveillance based on the digital footprints left behind. For example, disadvantaged users are more likely to fall victim to fraudulent offers or predatory websites. Among them stand out poor women, who are often test subjects for surveillance technologies - they are disproportionately monitored by Governments.

A key argument in the emerging literature on the social implications of AI (artificial intelligence) is that data-driven online algorithms often reinforce established structural inequalities rather than eliminate them. Research at the third level of the digital divide should therefore include topics such as digital footprints, algorithmic observation and data-driven discrimination. These problems are of particular importance in Bulgaria, where a large part of Internet users have poor digital literacy and are thus exposed to an increasing range of risks compared to digitally literate users.

The third level of the digital divide (and inclusion) allows it to be considered in parallel with the existing real processes of social differentiation and stratification in society, because it brings down the previous two. The study of digital inequalities emphasizes the interrelationship between online and offline benefits, differentiated for people occupying different positions in the social structure in terms of improving life trajectories, increasing market chances, improving health status, increasing participation in community and political life.

Socio-economic and socio-demographic inequalities affect the offline results of Internet use, are transformed into digital inequalities, which subsequently close the cycle and become social again

by registering the different benefits for different categories of online users. People's higher social status also makes them more advantaged users online with real offline benefits for themselves.

* * *

9. In the past five years, how has the macroeconomic and fiscal policy environment affected the implementation of the BPfA in your country, and what macroeconomic policies has your country implemented in support of a more gender-equal economy?

In the online survey you will be asked whether your country has introduced austerity/fiscal consolidation measures, such as public spending cuts or public sector cuts, in the last five years (YES/NO). If the answer is YES, you will be asked whether before or after the measures were introduced, assessments of their impact on women and men respectively (YES/NO) were carried out.

In the last five years the macroeconomic and fiscal policy environment has not negatively affected the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in Bulgaria. Public and private finance mobilized to promote the equality of women and men has been relatively stable over the years. Ofunds are secured in various areas of social policy, social protection, the labour market, education, sports, culture, economic development, etc., and the principles of gender equality have not been violated in the financing of the measures. The responsible institutions and organizations implement the measures they set out in the National Action Plans to promote the equality of women and men with funds from their budgets and under national, European and international programs and projects. The implementation of equality policies is also carried out by integrating the principle of equality of women and men into measures laid down in program and planning documents under the competence of individual institutions and organizations, which are financially secured accordingly. For example The Ministry of Economy and Industry implements equality policies related to measures laid down in The National Strategy for Small and Medium Enterprises (2021-2027).

Bulgaria has not introduced austerity measures, such as cutting public spending or cutting the public sector, in the last five years that have a negative impact on women's and men's equality policies.

* * *

Poverty eradication, social protection and social services

Critical areas of concern:

Women and poverty
Education and training of women
Women and health
Human rights of women
The child-girl

10. In the last five years, what actions has your country taken to reduce/eradicate poverty among women and girls?

In the online survey you will be asked to select specific actions from the list below:

- Promoted poor women's access to decent work through active labour market policies (e.g. job training, skills, employment subsidies, etc.) and targeted measures
- Broadened access to land, housing, finance, technology and/or agricultural extension services
- Supported women's entrepreneurship, access to markets, and business development activities
- Introduce or strengthen social protection programmes for women and girls (eg cash transfers for women with children, community service schemes/employment guarantees for women of working age, pensions for older women)
- Introduced/strengthened low-cost legal services for women living in poverty
- Other, please specify
- None of the above

In Bulgaria, it encourages **poor women's access to decent work** through active labour market policies (eg vocational training, skills, employment subsidies, etc.) and targeted measures.

Active labour market policy leads to promoting access of poor women to decent work through active labour market policies (eg vocational training, skills, employment subsidies, etc) and targeted measures.

Support for women is targeted in several areas:

- Provision of individualised services such as: information, counselling and referral to job vacancies; vocational guidance; support from psychologists and case managers; motivating individuals for active labour market behaviour and involving them in employment and training programmes and measures;
- Expanding opportunities and access to adult education;
- Incentives for employers who create jobs and provide employment.

The aim is to support unemployed women effectively and ensure rapid and quality transitions to employment through a wide range of services.

During the period 2019–2023, the average annual number of unemployed persons registered at employment offices was 176,888 persons. The average annual number of unemployed women is 99,031 persons or 55.6%. In the occupational structure of unemployed women, the proportion of women without qualifications or specialisation is predominant.

Unemployed women have equal access and actively participate in all programs, projects and incentive measures that are implemented on the labor market with funds from the state budget and from the European Social Fund under the Operational Program „Development of Human Resources”. A variety of training opportunities are provided in which women can participate – training for the acquisition of a professional qualification, training for the acquisition of key competences, on-the-job training (placement – for persons with qualifications and without work experience in the profession, apprenticeship under the guidance of a mentor – for persons with primary and lower education and without qualifications), training through work (dual training), etc. Women are the more active persons in training activities.

During the period 2019-2023, more than 25 thousand women were included in training under programs, projects and measures of the active labor market policy.

The policy to promote youth employment, incl. employment among young women is a priority of active labor market policy. Bulgaria implements the European Youth Guarantee – initiative, which guarantees „to every young person up to 25 years of age to provide a good offer of work, further education, training, apprenticeship or internship up to four months after becoming unemployed or leaving the formal education system (the school system or the higher education system)”. To this end, the National Plan for the Implementation of the Youth Guarantee 2014-2020 is being implemented, under which a number of measures are being implemented for early interventions and activation of young people who are not studying, not working, and not registered at employment offices, as well as measures for the integration into the labour market of registered unemployed young people. For reaching the youth, incl. young women and girls who are neither trained nor employed, in this case their activation is carried out by the youth mediators. After their registration at the employment office, young people have access to a wide range of information, counselling, referral services to take up employment in subsidised jobs or to primary labour market, varied training and qualification opportunities, work placements in a real workplace, apprenticeships, etc. These services are complemented by the services provided by case managers and psychologists, including: psychological support, career counseling, professional guidance, job search workshops, mediation to solve complex problems that distance young people from the labor market, etc.

Individual career guidance is provided; an individual plan is developed including steps to find a job that is tailored to the professional profile and the person's subsequent development wishes.

Within the framework of the „Career start program, unemployed young people under the age of 29, incl. young women and girls, with completed higher education and without the presence of work experience in the completed specialty, can acquire work experience and experience in their specialty by working in the public administration within 9 months. The aim is to facilitate the transition from education to employment and the achievement of a flexible combination of knowledge, skills and practice that correspond to the requirements of the modern economy.

Operation "Youth Employment" under the Operational Program „Development of Human Resources“ provides an opportunity for unemployed young people under the age of 29 to increase their competitiveness through internships or in-service training, which facilitates the transition from education to employment and the acquisition of professional experience necessary to fill vacancies, requested by employers.

The operation "Training and employment for young people" under the Operational Program „Development of Human Resources“ aims at the integration of unemployed young people up to the age of 29 into employment with an employer by providing training and subsidies for employers regarding employment provision.

In order to promote activity and improve the opportunities for finding a job and the employment on the labor market of young people up to the age of 29 who are neither in education or training, nor in employment and are not registered as unemployed persons in the "Labor Bureau" directorates, an operation "Ready for work" is implemented the Operational Program „Development of Human Resources“. Activities are carried out to identify, inform and motivate active behavior on the labor market of economically inactive young people; "Job search workshops" are held; psychological support is provided; individuals are directed to appropriate education and training measures tailored to their individual profile; labor exchanges are organized with the aim of meeting activated young people with employers.

For persons with primary and lower education and no qualifications, incl. women, opportunities are provided for apprenticeship and learning practical skills under the guidance of a mentor, as well as training through work (dual training).

Within the framework of projects initiated and implemented by the representative organizations of the social partners at the national level, training and employment opportunities are provided to unemployed persons who are disadvantaged in the labor market, incl. and unemployed women. A complex approach is applied, including the provision of training for the acquisition of professional qualifications in professions sought by employers, training in key competences necessary for the successful exercise of the professions, subsidized employment or employment in the primary labor market (unsubsidized employment) for a period of not less than 3 months.

Within the framework of the "Training and Employment" operation under the Human Resources Development Programme, unemployed persons who are over the age of 29 and are registered in the "Labor Bureau" directorates in the country can join employment with an employer in the real sector or local institutions self-management through trainings that are tailored to the specific needs of the workplace, as well as an employment subsidy.

Under the "Vouchers for employed persons" operation, opportunities are provided to employed persons in enterprises outside the state administration with a medium or lower level of education to acquire new or expand their knowledge and skills by including them in training for the acquisition of qualifications and/or key competences.

For the long-term unemployed, of whom over 50% are women, activities are implemented to activate them and return them to the labor market for sustainable employment. Information and motivation services are provided for active behavior in the labor market,

inclusion in Job Search Studios, provision of vocational guidance and counseling, training to acquire a professional qualification, provision of subsidized full-time or part-time employment for a period of up to 12 months in the private and public sectors, as well as mentoring after starting work. Agreements on integration into employment are concluded with the long-term unemployed, which define the specific goals and actions, tailored to the identified problems, deadlines and specific responsibilities of the unemployed and labor intermediaries.

Operation "Work" under the Operational Program „Development of Human Resources“ is aimed at increasing economic activity and improving access to employment for unemployed jobseekers, as well as activating inactive persons from areas with a high level of unemployment by providing opportunities for inclusion in various forms of training and employment. Targeted support is provided to the long-term unemployed in order to overcome obstacles and create prerequisites for their inclusion in employment. The operation also helps to deal with the imbalance in the distribution of the labor force and unemployment in small settlements where there is an unfavorable demographic situation, which in turn ensures the prevention of a permanent reduction of the working-age population in these regions, providing opportunities for employment and the creation of new jobs.

Women are involved in employment in the field of care for the elderly, provided under the National Program „Assistants for people with disabilities“.

The National Program „Retirement Allowance“ supports the transition from unemployment to work or retirement for people over 58. Employers who open vacancies and provide employment to persons from the target group, incl. women, funds are provided from the state budget for labor costs for a period of 3 to 24 months.

Unemployed women also participate actively in the National Programme for Employment and Training of Persons with Permanent Disabilities, in the incentive measures that provide incentives to employers providing „first job“, employ unemployed persons over 55 years of age, long-term unemployed persons, persons with disabilities, open „green jobs“, etc.

Employment exchanges organized by the Employment Agency with the participation of employers also have a positive effect on women's employment. Women are also supported through participation in a Job Search Workshop to acquire job search skills, preparation of application documents, for presentation to an employer.

The programs and measures of the active labor market policy implemented by the Employment Agency under projects of the Operational Program „Development of Human Resources“ are financed with funds from the state budget and co-financed by the European Social Fund.

Employment promotion policies, which cover a wide range of instruments such as employment and training programmes, recruitment incentives, upskilling and skills measures, job creation measures and the promotion of entrepreneurship, provide opportunities for effective support, for both men and women. Incentives for employment, the provision of opportunities to acquire skills that meet the requirements of new jobs effectively promote transitions in the labor market for women from vulnerable groups. Measures that promote entrepreneurship are also essential.

One of the key directions in the policy for increasing employment includes a complex of measures to promote the participation in the labor market of persons from vulnerable groups. In the Employment Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria 2021-2030, adopted by the Council of Ministers by Decision № 515 of 15 July 2021, as amended by Decision of the Council of Ministers № 368 of 2 June 2022, activities are planned in the long term to increase the supply of the workforce, which are also aimed at persons from unequal groups. Annually in the National Action Plan for Employment, which sets out operational objectives and priorities

policy areas include actions, programs and incentive measures for training and employment that support labor market transitions. The plan also defines the target groups to which the instruments of the active labor market policy for the respective year are directed as a priority. Complex support for persons from these groups unites a spectrum of services for active behavior in the labor market, which are tailored to their individual profile, inclusion in vocational training and/or training for the acquisition of key competences, referral to vacancies, inclusion in employment programs, etc. The specific measures address the barriers to employment faced by persons from different groups - for example, for unemployed young people who are without qualifications, vocational training opportunities are provided, the return to work for parents with young children is supported by providing babysitters, the long-term unemployed are encouraged for active behavior through a complex of measures that also include subsidized employment. Employers who create jobs and provide employment to persons from the target groups are provided with financial incentives. The National Action Plan for Employment includes Regional Employment Programs that address the problem of limited job creation in less developed regions. They are an effective tool of employment policy, as they provide employment opportunities for persons from vulnerable groups and contribute to the development of regions. The measures in the National Action Plan for Employment are financed with funds from the state budget and European funds.

Women from the groups of long-term unemployed persons, young people up to 29 years of age, unemployed persons with permanent disabilities and those over 50 years of age, unemployed persons with a low level of education and without professional qualifications, as well as unemployed parents with young children are among the vulnerable groups in the labor market who need support to find work. On the basis of the principles enshrined in the European Pillar of Social Rights and in implementation of the measures laid down in the Employment Strategy 2021-2030, the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy conducts a targeted active labor market policy to meet the specific needs of disadvantaged groups. Programs and incentive measures are implemented in accordance with the Employment Promotion Act, aimed at supporting the successful professional realization and employment of inactive and unemployed persons from vulnerable groups.

In response to the needs of businesses for a quality and productive workforce, trainings are organized and conducted for unemployed persons to acquire a degree of professional qualification or key competences. The goal is to acquire knowledge and skills sought by employers and support the transition to sustainable and quality employment. The inclusion of persons from unequal groups in the labor market in subsidized employment and adult education is financed annually through the National Employment Action Plan. Through the budget for an active labor market policy, employers expenses for wages and social security contributions of employees, as well as additional payments under the Labor Code, are covered. Subsidized jobs are full-time and part-time, which provides flexible employment opportunities for individuals and a more effective combination of professional and family commitments.

The larger programs that support women from unequal groups in the labor market are:

- program „Start of career“ - supports internship opportunities for young people up to 29 years old with higher education, without work experience in the acquired specialty;
- Training and employment program for long-term unemployed persons - long-term unemployed persons can join employment for a period of up to 12 months in jobs in the public and private sectors;
- National programme „Retirement“ allowance for employment of unemployed persons of pre-retirement age;
- National programme for the employment and training of the permanently disabled - for the employment of unemployed persons with permanent disabilities;

- National program „Activation of inactive persons“ – offers a complex of measures with a focus on activation and inclusion in the labor market of inactive persons, including discouraged persons.

One of the key reforms of the labor market during the period subject to monitoring is related to changes in the Employment Promotion Act in 2022 to regulate the activation activities of economically inactive persons. The new regulations provide for activities with economically inactive women and men to be carried out at the local level by the territorial divisions of the Employment Agency, together with the regional employment authorities (regional administrations, local self-government bodies, territorial divisions of ministries, organizations and social partners). Specific activities for working with economically inactive persons, tailored to the specifics of the region and the individual needs of the persons, are included in cooperation agreements concluded at the local level between the territorial divisions of the Employment Agency and the regional employment authorities. To implement the activities, provision has been made for the establishment of inter-agency teams with the participation of the parties to local cooperation agreements.

You are taking measures to **support for women's entrepreneurship**, access to markets and business development activities.

The National Strategy for Small and Medium Enterprises it supports the development of SMEs, entrepreneurship, the business environment, digitization and the introduction of eco-friendly policies. The Strategy sets out measure 1.4 „Promotion of key types of entrepreneurship“, which includes a specific action 1.4.2 Support for those wishing to start a business activity as self-employed persons and SMEs in key types of entrepreneurship (women, youth, the elderly, the unemployed and immigrants) to provide training, consulting and mentoring services. The measure is implemented by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy and within 2023. the following actions have been taken, which are reported in the Report of the Annual Program for the Implementation of the National Strategy for Small and Medium Enterprises:

In 2023, support for those wishing to start a business activity as self-employed persons continued, according to the terms of the Employment Promotion Act (PDO). The measures are financed with funds from the state budget for an active labor market policy. Pursuant to article 49, paragraph 1, of the PPE, unemployed persons are provided with funds for expenses for starting an independent economic activity as a micro-enterprise under the Law on Small and Medium Enterprises under a business project approved by the territorial division of the Employment Agency (. In 2023, 284 persons entered into a contract with AZ under article 49, paragraph 1, of the PPE to start independent economic activity. Of the persons who concluded a contract with AZ and registered a micro-enterprise (Article 49, paragraph 4 of the PPE), 267 people concluded a contract for the payment of additional monthly amounts for paid insurance contributions for the fund „Pensions“, Supplementary compulsory pension insurance and The National Strategy for Small and Medium Enterprises on the minimum amount of monthly insurance income for self-insured persons, according to the Law on the Budget of the State Social Insurance system and The National Strategy for Small and Medium Enterprises for the relevant year. The costs of used external consulting services and/or accompanying services were reimbursed to 115 unemployed persons who started their own business and one person took advantage of the opportunity to acquire a professional qualification. In 2023, after developing and approving a business project, 132 unemployed persons received a lump sum of money under article 47, paragraph 1, of the PPE in order to start business activities under an approved business project by a division of the Employment Agency, instead of cash unemployment benefit. The costs of used external consulting services and/or accompanying services were reimbursed to 30 unemployed persons who started their own business and one

person concluded a contract to provide employment to another unemployed person without the right to cash unemployment benefit. The total invested funds from the state budget for the implementation of measures to promote entrepreneurship under the Employment Promotion Act amount to BGN 1,613,538.

In 2023, measures for the development of entrepreneurship were implemented, also aimed at employers – micro-enterprises to create jobs, with BGN 1,597,170 spent.

They are introduced and strengthened **social protection programmes for women and girls.**

Pensions for older women

- **Social pension for old age** persons, regardless of their sex, who have reached the age of 70, who have not been granted another pension, including from another country, receive them when the annual income of a family member on the date of reaching the age is less than 30 percent of the sum of the poverty line determined for the country in the last 12 months. The amount of the social pension for old age, as well as the conditions for receiving it, are determined by the Council of Ministers on the proposal of the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy and the National Insurance Institute. For the period 2019–2024, the social pension for old age is paid in the following amounts:
 - 01.01.2019 – 30.06.2019 – BGN 125.58.
 - 01.07.2019 – 30.06.2020 – BGN 132.74.
 - 01.07.2020 – 30.06.2021 – BGN 141.63.
 - 01.07.2021 – 24.12.2021 – BGN 148.71.
 - 25.12.2021 – 30.06.2022 – BGN 170.00.
 - 01.07.2022 – 30.06.2023 – BGN 247.00.
 - 01.07.2023 – 30.06.2024 – BGN 276.64.
- **Personal pensions** – can be granted to persons in respect of whom some of the requirements of Social Security Code are not met and are paid in the amount of 90 percent of the social pension for old age. They are granted by the Council of Ministers to the following categories of persons:
 1. women who reached the age of article 68, paragraph 3, of Social Security Code gave birth to and raised 5 or more children until they reached the age of 18;
 2. persons who have reached the age of article 68, paragraph 3, of the Social Security Code, who have provided care for more than 10 years for disabled – members of their families permanently in need of assistance from others; the husband, wife, as well as their ascendants and descendants in the direct line are considered family members.

Additional conditions for these pensions are: that persons have an actual insurance period of at least 3 years and meet the requirement that the annual income of a family member on the date of reaching the age is less than 30 percent of the sum of the poverty line determined for the country in the last 12 months. The size of the poverty line is as follows: from 01.01.2022 – BGN 413.00; from 01.01.2023 – BGN 504.00; from 01.01.2024 – BGN 526.00. Until 31.05.2023, the annual income of a family member was assessed against the sum of the guaranteed minimum income for the previous 12 months.

- **Social disability pension** it is granted to persons who have reached the age of 16, with a permanently reduced working capacity/type and degree of disability of more than 71 per cent, who have not been granted another pension, including from another country. The amount of the social disability pension is determined as a percentage of the social old-age pension as follows:
 1. for persons with permanently reduced working capacity/type and degree of disability 100 per cent with certain foreign assistance – 160 per cent;

2. for persons with permanently reduced working capacity/type and degree of disability from 91 per cent to 100 per cent – 140 per cent.
3. for persons with permanently reduced working capacity/type and degree of disability from 71 per cent to 90 per cent – 130 per cent.

All three types of pensions are paid from the fund „Pensions, unrelated to labor, and are charged to the state budget. Their receipt is not tied to insurance participation (personal pensions require 3 years of insurance experience) and their function is to provide social protection to vulnerable groups of society, such as elderly women.

They have been introduced and strengthened **low-cost legal services for women living in poverty.**

Currently, according to the Legal Aid Act (promulgated, SG No. 79 of 2005, as amended, SG No. 18 of 2024) citizens have the right to free legal aid if they meet the conditions laid down in the law and wish to use a lawyer, and the interests of justice so require - article 23, paragraphs 2 and 3 of the Criminal Procedure Code.

In Art. 21 of the Civil Procedure Code are regulated **the types of legal aid and the scope** the legal aid regulated in the Republic of Bulgaria, namely:

- consultation and/or the preparation of documents with a view to reaching an agreement before the start of the court proceedings or to file a case, to start or conduct proceedings for the issuance of an individual administrative act and/or for its administrative challenge, including consultation and/or preparation of documents in regional consultation centres.
- legal representation;
- prerepresentation in out-of-court procedures – representation in administrative criminal proceedings, in the proceedings for issuing an individual administrative act, in the proceedings for contesting an individual administrative act by administrative order, in proceedings before arbitration and in mediation proceedings.
- representation in detention of a person under article 72, paragraph 1, of the Ministry of Internal Affairs Act, under article 16 a of the Customs Act and under article 124b, paragraph 1, of the State Agency Act „National Security“.

The following groups of persons are entitled to free legal aid:

1. persons and families who meet the conditions for receiving a monthly allowance in accordance with articles 9 and 10 of the Regulations for the Implementation of the Social Assistance Act (promulgated, SG No. 133 of 1998);

2. persons and families who meet the conditions for assistance with targeted heating assistance for the previous or current heating season;

3. persons using social or integrated health and social services for residential care, pregnant women and mothers at risk of abandoning their children, using social services for the prevention of abandonment;

4. children placed in foster families or in families of relatives or relatives in accordance with The Child Protection Act;

5. child at risk within the meaning of The Child Protection Act;

6. persons under art. 143 and 144 of the Family Code, to persons under the age of 21, as well as to persons over the age of 21, under maintenance obligations arising before the age of 21, in accordance with Regulation № 4 of 2009. of the Council of 18 December 2008 on jurisdiction, applicable law, recognition and enforcement of judgments and cooperation in matters relating to maintenance obligations (OJ, L 7/1 of 10 January 2009) and The Convention on the International Recovery of Child Support and Other Family Members (OB, L 192/51 of 22 July 2011);

7. victims of domestic or sexual violence or human trafficking who do not have the means and wish to use legal protection;

8. persons seeking or receiving international protection or benefiting from temporary protection in accordance with The Asylum and Refugees Act, for which the provision of legal aid is not due to another legal basis;

9. foreigners subject to a coercive administrative measure and foreigners placed in a special home for temporary accommodation of foreigners in accordance with The Law on Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria, who do not have the means and wish to use legal protection;

10. persons who have been denied or revoked the status of a stateless person in the Republic of Bulgaria or the proceedings for granting the status of a stateless person have been terminated in accordance with The Law on Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria, who do not have the means and wish to use legal protection;

11. persons whose interdiction is requested, as well as persons placed under interdiction;

12. disabled persons receiving monthly support under The Disability Act, whose monthly income is not sufficient to authorize a lawyer.

Criteria:

When providing legal aid in civil and administrative cases at the request of a citizen for the admission of legal aid, the authorities form their assessment, taking into account the following criteria: the income of the person or his family; the property status certified by a declaration; marital status; health status; employment; age; other circumstances.

In criminal cases, the assessment that the accused or defendant does not have the means to pay attorney's fees is carried out by the authority that directs the procedural actions, based on the circumstances specified above.

When, by virtue of another law, legal protection, backup defense counsel or representation is necessarily provided, legal aid is provided automatically, without assessment by the authority according to the above criteria.

Authorities that allow the provision of legal aid are:

- The National Legal Aid Bureau – independent state body, a budget-supported legal entity under the Minister of Justice, established by the adoption of the Law on Legal Aid, effective from 01.01.2006, provides free legal aid to natural persons who meet the conditions specified in the Law on Legal Aid, as well as on the grounds specified in other laws.
- The authority that directs the procedural actions – investigative bodies, prosecutor's office and court, as well as the relevant police or customs authority, or an authority under Art. 124 b, para. 1 of the Law on State Agency „National Security“.

Also in **The Civil Procedure Code** (promulgated, SG No. 59 of 2007, as amended, SG No. 39 of 2024) – Art. 83, para. 1, item 6, and c **The Code of Administrative Procedure** (promulgated, SG No. 30 of 2006, as amended, SG No. 102 of 2023) – article 227 a, paragraph 2, provision is made for the exemption from court fees and costs of the party to whom legal aid has been granted in the case, subject to the terms of article 23, para. 2 Law On Legal Aid This means that the so-called automatic exemption from state fees and costs will be granted to parties in cases where they have been granted legal aid because they do not have the means to pay a lawyer, but they wish to have one and the interests of justice require it. In these cases, no further assessment is made whether the court should exempt the party from paying court fees and costs, because the assessment has already been made once in the case when the legal aid was admitted.

This legal regulation fully guarantees access to justice for certain categories of civil legal relations in which the public interest is directly affected or one of the parties is socially and economically weak, and it is impossible to pay a state fee or expenses.

* * *

11. In the past five years, what actions has your country taken to improve access to social protection for women and girls?

In the online survey you will be asked to select specific actions from the list below:

- Introduced or strengthened cash transfers for families with children that prioritize women as recipients (e.g. child benefits, family allowances, conditional or unconditional cash transfers)
- Introduced or strengthened social protection for older women (e.g. expansion of social pensions, moratoriums, inflation adjustment, introduction of pension credits for caregivers)
- Introduced or strengthened social protection for older women (e.g. expansion of social pensions, moratoriums, inflation adjustment, introduction of pension credits for caregivers)
- Extended social protection to women in informal employment (e.g. subsidies for participation in contributory schemes; inclusion in non-contributory schemes)
- Improved access to social protection for other groups of marginalized women (please see groups listed in Q3)
- Other, please specify
- None of the above

You will also be asked about gender-sensitive social protection innovations during the COVID-19 pandemic, and you can choose from the following options:

- There was no significant social protection response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The social protection response to the pandemic was significant but did not spur any gender-responsive innovations.
- The social protection response to the pandemic spurred gender-responsive innovations, but measures were mainly short-term.
- The pandemic spurred gender-responsive innovations as well as longer-term transformations of social protection to strengthen women's income security.

It's reinforced **the social protection of women of working age**. It is strengthened **the social protection of older women**. It expands **the social protection of women in informal employment**.

The legislation of the Republic of Bulgaria provides legal guarantees to prevent discrimination and to ensure equal access of all persons to social protection, incl. and to all social security rights (cash benefits, pensions, allowances, etc.) provided by the State Social Insurance system, regardless of their sex, race, nationality, ethnicity, human genome, citizenship, origin, religion or belief, education, beliefs, political affiliation, personal or social status, disability, age, sexual orientation, marital status, property status and other protected characteristics.

State Social Insurance system in Bulgaria is implemented on the basis of the principles of compulsory and universal insurance, solidarity and **equality of treatment between insured persons**. It functions on a pay-as-you-go basis, as the acquisition of the right to cash benefits, benefits and pensions (including cash unemployment benefits) is a consequence of the personal insurance contribution of the persons who are insured for the relevant social risks, i.e. from

their insurance income and the presence of a certain insurance experience, which in general is the result of the exercise of labor activity.

In fulfillment of the principle of equality of insured persons, the scope of the insurance scheme and conditions for access to it, regulated in the Social Security Code, the obligation to pay the insurance contributions and calculate the contributions, as well as the way of calculating the benefits, are the same for men and women exercising labor activity. This is because one of the main prerequisites for acquiring insurance rights, incl. of cash benefits and pensions from State Social Insurance system, is that the person has the status of an insured person, regardless of his gender or other characteristic related to his personality.

The legal definition of an insured person for the purposes of the State Social Insurance system is contained in § 1, paragraph 1, item 3 of the Additional Provisions of the Social Security Code, according to which „insured person“ is **natural person**, which carries out an employment activity for which it is subject to compulsory insurance under Article 4 and Article 4 a, paragraph 1 of the Social Security Code, and for which insurance contributions have been paid or are due.

In § 1, paragraph 2, item 12 of the Social Security Code and Additional provisions, the definition of a pensioner for the purposes of supplementary compulsory pension insurance is specified, according to which „pensioner“ is **natural person**, which receives a personal or survivor's supplementary pension from an individual lot in a supplementary pension fund or from a fund for the payment of life pensions.

Over the past five years, measures and policies have been taken to improve the social protection of persons who do not have sufficient insurance experience to receive a pension from the State Social Insurance system. The range of persons entitled to an old-age social pension has expanded and its size has increased. The social pension for old age is a pension unrelated to work activity, which is granted by the State Social Insurance system as a type of social support to persons who have reached the age of 70, without the right to another type of pension, i.e. regardless of their insurance contribution and gender, but depending on a certain income criterion. In this regard, a change was adopted in 2023 in Art. 89 a of the SCC, in force since 1 June 2023, related to the conditions for granting the social pension for old age. According to the new version of article 89 a of SCC, persons who have reached the age of 70, to whom no other pension has been granted, including from another country, have the right to a social old-age pension when the annual income of a family member on the date of reaching the age is less than 30 per cent of the sum of the poverty line determined for the country in the last 12 months. Following the amendment of the provision, the assessment of entitlement to this type of pension which it has the character of social assistance, it is tied to the poverty line, and not, as before, to the guaranteed minimum income. With this change, the access of individuals to the right to the social old-age pension has been expanded, since the amount of the poverty line is higher, it is updated annually, which is why the number of pensioners who are entitled to this type of pension is greater.

To apply a fair approach in updating the incomes of all pensioners for the period from 2019 to 2022, the social pension for old age grew by almost 100%. In 2023 and 2024, the trend towards increasing the amount of the social pension for old age was maintained. From 1 July 2024, it rose by 11 per cent, that is, by the same percentage by which all pensions related to work activity were updated in accordance with Article 100 of the SCC. As a result of these changes, the amounts of other non-employment pensions (military and civil disability pensions, social disability pension and personal pension), as well as statutory pension supplements, which are determined as a percentage of the social pension for old age.

In order to provide additional financial support in connection with the emergency situation under the rapid spread of COVID-19 and as a measure to deal with the effects of the pandemic, in the period August 2020 – June 2022, one-off additional amounts (the so-called

„covid supplements“) were paid to the pensions of all pensioners (regardless of their gender, type of pension received, etc). As of July 1, 2022, these supplements were included in the basic amount of pensions in order to preserve the income of pensioners. As a result of these policies, pension amounts have risen significantly.

Given the above, it is primarily important to use the insurance rights from the State social insurance (SSI) system in the Republic of Bulgaria whether the person is insured or not, respectively whether he has the status of a pensioner or not, regardless of his gender and belonging to a certain group of persons - women of working age, adults women, girls and others referred to in question № 3 of the second section of the document „Guidelines for comprehensive UN-Women“ country-level reviews.

Extension of social pensions

- The amendment of the provision of Article 90 a, paragraph 2 of the SCC regulates a new amount of the social disability pension, effective from 16.09.2021. With the change, the amount of the social disability pension for persons with permanently reduced working capacity/type and degree of disability above 90 percent increased from 120 percent to 135 percent of the amount of the social old-age pension (SPS), and for persons with permanently reduced working capacity/type and degree of disability from 71 to 90 per cent rose from 110 to 125 per cent of the amount of PPS.

- With effect from 01.04.2022, the provision of Article 90 a, paragraph 2 of the CSR was again amended, regulating new amounts of the social disability pension differentiated into three categories, depending on the permanently reduced working capacity/type and degree of disability of the persons, instead of in two, as was recorded in the previous text. The new amounts fixed as a percentage of the oldage social pension are as follows:

- for persons with permanently reduced working capacity/type and degree of disability 100 per cent with certain foreign assistance – 160 per cent;
- for persons with permanently reduced working capacity/type and degree of disability from 91 per cent to 100 per cent – 140 per cent;
- for persons with permanently reduced working capacity/type and degree of disability of 71 percent to 90 percent – 130 percent.

As of January 01, 2019, it is in force in Bulgaria **The Disability Act**, with which the circle of persons subject to support has been expanded, as well as the amount of monthly financial resources received by people with disabilities has been increased. The Disability Act aims to promotes, protects and guarantees the full and equal exercise of the rights and freedoms of people with disabilities; yes created conditions for social inclusion of people with disabilities; yes contributes to respect for the inherent human dignity of people with disabilities; and yes provides support for people with disabilities and their families. According to Art. 4, item 2 of The Disability Act, among the main principles of the law are „equality and non-discrimination“. Disability Act guarantees the rights of persons with disabilities in a way that ensures respect for their human dignity and their equal treatment in private, public and political life, applying an individual approach and an individual assessment of needs.

According to the provisions of The Disability Act, people with disabilities have the right to financial support depending on their needs defined in the individual assessment, which it examines the functional difficulties of the person with a disability related to his health condition and the presence of barriers in the performance of daily and other activities, as well as the type of support. The individual needs assessment is prepared at the current address of the person with a disability from the directorates „Social assistance“ to ASP. People with permanent disabilities are entitled to financial support according to the individual assessment of their needs.

The financial support under the order of The Disability Act is intended to compensate for the costs associated with overcoming the difficulties caused by the type and degree of disability and consists of two components: monthly financial support according to the degree of disability and targeted benefits according to the type of disability (for the purchase of a personal motor vehicle; housing adjustment; balneotherapy and/or rehabilitation services; for the rental of municipal housing). Financial support excluding targeted municipal housing rental assistance has been defined and updated against a dynamic monetary indicator –, the official poverty line established for the country for the relevant year. The regular indexation of the poverty line and its multiplication in the different sizes of types of financial support for people with permanent disabilities contributes to improving their quality of life. The poverty line established by the Decree of the Council of Ministers in Bulgaria for the period 2019-2024 increased by 51.1% from BGN 348 in 2019 to BGN 526 in 2024.

S people with permanent disabilities over the age of 18 enjoy the right to monthly financial support, like depending from their degree of disability, they receive a different percentage from the poverty line established for the year in the country, as follows:

- from 50 to 70.99 per cent disability rate – at the rate of 7 per cent of the poverty line;
- from 71 to 90 on one hundred degree of disability – amounting to 15 per cent of the poverty line;
- over 90 per cent degree of disability – amounting to 25 per cent of the poverty line;
- over 90 per cent degree of disability with a certain foreign allowance, who receive a disability pension due to general illness or due to an accident at work or occupational disease – in the amount of 30 per cent of the poverty line;
- over 90 per cent degree of disability with a certain foreign allowance, who receive a social disability pension or a military disability pension, or a civil disability pension, or a survivor's pension – in the amount of 57 per cent of the poverty line.

Information on the average monthly number of users of monthly financial support under the Disability Act and the funds spent on this for the period 2019-2023.

Indicator/Year	2019.	2020.	2021.	2022.	2023.
Average monthly number of users	636,093	660,608	665,473	651 976	665 742
Funds spent(BGN.)	405 317 634	460,046,647	458 324 942	494 996 998	617,546,282

For the first half of 2024, monthly financial support was provided to 687,316 average monthly number of persons, for which a total of BGN 336,308,287 was spent. In the 2024 budget, a total of are set for providing monthly financial support 657,700,000 BGN.

Financial support for people with permanent disabilities in the form of targeted benefits is provided as follows:

- for purchase of a personal motor vehicle (up to four times the amount of the poverty line for the relevant year) for persons whose movement is difficult, if they also meet the following additional conditions: the average monthly income of a family member for the last 12 months is equal to or lower than the poverty line; have been determined by TELK/NELK over 90 percent type and degree of disability or permanently reduced working capacity; are working or studying.

- conversion of housing (up to twice the amount of the poverty line for the relevant year) of people with permanent disabilities with more than 90 percent permanently reduced working capacity or type and degree of disability and children with certain type and degree of

disability moving in a wheelchair, if the average monthly income of a family member for the last 12 months is equal to or lower than the poverty line;

- balneotherapy and/or rehabilitation services provided once a year, according to the needs of persons with permanent disabilities with more than 90 percent reduced working capacity, children with permanent disabilities and disabled soldiers, in the presence of a medical prescription from a specialist doctor. The targeted assistance amounts to up to 80 per cent of the poverty line for the relevant year, but not more than the expenditure actually incurred according to the documents submitted;

- rental of municipal housing to people with permanent disabilities, if they are single or are single parents with a child with permanent disabilities and the rental agreement is concluded with them, as well as if they are placed under full guardianship and the rental agreements are concluded with their legal representatives. The targeted aid is in the amount of the legally determined rent in accordance with the Law on Municipal Property.

In the 2024 budget, a total of BGN 3,300,000 is earmarked for providing financial support in the form of targeted aid.

They are strengthened **cash transfers for families with children.**

Among the elements of the social policy aimed at supporting families with children in Bulgaria is financial support through the provision of benefits for children in accordance with the Law on Family Benefits for Children. The purpose of family benefits is to support the upbringing of children in a family environment by parents or caregivers. Family allowances for children are financed entirely from the State budget, do not have the character of insurance benefits within the meaning of the Social Security Code and do not depend on insurance contributions or employment of parents. These benefits are not only aimed at certain vulnerable groups in society, but can be received by all Bulgarian citizens who meet the conditions regulated in the Law on Family Benefits for Children. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that family benefits for children do not constitute maintenance for the child or for the family, nor are they social benefits and do not aim to supplement or replace income in order to meet the basic living needs of individuals. These benefits are targeted and intended to be used for the child. Their amounts, as well as the amount of the income criterion for access to them, are determined by the Law on the State Budget of the Republic of Bulgaria for the relevant year, being tailored to the country's budget capabilities and not tied to the poverty line.

In order of twelve types of aid are provided for the Family Child Support Act, and for each of them a distinguishing criterion is adopted, tailored to the purpose of the specific family aid. Most types of family allowance are granted to families irrespective of their income. Only three types of family benefits are granted with an income criterion (average monthly income per family member for the previous 12 months, before the month of submission of an application-declaration for granting the relevant type of family benefit). It is necessary to emphasize that for children with permanent disabilities, children placed in families of relatives or relatives or in foster families, as well as for children with or without the right to a survivor's pension from a deceased parent and children raised by their single adoptive parents, all types of family benefits are provided with a reduced regime, regardless of the family's income.

In the period 2019-2024, changes were made in the Law on Family Benefits for Children related to improving the purposefulness and effectiveness of financial support under this law, the most important of which are the following:

From 01.01.2019, with changes in the Law on Family Benefits for Children, a new type of monthly family allowance was introduced for a child without the right to a survivor's pension from a deceased parent, which is provided without an income test for the family. The assistance aims to guarantee access to financial assistance on equal terms for all children without the right to a survivor's pension. The size of the monthly allowance for a child without the right to a

survivor's pension, as well as for other family allowances for children, is determined annually with the State Budget Law, and cannot be less than the previous year.

In support of the measures to cover children and pupils in kindergartens and schools with changes in the Law on Family Benefits for Children, effective from 01.08.2019, provision is made for the payment twice of the lump-sum allowance for pupils enrolled in the first grade – 50 per cent of its amount is paid after the entry into force of the order granting it, and the balance is paid at the beginning of the second school term if the child continues to attend school.

The 2020 State Budget Law has increased the amounts of the double income criterion, which has been applied since 2018, for the granting of the monthly family allowances under Article 7 of the Family Child Support Act for raising a child until the completion of secondary education, but not more than 20 years of age, to which the amounts of the allowances are linked. The average monthly income in which families receive the full amount of assistance is BGN 410, and with an average monthly income of BGN 410.01 to BGN 510 inclusive, families receive 80 per cent of the full amount of assistance.

With the 2021 the State Budget Act of the Republic of Bulgaria, changes were made to the Law on Family Benefits for Children, effective from 01.01.2021, through which the universal approach of supporting families with children was expanded. Since 2021, the income criterion for granting the one-time allowance for students enrolled in the first grade has been dropped, and the new conditions are applicable from the academic year 2021/2022. At the same time, with the changes made to the Law on Family Benefits for Children the one-time allowance for students enrolled in the eighth grade is regulated as a new family allowance, which for the academic year 2020/2021 was provided with an income criterion in accordance with Article 12 a, paragraph 9 of the Law on Measures and Actions during the State of Emergency, declared by a decision of the National Assembly of March 13, 2020, and to overcome the consequences. As of the academic year 2021/2022, the allowance is now granted without an income test. With the 2021 the State Budget Act of the Republic of Bulgaria for 2021, the amounts of these two aid have also been increased from BGN 250 to BGN 300. The income criterion for one-time pregnancy benefits and monthly benefits for raising a child up to one year – from BGN 450 to BGN 510 has also been increased, as well as the amount of monthly benefits for raising a child up to one year – from BGN 100 to BGN 200.

Amendments to the Family Child Support Act, effective from 17.02.2021, introduced equalization of the amounts of monthly allowances for raising a child with a permanent disability under Article 8 e of the Family Child Support Act, granted to the families of relatives or relatives and to voluntary foster families, with those of the parents (adoptive parents). In order to provide care and support in a family environment, this monthly allowance is now provided both to parents (adoptive parents) for children with certain 90 and over 90 per cent permanent disabilities, and to the families of relatives or relatives and voluntary foster families where children with permanent disabilities are placed under article 26 of the Child Protection Act. These changes regulate from the amount of assistance for the families of relatives or relatives and voluntary foster families, when the placed child has a certain 90 and over 90 percent type and degree of disability or degree of permanently reduced working capacity, to deduct the amount of monthly financial benefits under the State Budget Act of the Republic of Bulgaria (for maintenance and the supplement for a child with a permanent disability), if the families receive such.

At the end of 2022, the regulations guaranteeing the right to monthly family benefits for children with one or two deceased parents are systematized and refined in the Law on Family Benefits for Children. Under the changes, they continue to receive this support under a relaxed – line without an income test, regardless of whether or not they are entitled to a survivor's pension from a deceased parent. A relaxed regime has also been introduced, irrespective of the family's income, and to provide the monthly allowances for children who

are brought up by their single adoptive parents. The scope of the one-time allowance for students enrolled in the first grade has been expanded, which from the beginning of the academic year 2023/2024 is also paid for the second, third and fourth grade, regardless of family income. This one-time allowance, as well as the one-time allowance for students enrolled in the eighth grade, is provided for all children, regardless of the type of school in which they are enrolled.

With the amendments and additions to the Law on Family Benefits for Children effective from 01.01.2023, relief was achieved to the regime for receiving the one-time allowance for students under Article 10 a of the the Law on Family Benefits for Children, which from the academic year 2023/2024 is provided to families whose children are enrolled in the first grade or are enrolled or continue their studies, in the second, third and fourth grades of school.

In order to more adequately support families in the conditions of the ongoing inflationary processes in the country, with the 2024 State Budget Act of the Republic of Bulgaria, the amounts of the income criteria under the Family Child Support Act and some types of family benefits for children have been increased, as follows: the one-time pregnancy allowance; the one-time child birth allowance; the one-time child adoption allowance, as well as the monthly allowances for raising a child with a permanent disability.

Also, in the Regulations for the Implementation of the Law on Child Protection, in force from 1.06.2023, amendments have been adopted aiming at improving the regulations in the sphere of child protection. The main change is related to linking the granted financial benefits and funds (for prevention and reintegration, raising the child with relatives or relatives and in foster families) to the poverty line as a basis for determining the criteria for access and their amount and eliminating the guaranteed minimum income as such indicator. Based on these changes, both the amounts of financial benefits and funds have been increased, as well as the amount of the income criterion for access to monthly benefits for children placed in a family of relatives or relatives under the Act on Child Protection.

In the budget of the Ministry of Labor and Social Politics under the budget program „Support for children and families”, a significant resource is provided for financing the aid and funds granted under the order of the Law on Family Benefits for Children and under the order of the Child Protection Act. For 2024, funds under the program are almost BGN 700 million (BGN 687,170,000), of which there are over BGN 640 million for family benefits for children (BGN 641,328,000), which is over BGN 47 million more than last year.

* * *

12. In the past five years, what actions has your country taken to improve health outcomes for women and girls in your country?

In the online survey you will be asked to select specific actions from the list below:

- Promoted women's access to health services through expansion of universal health coverage or public health services
- Expanded specific health services for women and girls, including sexual and reproductive health services, maternal health and HIV services
- Promoted male involvement in sexual and reproductive health, including contraceptive uptake and responsible sexual behaviour
- Taken measures to support women's mental health, including access to specialized services and counselling

- Developed gender-sensitive approaches to the prevention and treatment of chronic and non-communicable diseases (e.g. cardiovascular disease, cancer, chronic respiratory disease, and diabetes)
- Undertaken gender-specific public awareness/health promotion campaigns
- Provided gender-responsiveness training for health service providers
- Strengthened comprehensive sexuality education in schools or through community programmes
- Taken action to expand access to health services for marginalized groups of women and girls (see list in Part Two: Priorities, achievements, challenges, and setbacks)□
- Other, please specify
- None of the above

The main policy in the field of diagnosis and treatment is to ensure equal access to medical assistance of the required quality to all Bulgarian citizens, regardless of their gender, age, ethnicity and social affiliation.

The Ministry of Health has a consistent policy of protecting the health of women and girls, as women's health, their reproductive behavior and maternity security are of utmost importance for the birth of healthy and fulfilling children.

In the National Health Strategy 2030 (adopted by the Decision of the National Assembly of 2024), measures have been laid down to improve maternal and child health indicators, which with a aimed at ensuring universal access and increasing the coverage of children, pregnant women and mothers of children up to one year old with quality health care and services for prevention, diagnosis, treatment and rehabilitation.

Decision № 333 of the Council of Ministers of 2021 adopted the National Program for the Improvement of Maternal and Child Health 2021-2030.. The activities of the Program and its work plans include: prenatal genetic diagnosis of pregnancy, which ensures access of pregnant women to biochemical screening, neonatal hearing screening in all newborns for early detection, diagnosis and referral for timely intervention of hearing impairment and ensuring full development and integration.

In order to ensure risk-free motherhood and guarantee the access of women without health insurance to medical care during pregnancy and childbirth, the Ministry of Health provides funding for activities related to pregnancy and childbirth for women without health insurance, outside the scope of mandatory health insurance. The scope and order of provision of medical services related to obstetric care and preventive examination during pregnancy of health-insured women are defined by Ordinance № 26 of 2007 on the provision of obstetric care to health-insured women and on carrying out research outside the scope of compulsory health insurance for children and pregnant women. This guarantees the access of all women, regardless of their health insurance status, to medical care during pregnancy and childbirth.

For the period 2021-2023,:

- the preventive examinations of 2,922 persons in 2021, of 2,921 persons in 2022 and in 2023 of 3,925 persons;
- the number of studies for 2021 was 9,083, for 2022 – 8,460 and in 2023 – 14,284;
- hospitalizations for obstetric care in 2021 were 7,140, for 2022 – 6,824 and in 2023 – 6,517.

In implementation of Ordinance № 26 by the Ministry of Health, reagents and consumables are provided for conducting research on children and pregnant women outside the scope of compulsory health insurance. Mass neonatal screening has been introduced for the following rare diseases: phenylketonuria, congenital hypothyroidism, congenital adrenal

hyperplasia, severe combined immune deficiencies, spinal muscular atrophy and cystic fibrosis. A test for hepatitis B is also planned, once during pregnancy.

Through the Law on the Budget of the National Health Insurance Fund, the financing of programs „Maternal health“ and „Child health“ is ensured, which are in line with all modern achievements of medical science and guarantee the access of health insured persons to the medical care they need in the outpatient and hospital system.

Compulsory health insurance provides a package of health activities guaranteed by the NHIF budget, defined in Ordinance № 9 of 2019 to determine the package of health activities guaranteed by the budget of the National Health Insurance Fund.

In Ordinance № 8 of 2016 on preventive examinations and dispensary of the Minister of Health, preventive activities are laid down, which are carried out in accordance with the specifics of certain groups of the population – children, pregnant women and women in labor. The latest update of the Ordinance of 2024 guarantees the best possible conditions for medical care and effective use of public resources. It is provided for **all women aged 30 and over** annual manual examination of mammary glands, for **women from 30 to 50 years** - ultrasound examination of mammary glands once every 2 years. For **women from 30 to 40 years** an examination by an obstetrician-gynecologist with gynecological status and a Pap smear is scheduled annually. For **women aged 50 and over** – conducting a triglyceride, total cholesterol and HDL – cholesterol test and evaluating cardiac – vascular risk according to the SCORE system for individuals without cardiovascular disease, diabetes mellitus, chronic renal failure, and LDL-cholesterol for individuals with cardiovascular disease, diabetes mellitus, CKD, once every 5 years. For **women from 45 to 69 years** including mammography of mammary glands once every 2 years, a **for women aged 70 and over** mammography will be performed once every 3 years.

For age categories 40, 45, 50, 55 and 60 years, a test for the determination of hepatitis B surface antigen (HBs Ag) with a rapid test and the determination of antibodies against hepatitis C (anti-HCV) with a rapid test is carried out.

Measures are applied for amplification of **comprehensive sexuality education** in schools or through community programmes.

Sexual and health education is present in the developed and approved curricula from kindergarten to high school in the following compulsory subjects and educational areas (for kindergarten): *homeland studies, man and nature, and biology and health education*. In the primary and lower secondary stages in the curricula of the subject *man and nature* age-appropriate areas of competence are provided and upon completion of the sixth grade, students have acquired competences regarding the structure of the human reproductive system, stages of development and sexual maturation and can assess responsibility and the risk to the health of the growing organism during early sexual contacts. They know and apply rules for the protection of reproductive health.

In the junior high school stage, in the educational content for the VII grade, where the five-kingdom system in the organismic world is presented in the curriculum, bacteria, unicellular, helminths and arthropods causing human diseases, disease prevention and hygiene norms are studied in order to protect against them. The seventh grade curriculum includes the topic: „Sustainable development and healthy lifestyle“.

In the upper secondary stage, health and sex education is included in the approved curricula for grades VIII and IX (for training on framework curricula with intensive foreign language learning) and the approved curriculum for grade X in the subject *biology and health education*.

* * *

13. In the past five years, what actions has your country taken to improve education outcomes and skills for women and girls, including in sectors where they are underrepresented?

In the online survey you will be asked to select specific actions from the list below:

- Taken measures to increase girls' access to, retention in and completion of primary and secondary education
- Taken measures to increase girls' access to, retention in and completion of technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and skills development programmes
- Addressed barriers to successful school-to-work transitions for women and girls
- Strengthened educational curricula to increase gender-responsiveness and eliminate bias, at all levels of education
- Provided gender equality and human rights training for teachers and other education professionals
- Promoted safe, harassment-free and inclusive educational environments for women and girls
- Increased access to skills and training in new and emerging fields, especially STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) and digital fluency and literacy
- Ensured access to safe water and sanitation services and facilitated menstrual hygiene management especially in schools and other education/training settings
- Strengthened measures to prevent adolescent pregnancies and to enable adolescent girls to continue their education in the case of pregnancy and/or motherhood
- Other, please specify
- None of the above

Provided **gender equality and human rights training** for teachers and other specialists in the field of education.

Commission for Protection against Discrimination conducts training seminars for employees of the Ministry of Education and Sciencesystem, including school principals, teachers and psychologists. The training includes familiarization with the status and powers of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination, with international, European and national standards for protection against discrimination in the field of education, with the way of working with vulnerable groups in the educational process, with preventive measures to prevent hate speech and subsequent conflicts in educational institutions.

In addition to specialists in the field of education, the Commission directly contacts learners at different stages of its education. An example of such an initiative is the "Legal Incubator" program – innovative practice aimed at supporting young lawyers for professional realization. The program is implemented thanks to an agreement between the Commission for Protection against Discrimination and the association „Initiative for Equal Opportunities“, through which seminars are organized for students majoring in „Law“ at the Commission for Protection against Discrimination in order to familiarize themselves with the specifics of the activity and proceedings before the national authority for equality. Similar training visits are also organized annually for secondary school students, thereby promoting students' awareness of issues related to human rights, tolerance, the prohibition of discrimination and other major topics related to equality.

A project of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination in the field of education (providing education without discrimination) was implemented in 2019 in implementation of a cooperation agreement № 03-454/ 07.08.2018 between the Ministry of Education and Science on the one hand and on the other Commission for protection against discrimination. The purpose of the tasks set before the team by the Commission for Protection against Discrimination is to study and analyze the system for ensuring education without discrimination in accordance with the Law on Protection from Discrimination, to identify the positive aspects and gaps in the system for ensuring non-discrimination in the field of education, as well as to increase the awareness of pedagogical staff regarding non-discrimination and tolerance.

The Commission for Protection against Discrimination held four two-day seminars with employees of the Ministry of Education and Science system according to previously given roll-call lists by the Ministry. The criteria for assessing whether a person in the training process is discriminated against have been discussed, namely:

- a learner who is considered to be unequally treated against another learner or feels harassed by a person from the teaching or non-teaching staff or by another learner;
- a teacher who considers himself unfairly treated against another teacher or feels harassed when exercising the right to work;
- whether the objective pursued by a training institution or the compilers of textbooks is legitimate;
- the requirement set by the Minister of Education and Science, the local self-government bodies or the training institution not to exceed what is necessary to achieve the goal provided for in the law; to be objectively justified and the means for achieving the legal goal not to exceed what is necessary.

The lecturers, members of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination, according to a previously prepared program, introduced the participants to the activities of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination, the proceedings for protection against discrimination, the audience-specific cases that the Commission for Protection against Discrimination is she looked in her practice. Trainers in the role of moderators participated together with the trainees in practical activities such as a simulation process, solving cases, a role-playing game for equality of treatment. Training packages have been distributed to each participant upon registration. Each of the participants was handed a certificate of participation in the initiative.

A larger one is provided **access to skills and training in new and emerging areas, especially in the field of STEM** (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) and in the field of digital literacy.

The Ministry of Education and Science, in its role as an institution implementing national policy in the field of science and scientific research, communicates with and stimulates higher education institutions and scientific organizations regarding the principle of equality of women and men in the participation of these organizations in research projects. In January 2022. The Ministry of Education and Science approved a Plan of Activities to ensure equality of women and men in the Ministry of Education and Science 2021-2027, in which special attention is also focused on the integration of the dimension of women and men in scientific research. In it, reequality between women and men in the field of scientific research and innovation is placed as a top priority in policies related to building the European Research Area (EFP). Measures are at stake to remove barriers to the recruitment, retention and career development of women researchers and eliminate gender imbalances in decision-making. The EPP, which is based on scientific excellence, attaches essential importance to the active

involvement of women in science, technology, engineering and entrepreneurship and mathematics.

Bulgarian legislation in the field of science, namely the Law on the Promotion of Scientific Research and the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, treats women and men researchers equally. The right to free choice of scientific development and the right to guaranteed objectivity in its evaluation are equal for all scientific workers and are an integral part of the provisions of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff of the Republic of Bulgaria. Article 1, paragraph 2, item. 2. 2. Of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff of the Republic of Bulgaria introduces the principle of „free choice of scientific development and objectivity in its assessment“ as one of the four main principles for acquiring scientific degrees and occupying academic positions.

The MES regularly informs the HEI and the NOS about trainings by the European Commission regarding the observance of gender equality in their participation in the EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation „Horizon Europe“ (2021-2027), as well as regarding the need to prepare a Plan for the Equality of Women and Men on their part.

The Ministry of Education and Science sends regularly detailed information about women in science (including in management positions at VU and NO and in committees of the Fund „Scientific Research“), most recently in the month of October 2023, in connection with the collection of data from the EC for the preparation of the annual edition She Figures 2024: Women in Science data collection.

As a result of all this the research sector observes and implements European and national documents that regulate gender equality issues in implementation of state policy in the field of science:

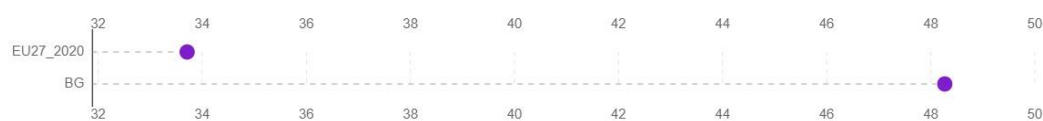
- [Gender Equality Strategy - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](https://european-council.europa.eu/media/en/press-room/pages/press-room-detail.aspx?lang=en&id=123456789) for the period 2020 - 2025.
- The EC Action Plan on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in External Action 2021—2025. (GAP III);
- The 2030 United Nations People, Planet and Prosperity Agenda - <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>;
- The national strategy for promoting equality between women and men for the period 2021-2030. - <https://www.mlsp.government.bg/blgarsko-zakonodatelstvo>.

The latest data available from the European Equality Institute the following information is shown to the sexes:

In the period from 2018 to 2021, the total share of women – scientists in Bulgaria grew from approx 46%* up to about 48%*. The total share of women scientists in Bulgaria to 2021 d. is over 48%* - significantly above the average share of around 34%* for the EU27 countries, incl. women scientists employed in the business sphere (*Figure 1*). Women account for 57%* of researchers in the public sector, about 45%* for EU27 countries (*Figure 2*), 55%* to 44%* in VO and 38%* to 22%* in the business sector, respectively.

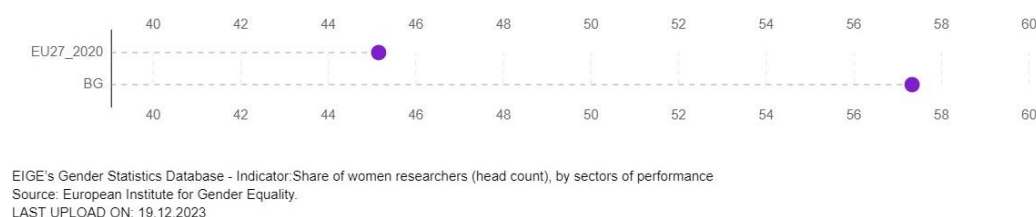
* - percentage based on total number of researchers

Figure 1. Total share of women scientists in Bulgaria as of 2021 compared to the share of EU27 countries.



EIGE's Gender Statistics Database - Indicator: Share of women researchers (head count), by sectors of performance
Source: European Institute for Gender Equality.
LAST UPLOAD ON: 19.12.2023

Figure 2. Share of women – scientists in the state sector in Bulgaria as of 2021 compared to the share of EU27 countries.



According to data for 2019 from the European Institute for Gender Equality in Bulgaria, the share of women working in the field of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) is the largest in the EU. Gender inequality in this area has the second lowest score in the EU - [Gender Equality Index 2019: Bulgaria \(europa.eu\)](https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2019/bulgaria).

In schools with vocational classes, pupils may study occupations in a dual system of education (training by work). This is a form of training in which the vocational qualification is acquired through practical training in a real working environment with an employer and at a school providing vocational training. The actual education through work is carried out in the XI and XII grades for students who have reached the age of 16. Employers have an essential role in applying for admission and in selecting the pupils they place on an employment contract for training through work in class XI and in class XII, giving girls and boys equal opportunities according to their interest and requests after trial placements. Modern corporate policies for encouraging more women in STEM occupations also have direct application in the employers' approach to the dual form of training at secondary level, which is an early support for successful insertion into the labour market.

* * *

14. What actions has your country taken to ensure that economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic closes gender gaps in poverty, employment, social protection, education, and/or health that the pandemic has exacerbated?

Bulgaria has taken a number of actions to ensure that the economic recovery after the Covid-19 pandemic overcomes the negative effects, including in terms of the equality of women and men in all areas of public life. An example of this is the above-mentioned legislative changes in the Labor Code, the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence, the Criminal Code, the Law on Legal Aid and a number of others, as well as the targeted measures included in various sectoral programs, plans and projects, including in the Recovery and Resilience Program. Further examples are presented herein.

Project BG05M9OP001-1.104-001 „Short-term support for employment in response to the Covid-19” pandemic, which is implemented by the Employment Agency, in its capacity as a specific beneficiary under Operational Program „Development of human resources” 2014-2020 under Priority axis 1: „Improving access to employment and the quality of jobs”, investment priority № 8, in order to provide support to enterprises and self-insured persons whose economic activity is directly affected by the adverse impact of the state of emergency imposed in the country, declared by a decision of the National Assembly of 13 March 2020, triggered by the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic.

In order to preserve the employment of workers and employees in enterprises carrying out the economic activities in the relevant sectors – hotel and restaurant industry, transport and tourism, specifically mentioned in the annex of RMS № 429/2020 (amended and supplemented by RMS 982/2020), the project implements support to employers, self-insured persons and municipal enterprises, which were established in accordance with the procedure set out in Article 52 of the Civil Code, the by providing compensation for part of the salary and the tax and insurance contributions due, which are at the expense of the insurer and the insured person and are in the amount of BGN 290. The employment of the supported workers and employees, as well as the activity of the self-insured persons, are reserved for the entire period of payment of the compensation, as well as for an additional period equal to half the period for which the compensation was paid.

In connection with the declared state of emergency in the country and measures to limit the spread of the COVID-19 virus, the Employment Agency recommended the use of electronic and remote mediation services for job seekers and employers.

Employers were offered the opportunity to submit requests for vacancies electronically, through the use of the official website of the Employment Agency.

Job seekers could also use the information provided through the official website to the Agency located in section „Job seekers”. In the section „e-Labor exchange”, it is possible to remotely familiarize yourself with the currently announced vacancies in the labor offices in the country. Those wishing to register at labor offices as job seekers, with the presence of a profile in the System for Secure Electronic Service, are given the opportunity to submit a remote application–Declaration for registration.

The system of secure electronic service can be used by individuals, as well as for the notification of labor offices in the country in the event of a change in the declared circumstances during registration.

Decision № 582 of the Council of Ministers of 06.08.2021 approved the National Program „Prevention and Rehabilitation of Pedagogical Specialists“, which aims to protect the life and health of pedagogical specialists, improve their health status and prevent risky socially significant and occupational diseases. The scheduled activities are in accordance with the epidemic situation in the country caused by COVID-19.

The national program was developed by the Ministry of Education and Science in cooperation with the social partners – trade unions and employers. organizations according to the fundamental principles in policies to preserve the life and health of teachers, principals and other pedagogical specialists. The focus of the program is teachers and other pedagogical specialists, as a particularly risky professional group. The aim is to strengthen the role of prevention and rehabilitation in caring for the health of those employed in the preschool and school education system.

The program is structured in two modules: „Prevention of pedagogical specialists“ and „Rehabilitation of pedagogical specialists“. The implemented activities of the program include examinations and consultations of pedagogical specialists who have suffered from Covid-19, as well as rehabilitation in case of established disease of various organs and systems specified in Module II of the National Program.

The activities planned for implementation started on 06.08.2021. Although the National Program started for the first time, within two months, 354 educators from all over the country participated in it. The participation of pedagogical specialists in NP „Prevention and rehabilitation of pedagogical specialists“ under the modules of the program is:

Module I „Prevention of pedagogical specialists“: 19 pedagogical specialists included - total value: BGN 285.;

Module II „Rehabilitation of pedagogical specialists“: 335 pedagogical specialists included – total value: BGN 32,152.

A platform for requesting and reporting expenses worth BGN 19,200 has been built.

The total budget of the program is BGN 400,000, distributed accordingly by modules: Module I: BGN 180,000.; Module II: BGN 200,000.; Construction of a platform for requesting and reporting costs: BGN 20,000.

By Decision № 302 of the Council of Ministers dated 13.05.2022, the National Program „Prevention and Rehabilitation of Pedagogical Specialists“ was approved. The goal, the way of development, the target groups, the structure of the program in two modules, are the same as the above program from 2021

The activities scheduled for implementation started on 13.05.2022, having been implemented in two stages. The stages covered the period 13.05. – 30.09.2022. 1,106 educators from all over the country participated in the national program. The participation of pedagogical specialists in the national program in 2022 marked an increase of more than three times the number of participants (354 pedagogical specialists) during the entire period of the program in 2021, when it started. The participation of pedagogical specialists in the modules of the program is:

Module I „Prevention of pedagogical specialists“: 44 pedagogical specialists included - total value: BGN 1,307.;

Module II „Rehabilitation of pedagogical specialists“: Included 1062 pedagogical specialists – total value: BGN 105,710.

The total budget of the program is BGN 400,000, distributed accordingly by modules: Module I: BGN 180,000.; Module II: BGN 200,000.; Upgrading, processing of functionalities and maintenance of a platform for requesting and reporting the costs of the modules: BGN 20,000.

According to Module 1, up to BGN 30 of the cost incurred for 1 pedagogical specialist who underwent a preventive examination is reimbursed.

Under Module 2, funds worth up to BGN 100 are reimbursed from the costs incurred for additional payment of food and reservation fee for 1 pedagogical specialist who carried out rehabilitation of diseases under the NOI program based on an established diagnosis.

* * *

Freedom from violence, stigma and stereotypes

Critical areas of concern:

Violence against women
Human rights of women
Women and the media
The child-girl

15. In the last five years, which forms of gender-based violence and in which specific contexts or settings has your country prioritized for action?

In the online survey you will be asked to select specific forms of gender-based violence that your country has prioritized from the list below:

- Intimate partner violence, including sexual violence and marital rape
- Domestic violence committed by other family or household members
- Sexual harassment and violence in public places, educational settings and workplaces

- Violence against women and girls facilitated by technology (e.g. online sexual harassment, online stalking, non-consensual sharing of intimate images)
- Femicide/Feminicide/gender-related killings of women and girls
- Gender-based violence against women in politics, including women's human rights defenders
- Gender-based violence in the media
- Gender-based violence in conflict-affected settings
- Child, early and forced marriages
- Female genital mutilation
- Trafficking in women and girls
- Other forms of violence or harmful practices (please specify)
- None of the above

Over the past five years, Bulgaria has continued to focus policies on preventing and combating all forms of violence among women and men, girls and boys, children and adults, in all areas of public life, supporting victims of violence and increasing public sensitivity on these issues. Priority is given to domestic violence, the victims of which are predominantly women, violence against children, human trafficking, incl. children, forms of cyber violence, and others. In this regard, a number of actions have been taken, such as legislative changes, strengthening of existing coordination mechanisms, improvement of services for victims of violence, mining, information campaigns, etc.

Main reason that necessitated the adoption of **The Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence**, like all other acts in the field of prevention and counteraction of domestic violence, is the extreme exacerbation of domestic violence in the last few years and an increase in the number of victims and victims, which made the problem a priority.

The exacerbation of domestic violence, especially in the conditions of the pandemic, put the issue of solving it as a priority. According to the published statistics after the declaration of the global pandemic in all countries, incl. and in Bulgaria, there is an escalation of violence and, in particular, an escalation of violence against women.

At this time of preparation of the draft Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence, data were collected by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. There has been an increase in the number of reports of domestic violence registered and recorded on the Single European Emergency Number (EEN 112), as well as data on the national hotline for victims of violence provided by the Foundation „Association Animus, for the last 3 years.

The alarming data and the wide range of people affected by domestic violence show the need to undertake regulatory changes to give quick and effective protection and to provide assistance and support to persons affected by domestic violence or at risk, as well as to exercise preventive and deterrent action on the perpetrator of the violence. This also necessitates the implementation of a consistent state policy in the field of domestic violence, which, by coordinating, implementing, monitoring and evaluating policies and measures to prevent and combat domestic violence to bring real results and prevent domestic violence.

The second reason that necessitated the need to undertake legislative changes in the field of domestic violence is the recommendations to the Republic of Bulgaria made within the framework of various control and monitoring mechanisms under UN conventions in the field of human rights and related to the problems of violence against women, and in particular domestic violence.

Next, it should be noted that the National Programme for Prevention of and Protection against Domestic Violence for 2020, adopted by Council of Ministers Decision № 238 of 9 April 2020, the National Programme for Prevention of and Protection against Domestic Violence for 2021, adopted by Council of Ministers Decision № 412 of 7 May 2021. and the National Programme for Prevention and Protection against Domestic Violence for 2022, adopted by Decision № 321 of the Council of Ministers on 20 May 2022, also provided for specific measures and legislative changes aimed at increasing the awareness and sensitivity of society on the issues of domestic violence, establishing a mechanism for the protection of victims of domestic violence and improving coordination and interaction between the various State bodies and organizations, the which are relevant to the problem. In Section I. Institutional and organizational measures from the National Program for Prevention and Protection against Domestic Violence for 2022. The Council of Ministers has envisaged as a first measure to combat domestic violence the establishment of a national body for the coordination, monitoring and evaluation of policies and measures to prevent domestic violence.

It is important to note that an analysis of the legislation in the field of domestic violence was made, as well as the recommendations of various control and monitoring mechanisms under UN conventions in the field of human rights and related to the problems of violence against women, and in particular domestic violence.

In the field of domestic violence are the following issues/risks identified:

- ✓ Lack of sufficiently reliable, effective protection and guarantee to protect the life, health and rights of persons at risk of domestic violence;
- ✓ Availability of various institutions with functions in the field of domestic violence without effective coordination between them;
- ✓ Lack of official statistics, a summary database and systematic collection of complete and comprehensive reliable statistical information on domestic violence and its various forms in order to conduct analyzes of the causes and extent of domestic violence and, in particular, domestic violence against women, and policy formation;
- ✓ Lack of a single national body responsible for formulating, implementing and evaluating policies and coordinating the actions of authorities on the prevention and countering of domestic violence.

To solve the identified weaknesses in the preparation of the draft of the Act of Amendment the Mediation Act (AoA of MA), the following main goals were set:

- ✓ Regulation of a set of measures aimed at creating reliable, effective protection and guarantee for the protection of the life, health and rights of persons at risk of domestic violence.
- ✓ Institutional upgrading in order to carry out a consistent State policy in the area of domestic violence by coordinating, implementing, monitoring and evaluating policies and measures to prevent and combat domestic violence.

As a result of the above in the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) are undertaken a complex of legislative changes in the field of domestic violence, which aimed to expand the prevention and support and protection of victims of domestic violence.

In connection with cases of domestic violence between persons who are not married or in de facto conjugal cohabitation, but are in a partnership relationship, which increased in July 2023, on August 1, 2023, a Bill was submitted to the National Assembly to amend and supplement the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence, № 49-354-01-87 by a group of people's representatives. The proposed bill aims primarily to expand the range of injured persons who can seek protection under the Protection from Domestic Violence Act, including persons who are or have been in an intimate relationship, removing the requirement for cohabitation.

The law was adopted and promulgated in Official Gazette No. 69 of 2023.

The Electronic Media Council monitored the **gender-based violence in the media**. The Council for Electronic Media referred itself to the topic of the violence inflicted on an 18-year-old girl from Stara Zagora and implemented a focused monitoring of the media coverage of the case for the period 28.07. – 03.08.2023 year in programs: BNT1, HORIZON, BTV, NOVA TELEVISION, NOVA NEWS TV, BULGARIA ON AIR, EUROCOM, DARIK RADIO BULGARIA, 7/8 TV, as well as in the non-linear services Gospodari.com, novini.bg, dir.bg and the VBOX7 video sharing platform. News and current affairs programmes have been reviewed on compliance by media service providers with the principle of protecting the personal integrity of citizens, pursuant to article 10, paragraph 1, item 4, of the Radio and Television Act.

Domestic violence has gradually become a significant social problem in Bulgaria after the series of murders and violence against women by their partners (in the home, family, cohabitation, intimate relationships) in the last few years. And if the women's stories were presented as single criminal cases until recently, then at one point the Bulgarian society reacted, shocked by „400 sheva“ after the violence of an 18-year-old girl by her friend. At the end of June 2023, a young woman from Stara Zagora was beaten, cut with a mock knife and shorn. The medical examination defined her wounds as minor bodily harm, which implied holding the crime accountable under the private prosecution. The suspect in the violence was released at the discretion of the City District Court. He has a criminal record - convicted of previously classified as minor bodily harm. At the time of the attack on his ex-girlfriend, he was on probation, ordered by the court in January 2023. Outraged by the qualification of the wounds as minor bodily harm and the release of the suspect, relatives and friends of the victim publicized the violence and in a short time attracted the attention of the public.

The case of the abuse of the 18-year-old girl focused civil discontent against domestic violence and caused a wide response not only in the country. Protests by Bulgarians in dozens of cities in our country and around the world are organized in support of the victim, as well as all victims of violence by a spouse/s, loved one/s or friend/s (intimate partner/s). Public opinion condemns not only acts of aggression, but also acts of soullessness and the inadequate work of the State's law enforcement institutions, which are charged in a timely manner with investigating crimes and dispensing justice. In less than one week after the case in Stara Zagora gained publicity (from 28.07.2023), mass public discontent caused the prosecutor's office and the court to change their decisions on the case, and the parliament to interrupt its summer vacation and urgently adopt amendments to The Criminal Code and in the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence. Even one MP resigns and leaves politics entirely, because of an unmeasured line addressed to victims of domestic violence.

The case in Stara Zagora makes prosecutors, judges, medical examiners react with public positions on the essence of their work, because they come to the attention of the media and disgruntled citizens. As a result of the great public response to what is happening in Stara Zagora, the medical examiner who prepared the forensic medical examination in the case of the attack on the girl has terminated employment relations until the end of the pre-trial proceedings. The deputy district prosecutor of St. Zagora, mainly because of the release from custody of the accused for the act.

The Union of Judges in Bulgaria comes out with a position on the case „... *only raising awareness and strengthening the legal culture would also ensure a civilized fair trial for anyone accused of committing a crime. Violence against every person is legally and humanly intolerable. Every victim has legal remedies, and every abuser is legally liable*“, it says in the position of the judges (<https://judgesbg.org/2023/07/31/%d0%b2%d1%8a%d0%b2-%d0%b2%d1%80%d1%8a%d0%b7%d0%ba%d0%b0-%d1%81-%d0%bf%d1%83%d0%b1%d0%bb%d0%b8%d1%87%d0%bd%d0%be-%d1%80%d0%b0%d0%b7%d0%bf%d1%80%d0%be%d1%81%d1%82%d1%80%d0%b0>

[d0%bd%d0%b5%d0%bd%d0%b0/](#)). „*The attitude towards the judicial panel from the Stara Zagora District Court and especially towards the judge-rapporteur also represents our community failure: - to the judges - because obviously we have not been efficient enough to uphold the values of justice so that we deserve the trust of being heard calmly; - to the political authorities - because they have not carried out sufficiently convincing policies to explain why it is harmful to explain the court outside the case; - to all of us - because we allowed calls for lynching of the judge distribution of her personal photos, of photos of her house indicating the settlement*“.

The violence practiced in Stara Zagora unexpectedly influenced the authority of the singer Toto and athlete Titi Papazov, popular among young people. After the publication of the case of the disfigured girl, an episode of video podcast from Yonislav Yotov's channel – Toto on YouTube gained popularity on social networks and traditional media. The guest of the show Konstantin Papazov – Titi tells how he cut his young girlfriend's hair because of infidelity, and Yotov reacts by laughing. Papazov's behavior, as well as that of the podcast host, garnered a lot of criticism online, and various commercial companies ended their collaboration with Toto. On the evening of August 1, Yotov apologized for the lack of critical reaction and announced that he had removed the clips from his channel himself.

The violent reprehensible reactions in society regarding the mistreatment of an 18-year-old schoolgirl do not escape the media itself, which are generally called to defend neutrality and factual fidelity in the coverage of the events. It is understandable when reporters and the media openly state their sympathy for the injured girl, but whether it is understandable to fuel revanchism towards certain officials such as judges, medical examiners, prosecutors... Monitoring reports as a bad practice that in the content of one of the programs a reporter searches at home for the coroner, who prepared the forensic medical examination in the case in Stara Zagora and who was removed from office until the end of the pre-trial proceedings.

Under the influence of social networks and published data about the crime and its possible perpetrator, including the distribution online of personal photos of the victim and the accused abuser, the monitored media services put the principle of personal privacy in the background (personal data such as names, age, family and sexual life, health status) and disclose sensitive data and photos about both the victim and about the alleged abuser. The great public interest, dictated by long denials from some circles and an unresolved public problem with domestic violence, takes precedence over the personal space of the participants in the incident.

The tangible media influence and large-scale public reactions under the motto „None more“, as well as the subsequent political intervention on the subject, provoked the Committee on Journalistic Ethics to remind reporters of professional standards in covering such cases of violence (<https://mediaethics-bg.org/%d0%bf%d0%be-%d0%bf%d0%be%d0%b2%d0%be%d0%b4-%d0%bc%d0%b5%d0%b4%d0%b8%d0%b9%d0%bd%d0%be%d1%82%d0%be-%d0%be%d1%82%d1%80%d0%b0%d0%b7%d1%8f%d0%b2%d0%b0%d0%bd%d0%b5-%d0%bd%d0%b0-%d0%bf%d1%80%d0%be%d1%8f/>).

„In recent days, cruelty and aggression have been a central topic of the Bulgarian media and the public. Information about violence against a young woman in Stara Zagora was followed by information about other similar cases that are revealed by the victims themselves or by law enforcement. We are facing a significant societal problem. In such a situation, the media have an important role to play in the objective and professional coverage of the debate, based on the rules of ethical journalism, involving empathy and solidarity towards the victims and their relatives and intolerance towards any form of violence. The Commission for Journalistic Ethics calls

on the media to cover acts of violence in accordance with the requirements of ethical and responsible journalism.

The first task of journalists is **clarifying the facts**. Before the facts and circumstances related to the acts of violence are clarified, the media should **to refrain from qualifications and emotional reactions**, which are not based on established facts, and to comply strictly **the presumption of innocence** (2.6.1. from the Code of Ethics of the Bulgarian media). **Entry into the private sphere of persons who have suffered violence is not justified regardless of the existence of public interest, except in exceptional cases for the purposes of prevention.** We recommend that the media refrain from revealing the identity of victims of violence without their consent (2.6.3. from the Code of Ethics of the Bulgarian media). Even their consent, as well as the provision of photos and video by them or their relatives, is still not a sufficient basis for disclosing personal data, for example for the photos to be published. This should only be done after a thorough analysis of the balance between considerations of public interest and the protection of personal integrity.

The Commission found cases of **entry into the private sphere and of persons from the investigation and court**, including posting photos, searching for addresses and capturing judges' homes, posting photos and statuses from their Facebook pages, etc. under. Even if it is assumed that these persons in certain circumstances have a lower threshold of protection of private life due to the public functions they perform, entry into the private sphere is permissible only in connection with the performance of these functions. If the persons are not related to the discussed issues or if the presented information is not related to the performance of their functions, a violation of the standard of privacy takes place.

The media have a critical function and owe a critical analysis to the judicial system and its effectiveness. However, in specific cases, no pressure should be exerted for a certain direction or result of the activity of the investigative bodies and the court, since this is in **conflict with the requirement to form an independent judicial belief in accordance only with the law and established facts and the right of the parties to a fair trial.**

Responsible journalism adheres to the standard according to which the media do not allow themselves to be used as a platform by those who encourage, incite or use violence (2.6.3. from the Code of Ethics of the Bulgarian media); they report their actions with the necessary restraint and only if it is in the obvious public interest“.

The focused thematic monitoring of Electronic Media Council on the case from Stara Zagora found that most monitored media services assess the case as such **of great public interest**, which prevails over the principle of protection of personal integrity. If in the first two or three days from the beginning of the public disclosure about the specific violence, the media does not report the name of the victim and the alleged perpetrator, then after that **the names become known to the audience**, at the same time, the two names of the victim were named directly on national air by an official – judge (respectively reflected in BNT1, BTV, NOVANEWS TV). If at the beginning the relatives of the victim are also afraid and keep a certain anonymity, then after the violent public discontent and large-scale protests, they come out with their names and faces in the public space. At the same time, spread on social networks and **pictures of the girl's wounds**, which subsequently serve the media to visualize the violence caused. If in most television programs the bloody scars of the violence are defocused with a mask, one of the programs repeatedly broadcasts raw footage of posters from the protests showing the victim's injured naked body. Initially, this footage was part of a live broadcast, but then it was circulated as part of already edited material. **Their repeated overexposure, as well as their subsequent distribution in non-linear services, in addition to constituting a violation of the principle of personal privacy**, it also raises the question of the editorial selection of illustrative material, which should spare both viewers and the

victim. It should be explicitly emphasized that **the participants in the case (DM and GG) are not public figures, the** which previously attracted a lot of public attention because of the exercise of public functions.

The television distribution of pictures of wounds on the girl's naked body (regardless of the fact that the genitals are covered in black) can be characterized as related exclusively to details of the personal sphere. It is questionable whether this naturalistic illustrative contributes to the debate of general interest, given that the girl is not a public figure. Resonant is the question of whether the public's interest should necessarily also cover detailed images of wounds? And whether **these details do not only satisfy curiosity in search of sensationalism**. Natural photos actually show information related to the girl's medical condition. There is also the question of whether the distributed photos of the girl's body parts were taken with her consent. Because, as a general rule, it is not to make personal information public without the consent of the person in question. Whether in this case the great public interest and concern does not overstep moral boundaries in the face of the privacy considerations of the individual concerned...

Regarding the accused –, the observation found that his name was announced almost simultaneously with the giving of publicity to the violence. D. D. commits a socially dangerous act not for the first time. The media use in their reports his photos from social networks, which the suspect himself published. At the same time, it should be emphasized that they are made at his address **high emotional charge qualifications like „monster“, „beast“, „villain“, „freak“, „psychopath“ and er**. Fixing public attention on the personality of the abuser creates **danger to the media they present the person as guilty before the court issues a verdict**. In some programmes, the good practice of indicating whether or not the person has pleaded guilty has been observed.

The case in Stara Zagora finally defined the discussion on domestic violence in a matter of universal public interest, and the publicized personal information served an important public purpose – the questions of the legislative settlement of the problems of domestic violence, of the implementation of measures for the protection of victims, of the amounts of punishment of abusers. The urgent changes made to the Criminal Code and the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence continue to be a topic of discussion in our society, as well as the media continue to cover the development of the case from Stara Zagora. The new forensic medical examination, carried out after the observation period, shows that the wounds have already been classified as two medium bodily injuries and the suspect has been charged with new charges based on new evidence.

Violence against the 18-year-old girl literally unleashes the publicity of numerous other cases of domestic violence, which further prove that, unfortunately, aggression in the home and between intimate partners is a permanent phenomenon in social life. More information about media surveillance - <https://www.cem.bg/controlbg/1484>.

Trafficking in women and girls it is also among the forms of violence against which priority action is being taken. Bulgaria is one of the main countries of origin of victims of human trafficking exploited in various Western European countries. Victims of human trafficking for sexual exploitation are mainly women and girls, which corresponds to global trends, especially those in Europe. Confirming that female persons are the most threatened group is the number of reports, which make up more than half, received by National Commission for Combating Human Trafficking and representatives of the non-governmental sector. The final destination of human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation is usually the European countries where prostitution is legally regulated. Traffickers target precisely those countries where their victims can legally work in the field of providing sexual services, using a different form of coercion to force them to do so and at the same time

circumventing the laws and rules for this activity, showing flexibility and accumulating profits using their victims.

Maintaining sustainability in the implementation of national policies to counter human trafficking and protect victims and the necessary responsible actions, as part of the state's response to overcome the problem, requires comprehensive measures, both in terms of investigation, prosecution and protection, as well as in terms of improving the quality of life of Bulgarian citizens. Measures to influence the main causes and prerequisites for involvement in human trafficking, among which the key ones are education, social and the economic environment. Building favorable factors to change the attitudes of society or certain social groups and influencing the possibility of protection from risky situations is a complex process, part of the commitments within the scope of all competent institutions and stakeholders. Measures for the prevention of human trafficking and the protection of victims are also an unchanged commitment of destination countries that have their place in the process of supply and demand for services related to operational practices and should be investigated as well as followed by corresponding synchronized actions and cooperation internationally.

Information on formally and informally identified victims of human trafficking, according to reports received in the National Commission for Combating Human Trafficking administration:

Victims of human trafficking	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Total number of Victims of human trafficking	85	60	132	93	63
Women	48	39	86	65	50
Minors	3	3	3	9	0
Minors	6	1	3	3	0
Men	37	21	46	28	13
Minors	3	0	5	0	0
Minors	4	0	3	3	0
Inland traffic signals	11	8	27	35	25
External traffic signals	48	32	43	45	35
Sexual exploitation	29	27	47	33	31
Women	29	26	45	33	31
Minors	2	3	4	3	0
Minors	2	0	0	0	0
Men	0	1	2	0	0
Minors	0	0	1	0	0
Minors	0	0	0	0	0
Labor exploitation	39	26	61	18	18
Women	11	8	23	6	10
Minors	3	0	0	0	0
Minors	0	0	2	0	0
Men	28	18	38	12	8
Minors	3	0	3	0	0
Minors	2	0	3	0	0
Forced begging	7	7	5	3	3
Women	0	5	4	2	2
Minors	0	1	0	0	0
Minors	0	1	0	0	0
Men	7	2	1	1	1
Minors	0	0	0	0	0

Minors	0	0	0	0	0
Child victims of trafficking	16	4	14	15	0
Minors	6	3	8	6	0
Minors	10	1	6	9	0
Pregnant women, for the purpose of selling the newborn	1	0	1	0	0
Minors	0	0	0	0	0
Minors	0	0	0	0	0
Forced detention in obedience	0	0	1	2	1
Women	0	0	1	2	1
Men	0	0	0	0	0
Removal of organs, tissues and cells	0	0	0	0	0
Women	0	0	0	0	0
Men	0	0	0	0	0
Traffic risk	7	0	6	9	4
Women	5	0	5	8	3
Minors	2	0	4	6	2
Minors	0	0	1	2	1
Men	2	0	1	1	1
Minors	1	0	-	0	0
Minors	1	0	-	1	1
Other related offences (channeling, domestic violence, forced marriage, violation of labour rights, children at risk, etc)	13	13	6	12	4

Victims of trafficking supported in specialized services for victims of human trafficking:

Adult Victims of human trafficking who received protection and support	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Total number of Adult Victims of human trafficking who received protection and support (including those cared for in residential and advisory services)	25	25	42	51	45
Women	20	-	28	23	29
Children of Victims of human trafficking who received protection and support placed together with their mothers	4	3	14	15	13
Other family members	0	0	0	1	1
Men	5	-	1	3	2
Resident Services	-	21	29	27	27
Advisory services	-	4	13	9	5

* * *

16. In the last five years what actions are prioritized for your country to address gender-based violence?

In the online survey you will be asked to select specific actions from the list below:

- Introduced or strengthened violence against women laws, and their enforcement and implementation
- Introduced, updated or expanded national action plans on ending violence against women and girls
- Introduced or strengthened measures to increase women's access to justice (e.g. establishment of specialist courts, training for the judiciary and police, protection orders, redress and reparations, including for femicide cases)
- Introduced or strengthened services for survivors of violence (e.g. shelters, help lines, dedicated health services, legal, justice service, counselling, housing, socioeconomic rehabilitation)
- Introduced or strengthened strategies and interventions to prevent violence against women and girls (e.g. in the education sector, in the media, community mobilization, work with men and boys)
- Monitoring and evaluation of impact, including evidence generation and data collection
- Introduced or strengthened measures for improving the understanding of the extent, causes and consequences of violence against women among those responsible for
- implementing measures on ending violence against women and girls, including through the collection and use of data from different sources
- Other, please specify
- None of the above

All adequate actions to deal with violence are priorities for Bulgaria. Over the past five years, a whole set of measures have been taken in this direction. Legislative changes have been made for enhanced protection against violence and domestic violence in particular, facilitated access to justice, optimization of institutional responsibilities, coordination, monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of policies and measures in the field of prevention and protection from domestic violence, coordination mechanism for assistance and support to persons who have suffered from domestic violence, national action plans to end violence are being expanded through prevention and protection programs and specialized services providing protection, assistance and support to persons affected by domestic violence or at risk, providing protection from the period of domestic violence until the full recovery of the victims and their social inclusion in society, as well as specialized programs for working in perpetrators information activities to sensitize the public on these issues are being intensified. Actions are also carried out to prevent violence among children – girls and boys, ongoing monitoring, data collection and analysis, a Coordination Mechanism for interaction at work in cases of children, victims or at risk of violence and for interaction in crisis intervention, and others.

The ombudsman in defense of victims of domestic violence. The Ombudsman has repeatedly brought to public attention the problem of domestic violence, which has further intensified in the conditions of the global COVID-19 pandemic. The Ombudsman's institution has consistently defended the position that changes in the regulatory framework are needed to ensure both more effective protection of victims of domestic violence and modern mechanisms for the prevention of this phenomenon.

The efforts of the ombudsman institution are aimed at changing the current legislation to create effective mechanisms that work to protect victims from domestic violence. At the end of 2019, a working group was started under the leadership of the Ministry of Justice, which had the task of preparing proposals for amending the current Law on Protection from Domestic Violence. A public discussion was organized by the ombudsman on 26.01.2021, prepared by the working group on which they took part specialists from the non-governmental sector working in the field of protection of citizens' rights, representatives of state and local bodies, people's representatives, psychologists, judges, prosecutors, and citizens. The issues raised, as well as the opinions expressed by the participants, the ombudsman provided the Ministry of Justice for consideration and reflection in the bill.

In implementation of the Ombudsman's recommendation for urgent consideration of the bill, two meetings were organized by the Ministry of Justice at the beginning of the year, and at the second meeting, again on the proposal of the Ombudsman, people's representatives were invited and attended to familiarize themselves with what has been achieved so far in the drafted bill, as well as with the controversial moments of the bill. The work of the expert group resumed with the task of finally preparing the proposals for amending the Domestic Violence Protection Act as soon as possible and submitting them to the National Assembly for consideration.

The specific proposals to amend and supplement the regulations, which the ombudsman believes would contribute to more effective protection of victims and effective prevention of domestic violence, are:

- elimination of systematicity as a condition for qualifying the act committed in the conditions of domestic violence – at the present moment, in order to punish one abuser more severely, there must be at least three registered acts of violence. This is not always possible, because sometimes violence can take a life from the first time or lead to mutilation of the injured person;
- incrimination of all forms of domestic violence;
- criminalization of persecution, which could also arouse a well-founded fear for the victim's freedom, sexual integrity and honor, not just fear for the victim's life or health.

In addition to the mentioned proposals for legislative changes, according to the ombudsman, other measures are needed such as:

- providing integrated data collection and official statistics on domestic violence cases;
- establishment of an effective coordination mechanism to ensure better cooperation between institutions in cases of domestic violence;
- targeted training for professionals working with victims of domestic violence – police, prosecutors, judges, social workers, health care professionals;
- zero-tolerance campaigns on domestic violence to raise public awareness to overcome social stereotypes and empower women not to be silent victims.

The Ombudsman also recommends that a sufficient number of accommodation centers for victims of violence be established, accessible and evenly distributed geographically throughout the country (at least one for each regional center) in accordance with the minimum standards of the Council of Europe, there should be at least one accommodation in a crisis center for every 10,000 inhabitants.

Changes have been introduced in laws regarding violence, and their implementation and enforcement have been strengthened.

As we noted above, an analysis of domestic violence legislation was made, as well as the recommendations of various control and monitoring mechanisms under UN conventions in the field of human rights and related to the problems of violence against women, and in particular domestic violence. As a result, action was taken to strengthen it the protection against violence and in particular against domestic violence with a whole complex of measures,

detailed above, as in the Act amending and supplementing of The Law on Protection from Domestic Violence :

- **The subject scope of the law was expanded:** In addition to the rights of persons who have suffered from domestic violence and protection measures, the bill also regulates the bodies and mechanisms for implementing the state policy for prevention and protection from domestic violence and the interaction between them; prevention programs and specialized services for providing protection, assistance and support to persons who have suffered from domestic violence or at risk, changes are introduced in the proceedings for the imposition of measures for protection against domestic violence in order to speed up the proceedings and more effective protection, including and on measures to ensure protection based on Regulation (EU) № 606/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 June 2013 on the mutual recognition of measures to ensure protection in civil cases (OJ, L 181 of 29 June 2013).
- **The obligation of the State to conduct a consistent State policy in the area of domestic violence by coordinating, implementing, monitoring and evaluating policies and measures to prevent and combat domestic violence is guaranteed.**
- **An Additional Security for Protection and Compensation was introduced the rights of persons who have suffered from domestic violence.**
- **The forms of domestic violence in the Domestic Violence Protection Act were synchronized with the European acts** According to Art... 2 of the Domestic Violence Protection Act, domestic violence is any act of physical, sexual, mental or economic violence, as well as the attempt at such violence, the forced restriction of personal life, personal freedom and personal rights, committed against persons who are related, who are or have been in a family relationship or in de facto conjugal cohabitation or in an intimate relationship. Enter **additional mechanism for protection against domestic violence according to which domestic violence acts may be committed by act or omission.** The purpose of the proposed change is to assist victims by adding additional protection mechanisms by introducing an obligation for relatives of an abused person to notify the competent authorities of acts of violence. This proposal will reduce cases of domestic violence against minors and minor children inflicted by one parent before the other without the latter taking action, as well as cases of domestic violence against vulnerable persons who are in a helpless state as a result of severe disability, illness or old age or are placed under interdiction.
- **The circle of persons who have suffered from domestic violence, who can seek protection under the terms of the Criminal Code, has expanded**
- **Access to justice is facilitated:**
- It is planned that, at the request of the injured person, the state and municipal bodies, medical institutions, legal entities that carry out activities of prevention and protection from domestic violence in accordance with the procedure of the Criminal Code, within 24 hours to forward an application for the initiation of proceedings for the issuance of a protection order to the relevant district court.
- The envisaged provision is for the purpose of ensuring by the state that victims can report domestic violence or crimes of violence to the competent authorities in an easy and accessible way, resp. to have easier access to justice, while taking measures to encourage any person who knows of such an act committed to notify this to the competent authorities.
- Also with the Act amending and supplementing of the Domestic Violence Protection Act (promulgated in SG No. 66 of 2023) se they also rank additional guarantees for the protection of the rights of persons and enhanced protection of the vulnerable category of persons by the state. It is foreseen the director of the Directorate „Social Assistance“ can submit an application when the injured person is a minor or a minor and/or is in a helpless

state as a result of severe disability, illness or old age or is placed under guardianship. In addition to the expansion of the circle of injured persons who can seek protection in accordance with the Domestic Violence Protection Act, it is envisaged that, when the victim cannot defend himself due to a helpless state or dependence on the perpetrator, the proceedings may also be initiated at the request of the prosecutor.

- an obligation is introduced for the court to ex officio request for the parties inquiries about the family and/or kinship relationship between the parties, criminal records and measures imposed by law, as well as other inquiries for the purposes of the proceedings.
- An expanded possibility to provide free legal assistance in the proceedings under the Criminal Code is foreseen. With the transitional and final provisions of the Act amending and supplementing of the Domestic Violence Protection Act, amendments and additions are made to the Law on Legal Assistance, according to which it is allowed in proceedings under [The Protection from Domestic Violence Act](#) the court should allow legal aid, taking into account a possible state of dependence of the victim on the perpetrator, leading to the impossibility of using the owned property, as well as other circumstances preventing effective legal protection.
- Measures to protect against domestic violence, which may be imposed by the competent authorities and regulate their period of validity, are being increased;
- A National Council for Prevention and Protection against Domestic Violence is being established as a permanent collective and advisory body for the implementation of the state policy on prevention and protection from domestic violence; The functions of National Council are:
 1. defines priorities in policies in the field of prevention and protection from domestic violence;
 2. coordinates, monitors and evaluates the implementation of policies and measures in the field of prevention and protection from domestic violence;
 3. develops and updates a coordination mechanism for assistance and support to persons affected by domestic violence and submits it for adoption by the Council of Ministers, monitors its effective functioning and gives instructions and recommendations on its implementation;
 4. develops a national program for prevention and protection from domestic violence based on the identified priority activities for funding and submits it for adoption by the Council of Ministers, making proposals for its updating if necessary;
 5. requests and receives information from state bodies, legal entities and others related to the prevention and protection from domestic violence;
 6. creates and maintains a national information system for cases of domestic violence carried out on the territory of the country, or in relation to Bulgarian citizens abroad who have sought help and support, and a list of legal entities that carry out activities of prevention and protection from domestic violence in accordance with this law, subject to compliance with the requirements of The Personal Data Protection Act;
 7. summarizes and analyzes the results of the implementation of policies in the field of prevention and protection from domestic violence and proposes measures to increase their effectiveness;
 8. publishes and disseminates statistical information in relation to domestic violence in compliance with the requirements of The Statistics Act and The Personal Data Protection Act;
 9. organizes information, awareness and training campaigns on issues related to domestic violence;

10. develops and updates draft strategies, programs and plans in the field of prevention and protection from domestic violence and monitors and reports on their implementation;

11. gives opinions and makes proposals to amend existing and to adopt new normative acts in the field of prevention and protection from domestic violence;

12. develops draft normative acts in connection with the prevention and protection from domestic violence and submits them to the Council of Ministers through the Chairman of the National Council;

13. approves methodological guidelines and participates together with other representatives of organizations, institutions and judicial bodies in the development of documents related to the risk assessment under this law;

14. carries out international cooperation with international organizations and institutions active in the field of prevention and protection from domestic violence, exchanging information and good practices;

15. approves the procedures for the selection of activities for the prevention of domestic violence and specialized services for protection against domestic violence, financed in accordance with art. 6f, para. 6, and controls the fulfillment of the conditions of the financing contract;

16. approves the training programs for employees to perform functions in relation to the prevention and protection from domestic violence;

17. maintains and develops a national telephone helpline for persons who have suffered from domestic violence and are at risk;

18. monitor and evaluate the impact of measures for prevention and protection against domestic violence.

- **National plans of action to end violence are being expanded**

- An obligation is introduced for the Council of Ministers to adopt a three-year national program for prevention and protection from domestic violence by March 31 of the relevant year, which will be prepared by the National Council.

- Prevention and protection programs and specialized services are regulated, providing protection, assistance and support to persons who have suffered from domestic violence or at risk, providing protection from the period of domestic violence until the full recovery of the victims and their social inclusion in society, as well as specialized programs for working in perpetrators.

Pursuant to Article 6f, Paragraph 6 of the Law on the State Budget of the Republic of Bulgaria for the relevant year, the budget of the Council of Ministers determines funds for financing projects of the bodies of the executive power, the bodies of local self-government and local administration and legal entities, which carry out activities for the prevention and protection of persons who have suffered from domestic violence or at risk provided that they carry out activities under this law, for the development and implementation of:

1. domestic violence prevention programmes concerning:

a) work with the judicial authorities;

b) working with the authorities of the Ministry of the Interior, including training police officers and other law enforcement officials to identify the cases of domestic violence, under protocols for responding to and implementing the relevant legislation; the programme is adopted by the Ministry of the Interior;

c) training in educational establishments to prevent domestic violence and promote gender equity and respect; the programme is adopted by the Ministry of Education and Science;

d) training of persons who carry out prevention and protection under the law;

e) monitoring the implementation of the law;

f) preparation and implementation of information campaigns, seminars and conferences;

2. specialized services for providing protection, assistance and support to persons who have suffered from domestic violence or at risk, which include:
 - a) a national telephone helpline for persons who have suffered from domestic violence or are at risk;
 - b) social, psychological and legal counselling and specialized programmes for the recovery and/or protection of persons or children victims of domestic violence or witnesses in a counselling centre;
 - c) social, psychological and legal counselling and specialized programmes for the recovery and/or protection of persons or children victims of domestic violence or witnesses in sheltered housing;
3. specialized programs to overcome aggression and deal with anger for perpetrators of domestic violence, which include social and psychological counseling.

Monitoring cases of child abuse.

Coordination mechanism for interaction in work in cases of children, victims or at risk of violence and for interaction in crisis intervention. National telephone line for children at the State Agency for Child Protection

For the period 2019-2023. experts from the State Agency for Child Protection worked on 148 cases of trafficking in children, of which 108 were girls and 40 were boys. During the period January – June 2024, 18 cases involving 24 children were worked on, of which there are 19 girls and 5 boys.

With the entry into force of the Law on Social Services on 1 July 2020, the amendments to the Law on Child Protection also came into force, as the Coordination Mechanism for Interaction at Work in Cases of Children, Victims or at Risk of Violence and for Interaction in Crisis Intervention, for short called the Mechanism under Article 36 of the Civil Code, became part of the Civil Code. Monitoring of cases of violence against children is carried out by the State Agency for Child Protection.

Monitoring cases of child abuse is important for creating flexible interaction mechanisms, as well as for creating targeted policies and legislation to improve inter-institutional cooperation and coordinated response. It is also important for the creation of preventive mechanisms for children from an early age. The leading place is occupied by the reports submitted by the Ministry of the Interior. The following are reports submitted by parents, predominantly mothers. There has been a tendency to increase the number of reports submitted through the National Children's Helpline 116 111. The trend in recent years for a relatively large number of reports submitted by parents remains stable and that for not particularly large activity by people external to the family remains stable. It is noteworthy that the relative share of reports submitted by GPs to children and health facilities remains low. In the case of educational institutions, the situation is similar. Often cases include data on more than one type of violence against the same child, that is, physical violence, e.g. it is often combined with another type of abuse – neglect, mental/emotional or sexual.

Children between the ages of 12 and 16 are most often victims of violence, and more often these are girls (girls are more than twice as many as boys), followed by children between the ages of 8 and 11, and in this age group girls are more frequent victims.

Information from National Children's Telephone Line 116 111 for the period from 2019 to June 2024.

The National Children's Telephone Line at the State Agency for Child Protection has a harmonized telephone number 116,111, in accordance with article 17 a, paragraph 1, item 17, of the Child Protection Act, provides information, counselling and assistance to children. The telephone line functions around the clock by maintaining a Call Center at the DASP.

The State Agency for Child Protection aims at the line to provide counseling to needy children and concerned adults for children on the one hand, and on the other hand to provide quality psychological support to children who have fallen into need for it.

The National Children's Helpline 116 111 also serves as a tool through which information is received about violence committed against a child, including when a child calls and reports violence experienced by a peer, friend, relative, notifies another child who is experiencing violence or shares that he is a witness of domestic violence.

Regarding the place where the violence was committed, according to information from the persons who report it to the line, the data from both systems show that the violence occurs most often in the child's family, and as the perpetrator, the persons indicate the parents most often.

When calls are received from minor children who report violence against them, the counselors inform about the rights of the child, the functions and activities of the departments „Child Protection”, as well as the types of support that can be provided to their family, in order to improve communication and relationships in it. Callers are also informed about the possibility of maintaining their anonymity when reporting, with an emphasis on the need for professional help to deal with the situation.

2019: The National Children's Telephone Line consultations held 116,111 related to child abuse were 851, 152 more than in 2018, and the most frequent occasion for a call from this category was the presence of risk of physical abuse, mental abuse and neglect. According to the type of violence: physical is leading – 371, neglect – 195, mental 140, sexual abuse reports – 70, incest – 1, other type of violence – 29, witnesses of violence - 45. According to The National Children's Telephone Line data 116,111, the family is where children experience violence at most – 626, with 119 reports more than in 2018. There were 107 children who were victims of violence in the street, 47 more than in 2018, the number of reports of violence at school decreased by 12, and for 2019 there were 35. Children who have experienced violence in specialized institutions is 15, in adoptive family 1, and in the case of close ones – 26 reports each, in a public place – 41.

Girls are the ones who were more active in reporting violence – 173 and boys 92. Of these, 78 of the calls were made by children under the age of 12 and 187 by children over the age of 12. There were 168 parents who reported violence against a child. Nine teachers reported child abuse, 331 of the cases another adult, 78 from an institution.

In 2019, the telephone line team reported the highest number of reports submitted for children at risk since the line's opening by the end of 2019 – 787.

2020 d: Statistics from the line system and prepared reports show that calls received in 2020 from children and adults was 61,212 calls, 11,453 more (19%) than in 2019, when incoming calls were 49,759. The most calls were during the period from May – 6564 to August – 6829, after which there was a slight drop in calls in September to 5081 and a significant decrease in the months of November and December.

The tendency to consult children most often on the topic of relationships (47%) and family problems (19%) is maintained. Calls received in which child abuse was reported came in third place in the line system with 11%.

In 2021, The National Children's Telephone Line data showed that 34,751 calls were received, 43.2% less than in 2020, when 61,202 calls were registered, but consultations were held on serious problems for children and timely psychological support was provided. During the year, there was also a significant increase towards a decrease in the number of calls actually missed.

Underage girls are interested in topics related to sexuality and early pregnancy. In minor children, the main topic is about relationships with peers. In February 2021, calls were registered from children who shared that because of the pandemic they communicate more

often through social networks, and some of them shared about abuses of their profiles in social networks and harassment against them through Internet communication. Older children share that they develop and maintain friendships and romantic relationships online. Children are consulted in the direction of their safety on the Internet, as well as the opportunity to seek assistance by submitting a report through the website of Directorate General for Combating Organised Crime. In the month of February, there are calls from children and parents who report school problems and school bullying. Children also share about family and psychosocial problems.

The data show that girls are primarily interested in the topic of peer relationships during the growing up period, followed by the need to communicate, friendships with peers, sharing about family and psychosocial problems, searching for information about health and sexuality.

Boys share more about psychosocial problems with counsellors – 97 calls, and girls have 89 registered. In 56 of the calls, the girls reported violence, while in boys they reported it in 34 of the calls.

Very often calls are received from separated parents who share about a broken regime of personal contacts with the child. Neglecting the care of a child by other parents or claiming abuse is often reported.

2022: The received information on the Line from what is shared with children and adults clearly outlines risk factors for children in the family environment. What is stated by the minors and their parents, relatives, neighbors, teachers shows that the children are subjected to physical, health, educational and emotional neglect. Adults submit information about children being raised in poor conditions, children in turn, sharing their fears, concerns and questions, show that in the environment in which they are raised there are clearly difficulties in care, addictions of adults, permanent unemployment of parents, systematic exposure to domestic violence. Children witness the manifestations of mental ill-treatment and physical and verbal aggression between their parents, and in some cases, directed at themselves.

During the year, reports continued to be received from neighbors and relatives of families, which are most often in cases of domestic violence and/or abuse of alcohol and other psychoactive substances by one or both parents, which is a high-risk factor for the development and security of children.

The topic of violence also maintains a trend in third place with 781 calls, with 729 registered alerts and the remaining 52 addressing the topic of violence.

What are girls calling about in 2022.?

There were 1,844 registered calls from girls, and 1,765 were consulted, and 79 of the calls also registered a report of a child at risk. Physical and mental abuse was reported in 38 of the calls from girls, 3 for physical abuse, 15 for mental abuse, 4 of the calls for suicidal intent, 5 for neglect, 6 for cyberbullying.

2023: In 2023, the most reports were filed for physical and mental abuse – 462, second for neglect – 418, third for mental abuse – 328. Very often, reports of violence are about more than one type of violence. The data show 63 calls in which a risk was registered for a child involved in parental conflict.

The data showed that there were 1,074 reports from adults and 107 reports from children. The signals from National System „112“ are 315, followed by parents – 115 signals from fathers, 95 from mothers and from neighbors – 110 signals. There were 23 reports from educational institutions and – 20 reports from medical personnel. The remaining reports were submitted by citizens. Reported growth in alerts via „National System 112“. In general, calls from parents have close values, and during the periods of summer vacation and public holidays, more calls are received, and they are most often from fathers for a non-observable regime of personal contacts with the child.

Regarding the place of violence that children and citizens indicate, it occurs in the family in 563 of the reports, and the parents are most often named as perpetrators. Alerts are very often submitted for groups of children – siblings – 237 alerts, for girls 227 are submitted, for boys 224 and 43 for a child when citizens do not identify gender.

Data for 2023 showed an increase in reports of violence of 2% compared to 2022 and 5.55% compared to 2021. As stated above in the report, they are most often submitted by citizens and through the „National System 112“.

National helpline for children call received data for 2019 – June 2024 (in cash)

Period	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	June 2024	Total for the period
Total number accepted in National helpline for children	50883	61 212	34751	28400	13671	13856	202773
Total number conducted communications	9775	160043	12276	7700	4252	5098	199144
Total number of allerts	787	6073	1018	1162	578	1007	10625
Number of alerts for							
Physically	97		52	53	57	389	648
Mentally	40		207	193	48	526	1014
Sexually	18		3	1	1	42	65
Neglect	40		196	283	118	297	934
Physical violence to girls			10	18	13	119	160
Mental abuse to girls			69	74	16	143	802
Sexual violence towards girls			3	1	1	26	31
Disregard to girls			55	68	25	59	207
Received calls from:							
Children	7136	2493	1256	419	188	417	11909
Boy	3187	6448	4374	1954	1112	1331	18406
Girl	3949	4926	3315	1844	1007	1009	16050
Period							
Consultations held in relation to:							
Violence against children	851	817	703	729	426	779	4305
Violence against girls			240	239	120	195	794
Executor:							
Parent	156	431	622	411	233	431	2284
Another relative	20	55	33	31	25	23	187
Teacher	3	4	8	10	6	5	36
Acquaintance/neighbour	12	20	14	8	5	2	61
Another child	22	64	31	24	10	11	162
Unknown	6	8	4	7	16	20	61
A place of violence:							
In the family	163	665	605	49	312	547	2786
At school	3	12	19	19	15	15	86
On the street	35	81	45	24	24	22	231
Resident	5	10	22	10	2	5	54
In adoptive family	0	2	1	4	0	9	16

With relatives	5	37	39	31	11	41	164
In a public place	14	42	29	4	21	19	129

Strategies and interventions to prevent violence against women and girls have been introduced and strengthened. In addition to the implementation of anti-discrimination legislation in the country, the Commission for Protection from Discrimination participates and supports initiatives related to combating gender-based violence. Initiatives are of a different nature and focus – from awareness campaigns and discussion forums in the country to international cooperation and increasing capacity through the exchange of good practices and normative standards. An example of the engagement of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination is the meetings held with the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, where new standards in European and international law were discussed, as well as the need for a comprehensive system of international protection of women as a specific vulnerable group in need of special protection. Another similar event, organized by the Alliance for Protection from Violence and the Ambassador of the State of Israel to the Republic of Bulgaria, with the participation of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination, is a forum with the aim of discussing and sharing information on discrimination and domestic violence against women both in Bulgaria and Israel, and to discuss the actions that can be countered against them. Through this kind of activities, with the help of all interested parties is given publicity to the problems related to gender violence, which facilitates dialogue through which effective measures and sustainable decisions could be taken to overcome it.

* * *

17. In the past five years, what strategies has your country used to prevent gender-based violence?

In the online survey you will be asked to select specific actions from the list below:

- Working with women, men, and couples to improve their skills in interpersonal communication, conflict management, and shared decision-making
- Empowering women and girls to promote their economic independence and access to resources, and promote equitable relations within households, communities and society
- Alleviating poverty through interventions targeted at women or the household
- Create safe environments including schools, workplaces, and public spaces
- Promoting non-violent family relationships and positive parenting practices
- Promoting positive gender-equitable attitudes, beliefs, values and norms, especially among men and boys
- Mobilizing community/faith/traditional leaders, politicians, opinion influencers, journalists, or media influencers (such as sport athletes or celebrities) to influence positive norms
- Raising public awareness to change attitudes and behaviour

- Promoting gender-egalitarian values in primary and secondary education, including through comprehensive sexuality education
- Other, please specify
- None of the above

Bulgaria has implemented various strategies to prevent gender-based violence in the last five years, such as pincreases public awareness in order to change attitudes and behavior.

For example, in implementation of the Law against Domestic Violence, with funds from the state budget, it annually finances projects of non-profit legal entities for domestic violence prevention and protection programs; to provide assistance to persons affected by domestic violence; trainings; specialized programs for perpetrators of domestic violence; to maintain a national telephone line for victims of domestic violence.

In the field of education from the 2024-2025 academic year, the National Program „No Aggression for a Secure Educational Environment“ is implemented. The programme has been developed in accordance with priority area 5. „Effective inclusion, durableinclusion and educational integration“ and with Priority Area 4. „Cohesive school communities and systematic work with parents“ of the Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learningnet in the Republic of Bulgaria (2021–2030).

The purpose of the Program is to provide conditions for creating a secure educational environment in kindergartens and schools and for methodical support of this process as a means of preventing aggression and bullying among children and students.

The specific objectives of the Program are;

- Creating conditions for the development and engagement of the community in the kindergarten and the school community with the implementation of activities to create a secure educational environment and to prevent aggression and violence.

- Creating conditions for supporting and affirming an educational culture based on mutual respect, equal dignity, justice and promoting informed and competent participation of all in the kindergarten community and in the school community.

By developing a secure school environment and increasing the culture of communication, it is expected to improve the discipline of students in educational institutions.

Policies on student participation and self-management are being developed as another opportunity to improve dialogue in educational institutions. Meetings of the management of the Ministry of Education and Science were held with representatives of the National Student Parliament in order to identify joint initiatives, as well as with representatives of the Student Councils of schools from the city of Sofia and the country. The creation of regional self-government student teams to support the heads of educational institutions by applying the „Peacemakers“ or student approach is discussed, educating peers and involving students from the National Student Parliament in supporting the aggression prevention policy in August 2024.

There is increasing evidence of student council initiatives related to the prevention of aggression, as well as for charitable purposes, to provide help and support to their classmates, for a specifically shared common cause. The first steps in this direction have already been taken with the support of pedagogical specialists and teachers in schools.

Activities have been carried out to sign an Agreement on Understanding and Cooperation between the Ministry of Education and Science and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in Bulgaria, including on policies for a safe school environment as a means of preventing aggression.

Policies are being pursued to increase the number of school psychologists and pedagogical counsellors. The education system has developed one of the widest networks of supporting professionals. Every year, the Ministry of Education and Science stimulates the

directors of educational institutions to appoint psychologists and pedagogical advisors and takes into account the increase in their number in educational institutions. According to data as of 15.09.2023, the total number of psychologists is 1380, and pedagogical advisors – 851.

National Programme for the Prevention and Suppression of Trafficking in Persons and Protection of Victims. Every year, the National Commission for Combating Human Trafficking, through its administration, develops a National Program for the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking and the Protection of Victims, which is adopted by the Council of Ministers. The programme consists of seven chapters: 1) Institutional and organizational measures; 2) Prevention; 3) Training and capacity-building; 4) Protection, recovery and reintegration of victims of trafficking in persons; 5) Research, analysis and statistical reporting of data on trafficking in persons; 6) International cooperation; and 7) Legislative changes. The program includes activities proposed by all institutions represented in the National Commission for Combating Human Trafficking, as well as by non-governmental and international organizations, especially those represented in the Standing Working Group of the Commission. Each activity included in the programme has a clear description, objective, time frame, expected results, responsible party and financial dimension.

The National Commission for Combating Human Trafficking Secretariat is responsible for the implementation of the majority of the activities included in the program. The secretariat's responsibilities include organizing and conducting information and education campaigns and activities for risk groups; methodological guidance in the work of the ten Local Commissions for Combating Trafficking in Persons, shelters and support and protection centres for victims of trafficking; participation in international cooperation for the prevention and counteraction of trafficking in persons. Within the framework of the above campaigns or as individual activities, the National Commission for Combating Human Trafficking secretariat organizes national and international events such as conferences, forums, round tables and capacity-building seminars on topics related to human trafficking. Preventive activities are mainly aimed at potential victims of human trafficking and at various target, risk groups.

National Programme for the Prevention of Violence and Abuse of Children (2023–2026) and Action Plan for its implementation (2023–2024), State Agency for Child Protection. The documents were adopted by Decision №51 of 23.01.2023 of the Council of Ministers. The implementation of the Programme's objectives is set out in comprehensive, cross-cutting action plans, with a two-year period of operation. The National Programme for the Prevention of Violence and Abuse of Children (2023 – 2026) is envisioned as a four-year strategy document that sets the national policy framework in the area of violence against children through a coordination and communication mechanism between government authorities, representatives of civil society and the non-governmental sector, the support of the network of professionals working with children, the support of parents, raising the awareness of children, the improvement of the normative framework, protection of children against violence and exploitation based on their needs, support of children, victims of violence for recovery and rehabilitation. It contains certain factors that influence society, the relationships between children and parents, persons who care for children, on public attitudes.

The programme is focused on prevention measures and services that are most likely to reduce the incidence of child abuse. Changing public attitudes is one of the expected results of the implementation of the program. For example, the leading cause of the large number of cases of early births is also rooted in public tolerance of cohabitation on a family basis among adolescents, minors, from a certain ethnic community, which in some cases is defined as a type of sexual violence by adult men on girls.

All identified problems and strategic goals for achieving sustainable results for the prevention of violence and abuse of children are achieved through clear and specific operational goals, determined on the basis of the different target groups to which the program is aimed. 5 Strategic Objectives and 28 Operational Objectives are derived. The program contains an extremely detailed analysis of the situation in the country, as well as trends in the period 2019 – 2021. The program itself and a separate annex to it contain very detailed and comprehensive reliable statistical data on violence in its various forms, place of commission, perpetrator, incl. is also based on data from EUROSTAT. The source of the data is NSI and all other responsible ministries and departments, as well as from the Supreme Cassation Prosecutor's Office.

In the Action Plan for the implementation of the programme for the period (2023-2024), part of the operational objectives relate to guaranteeing the right to protection of children involved in parental conflicts, children whose parents reside abroad for the long term, children with disabilities and with complex communication abilities, children victims of trafficking, of labour exploitation. A special place is allocated to the prevention of child/early marriages and cases of early births, goals are also provided for cross-border movement of children, for children in conflict with the law, etc. A review of the regulatory framework was also made, and specific proposals for changes in the current legislation were given. Emphasis is placed on working with parents and supporting them. Part of the objectives concerns intersectoral interaction and, in general, improving coordination between institutions.

The Program includes a clearly defined Monitoring (of implementation and results) – internal within the relevant institution and external by the Interdepartmental Working Group „Prevention of Violence and Abuse of Children“ of the National Council for Child Protection. Every three months since the adoption of the National Program and the Plan for its implementation by the interdepartmental working group, the progress on the implementation of the Action Plan is periodically reported and familiarized with the National Council for Child Protection (not present by sending the information by e-mail to the members of the council) and with the existing new challenges and difficulties, about the progress or about the delay in the implementation of certain activities and measures.

* * *

18. In the past five years, what actions has your country taken to prevent and respond to technology-facilitated gender-based violence (e.g. online sexual harassment, online stalking, non-consensual sharing of intimate images)?

In the online survey you will be asked to select specific actions from the list below:

- Legislation and regulatory provisions introduced or strengthened
- Collected data to better understand the magnitude of technology-facilitated violence, drivers and consequences
- Implemented awareness raising initiatives targeting the general public and education settings to sensitize young people, caregivers and educators to ethical and responsible online behaviour
- Worked with technology providers to introduce or strengthen human rights-based design, development and deployment approaches to address technology-facilitated gender-based violence
- Strengthen the capacity of government actors for the development of policy and legislation, and their enforcement and implementation

- Other, please specify
- None of the above

Legislation and regulatory provisions introduced and strengthened.

With Amending and Supplementing Action on Law for home protectionit violence (promulgated. SG No. 66 of 2023.) amendments and additions to the Child Protection Act have been adopted. According to the adopted amendments, it is foreseen in The Ministry of Internal Affairs to create and maintain a National Information System for Prevention and Protection from Pedophilia and a National Register for cases of pedophilia carried out on the territory of the country, or in relation to Bulgarian citizens abroad who have sought help and support and to persons convicted of crimes under section VIII "Debauchery" of the Criminal Code, carried out against minors and minors, as well as issuing references and certificates for the registered circumstances. It should be borne in mind that the crimes under section VIII „Debauchery also includes acts committed through information or communication technology relative to people, not graduatedand 14 and 18 years of age.

According to Art. 155a (1) Who, through information or communication technology or otherwise, provides or collects information about a person under the age of 18 to establish contact with him for committing a lewd act, copulation, sexual intercourse, prostitution, for creating pornographic material or for participation in a pornographic performance, it is punishable by imprisonment from three to ten years and a fine from ten thousand to twenty thousand BGN.

(2) The penalty referred to in paragraph 1 shall also be imposed on anyone who, through information or communication technology or otherwise, establishes contact with a person under the age of 14 for the purpose of committing a lewd act, copulation, sexual intercourse, for the creation of pornographic material or for participation in a pornographic performance.

(3) Where significant harmful consequences for the physical, mental or moral development of the victim have occurred from the act referred to in paragraphs 1 and 2, the penalty shall be imprisonment for five to twelve years.

It is planned that the National Register will be part of the national information system and will contain an indefinite electronic database of up-to-date data on the following circumstances that are subject to entry in it:

- 1. the acts of sexual assault against minors and minors on which sentences have been handed down;*
- 2. data on the perpetrators;*
- 3. type of crime;*
- 4. duration of performance;*
- 5. caused illegal consequences and damages;*
- 6. history of the crimes committed and the punishments and measures imposed on them, as well as rehabilitation;*
- 7. database for foreign citizens who have received the status of long-term, permanent or long-term residence in Bulgaria, who have been convicted in other countries for sexual crimes.*

According to Art. 159 (1) Whoever creates, exhibits, presents, broadcasts, offers, sells, rents or otherwise distributes pornographic material shall be punished by imprisonment for up to one year and a fine of one thousand to three thousand BGN.

(2) Whoever distributes pornographic material through information or communication technology or in any other similar way shall be punished with imprisonment for up to two years and a fine of one thousand to three thousand BGN.

(3) Whoever exhibits, presents, offers, sells, rents or otherwise distributes pornographic material to a person under the age of 16 shall be punished by imprisonment for up to six years and a fine of up to five thousand BGN.

(4) For the act referred to in paragraph 1 – 3, the penalty shall be imprisonment from three to six years and a fine of up to ten thousand BGN when:

1. a person under the age of 18 or a person who looks like one was used to create the pornographic material;

2. a person who does not understand the property or meaning of what was done was used to create the pornographic material;

3. is committed by two or more persons;

4. was performed again.

(5) When the act referred to in paragraphs 1 - 4 is committed on the order or in execution of a decision of an organized criminal group, the penalty shall be imprisonment from three to ten years and a fine of up to twenty thousand BGN, and the court may also order the confiscation of part or all of the perpetrator's property.

(6) Whoever holds or procures for himself or for another through information or communication technology or other pornographic material, for the creation of which a person under the age of 18 or a person who appears to be such was used, shall be punished with imprisonment for up to five years and with a fine of up to ten thousand BGN.

(7) The penalty referred to in paragraph 6 shall also be imposed on the person who, through information or communication technology, knowingly accesses pornographic material for the creation of which a person under the age of 18 or a person who appears to be such has been used.

(8) In the cases referred to in paragraph 1 – 7, the court may also impose disqualification under article 37, paragraph 1, item. 6 or 7.

(9) The subject of the crime is confiscated in favor of the state, and if it is missing or alienated, its equivalence is awarded. “

It is assigned to the Ministry of Internal Affairs to ensure the registration, storage and maintenance of the data in an up-to-date state, and also ensures the interaction with foreign information systems for the exchange of information regarding cases of pedophilia and regarding persons convicted of crimes under section VIII "Debauchery" of the Criminal Code, committed against minors.

The information subject to entry in the National Information System, the procedure for its collection and provision, the organization and functioning of the system and the level of access, as well as the manner of its interaction with foreign information systems, will be determined by an ordinance issued by the Minister of the Interior.

It is planned that the information will be collected by the bodies of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Judiciary, and the bodies of the executive power, local self-government and local administration, the State Agency for Child Protection, the Agency for Social Assistance, the municipal commissions for the child, the National Assembly and the bodies of the judiciary will have access to the data. Persons carrying out activities with minors are obliged to make inquiries by submitting a written application to the National Register regarding the above-described circumstances when concluding employment and civil contracts with workers and employees. References are free. The existence of such a circumstance is grounds for refusing to conclude an employment or civil contract.

It is provided that the obliged persons, as well as the conditions and procedure for the request and for the provision of information, are determined by an ordinance of the Minister of the Interior works. The information received can only be used in connection with and within the scope of the activity of its applicant, who has no right to disclose it.

It is accepted not to enter, nor to provide personal data to injured persons, nor other circumstances concerning their personality that could lead to their identification, and the circumstances are entered and cannot be publicized without the consent of the parents or legal representatives, and if the child has reached the age of 10, his consent is also required. It is planned, in cases of resumed criminal proceedings and subsequent acquittal, the previously entered circumstances regarding the conviction should be deleted entirely with retroactive effect.

The Digital Services Act introduces new rules for online platforms often used by school-age children. The new piece of legislation follows the principle that what is illegal offline – including in the schoolyard – is also illegal online. It offers better protection against crime and illegal content such as cyberbullying and online harassment. The goal is to make the new rules for online security part of children's daily reality.

The aim of the initiative is to build a network in the education sector to support and monitor compliance with the new legislative act in schools. Each school must have a „school guardian“, educator or teacher to be trained in the Digital Services Act and its tools, and to whom children and parents can turn in the event of cyberbullying.

Implementation of awareness-raising initiatives aimed at the general public and educational institutions in order to draw the attention of young people, educators and educators to ethical and responsible behaviour on the Internet.

The Ministry of Electronic Government leads and coordinates **the national program „Digital Bulgaria 2025“ and road map to it**, adopted by the Council of Ministers on December 5, 2019. The program is incorporated into the national strategic framework aimed at digital transformation in 2024. Priority areas relate to the use of information and communication technologies. In the priority area „Internet“ Management, one of the goals is „Safer Internet for children“, supported by specific measures. By priority „Increasing digital competences and skills“, goal „Guaranteeing children's rights in a digital environment“ of NP „Digital Bulgaria 2025“ within the line budgets, the following measures are implemented: organization of information campaigns to limit risks and responsible behavior of children in the Internet environment; development of cooperation with academia for the introduction and development of media and digital literacy training; creation of information events and campaigns by the members of the Children's Council at the State Agency for Child Protection to promote digital competence and protect children's rights in a digital environment; combating sexual exploitation and abuse of children through computer systems.

Safe behavior in a digital environment in curricula. Internet security and safety rules in schools. The social campaign under the motto „Keep the child on Internet“. In order to increase the security and safety of children in the Internet space, the Ministry of Education and Science supported the social campaign under the motto „Keep the child on Internet“, whose ambassadors are Ivet Goranova, Olympic karate champion, and Yavor Kolev, a long-time cybersecurity expert, notifying school principals of the campaign's messages and the opportunity to join it. It is implemented as a social project for public benefit with the aim of preventing online bullying, protecting children from risks in social networks and building skills for safe use of the Internet. Within a year, discussion lessons were held with more than 120,000 students, teachers and parents in 25 cities throughout Bulgaria, for which the school principals and heads of Regional Directorate of Education provided assistance.

In the curricula of the subjects of computer modeling, computer modeling and information technology and information technology, there are specially included topics in which safe behavior in a digital environment is considered.

Following a recommendation from the State Agency for Child Protection, rules on security and safety on the Internet are being developed in all schools, which are included in the school's rules of procedure, in the school community's code of ethics or in other school documents. These rules contain specific requirements for ethical behavior in an online environment, introduce online safety regulations, as well as measures against risky behavior on the Internet, cyberbullying and other threats.

The administration of the National Commission for Combating Human Trafficking, the Local Commissions for Combating Human Trafficking and the partner organizations members of the PRG focus on **awareness of online risks and the use of a safe internet**, through information sessions with students and parents, as well as through training for professionals working in the field of education – teachers, pedagogical advisors, psychologists.

This is imperative because information and communication technologies, the Internet and social networks play an increasing role in the process of recruiting, advertising sexual services, as well as in exercising control over victims of trafficking. Traffickers are increasingly using social networks and mobile applications such as Facebook, Skype, Viber and others in the recruitment and control of victims of human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Social networks and the Internet are also used as a tool to engage in human trafficking for the purpose of labor exploitation. The Internet is actively used to offer and advertise sexual services among a wide range of customers - ads are published on certain sites or created purposefully. In addition, various social media posts or personal correspondence with the perpetrators can be used to coerce the victims. The same, as well as pre-created pornographic material, can be used to induce victims to prostitution. The choice of Internet communication /including Viber, WhatsApp/ is often made by the perpetrators and for security reasons.

* * *

19. In the past five years, what measures has your country taken to resource women's organizations working to prevent and respond to GBV?

Funding of projects of non-profit legal entities in accordance with Article 6, Paragraph 7 of the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence until the end of 2023.

Until the entry into force of the new Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence, as of January 1, 2024, with the law for the state budget of the Republic of Bulgaria for the relevant calendar year under the budget of the Ministry of Justice funds in the amount of BGN 450,000 were determined to finance projects of non-profit legal entities, for:

- ✓ development and implementation of programs for prevention and protection from domestic violence;
- ✓ programmes to provide assistance to persons who have suffered from domestic violence;
- ✓ training of persons who carry out protection under the Criminal Code;
- ✓ specialized programmes attended by persons who have committed domestic violence.

Also every year eabout the entry into force of the new Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Civil Code, as of January 1, 2024. The Ministry of Justice was also concluding a contract to finance a national telephone line for victims of domestic violence.

After the entry into force of the Act of Amendment of the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence promulgated. SG No. 66 of 2023, as of January 1, 2024, the National Council for Prevention and Protection from Domestic Violence, established under the Council of Ministers, took over this activity in its capacity as a specialized permanent collective and advisory body for the implementation of the state policy on prevention and protection from

domestic violence through coordination, monitoring and evaluation of policies and measures to prevent and protect against domestic violence.

An important role in providing support to persons who have suffered from domestic violence has **social services** which offer protection to women or men – victims of violence, including domestic violence, as well as their children. Some of these services, state-delegated activities, are managed by non-profit legal entities. The funds are provided from the state budget.

The Law on Social Services) and its by-laws provide for special provisions in the support of persons in a crisis situation, persons who have suffered from domestic violence, or persons – victims of trafficking. With a view to ensuring the full network of social services throughout the country in the long term, the The law on social services introduced for the first time national-level planning of social services financed from the state budget by developing a National Map of Social Services.

Social services delegated by the state activities, to which children and persons who are victims of violence can be directed on the territory of the country as of 31.12.2023 are the following:

- 20 Crisis centers for children, with a total capacity of 212 places;
- 11 Crisis centers for persons, with a total capacity of 136 seats;
- 162 Community Support Centers, with a total capacity of 7,446 seats;
- 12 Units „Mother and baby”, with a total capacity of 75 seats.

Specialized services for victims of human trafficking. The seven specialized services provided for victims of human trafficking are managed by non-governmental organizations, and their maintenance is entirely the commitment of the National Commission for Combating Human Trafficking and is covered by its budget.

* * *

20. In the past five years, what actions has your country taken to address the portrayal of women and girls, discrimination and/or gender bias in the media, including social media?

In the online survey you will be asked to select specific actions from the list below:

- Enacted, strengthened, and enforced legal reforms to combat discrimination and/or gender bias in the media, including social media
- Introduced binding regulation for the media, including for advertising
- Supported the media industry to develop voluntary codes of conduct
- Provided training to media professionals to encourage the creation and use of non-stereotypical, balanced and diverse images of women and girls in the media, including social media
- Promoted the participation and leadership of women in the media
- Established or strengthened consumer protection services to receive and review complaints about media content or gender-based discrimination/bias in the media
- Other, please specify
- None of the above

Negative gender stereotypes in society are multiplied in subsequent negative views that hinder group and/or individual personality development. The short and high-impact messages of advertisements in television programs often tread on such stereotypes in order to achieve a faster and more effective impact on consumers of goods, without taking into account the negative impact of such communication on the overall culture and well-being of society. That is why the fight against negative gender stereotypes is a significant goal and challenge for the dynamically developing democratic society, which, while preserving its traditional family values, manages to improve the situation of its male and female members in their daily lives. The Council for Electronic Media in the period from mid-2019 to mid-2024 began to carry out focused observations on the participation of women and men in television advertising in connection with the commitments of the media regulator in the National Council for Equality of Women and Men under the Council of Ministers (NSRJM to the Council of Ministers). This is one of the measures planned in the biennial National Action Plans to promote equality of women and men in the period.

The first monitoring, implemented in 2020, covers television commercials in four programs (BTV, BTV CINEMA, NOVA TELEVISION, DIEMA FAMILY) of the two largest commercial media service providers (BTV Media Group EAD and Nova Broadcasting Group EOOD) in a total volume of 32 hours of content. Two of the programs have a specialized – film profile, two of the programs have a polythematic profile. Monitoring in its entirety reports as a positive trend the absence of discriminatory commercial practices by gender, as well as the absence of negative gender stereotypes in the observed programs and advertisements. Television commercials tread on stereotyped images and social roles, reflecting objective social and cultural relations based on gender differences as well, which cannot be qualified unambiguously with a negative sign. The representation in commercial messages of the woman as a housewife and mother or the representation of the man as a worker and husband are images reflecting human daily life and drawing relevant social groups to the advertising message. The change in the social participation of both sexes in economic and family life is also reflected on the screen, including in commercial announcements in television programs. Until recently unthinkable advertising plots (father changing baby's diapers, woman managing business processes, etc) are now perceived as normal by the audience, precisely because of the cultural changes that have taken place in the social participation of both sexes in postmodern Bulgarian society. Male voiceovers are reported to dominate the voiceovers of commercials, while female images in a shot outnumber those of males. In the case of children's participation in advertisements, they are placed primarily in a family environment, with advertisements with the participation of women and children being double the participation of men with children. There is no reported exploitation of sex or eroticism in television commercials, although single erotic elements are reported in them. Given the greater amount of male voices in voice-overs and the greater amount of female characters in a frame, it can be concluded that there is a balanced participation of women and men in television commercials. In the observed commercial messages /advertisements/, no negative gender stereotypes or the use of discriminatory practices in the commercial speech are found.

The second consecutive monitoring of advertisements from the point of view of the participation of women and men in commercial speech and the available gender stereotypes was conducted in 2022 and covers four programs (BTV, BTV LADY, NOVA TELEVISION, DIEMA FAMILY) of the same commercial media service providers (BTV Media Group EAD and Nova Broadcasting Group EOOD) for a period of three days in the prime-time time range (a total of 48 hours of production or 12 hours for each service). The monitoring also found in 2022 that there is no gender discrimination in the distributed advertisements. The advertisements reflect human daily life and the social participation of both sexes in work, in family life, during recreation. In the main characters on screen, there is a dominance of the

female performance, while in the secondary characters there is some competition for the first place (in some programs women dominate, in others men, but the results almost approach). In voiceovers –, male voices dominate. In the case of age indicators, young people of active age predominate in advertisements. Stereotypical gender roles are inevitably reflected - the woman is a housewife, shopping; the woman is a mother and takes care of the home, the children, the whole family - health, food; the man plays sports, keeps in good shape; the man makes repairs at home, maintains the garden. There is also an increasing presence of advertisements in which there is a change in gender stereotypes, not only women take care of the home and children, for example. A man is a caring father, a husband. He is also a house host who cleans and washes. Both men and women participate in advertisements for nutritional supplements and medicines, with an emphasis on maintaining a healthy lifestyle, training and improving health. Without unnecessary obsession, the usual division is observed in moderation –, a woman is a caring mother, housewife, seductress, but also a businesswoman, sportswoman, active. The man is the master at home, the strong hand, but also the cleaning, cooking, loving husband and father. Monitoring does not detect in advertisements the presence of nudity, sexism, violence, ridicule, irony, dominance, addiction.

In 2023 The Council for Electronic Media conducted for the first time monitoring the participation of men and women in the news and current affairs programs of the two public media service providers, the Bulgarian National Television (BNT), respectively for the BNT1 program and the Bulgarian National Radio (BNR) – for the HORIZON program. The review covers two-week period - April 17-30, 2023. For BNT1, the results show that male and female presenters (journalists) are absolutely equal – 31 times for each of the two sexes. Guests/show participants are dominated by men, who are twice as many as women (437 men/209 women). For HORIZON respectively, men hosted shows 187 times, while women hosted 94 times, male guests for the period were 126 people against 57 female guests/interlocutors.

In the practice of the Council for Electronic Media, 3 Criminal Decrees (PR) have been issued to media service providers for sexism in television shows. The proceedings instituted are for violations of article 17, paragraph 2, in connection with article 10, paragraph 1, item 6, of the Radio and Television Act, namely, the non-admission of broadcasts that are contrary to good morals

1. On 14.12.2021, on the program „Nova TV“ of Nova Broadcasting Group EOOD, an episode of the TV game „Family Wars“ was broadcast, in which the participants were asked the question: „What can an 80-year-old woman stop wearing because it doesn't make sense?“. The presenter's answers and comments abound with offensive expressions, mocking language and inappropriate jokes. In this way, it is demonstrated that the elderly, specifically women, can be offended and ridiculed without any problems, because of their appearance, difficulties in getting around and their health problems. Women over the age of 80 are portrayed as leaking, unable to keep their balance, with shaking hands, etc. For this reason, the supplier was issued a criminal decree with № RD-10-9/ 30.03.2022, which imposed a pecuniary sanction of BGN 5,000. The decree was appealed by the company to the Sofia District Court (SRC). At the moment, there is no ruling from the court.

2. On 24.11.2022, under the program „DIEMA FAMILY“ of Nova Broadcasting Group EOOD, an episode of the TV game „Family Wars“ was broadcast, in which the participants were asked the question: „Name something you can do to both your dog and your wife?“. Subsequent responses and comments, in most cases with laughter, with slight mockery, show disrespect and incite violence. Words like „I put a leash on you and walk you“, „to train her to follow commands“, „comes to me to kick both the dog and the woman“, „to scold her“, „to tie her“. In this way, a mocking attitude towards women is justified and encouraged, equating them with the pet. For this reason, the supplier was issued a criminal decree with № RD-10-4/

02.03.2023, which imposed a pecuniary sanction of BGN 5,000. The decree was appealed by the company to the Sofia District Court. With Decision № 5818 of 14.12.2023. The SRS cancels the procedural NP, and the reasons state that *the lines used should be interpreted in the light of the humorous nature of the transmission, not literally. The questions asked and their answers are intended to cause laughter; not to incite disrespect for women, animals or to incite humiliating treatment or violence.* With Decision № 8952 of 17.06.2024 of the Administrative Court Sofia – city, the decision of the SRS was annulled and the procedural NP was confirmed. The reasons state that *clear signs must be given to society – mature and adolescent that such an attitude, though in jest, cannot be accepted, lest it give rise to favoritism to men who train, bind, kick, and in every way treat a woman like an animal. The same would apply in reverse. Man, as an individual, whether male or female, should be respected, so that the same in his self-respect and respect for others does not allow manifestations that harm good morals. It is not a value to humiliate someone and this attitude is in violation of good manners. It is attractive for the audience to use the expressions of the presenter incl. and for the wink, evident from the laughter caused, but not socially educational. Such attractiveness behavior can be considered encouraging by adolescents, but this is also contrary to good manners.*

3. On 31.12.2022, under the program „BNT 1“ of the public provider of media services, the Bulgarian National Television broadcast the column „Living Archives“ with guest Petar Stoyanovich, in which the quality of meat during socialism is discussed. Mr. Stojanovic tells how during one of his holidays in Greece in the 80s, a local butcher told him that *„Bulgaria is gone, a little girl is blowing whistles - very nice. Went butcher shop, badger and calf blue - not nice“*. The speech remains an impression that in Bulgaria it is normal and acceptable for little girls to offer sexual services, which, despite the fact that the story is about the 80s, was accepted uncritically by the presenter and left without comment. For this reason, the supplier was issued a criminal decree with № RD-10-9/ 20.04.2023, which imposed a pecuniary sanction of BGN 3,000. The decree was appealed to the Sofia District Court. With Decision № 5606 of 04.12.2023. SRC cancels the process NP on the grounds that *„it should be explicitly stated that the quoted sentence, which is assumed to have violated morality in society, lacks a hint of the provision of sexual services by small girls, as is the statement in the analysis of this sentence. There is no comment on sexual topics, there is no crossing the line of good tone, which leads to vulgarity, however unacceptable, cynical and vulgar expressions are not used. The conclusion of the actor-compiler and subsequently of the administrative-penal authority about the content of the sentence included as content is not only outside the context of the transmission and specifically the rubric, but there is no way to connect with the cited argument for the provision of sexual services. By itself, the expression „makes a whistle“ does not lead to the conclusion of providing a sexual service.“* With Decision № 2731 of 24.04.2024 of the Administrative Court Sofia – city, the decision of the SRS was confirmed and the procedural NP was finally annulled. Reasons are given that *„In this regard, the present instance finds justified the considerations presented by the district court that the words were taken out of context. The words are an excerpt from the guest's comment on the occasion of broadcast archival footage for various branches of light industry before 1989. in Bulgaria and his personal memories in connection with them and in particular with meat production and the meat products offered at that time. The words are an excerpt from a quote aimed at showing the poor quality of the product through the prism of a foreigner. It is this detachment from the general message that is indicative of the conclusion that the composite signs on the objective side of the alleged violation under Art. 17, para. 2 of the ZRT.“* are not present

The Council for Electronic Media kato Media Regulator cooperates successfully with the self-regulatory body National Council for Self-Regulation, which decides on compliance with the National Ethical Rules for Advertising and Commercial Communication in the

Republic of Bulgaria (Code of Ethics). In the period from August 2019 to July 2024. The National Council for Self-Regulation ruled on 26 cases of a different nature of commercial communication. In 2 (two) of the cases, he found a violation of the Code of Ethics in connection with incorrect exploitation of gender in the commercial speech. S [Decision № 293 of 02.08.2019](#). The National Council for Self-Regulation ruled that the Facebook ad of the Mintis brand was beyond the norm of sexual provocativeness. Three advertisements with marked erotic content are distributed on the social network in violation of the National Ethical Rules for Advertising and Commercial Communication in the Republic of Bulgaria. They exploit stereotypical images of women and men in sexual positions. S [Decision №317 of 16.07.2024](#). National Council for Self-Regulation rules on advertising for ice cream Last name Galaxy, which is presented in the form of an advertising video and outdoor advertising – billboard. SEM referred the National Council for Self-Regulation to the television version of this advertisement, in which the images of three young women are exploited. The complaint to the National Council for Self-Regulation points out that the advertising of the ice cream violates the general rules of decency and public behavior, inappropriate especially for children and adolescents, but also for the mass audience, as it implies sexual acts. The decision of the National Council for Self-Regulation is that there is a violation of Art. 1.2. and Art. 2 of the Code of Ethics - “Any commercial communication must be in accordance with the law, decent, honorable, honest and truthful. Commercial communication must not contain statements or audio or visual elements that violate good morals or can be defined as vulgar or repulsive, according to generally accepted moral norms in the respective country and culture“. After the pronouncement of the National Council for Self-Regulation, the distribution of the above-mentioned advertisements was stopped.

Partnerships of The Commission for Protection against Discrimination with media. On June 7, 2024, a memorandum of cooperation was concluded between the Commission for Protection against Discrimination and TV1 Bulgaria EOOD.

By virtue of the signed memorandum, the two parties agree on joint cooperation in the field of mass awareness as a forum for social interaction and communication, and the initiatives and activities of the parties should be conditioned by the idea of tolerance and equality of treatment.

The parties express their desire for cooperation and joint activities, which consist in the preparation and promotion of various initiatives and information campaigns related to preventing hate speech in the media environment, countering discrimination in society, and inaccessible architectural environments.

In 2023, with the same focus, such a memorandum was concluded between Commission for Protection against Discrimination and the Bulgarian National Radio.

The media partnerships in question are an opportunity for the Commission to contribute to the portrayal of women and girls according to the principles of equality of treatment and equal opportunities, as well as to facilitate the elimination of gender-stereotyped attitudes and inculcating discrimination.

* * *

21. In the past five years, what actions has your country taken specifically tailored to address violence against marginalized groups of women and girls?

In the online survey you will be asked to select the marginalized groups of women and girls for whom your country has taken measures from the list below, as appropriate in your national context:

- Women living in remote and rural areas
- Indigenous women
- Women marginalized because of race, ethnicity and/or caste
- Women from religious minorities
- Women with disabilities
- Women living with HIV/AIDS
- People with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities or expressions, or sex characteristics
- Girls, adolescents and younger women
- Older women
- Migrant women
- Refugee and internally displaced women
- Women in humanitarian settings
- Other, please specify
- None of the above

Actions carried out in Bulgaria to deal with violence against women and girls do not distinguish between age, disability, health status, ethnicity, religion, etc. Concurrently, special actions are being implemented to address violence against marginalized groups of women and girls.

Project „Improving access to justice for persons living below the poverty line with a special focus on women, children and the Roma community“.

In 2020. The National Legal Aid Bureau has started implementation of the project „Improving access to justice for persons living below the poverty line with a special focus on women, children and the Roma community“, financed under the program „Justice“ of the Norwegian Financial Mechanism 2014-2021. The project partner is the Norwegian Judicial Administration. The project is directly related to improving legal protection services for persons belonging to ethnic minorities, as well as for persons living in households below the poverty line. The project is also related to improving Roma women's access to legal aid and justice. Within the framework of the project, 250 representatives of vulnerable social groups (women, children and the Roma community) in the small and remote areas of the Stara Zagora, Veliko Tarnovo and Varna regions receive primary legal assistance, including victims of domestic violence, women, children and representatives of minority communities. For this purpose, mobile teams of lawyers and Roma mediators have been created in the three areas that provide primary legal assistance. The main activity of the project is to provide legal advice in isolated and remote places, which increases the awareness of the population regarding the protection of their rights.

In addition, the NBPP project increases the professional capacity of a minimum of 300 lawyers registered in the National Register of Legal Aid and improves their knowledge on the topics of prevention of discrimination, overcoming stereotypes and prejudices, domestic violence and gender violence.

In March 2021, the provision of legal advice in small and remote settlements in the three districts began, with special attention to women, children at risk, and citizens of minority origin.

The project has signed the contract with Roma mediators. The main tasks of the Roma mediators include identifying representatives of the target groups of the project from Roma neighborhoods, hamlets and small settlements on the territory of the three pilot areas of the project, which can use the services of the local pilot centers; holding individual and group

meetings with representatives of the target groups of the project, with a view to motivating for consultation and use of the services of the pilot centers and mobile teams; on-site organization of the provision of consultations by the mobile teams; organization and conduct (together with other employees from the regional centers) of information campaigns and meetings to familiarize the target groups of the project with legal provisions and legal cases, concerning legal aid and domestic violence, with a view to increasing their awareness and facilitating their access to justice; supporting communication between lawyers and those in need by personally carrying out or organizing translation in cases where the person in need of consultation does not understand the Bulgarian language well enough; advising lawyers in providing legal assistance in sensitive cases on the approach that would be most appropriate; cooperation with local NGOs and local authorities; promotion of the project and the opportunities it provides among the Roma community.

In addition, among the lawyers working on the project there are those who self-identify as Roma.

The project ended on April 30, 2024.

* * *

Participation, accountability and gender-responsive institutions

Critical areas of concern:

Women in power and decision-making
Institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women
Human rights of women
Women and the media
The child-girl

22. In the past five years, what actions and measures has your country to promote women's participation in public life and decision-making?

In the online survey you will be asked to select specific actions from the list below:

- Introduced temporary special measures, such as quotas, reserved seats, benchmarks and targets that promote women's participation in politics, especially at decision-making level
- Introduced or increased targets and benchmarks of legislative temporary special measures, such as quotas or reserved seats, to promote gender balance or gender parity in legislatures (aiming for 40 per cent or more of seats being occupied by women)
- Introduced whole-of-government or ministerial cabinet gender parity laws or policies dictating that around half of decision-making positions are occupied by women
- Reinforced the adequate implementation of existing temporary special measures by boosting compliance mechanisms, including through the imposition of sanctions on political parties for non-compliance.
- Provided opportunities for capacity building and skills development, such as mentorship, training in leadership, decision-making, public speaking, self-assertion, and/or political campaigning for women candidates, elected or appointed politicians, parliamentary caucuses, and/or gender equality advocates

- Taken measures to prevent, investigate, prosecute and punish violence against women in politics and public life
- Encouraged the equal political participation of all women, including young women and underrepresented groups like indigenous women, through capacity building, skills development, sensitization and mentorship programmes
- Strengthened civic space and protections for women's movements and women human rights defenders
- Collected and analyzed data on women's political participation, including in appointed and elected positions
- Other, please specify
- None of the above

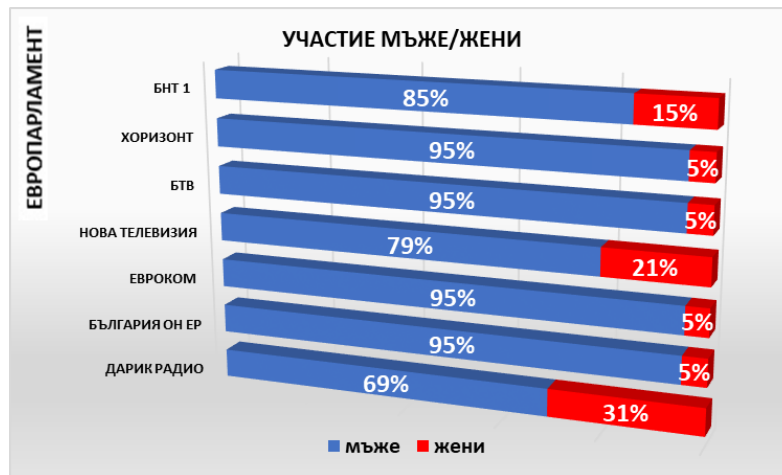
Data collected and analysed on women's participation in political life, including in appointed and elected positions.

In the reporting period (from mid-2019 to mid-2024) in the Republic of Bulgaria,:

- Twice European Parliament elections – May 2019 and June 2024.
- Twice local elections – October 2019 and October-November 2023.
- Once for President and Vice President - November 2021.
- Six times for National Assembly – April 2021; July 2021; November 2021; October 2022; April 2023; June 2024.

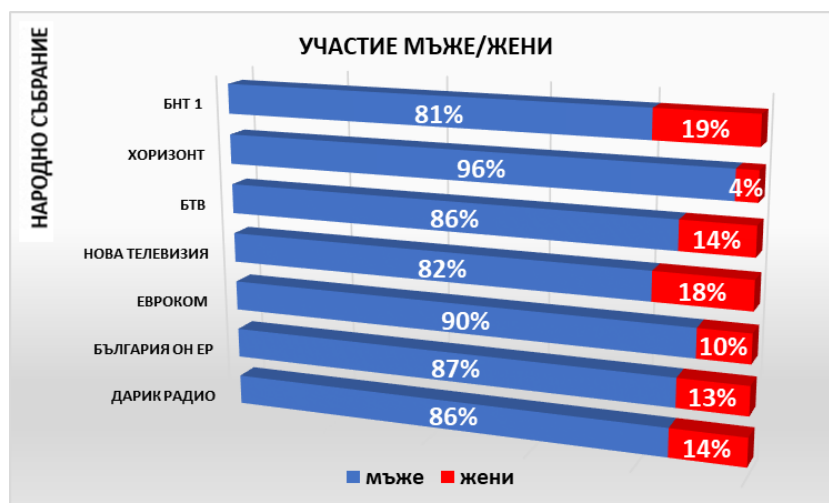
In connection with the election campaigns for these 11 votes in the last five years, the Electronic Media Council conducts for each of them specialized monitoring of the audio and audiovisual content of media services, with the aim of monitoring compliance with the Electoral Code and the Law on Radio and Television. Within the framework of monitoring, the participation of men and women in the campaign itself and in the media content is taken into account. For each election, the , the Electronic Media Council requests from the Central Election Commission a report on the participation of men and women in the political race. Thanks to the search for this data, the CEC has started and established a practice of announcing them publicly to the media and society.

According to the CEC, a total of 6,518 candidates participated in the election campaign for elections for the European Parliament and extraordinary elections for the 50th National Assembly on June 9, 2024, of which 332 people are candidates in both votes. There are a total of 418 nominated as MEPs.. Of these, 131 were women and men – 287. This makes 31.34% participation of women among EP candidates against 68.66% for men. As a result of the vote, 4 women from Bulgaria and 13 men entered the EP, or the political representation of women was 23.52%. Accordingly, in media content, the male-female ratio is as follows for the 7 most influential radio and television programs:



CEM data on the vote for the European Parliament: In the BNT1 television program of the public media service provider BNT, participation in the pre-election content for the campaign is in the ratio of 85% men to 15% women. In the HORIZON radio program of the public media service provider BNR, men have 95% participation in the pre-election content against 5% women. Television program BTV of the commercial provider BTV MEDIA GROUP EAD – 95% men vs. 5% women. NOVA TV of the commercial supplier Nova Broadcastnig Group EOOD - 79% men against 21% women are included in the pre-election content for the campaign. Television program BULGARIA ON AIR the commercial supplier INVESTOR.BG AD – 95% men are 5% women. Radio program DARIK RADIO BULGARIA of the commercial provider Darik Radio AD – 69% men against 31% women participate in the pre-election content for the campaign.

There are a total of 6,100 candidates for people's representatives on June 9, 2024, and of these, 1,506 are on the lists of two constituencies, according to CEC data. There are 1,826 women who have been proposed as Bulgarian MPs, and – 4,274 men are many times more. In percentage terms - female candidates are 29.91% against 70.09% men. Of the 240 new people's representatives in the 50th National Assembly, 176 are men and 64 women or 26.66% women and 73.33% men. And in the reported media content, the participation of female candidates is less compared to that of men. Accordingly, the male - female ratio is as follows for the 7 most influential radio and television programmes: the

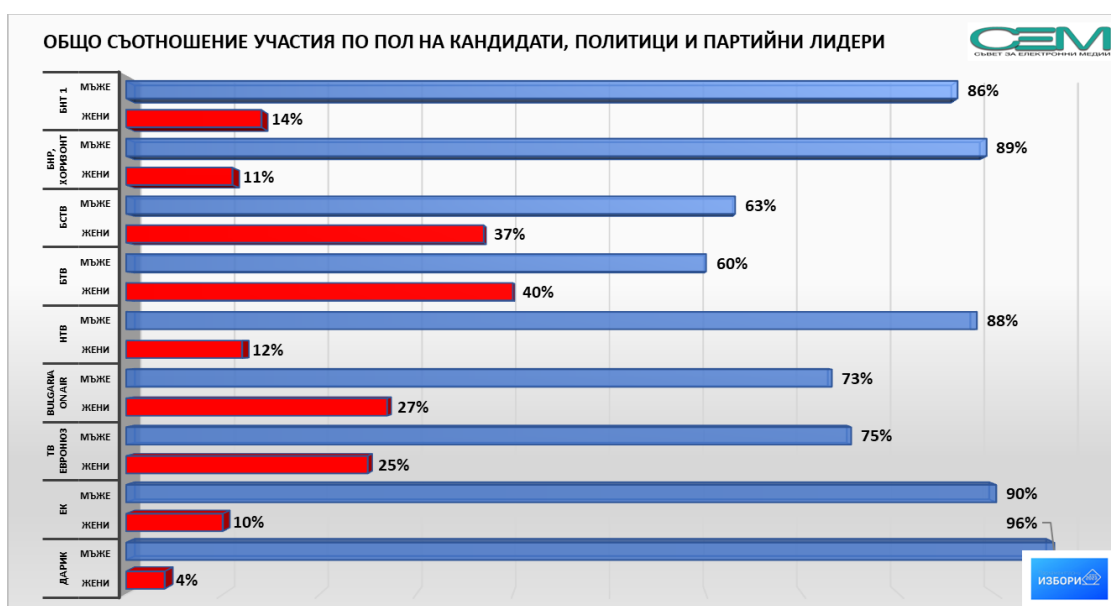


The Council for Electronic Media data on the vote for the 50th National Assembly: Television program BNT1 of the public media service provider BNT - 81% men against 19%

women participate in the pre-election content for the campaign. In the HORIZON radio program of the public media service provider BNR, there are 96% men against 4% women. In the BTV television program of the commercial supplier BTV MEDIA GROUP EAD - 86% men against 14% women. In the NOVA TELEVISION program of the commercial provider Nova Broadcasting Group EOOD - 82% men against 18% women participate in the pre-election content for the campaign. Television program BULGARIA ON AIR to the commercial supplier INVESTOR.BG AD – 87% men vs. 13% women. Radio program DARIK RADIO BULGARIA of the commercial provider Darik Radio AD – 86% men against 14% women participation in the pre-election content for the campaign.

The picture of women's and men's participation in the election campaigns for the other elections in the last five years is no different from that of June 9, 2024. For example, in the campaign for the 49th National Assembly and the vote on April 2, 2023, respectively, the ratio is as follows:

According to the CEC, there are 1,341 registered women as candidates for national representatives against 3,225 male candidates out of a total of 4,566 people. These are 29.37% female and 70.63% male candidates. As a result of the vote, 58 women and 182 men deputies entered the 49 parliament out of a total of 240 people's representatives – 24.17% women and 75.83%. The following integrated table shows the participation of both sexes in 9 radio and television programmes:



Television program BNT1 of the public media service provider BNT - 86% men against 14% women participation in the pre-election content for the campaign. Radio program HORIZON of the public media service provider BNR - 89% men against 11% women. Television program BСТВ of the public provider BULGARIAN FREE MEDIA EOOD - 63% men against 37% women. Television program BТВ of the commercial provider BТВ MEDIA GROUP EAD - 60% men vs. 40% women. TV program NOVA TV of the commercial supplier Nova Broadcastnig Group EOOD - 88% men vs. 12% women. Television program BULGARIA ON AIR the commercial provider INVESTOR.BG AD – 73% men against 27% women have participation in the election content for the campaign. TELEVISION EURONEWS BULGARIA of the commercial provider TELEVISION EUROPE AD are 75%

men against 25% women. TV program EROCOM of the commercial supplier Television Eurocom OOD– 90% men vs. 10% women. Radio program DARIK RADIO BULGARIA of the commercial provider Darik Radio AD – 96% men against 4% women participation in the pre-election content for the campaign.

The Children's Council of the Chairman of the State Agency for Child Protection was established in 2003 in implementation of the basic principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Child Protection Act. It includes representatives from the 28 administrative regions in the country, 4 quotas for children from vulnerable groups and 1 quota for a representative of children granted international protection in Bulgaria with a mandate of 2 years. The purpose of its creation is to promote child participation in child policy-making and decision-making processes (its main mission is to present a child's perspective). The children themselves elect a chairman, vice-chairman, secretary and chronicler, who are voted on and elected at a meeting.

All the activities that take place during their meetings give children the opportunity to exchange knowledge, learn moral and intellectual values, discuss ways to interact with state and non-governmental organizations at the national and regional level, and express their position on political and social life in our country.

Through this direct dialogue with children, the State Agency for Child Protection promotes children's participation in decision-making that concerns children's rights.

The Regional Development Councils (RDC) they function in the six planning regions in Bulgaria – Northwest, North Central, Northeast, Southwest, South Central and Southeast. The composition of the Soviets is determined by order of the Minister of Regional Development. When comparing the compositions of the RSR in 2020 and 2024, a positive trend is observed regarding the equal participation of representatives of both sexes in them. In three of the Soviets, the proportion of women increased. Women make up 34% to 46% of the current membership of all six Councils.

* * *

23. In the past five years, what actions has your country taken to increase women's access to expression and participation in decision-making in the media, including through information and communication technologies (ICT)?

In the online survey you will be asked to select specific actions from the list below:

- Strengthened the provision of formal and technical vocational education and training (TVET) in media and ICTs, including in areas of management and leadership
- Taken measures to enhance access, affordability and use of ICTs for women and girls (e.g. free Wi-Fi hubs, community technology centers)
- Introduced regulations to advance equal pay, retention and career advancement of women within the media and ICT field
- Collaborated with employers in the media and ICT field to improve internal policies and hiring practices on a voluntary basis
- Provided support to women's media networks and organizations
- Other, please specify
- None of the above

Measures taken to improve access, accessibility and use of Information and communication technologies by women and girls (eg free Wi-Fi centres, community technology centres).

Rail's Girls MAY 2022 is a global initiative, aimed at providing tools and inclusiveness to women to understand technology and build their ideas by providing great experience in basic sketching, prototyping and programming. Rails Girls is a free two-day workshop engaging ladies of all ages with zero or minimal programming and technology experience. The main goal is to show that programming is a fun, interesting, exciting and very useful skill that everyone can use in many different ways. On May 22, 2022. Digital National Alliance held its 14th edition of Rails Girls Sofia. A new group of 100 girls have been trained in basic coding, thus expanding the already existing community of already 2,000 girls. The total community of mentors reached 400 people, and the initiative was implemented in Burgas, Varna and Vratsa.

* * *

24. Please describe your country's current national women's machinery (government entity exclusively dedicated to the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women) and describe the measures that your country taken over the past five years to establish and/or strengthen it.

In the online survey you will be asked four additional questions.

First, you will be asked to choose one of the following options regarding the current location of the national machinery for women within the Government:

- *Ministerial level or equivalent whose head has full cabinet participation*
- *Entity ascribed directly to the Head of the Executive or entity whose head directly reports to the head of the Executive (e.g. offices ascribed to the presidential office, secretaries, national institutes, among others)*
- *Entity within a sectoral Ministry (e.g. sub-ministerial, under-secretary positions, institutes, councils and others)*
- *Entity below sub-Ministerial level (e.g. advisory or consultative commissions/committees/ working groups in the Executive; ombudsman's and advocates offices; interdepartmental bodies/taskforces; decentralized mechanisms within the Executive at provincial/local level)*
- *Not applicable*
- *Other, please specify*

Second, you will be asked whether the national women's machinery has adequate financial resources and staff capacity to fulfil its mandate (YES/NO) and to choose one of the following statements to describe the evolution of the budget of the national women's machinery over the past five years:

- *The budget of the national women's machinery has increased (as a proportion of overall government spending)*
- *The budget of the national women's machinery has remained stable (as a proportion of overall government spending)*

- *The budget of the national women's machinery has declined (as a proportion of overall government spending)*
- *Not applicable*
- *Other, please specify*

Third, you will be asked to choose among the following options with regards to the guiding vision that best describes the current mandate of your country's national women's machinery's:

- *Protection families, women and children*
- *Promoting the wellbeing and rights of women and girls*
- *Ensuring gender equality is realized for all*
- *Not applicable*
- *Other, please specify*

Finally, you will be asked about the number and names of the programmes for the implementation of which the national machinery for women is directly responsible.

The National Machinery for Women is directly responsible for implementing:

- *National Strategy for the Promotion of Equality for Women and Men 2021-2030 – 1 issue.*
- *National action plans in implementation of the national strategy. A National Action Plan to promote the equality of women and men for the period 2023-2024 – 1 piece. A National Action Plan for the period 2025-2026 is under development. The current strategy will be implemented through five two-year action plans.*
- *National reports on the equality of women and men. Reports are produced annually.*

In the Republic of Bulgaria, a well-built, established and proven national institutional mechanism for equality between women and men at the horizontal and vertical levels is successfully functioning.

The national institutional mechanism is regulated in the Law on Equality of Women and Men (Obn. SG No. 33 of 26.04.2016) with a view to optimizing the distribution of responsibilities between the relevant bodies, resources and management of the process of conducting a long-term and unified state policy to promote the equality of women and men.

The Council of Ministers defines the policy on equality of women and men and adopts a National Strategy for Equality of Women and Men, and plans for its implementation.

The central and territorial bodies of the executive power they implement the policy on equality between women and men in accordance with the National Strategy on Equality between Women and Men.

The National Council for the Equality of Women and Men under the Council of Ministers is body for carrying out consultations, cooperation and coordination between the central and territorial bodies of the executive power and the structures of civil society. It consists of representatives of all ministries at the level of deputy minister, state and executive agencies and other bodies established by law; the editorial organizations of employers and employees at the national level; The National Association of Municipalities in the Republic of Bulgaria; non-profit legal entities whose subject of activity is in accordance with the priorities of the state policy on equality of women and men, determined under the conditions, criteria and according to the procedure regulated in the Regulations for the organization, the organization and activities of the National Council (4 years of experience in implementing programs and projects in the field of equality between women and men and implementing

activities of national importance in this area).

The National Council provides opinions on draft strategic documents and normative acts that contain provisions related to the equality of women and men before their submission to the Council of Ministers; participates in the development of the National Strategy for the Equality of Women and Men; proposes measures to promote the state policy for the equality of women and men; participates in the development of quantitative and qualitative indicators, necessary for the system for monitoring the equality of women and men.

The National Council on the Equality of Women and Men holds at least 4 meetings per year, according to the Public Law for the organization, organization and activity of Council, who is accepted by The Council of Ministers. Through the functioning of The National Council for the Equality of Women and Men under the Council of Ministers a sustainable model for cooperation between institutions, social partners and civil society has been achieved, incl. local level. More information for The National Council can be found at http://www.saveti.government.bg/web/cc_19/1.

The Minister of Labor and Social Policy directs, coordinates and supervises the implementation of the state policy on equality of women and the men and he is the chairman of the National Council on the equality of women and men.

The duties of the minister regulated in the Law on Equality of Women and Men are: develops, participates in the discussion and proposes the adoption and/or amendment of normative acts and strategic documents related to the equality of women and men; organizes and directs the activities of The National Council for the Equality of Women and Men under the Council of Ministers; coordinates the development, implementation and reporting of the National Strategy and its implementation plans; organizes the creation and maintenance of a system for monitoring the equality of women and men and coordinates the preparation of a report on the equality of women and men in the Republic of Bulgaria; provides methodological assistance to the bodies of the executive power for the implementation of the state policy on the equality of women and men; represents the state in international organizations and programs in the field of equality of women and men; leads and coordinates participation in national and international programs and projects for the equality of women and men, including together with other state authorities and organizations; maintains contacts with related specialized state bodies in other countries, as well as with international organizations active in the field of equality between women and men.

Unit “Equal opportunities, anti-discrimination and social benefits” in the Directorate “Policy for People with Disabilities, Equal Opportunities and Social Benefits” in **Ministry of Labor and Social Policy**, assists the minister in fulfilling the obligations under the Law on Equality of Women and Men.

The “Equal opportunities, anti-discrimination and social benefits Department, together with its other responsibilities”, develops and coordinates the implementation of the state policy in the field of equal opportunities, analyzes and evaluates the compliance of the legislation of the Republic of Bulgaria with that of the European Union in the field of equal opportunities, develops normative acts and the program budget of the ministry in this area, etc. Responsible for organizing, coordinating, communicating, participating in developing and analyzing the implementation of the National Strategy and National Action Plans. Participates in committees, councils, working groups, programs in the field of equality between women and men and anti-discrimination at the European and national level.

The department is also the secretariat of the National Council for the Equality of Women and Men under the Council of Ministers, providing organizational and technical its activity.

Coordinators on equality between women and men are employees in the central and territorial bodies of the executive power, designated as coordinators in implementation of

The Law on Equality of Women and Men. They currently number 87 (50 at national and 37 at district level in the 28 administrative districts).

The coordinators support the operational implementation of the policy and the mainstreaming approach to the equality of women and men at the national and regional level. They participate in the development and implementation of the national policy on equality between women and men, coordinate the implementation of measures within the competence of the executive body, participate in the preparation of reports on equality between women and men, in the development of the quantitative and qualitative indicators and analyses of the equality of women and men in the relevant area of competence of the institution, coordinate the collection and dissemination of information and good practices, the provision of data on equality of women and men from the competence of the executive body, participate in trainings on equality of women and men, as well as in the organization of such trainings, etc. Their functions as coordinators are also entered in their job descriptions and/or in an order of the appointing authority. Coordinators on equality between women and men, in the performance of these functions, cooperate with the Ministry of Education and Science.

Sloudly Law on Equality of Women and Men, **at the local level by regions and municipalities**, dthe state policy on equality between women and men is implemented by **regional governors and local self-government bodies** together with the territorial units of the ministries, state and executive agencies and other bodies established by law, the representative organizations of workers and employees and employers, non-governmental organizations working on issues of equality between women and men, as well as other organizations.

The regional governor ensures coordination between national and local interests on issues of equality between women and men and interacts with local self-government bodies and local administration, as well as with the territorial units of representative organizations of workers and employees and employers. In carrying out their powers in the implementation of the state policy on equality of women and men, the regional governors are assisted by the officials appointed by them in the regional administration, who perform the functions of coordinators for equality of women and men, according to Gender Equality Act.

The Republic of Bulgaria, through the Ministry of Education and Science, which directs and coordinates the national policy on equality between women and men, implements consistently **measures to strengthen the national institutional machinery** in the last five. Such are, for example, measures to ensure the commitment and participation of stakeholders in the implementation of the policy, improve capacity, increase public awareness and sensitivity on issues of equality between women and men in all areas of life, integration of the principle of equality and others.

* * *

25. In the past five years, what other mechanisms and tools has your country used to mainstream gender equality across sectors? (e.g. gender focal points in the Executive, Legislature or Judiciary; inter-ministerial coordination mechanisms; gender audits, consultations with women's organizations)

Over the past five years, Bulgaria has used various mechanisms and tools to integrate the principle of equality between women and men in different sectors.

The functional one **national institutional mechanism**, described above, ensures the implementation of an integrated approach through the setting, implementation and monitoring of measures in the conditions of intersectoral coordination. National action plans are being drawn up in implementation of the National Strategy for the Promotion of Equality for Women and Men. Annual reports are developed to track progress in the implementation of the measures

set out in the plans and, accordingly, of the Strategy. Information from national statistics and administrative information from the institutions and organizations involved is integrated into these monitoring reports.

Ensuring engagement, participation and coordination. Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, through the specialized Department of „Equal Opportunities, Anti-Discriminations and Social Assistance“ in the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, ensures the active participation and commitment of the interested parties in the formulation and implementation of the national policy on equality of women and men.

The normative provisions of the Law on Equality of Women and Men and the Regulations for the organization, organization and activities of the National Council for the Equality of Women and Men. The continuous functioning of the Council is ensured, at least 4 meetings are held annually, the main policy documents are consulted, current issues are discussed, thematic discussions are held, information, opinions and practices are exchanged.

Interdepartmental working groups are being formed to develop the main policy documents, proposals for legislative changes and other significant documents. For example, three inter-ministerial working groups are currently functioning: to develop a draft National Action Plan for the Promotion of Equality of Women and Men 2025-2026; to elaborate draft legislative changes with a view to transposing into national law the „Directive (EU) 2022/2381 on EP and the Council from November 23, 2022. to improve the gender balance among non-executive directors of listed companies and related measures“; for conducting a review and preparing the current national report on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action Beijing +30.

Increasing the capacity of coordinators for equality between women and men. An important link in the overall process of implementing the policy on the equality of women and men and integrating this principle into sectoral policies in Bulgaria are **equality coordinators** in the central and territorial bodies of the executive power.

The specialized unit of Department of „Equal Opportunities, Anti-Discriminations and Social Assistance“ in the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy works in close cooperation with the coordinators. It turns out the necessary methodological support in the implementation of their commitments under the LLL. Trainings are held annually and raising awareness and capacity and to the coordinators. The main topics in the trainings are the normative, institutional and strategic framework of the policy on equality of women and men in national, European and international terms, current developments and perspectives, initiatives and practices, integration of principles of equality of women and men in sectoral policies, etc.

For example, during the training of coordinators in 2022, in addition to the above topics, participants are familiar with the work of national and international commissions, committees and working groups on issues related to the equality of women and men – NSRJM, The High Level Group on Non-Discrimination, Equality and Diversity at the EC both subgroups attached to it, the Advisory Committee on Equality between Women and Men of the EC, etc., the practice of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination in relation to discrimination on the grounds of „gender“ in the exercise of the right to work and sexual harassment. Representatives of Bulgarian Forum of Business Leaders, Municipality of Gothenburg, Sweden, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights presenting The Charter of Diversity in Bulgaria, Sweden's experience in diversity and equity, the how to read and use the data under equality to women and men in Bulgaria. Special emphasis is also placed on the distinctive sign of institutions/organizations for significant achievements in the effective implementation of the policy on equality of women and men in the Republic of Bulgaria and selection of carriers of the national sign, according to Law on Equality of Women and Men.

In 2023, the Department of „Equal Opportunities, Anti-Discriminations and Social Assistance“ in the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy with the assistance of the coordinators

for equality of women and men at the regional level **Collection with practices in the field of prevention and support of victims of various forms of violence at the district level.** The coordinators sent information about established good practices in the field of prevention and support of victims of various forms of violence in places.

In the compendium are gathered local politicianand and implemented measures to prevent and support victims of violence from 22 administrative regions in Bulgaria. Information is arranged by area.

Numerous good practices are included, such as pabota with children aged 3 to 6 years in kindergartens in order to protect their personal (physical and emotional) boundaries, creation of Youth club "Let's be friends", which is an informal group of young people united around the understanding of living in a world free from violence (Pernik) and The Positive Parenting Program "School for Parents - Roles and Relationships" - focus prevention of bodily violence as a method of upbringing, creation and functioning of District Council for the Prevention of Domestic Violence (Razgrad), creation of Local mechanismuhm for the application of the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence (2011) in the Razgrad region, which it is unique and unique for Bulgaria. The Mechanism represents a structural framework for interaction that institutionalizes cooperation for the prevention of domestic violence, ffunctioning of various social services in places that are widely accessible and relatively evenly distributed, development of mobile social services, which enables their use by residents of more remote and hard-to-reach settlements, Functioning of the Coordination Mechanism for interaction at work in cases of children, victims of violence or at risk of violence and for interaction in crisis situations (Ruse) and availability of rules for work and interaction of the responsible institutions, which complement and specify the Mechanism. Regional administration – Sofia region have emphasized in their work on the topic of Prevention of dangers, harassment, aggression and protection in online communication, as well as promotion of the National Helpline for Children to help and support adolescents and their parents to share problems in the family, school and friendly environment, Organization of trainings on the topic „What to choose - friendship or aggression“, Work with the community on the prevention of „early marriages“, which are often accompanied by verbal, physical, mental and sexual violence, etc.

Numerous other activities reported as good practices were also carried out, such as: organizing a hike under the title: „No to aggression“ - at least 75 students from all schools on the territory of the municipality between the ages of 12 and 18 participate, organizing a day on the pink shirt, under the title „Let's be better“ and/or „No to bullying, Yes to friendship“, periodic meetings, talks and lectures jointly on topics: „Aggression, bullying and violence at school“, „Prevention of violence at school“. Many other activities are also presented, such as holding group creative workshops, psychosocial work with victims of violence, etc.

Some of the regional administrations have also made supporting proposals to work on for the introduction both in the legislation as uniform requirements in this sphere and in the future programming of specialized services for adult and child victims of violence and in terms of working with perpetrators: as initiation of Programs for acquiring modern knowledge and skills and recovery from trauma, programs for the prevention of domestic violence at school, creation of Offices for counseling, guidance and support of victims of domestic violence, implementation on yurydical and psychological consultations for victims of violence, etc.

Distinctive sign for significant achievements in the effective implementation of the policy on equality between women and men in the Republic of Bulgaria. The sign was created in compliance with article 16 of the Act on Equality between Women and Men.

The procedure for obtaining from the institutions/organizations the Distinctive Sign is carried out according to the Terms and Conditions for obtaining a distinctive sign for significant achievements in the effective implementation of the policy on equality between women and men, approved on November 27, 2017 by the Minister of Labor and Social Policy. The

procedure is announced annually at the beginning of the calendar year. In 2024, for the seventh year in a row, the Ministry of Education and Science organized and conducted a procedure for receiving the Distinguishing Mark from the institutions/organizations. The secretariat of the The National Council for the Equality of Women and Men under the Council of Ministers, which is a department in the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, sends information and a link to the announcement published on the official page of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy to all members of the The National Council for the Equality of Women and Men under the Council of Ministers and to all coordinators for the equality of women and men at the national and regional level with a view to disseminating the information to all interested parties. For example, according to data from the Ministry of Economy and Industry, the coordinator in the ministry organized the dissemination of information to 77 social partners, employers' and trade union organizations.

With order of the Minister of Labor and Social Policy naznachava Commission for consideration and evaluation of received applications under the Procedure for receiving a distinctive sign from the institutions/organizations with significant achievements in the effective implementation of the policy on equality of women and men in the Republic of Bulgaria (the Commission). The Commission performs the tasks assigned to it and presents pthe rejected applications for discussion and approval at a meeting of the National Council for the Equality of Women and Men at the Council of Ministers. During the meeting, the members of the National Council vote for the selection of the recipients of the Distinctive Badge for the previous year. Awards are presented in three categories: state institutions (central and local government), commercial and non-profit organizations, and public organizations and institutions. Every year, the number of candidates increases, as well as the initiatives they implement.

The hallmark of significant achievements in the effective implementation of the policy of equality between women and men is a moral reward, a symbol of prestige and an incentive for institutions/organizations to integrate the principle of equality between women and men and improve their governance, in accordance with the achievement of equality for all. The sign represents a material medium of moral value in the form of a plaque and a logo with the year of receipt written on it. The logo is recorded in electronic format on disk, which the awarded institutions and organizations can use in the promotion of their activities. The awards are completely equal and are presented in the order of receipt of the applications of the participants in the competition at an event held especially for the purpose.

The main purpose of awarding the Distinctive Badge is to encourage efforts to more and more institutions/organizations, as well as the competition between them, which in its own order to lead to more effective policies aimed at achieving the equality of women and men in Bulgaria.

Important part of the Management Program of the Republic of Bulgaria for the period June 2023 – December 2024. in the area of policy on equality between women and men is the signing of **Memoranda of cooperation with non-governmental organizations and businesses to promote the professional development of women in corporate business, in small and medium-sized businesses, as well as in decision-making.** The subject of the memoranda is mutual cooperation between the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy and key NGOs and business, with a view to supporting the successful implementation of policies on equality between women and men, the goals and tasks of the contracting parties.

In 2023. Ministry of Labour and Social Policy signed two Memorandum with civil organizations - Association „Women's Forum” and the Council of Women in Business in Bulgaria, to promote the development of women in business and entrepreneurship, which is

among the government's commitments in the Management Program of the Republic of Bulgaria for the period June 2023.– December 2024 in the field of equality between women and men.

Both organizations participate in the interdepartmental working group for the transposition into Bulgarian legislation of Directive (EU) 2022/2381 of the European Parliament and of the Council of November 23, 2022 on improving the gender balance among directors of companies listed on the stock exchange, and for related measures.

Regarding **gender budgeting** and in view of the fact that the gender equality policy and related measures are of a horizontal nature, in the opinion of the Ministry of Finance and if necessary, all primary budget managers under the state budget should develop and present within the budget process program format of budget, respectively periodic reports on the degree of its implementation, where objectives are indicated, indicators and degree of implementation of the implemented policies/implemented budget programs and measures under them. According to the requirements laid down in recent years in the instructions issued by the Minister of Finance for the preparation and presentation of budget forecasts/draft budgets, the relevant primary budget managers with leading powers in a specific policy (in the specific case, the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy), whose specificity does not imply opportunities to present expenses in different sections (e.g. by criteria such as gender, age, income, region), they should also apply an alternative way of presenting costs, which illustrates the financial impact of the implemented policies on different target groups. This also applies to carrying out an evaluation and from the point of view of gender equality policy in budgeting various activities and measures aimed at certain target groups and will contribute to transparency regarding the allocation and reporting of the budget and the results of the implementation of this policy.

The functional competence of the Ministry of Finance is to guarantee the sustainability of public finances, providing a resource for financing the main functions of the state in accordance with the parameters of the annual law on the state budget of the Republic of Bulgaria adopted by the National Assembly and in accordance with the medium-term budgetary framework approved by the Council of Ministers.

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26. If there is a national human rights institution in your country, what measures has it taken to address violations of women's rights and promote gender equality?

In the online survey, you will be asked whether there is a national human rights institution in your country (YES/NO) and if so, whether it has a specific mandate to focus on gender equality or discrimination based on sex/gender (YES/ NO)

The Commission for Protection against Discrimination (CPC), is an independent specialized state (quasi-judicial) body for preventing discrimination, protecting against discrimination and ensuring equality of opportunity. The Commission supervises the implementation of and compliance with the Anti-Discrimination Act or other laws governing equality of treatment. It is a national human rights body, with „B“ status accredited by the United Nations.

An important prerequisite for promoting equality between women and men is protection against discrimination on the basis of „gender“. Complaints of discrimination on the basis of gender „,“ during the reporting period were considered in a total of 105 initiated proceedings for protection against discrimination, in some of them it was considered as an independent basis, and in others it was considered by a panel for multiple discrimination (more than one basis). Also discrimination could be carried out in the form of „harassment“ and of „sexual

harassment“, according to the provisions of Art. 5 of the CPA: *„Harassment on the basis of the signs referred to in article 4, paragraph 1, sexual harassment, incitement to discrimination, persecution and racial segregation, as well as the construction and maintenance of an architectural environment that makes it difficult for persons with disabilities to access public places, are considered discrimination.“* In the period 2019 -2024. The Commission has initiated 8 proceedings on the basis of „sexual harassment“, in 4 of which they are also based on „gender“, and the rest also concern multiple discrimination, but in combination with other protected signs such as „age“, „marital status“ and „personal status“.

One of the main functions of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination (CPC) is preventive. In order to prevent discrimination, the commission implements various initiatives, project proposals, meetings with citizens and reception rooms.

One part of prevention is implemented with the help of regional representatives of the commission. They are located in 24 of the 28 areas, with which fact the Commission is unique in Europe. Their commitment is to provide independent assistance to citizens, to consult and inform them about the application of the anti-discrimination law, about the powers and rules for proceedings before the Commission for Protection against Discrimination, about the legal possibilities for protecting the violated right to equal treatment, including for their procedural powers in proceedings before the Commission for Protection against Discrimination. They assist the Commission in organizing and informing the local public about upcoming events, seminars and other forms of public dialogue. They inform all interested entities, representatives of state institutions in the region, local authorities, trade unions, non-governmental organizations and target groups directly related to the topic. In this way, they support and support the common will for tolerance, tolerance and equality between different groups of people. Organized and held informational meetings and presentations – alone or jointly in 2022 are a total of 413, and participation in foreign initiatives – 52. After the Covid-19 pandemic, in July 2022, the organization and holding of open reception rooms – 213 was restored, where 256 citizens were consulted. In the period January – December 2022, 2147 consultations (in offices, by phone, e-mail) were reported, and the number of complaints filed through regional representatives for the same year was 85. The parameters of the number of consultations and complaints submitted for the last five years, the reporting period, are relatively similar and generally give an idea of the workload and commitment of the Directorate „Regional Representatives“.

| **The Ombudsman of the Republic of Bulgaria** it was established as a higher and independent state body by a law that entered into force on January 1, 2004.

The institution of **the ombudsman** as a public defender who promotes and protects human rights and fundamental freedoms, it is established under the Ombudsman Act (promulgated in the Official Gazette No. 48 of 23 May 2003, entered into force on 01.01.2004.). This normative act regulates the legal status, organization and activities of the ombudsman.

The Ombudsman is a constitutional body and his status is determined by the Constitution art. 91a, special Law on the Ombudsman and Regulations on the organization of his activities adopted by the National Assembly.

Under article 91 a of the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria, the National Assembly elects an ombudsman who advocates for the rights and freedoms of citizens. The powers and activities of the ombudsman are regulated by law.

In the provision of article 3, paragraph 1, of the Ombudsman Act, it is expressly provided that in his activities the Ombudsman is independent and subject only to the Constitution, laws and ratified international treaties to which the Republic of Bulgaria is a party, being guided by his personal conscience and morality.

According to the Ombudsman Act, the Ombudsman is a public defender who promotes and protects human rights and fundamental freedoms. It advocates by the means provided for by law, when by action or omission the rights and freedoms of citizens are affected or violated by state and municipal bodies and their administrations, by the persons entrusted with providing public services, as well as by private legal entities.

Thus defined, the mandate of the ombudsman is as broad as possible, including not only the protection, but also the promotion of citizens' rights, as well as the promotion and provision of assistance and protection in relation to actions, omissions and inactions in the private sector, and not only in relation to the public sector.

The Ombudsman's constitutional mandate includes all violations of citizen's rights, without any restrictions. This includes economic, social, cultural, political and civil rights, as well as EU Charter rights that are linked to EU membership. Nor does the Ombudsman Act make an explicit distinction between types of rights, but provides for the protection of all groups of fundamental rights and freedoms without restriction. Under article 2 of the Ombudsman Act, these are the rights of citizens who are threatened or violated by an act or omission of State and municipal bodies and their administrations, by the persons entrusted with providing public services, and by private legal entities.

In our country, it appears as a serious problem that women are more often than men employed part-time, work more at home or are engaged in other atypical forms of employment. This in turn is what results in lower pay levels.

Women are still mainly charged with the care of raising children, with the care of elderly and dependent family members, which directly reflects that women have less free time than men. Women have to be absent from work more often for family reasons, which also has a negative impact on their career development and growth.

For years, there has been a problem in our country about the right of access to health care for women without health insurance, whose pregnancies are not monitored by specialists, they give birth without observations of their pregnancies and without the necessary tests.

In view of the problems identified and to protect the right of pregnant women to access quality health care, the Ombudsman recommends:

- to take action to regulate the possibility of conducting a greater number of examinations and tests during pregnancy, covering the beginning of pregnancy, which would be of great benefit in preventing complications, their timely diagnosis and treatment.

- to discuss various options to guarantee access of uninsured pregnant women to medical care, including at least four examinations and basic tests in the package for them.

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Peaceful and inclusive societies

Critical areas of concern:

Women and armed conflict

Human rights of women

The child-girl

27. In the past five years, what actions has your country taken to build and sustain peace, promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development and implement the women, peace and security agenda?

In the online survey you will be asked to select specific actions from the list below:

- Adopted and/or implemented a National Action Plan on women, peace and security
- Integrated women, peace and security commitments into key national and inter-ministerial policy, planning and monitoring frameworks
- Used communication strategies, including social media, to increase awareness of the women, peace and security agenda
- Increased budgetary allocations for the implementation of the women, peace and security agenda
- Taken steps to reduce excessive military expenditures and/or control the availability of armaments
- Re-allocated funds from military spending to social and economic development, including for gender equality and the empowerment of women
- Supported inclusive and gender-sensitive conflict analysis, early warning and prevention mechanisms
- Other, please specify
- None of the above

In his capacity as co-author of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, Bulgaria attaches priority importance to issues related to the equality of women in all areas of socio-political, economic and social life, including the participation of women in efforts at the national and international level for the prevention and resolution of conflicts, the construction and strengthening of international peace and security. Promoting the active role of women in maintaining peace, promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development and implementing the women, peace and security agenda it occupies an important place in the foreign policy and in the policy in the field of security and defense of the Republic of Bulgaria.

Over the past five years, Bulgaria has adopted and implemented the first **National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2020-2025**. [“National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2020-2025”, https://www.mod.bg/bg/doc/ravnopostavenost/20210408_NAP_WPS_BG.pdf](https://www.mod.bg/bg/doc/ravnopostavenost/20210408_NAP_WPS_BG.pdf).

The strategy document was formally adopted by Council of Ministers Decision № 185 of 19 March 2020, the with which Bulgaria became the 84th member state of the United Nations to adopt such a strategic document.

In the fall of 2019. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs organized a public consultation on the draft National Action Plan for Women, Peace and Security 2020-2025.

The process of preparing the national action plan on women, peace and security for the period 2020-2025 was initiated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and carried out in consultation with Ireland, which offered to share its experience and expertise as one of the leading countries in the implementation of resolution 1325 of the UNSC.

Bulgaria's first national action plan includes four complementary areas, formulating the goals that Bulgaria strives to achieve during the five-year period of implementation of the plan. They are called the “four P-ta” – prevention, participation, protection and prioritization. In addition, specific indicators have been introduced to measure the results expected to be achieved in the short, medium and long term. The expected results relate to achieving equality of women and men, empowering women and their more active role in conflict prevention, resolution and peacebuilding, strengthening and peacekeeping processes. The deadlines for the implementation of the scheduled activities are determined by the responsible institutions, departments, organizations. Financial provision follows the funds provided for, within their budgets.

In 2023, a mid-term review of the implementation of the National Action Plan, which covers the period 2020-2022, was carried out. It makes a preliminary assessment of what has been achieved so far and highlights the areas where additional efforts are needed to fully implement the set goals. Progress is reported in the following directions:

- the number of crisis centers in the country has increased (186);
- there are two round-the-clock hotlines for signals of the Bulgarian Armed Forces;
- a single database of female military personnel is available at all levels;
- some 1,500 military personnel have been trained on the subject of women, peace and security;
- a risk assessment algorithm has been developed to identify domestic and gender-based violence that is used by the police.

Based on the data presented and the snapshot taken of progress in the country, recommendations have been formulated in three areas that require more attention to the end of the implementation of the National Action Plan. The first include the prioritization of policies for equality between women and men and the building of strategic partnerships. The second group of recommendations concerns public awareness and the third relates to the collection and aggregation of data and its publicity.

The national plan is implemented and progress in the implementation of the measures envisaged is systematically reported through the provision of information by the Ministry of Defence in the annual reports on equality between women and men.

The Ministry of Defense has established a system for submitting reports and complaints registered and related to the equality of women and men and a summarized database of the Military District Prosecutor's Offices in Bulgaria, Service „Military Police“, Inspectorate of the Ministry of Defense, Defence Headquarters and Association of Women Servicemen. The statistics include information on female and male military personnel, civilian employees (c.s.l) in defence and civil persons against military personnel and c.s.l. from defence, in the performance of official duties and at home.

From the comparative analysis carried out in the Ministry of Defense, it is concluded that the processes in Bulgarian society of a significant increase in the manifestations of aggressive behavior and violence in all its forms are mirrored among servicemen and civilian employees of the defense system of the Republic of Bulgaria.

Bulgaria consistently supports initiatives related to the full participation of women and girls. The country is a member of and actively participates in the EU Informal Working Group on Women, Peace and Security, The United Nations Group of Friends on Women, Peace and Security and the Group of Friends on Combating Gender-Based Violence, as well as the International Network of Contact Points on Women, Peace and Security Issues. Bulgaria traditionally, it makes national speeches devoted to the rights of women and girls during the Open Debate of the United Nations Security Council and also during the opening segment of the annual sessions of the Commission on the Status of Women.

The full realization of women's rights and their empowerment has been declared twice for Bulgaria's voluntary national commitment as a member of the UN Human Rights Council in raising the country's candidacy for the periods 2019-2021 and 2024-2026.

The empowerment of women and girls is also among the main topics in Bulgaria's dialogue with the countries of sub-Saharan Africa. The country participates with financing of projects under the Bulgaria-UNESCO Trust Fund.

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28. In the past five years, what actions has your country taken to increase the leadership, representation and participation of women in conflict prevention, resolution, peacebuilding, humanitarian action and crisis response, at decision-making levels in situations of armed and other conflicts, and in fragile or crisis settings?

In the online survey you will be asked to select specific actions from the list below:

- Promoted and supported women's meaningful participation in peace processes and the implementation of peace agreements at all levels
- Promoted equal participation of women in humanitarian and crisis response activities at all levels, particularly at the decision-making level
- Adopted gender-responsive approaches to the prevention and resolution of armed or other conflict
- Adopted gender-responsive approaches to humanitarian action and crisis response
- Protected civil society spaces and women's human rights defenders
- Developed, adopted and / or implemented a high impact National Action Plan on 1325
- Other, please specify
- None of the above

As mentioned above, Bulgaria has developed, adopted and is implementing a high-impact national action plan on UNSC Resolution 1325.

In addition, in Ministry of Defense is developed Plan for the implementation of Resolution 1325 of the UN Security Council in the Ministry of Defense. The plan is available at [and the website of Ministry of Defense. https://www.mod.bg/bg/doc/ravnopostavenost/20110324_OON_1325_PLAN.pdf](https://www.mod.bg/bg/doc/ravnopostavenost/20110324_OON_1325_PLAN.pdf).

The Ministry of Defense of Bulgaria and the Armed Forces of Bulgaria are aware of the importance of gender impact, especially on women, children and the elderly during the crisis and disasters related to climate change. In response to this, the Center for Excellence in Crisis Management and Disaster Response was established, located in Sofia, Republic of Bulgaria. The core area of activity of the Center of Excellence - Crisis Management and Disaster Response) is combined with an extensive complex of programs including relevant cross-cutting themes such as sustainability, climate change, protection of the civilian population and gender mainstreaming. Although not an operational body, the Center of Excellence provides research and analysis, specialized training and advanced training for senior experts (in management and operational positions), support for developing concepts and conducting experiments, teaching and attestation, analysis of accumulated knowledge after completion of a project. The Centre has for many years been working towards the implementation of gender equality in the security and defence sector, especially in its own field of activity. Building on and promoting the necessary pooled expertise in the pursuit of the latter objective, the Centre has a dedicated Gender Adviser – and three certified Gender Trainers. The research and analysis of DR LMS and the related – implementation of the concept by gender in a military context is a continuous process that affects the planning, policy development and development of education and training (E & T) at the Center.

In 2022. Ministry of Defense selected and sent the first commander with the rank of senior officer to the NATO and UN certified Military Personnel Training „Commanding Officers Seminar“ at the Northern Center for Gender Equality in Military Operations. The Northern Center for Gender Equality in Military Operations has focused NATO and UN expertise in education and training on the DR JMS and UN Security Council Resolution 1325.

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29. In the last five years, what actions has your country taken to enhance judicial and non-judicial accountability for violations of international humanitarian law and violations of the human rights of women and girls in situations of armed and other conflicts or humanitarian action and crisis response?

In the online survey you will be asked to select specific actions from the list below:

- Implemented legal and policy reform to redress and prevent violations of the rights of women and girls
- Strengthened institutional capacities, including of the justice system and transitional justice mechanisms as applicable, during conflict and crisis response
- Strengthened capacity of security sector institutions on human rights and prevention of sexual and gender-based violence and sexual exploitation and abuse
- Increased access of conflict-affected, refugee or displaced women to violence prevention and protection services
- Measures taken to combat illicit arms trafficking
- Measures taken to combat the production, use of trafficking in illicit drugs
- Measures taken to combat trafficking in women and children
- Other, please specify
- None of the above

According to Bulgarian legislation, every application for inter-ancestral protection is considered on an individual basis. In accordance with the requirements of the Asylum and Refugees Act, the existence of an armed conflict in the State of origin of the person seeking protection is a prerequisite for granting humanitarian status under article 9, paragraph 1, item 3, of the the Asylum and Refugees Act.

Bulgarian legislation pays special attention in cases where sexual exploitation is among the purposes of the crime „human trafficking“. In this area, it has been brought into line with international and European standards - our country has ratified the Council of Europe Convention on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings, the United Nations Convention on Combating Transnational Organized Crime and two of its protocols: the Protocol on Illicit Trafficking in Emigrants by Land, Air and Sea and the Protocol to Prevent, Prohibit and Punish Illicit Trafficking in Human Beings, the especially women and children (Palermo Protocol). The requirements of Directive 2011/36/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of April 5, 2011 on preventing and combating human trafficking and protecting its victims and replacing Framework Decision 2002/629/JHA of the Council. Normative amendments have been prepared in the criminal-legal field, which aim to improve the Bulgarian legal framework with a view to prevention and adequate and comprehensive counteraction of these forms of criminal behavior and introduction of relevant international standards.

The National Commission for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings has no mandate regarding the investigation and prosecution of human trafficking cases. The data below are provided by the Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Bulgaria, in connection with the Annual Reports in implementation of the National Programs for the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking and the Protection of Victims.

Statistical data on criminal proceedings for human trafficking according to certain indicators from the official statistics of the Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Bulgaria

Year	Texts from the Penal Code	Newly formed pretrial proceedings	Persons under the procuratorial acts submitted to the court	Convicted and sanctioned persons with an effective judicial act
2019.	Total Art. 159a - Art. 159 Penal Code	84	73	61
	purpose - lewd acts	64	48	39
	purpose - forced labor	10	11	12
	purpose - removal of body organs	2	3	0
	purpose - keeping in forced submission	5	2	2
	purpose - towards a pregnant woman for the sale of the child	3	9	8
2020.	Total Art. 159a - Art. 159 Penal Code	76	69	46
	purpose - lewd acts	58	65	43
	purpose - forced labor	16	3	1
	purpose - removal of body organs	1	0	0
	purpose - keeping in forced submission	0	0	0
	purpose - towards a pregnant woman for the sale of the child	1	1	2
2021.	Total Art. 159a - Art. 159 Penal Code	55	77	27
	purpose - lewd acts	42	71	26
	purpose - forced labor	7	1	1
	purpose - removal of body organs	3	0	0
	purpose - keeping in forced submission	1	0	0
	purpose - towards a pregnant woman for the sale of the child	2	5	0
2022.	Total Art. 159a - Art. 159 Penal Code	57	65	37
	purpose - lewd acts	35	56	31
	purpose - forced labor	11	4	1
	purpose - removal of body organs	1	0	0
	purpose - keeping in forced submission	9	5	5
	purpose - towards a pregnant woman for the sale of the child	1	0	0
2023.	Total Art. 159a - Art. 159 Penal Code	52	52	40
	purpose - lewd acts	44	46	36
	purpose - forced labor	7	4	2
	purpose - removal of body organs	0	0	0
	purpose - keeping in forced submission	1	2	2
	purpose - towards a pregnant woman for the sale of the child	0	0	0

The State Agency for Refugees under the Ministry of Justice has developed and approved Standard Operating Procedures for Prevention and Response to Sexual and Gender-Related Violence.

These procedures are applied to every signal received, and the response time is within 24 hours. Operational procedures include working in a multidisciplinary team, and depending on each specific case, assistance is sought and another competent authority.

Regular information sessions on topics related to domestic violence and the prevention of such violence are held on the territory of the registration and reception centers of the State Agency for Refugees.

In cooperation with non-governmental organizations, women and girls seeking international protection are informed about their rights, opportunities to receive support and protection.

Everyone who seeks help or reports violence is assisted in accessing legal aid.

Bulgaria is implementing measures to strengthen the capacity of security sector institutions with regard to human rights and the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence, as well as sexual exploitation and abuse

For example, the Ministry of Defense engaged in the project „Support for victims of domestic violence through a program to increase capacity and awareness among human resources specialists“ of the Institute of Public Administration. Institute of Public Administration together with the Center for the Study of Democracy and the Association „Demeter“ prepared 5 (five) trainers – three female military personnel and two employees of the MoD Administration.

* * *

30. In the last five years, what actions has your country taken to eliminate discrimination against and violations of the rights of the girl child, including adolescent girls?

In the online survey you will be asked to select specific actions from the list below:

- Taken measures to combat discriminatory social norms and practices and increased awareness of the needs and potential of girl children
- Strengthened girls' access to quality education, skills development and training
- Tackled disadvantages in health outcomes due to malnutrition, early childbearing (e.g. anemia) and exposure to HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases
- Implemented policies and programmes to reduce and eradicate child, early and forced marriage
- Implemented policies and programmes to eliminate violence against girls, including physical and sexual violence and harmful practices such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation
- Implemented policies and programmes to eradicate child labour and to recognize, reduce and redistribute unpaid care and domestic work undertaken by girl children
- Promoted girls' awareness of and participation in social, economic and political life
- Incorporated STEM education / closure of gender digital divide in access to digital tools and competencies for girls
- Other, please specify
- None of the above

Protection from labor exploitation. Legislation in Bulgaria protects children from labor exploitation. It regulates a ban on work up to 16 years of age, which is the mandatory age of education according to the Constitution, as well as special protection for minor workers and employees. Exceptions are also provided for initiation at work at a younger age, but they are mainly for talented children, for their inclusion in film productions, in theater troupes, musical ensembles, etc.

Minors may be employed only after prior authorization by the Labour Inspectorate. If the documents submitted by the employer are correct, an organization has been created to have a decision from the Labor Inspectorate within 2 days, even though the deadline is seven days. Employers are required to have documents that are mandatory for every workplace, regardless of whether minors or adults will be employed. The difference is that when hiring persons under 18, they are presented in advance to the Inspection, and when hiring adults, – during inspection.

The employment of minors without permission from the Labour Inspectorate is considered a criminal offence. If such a violation is found, the Prosecutor's Office is notified of the initiation of criminal proceedings.

Minors work under reduced working conditions. They are entitled to extended leave of at least 26 days. They cannot perform heavy physical labor, as well as perform work related to the impact of physical, chemical and biological agents and which creates a risk for their physical and mental development. The working time for them is 35 hours a week for a five-day working week, for which they should receive a minimum minimum wage. Overtime and night work is prohibited for them. For persons under the age of 16, the work done from 20:00 to 06:00 in the morning is night.

A persistent trend towards growth in the issued work permits for minors is shown by the data of the Executive Agency „General Labor Inspectorate“

In 2024, in order to raise youth awareness of their labour rights and obligations, when starting work, the Executive Agency General Labour Inspectorate conducted an information campaign among secondary school learners who are future participants in the labour market. Labour inspectors held information events in 40 schools in the country, and principals welcomed the initiative and appealed more frequently to hold such events.

Coverage, inclusion and prevention of dropping out of the education system. Increasing the coverage of children and students in preschool and school education and reducing the share of school dropouts are realized by the Bulgarian government as one of the most important tasks in the field of education, which require integrated and synchronized actions of the interested institutions. For this purpose it is applied **Mechanism for joint work of institutions to cover, include and prevent dropping out of the education system**, created with PMS № 100 from June 8, 2018 (Mechanism).

The mechanism is a fundamental measure in prevention policies to reduce the share of early school leavers (for short), incl. to overcome socio-economic, regional and cultural barriers to access education, as well as to intervene and compensate Early school leaving. Within the framework of its activity, the reasons for dropping out of school in Bulgaria are systematized, against which measures are formed and implemented to prevent dropping out of school at the level of „child“ and „student“. In general terms, the following groups of causes are established: economic; cultural; social; educational, etc. The causes of Early school leaving are complex and combine different personal, social and economic factors, but cultural barriers and limited access to quality education play a key role. They are also related to forced separation of girls from the educational process by the parent and their engagement in caring for younger children in the family, housework, „early marriages“, etc.

In the period from 2018 to 2024, the activity under the Mechanism is upgraded with the implementation of national program „Together for every child“ through a complex of measures to support outreach teams and to actively involve parents in the work of motivating children and students, including girls, to attend school.

The National Child Protection Program it is an important document in which the guidelines, goals and commitments for the development of state policy in the field of children's rights are clearly spelled out.

* * *

Environmental conservation, protection and rehabilitation

Critical areas of concern:

Human rights of women
Women and the environment
The child-girl

31. In the past five years, what actions has your country taken to integrate gender perspectives and concerns into environmental policies, including climate change adaptation and mitigation, biodiversity conservation and land degradation?

In the online survey you will be asked to select specific actions from the list below:

- Supported women's participation and leadership in environmental and natural resource management and governance
- Strengthened evidence and/or raised awareness about gender-specific environmental and health hazards (e.g. consumer products, technologies, industrial pollution)
- Increased women's access to and control over land, water, energy, and other natural resources
- Promoted the education of women and girls in science, engineering, technology and other disciplines relating to the natural environment
- Enhanced women's access to sustainable time- and labour-saving infrastructure (e.g. access to clean water and energy) and climate-resilient agricultural technology
- Taken measures to protect and preserve the knowledge and practices of women in indigenous and local communities related to traditional medicines, biodiversity and conservation techniques
- Taken steps to ensure that women benefit equally from decent jobs in the green economy
- Monitored and evaluated the impact of environmental policies and sustainable infrastructure projects on women and girls
- Other, please specify
- None of the above

During the reporting period, various actions were taken in Bulgaria for integrate gender perspectives and issues into environmental policies, including climate change adaptation and mitigation, biodiversity conservation and land degradation.

Climate change is one of the greatest challenges we face and our country is actively involved in the overall efforts to mitigate climate change and adapt to the adverse effects of its change. Undoubtedly, the risks of climate change prioritize the most vulnerable communities, including women and girls of all ages, including adults, pregnant women, women raising children alone, women with chronic diseases, as well as women in difficult socio-economic situations. It is the less favourable socioeconomic status of women and the higher risk of social exclusion that are prerequisites for their vulnerability, to which are added physiological factors associated with the acclimatization of the human body to prolonged heat.

At the same time, women around the world traditionally have access to fewer resources and education and are less involved in collective decision-making, making it difficult to advocate for their interests in addressing climate risks.

This also applies to the process of a just energy transition. In communities dependent on fossil fuel industries, programmes and resources are not always targeted at working women and households most affected by the adverse economic effects of the energy transition.

More and more plans and strategies at the national and local levels are taking climate risks into account, but they also place a stronger role for women and the communities they lead in finding solutions. Every year, the regional structures of the Ministry of Environment and Water (MOEW) conduct campaigns to raise public awareness and culture to combat climate change.

Women and men scientists and researchers were equally represented as speakers at the High-level Conference on Climate Risks in the Black Sea Region, organized by the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and the Ministry of Environment and Water as part of the satellite programme of the 61st session of the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which was held in Bulgaria between 27 July and 2 August 2024. The panel included 466 delegates from 150 countries, with equal contributions of women among the scientific and government delegates, including the Bulgarian delegation, where the leading government and science representatives were women.

Bulgaria actively participates with its prominent women entrepreneurs in the field of climate in the Women Climate Leaders network, created by the European Investment Bank.

Bulgaria will be represented by a delegation including a significant number of women delegates to the Conference of the Parties to **The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change** (COP29) in Baku, Azerbaijan, as well as in the established scientific council for the conference.

Bulgaria is in the top 3 of the EU countries, where the percentage of women in high positions related to the climate is above the EU average of 25%. More than 40% of high-level climate-related positions (in national ministries responsible for environment, transport and energy) are held by women.

Bulgaria is also among the top 4 countries in the EU in terms of the percentage of women participating in COP delegations. About 50% of Bulgarian representatives are women, compared to about 40% on average at the EU level. Even higher is the percentage of women in so-called subsidiary bodies that provide technical, financial and administrative advice to COP – close to 60%.

In the EU, there is a clear upward trend in the proportion of women in COP and subsidiary body delegations (in the period 1996–2011), as well as in the proportion of women who are heads of delegation.

Bulgaria and Romania are the top 2 countries in the EU in terms of the percentage of women (about 30%) with engineering degrees. These graduates become future electrical engineers, nuclear, hydraulic and thermal energy experts and policy makers – are all crucial to tackling climate change. Bulgaria is among the first countries in the EU in terms of the share of women graduates in natural sciences (67%) and technologies (34%).

Agricultural Academia conducts activities to integrate gender perspectives and issues into environmental policies, including climate change adaptation and mitigation, biodiversity conservation and land degradation, and integration of gender perspectives into disaster risk reduction policies and programs and building environmental and climate resilience:

- Respect for human rights and human dignity, the principles of freedom, equality and non-discrimination are internal values of the Agricultural Academy and a structural part of the mission that the academy applies in its daily work. All previous activities and initiatives are carried out without any discrimination related to gender, sexual orientation, religion, ethnic group, cultural origin. In addition, there has always been special attention for the inclusion of disadvantaged people to reduce any potential barriers to access the opportunities offered. This ensures compliance with the EU principles set out in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union and Article 21 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

- The experts of the Agricultural Academy are fully aware that gender mainstreaming is a fundamental requirement related to research and innovation and follow the principles of the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, which sets out the European Commission's wider commitment to equality in all EU policies. In addition, gender equality in research and innovation is a priority of the European Research Area, comprising three objectives: gender equality in scientific careers, gender balance in decision-making and mainstreaming gender equality in the content of research and innovation. These three objectives are taken into account and implemented in the work of the Agricultural Academy units.

- Over the past 5 years, over 60% of SSA workers have been women.

- In 2023, the „Gender Equality Plan“ was adopted in the Agricultural Academy (<https://agriacad.bg/bg/about/documents>), which sets itself two main operational objectives: a) affirming and maintaining a permanent institutional policy for gender equality in the management of professional life, scientific research, training and career development of employees, and b) capacity formation and awareness-raising on gender issues in the institution. The implementation of the plan is monitored annually by the Equality Committee and the results are reported publicly.

The index for the equality between genders for 2022, presented through 2023 d., includes thematic accent on socially the fair one transition on The European Green Deal. The index is an objective statistical tool for measuring the equality of women and men, which was created by the European Institute for Gender Equality. Thematic focus analyzes public attitudes and behavior in connection with the amendment on the climate and the mitigation on the consequences from him, energy, transport and intaking up on Solutions. The data are collected through different studies, like for example the study on European Institute for Gender Equality from 2022 d. about inequality between genders po attitude on unpaid care, the individual and the social activities, as well and others studies in all over EU. Differences are focused between genders in unpaid care, including the connections with transport, the environment environment and the personal consumption and behavior. Some of the main ones highlights for Bulgaria are:

The women in Bulgaria are tend yes they use more environmentally friendly transports funds than the men. In Bulgaria significantly more women (51%), than men (41%) are used the walking on foot like one from the three si basic funds for moving through one typical week through 2022 d. Therefore the number for the women (but no and for the men) is higher from the average value for EU (respectively 46% and 43% for the women and the men). About 41% from women, in comparison with 34% from men, are used public

transport like one from their own three basic transports funds. These values exceed the average value for EU, where 32% of the women and 29% of the men they choose public transport.

The lonely women in Bulgaria they have greatest difficulties to they support dthe ohms si warm. IN Bulgaria the difference po gender is strongest expressed among the faces without partner, like the women are standing up before bigger ones difficulties. Prez 2021 d. 40% from the lonely women report, that no are in condition yes they support the homes si enough warm, in comparison with 30% from the lonely men. These percentages are higher from the average for EU (respectively 10% and 9%). The maintenance on adequately heating on the homes also is it was problem for the people with low education, like 41% from the women and 40% from the men in this one category are experienced difficulties in this attitude.

Representation on the women in energy and the transport sector in EU and in Bulgaria, as well and on management positions, is not enough. In 2022 15% from the employed in energy sector in Bulgaria are women, which is under the average value for EU from 24%. Jthe enites are represented 19% from the workers in the transport sector. Prez 2022 d. 21% of the faces, takers Solutions in the parliamentary ones commissions, dealing se se with the environment environment and the amendment on climate, are women, which is under the average for EU (30%).

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32. In the past five years, what actions has your country taken to integrate gender perspectives into policies and programmes for disaster risk reduction and building environmental and climate resilience?

In the online survey you will be asked to select specific actions from the list below:

- Supported women's participation and leadership, including those affected by disasters, in disaster risk reduction, climate and environmental resilience policies, programmes and projects
- Strengthened the evidence base and raised awareness about the disproportionate vulnerability of women and girls to the impact of climate change, environmental degradation and disasters
- Promoted access of women in situations of disaster to services such as relief payments, disaster insurance and compensation
- Introduced or strengthened and implemented gender-responsive laws and policies related to disaster risk reduction and building climate and environmental resilience (e.g. disaster laws addressing vulnerability of women in disaster)
- Other (please specify)
- None of the above

Bulgaria, through the Ministry of Agriculture and Food, carries out actions aimed at the sustainability of rural areas in the country. The profound changes in the social and economic situation which have taken place in recent decades are having a significant impact on the living conditions of people throughout the European continent. Rural areas face depopulation, and the age structure of the population in rural areas is on average higher than in urban areas. Demographic trends, together with a lack of connectivity, infrastructure and highly skilled jobs and poor access to public services, including education and health care, make rural areas a less attractive place to live and work. Population aging and at the same time the decline in

agricultural activities and economic growth in rural Europe are one of the main reasons why women leave rural areas. This has a negative impact not only on the labor market, but also on the structure of society. Demographic trends for rural women to leave are common to the EU and the Western Balkans.

Women and girls play a central role in the sustainability of rural households and communities. However, rural women are not a homogeneous group. Their position, profession, contribution to society, needs and interests vary widely.

Gender equality and support for women is a fundamental principle of modern democratic societies and plays a crucial role in developing the economic growth of rural communities in the EU. They are the driving force for the preservation and development of rural areas, both culturally and economically. However, the data show insufficient progress in this area, as there are still many inequalities between women and men. Rural areas in Europe are characterized by migration, where the share of women leaving the countryside is higher than the share of men leaving these areas. As for young men and women, young women are more likely to leave rural areas. Because of these processes, there are large demographic imbalances between and within regions and obstacles to strong rural economic and social development.

Attention should be drawn to the fact that many women have temporary contracts (eg seasonal workers) or play an „invisible role“ in rural societies (eg assisting spouses), which can leave them exposed to vulnerable situations (such as lack of access to social protection) or maternity benefits in some cases. As assisting wives, they often do not have any ownership rights to the lands or farms. Women are more likely to interrupt their careers to help care for the family and older or disabled relatives, given that the burden of care is unevenly distributed between men and women. In general, there are more women in low-paid jobs in rural areas than in cities. Women are therefore more likely to live in poverty or social exclusion than men. All this affects the social structure of rural communities.

It is necessary to recognize and evaluate the role of women in small or family farms, as they are the basis of socio-economic life in rural areas, ensuring food production, preservation of traditional knowledge and skills, regional identity and environmental protection.

Much has been done over the past few years to support the transition of rural areas to fostering innovation. That is why considering the role of women entrepreneurs in the food industry is crucial. Women are innovators and drivers of change in rural areas.

This is also recognized by the EU, which through its various policies seeks to support women in the agricultural and food sectors. [The long-term vision for EU rural areas](#) is an initiative of the European Commission to develop a common European vision by 2040. It recognizes the diversity of rural areas in Europe while identifying common challenges and opportunities.

Among the 10 general objectives of the EU Rural Vision 2040, four of them specifically target entrepreneurship, innovation and new activities:

- № 5: Inclusive communities of different generations solidarity, justice and renewal, open to new ones in agriculture and rural areas and promoting equal opportunities for all.
- № 7: Making full use of digital innovation with equal access to new technologies, widespread digital literacy and opportunities to acquire more advanced skills.
- № 8: Entrepreneurial, innovative and skilled people who co-create technological, environmental and social advances.
- № 10: Areas of diversity make the most of their unique advantages, talents and potential.

One of the possibilities for the development of geni entrepreneurs is provided by [EIT Food](#), which is the world's largest and most popular dynamic food innovation community. The

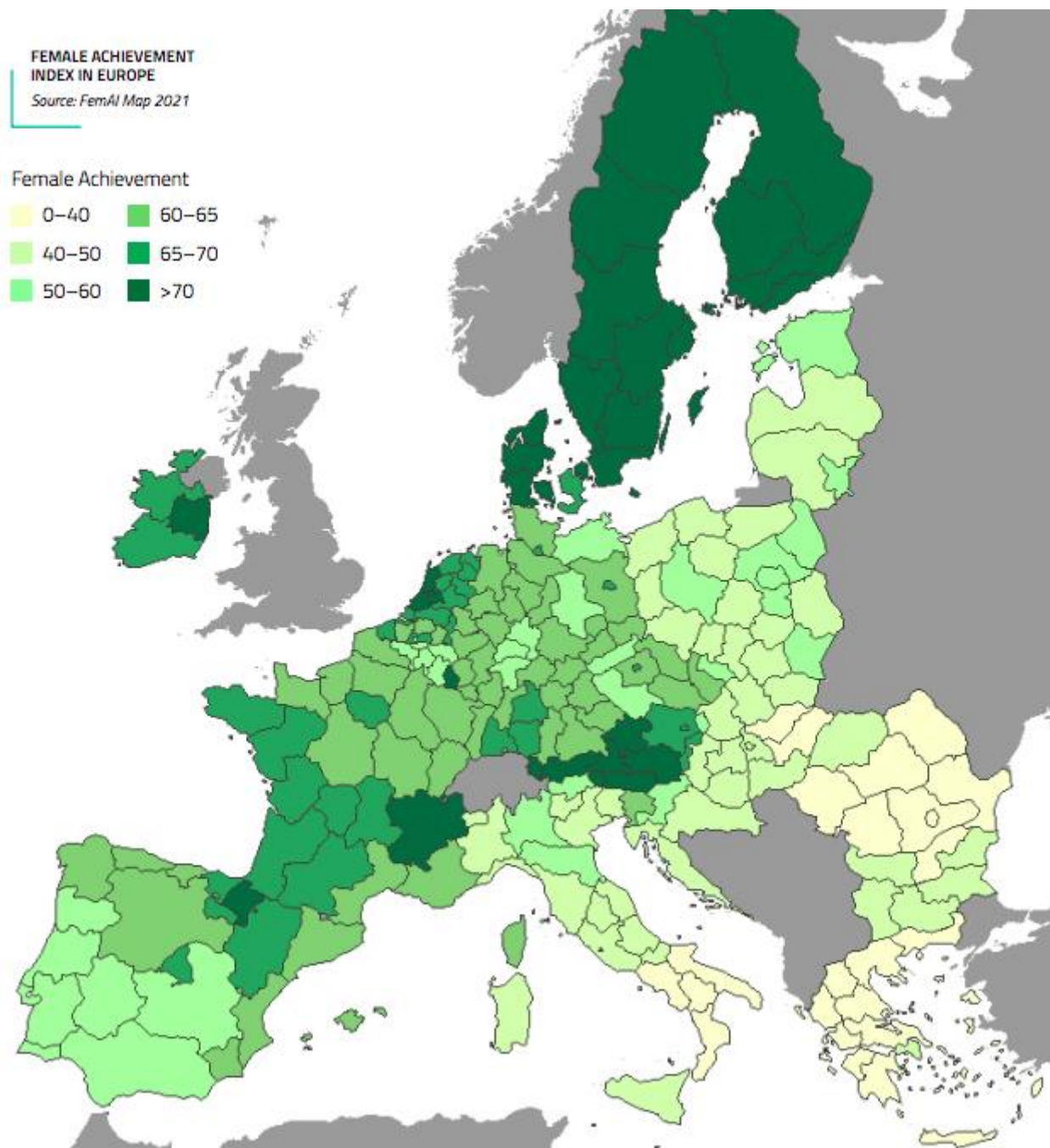
organization supports women innovators in the food industry sector. By empowering women leaders in agrofood through various programmes such as [WE Lead Food](#), [Supernovas](#) and mostly [Empowering Women in Agrifood \(EWA\)](#), it reinforces its impact in the area of encouraging women to be entrepreneurs, leaders or investors. Empowering Women in Agrifood is a unique project to support women innovators from EU countries, the (like Bulgaria) which are "modest or "emerging" in the ranking of the European Innovation Scoreboard. The project consists of

- 6-month training tailored to the specific needs of business and entrepreneurial topics;
- more than 20 hours of individual mentoring by successful entrepreneurs and experts in the field of business and food industry;
- participation in entrepreneurship and networking
- high-level stakeholder events; and prizes of EUR 15,000 for each country.

The project is implemented in 18 countries of Central and Eastern Europe: Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain, Turkey and Ukraine. Over 360 women have already taken part in the project and interest continues to grow.

The topic of women's entrepreneurship is also advocated within the framework of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which continues yes supports gender equality in rural areas through [the CAP Strategic Plans \(2023-2027\)](#) and in particular under Specific Objective 8, promoting employment, growth and women entrepreneurs, social inclusion and local development in rural areas, as well as in the circular bioeconomy and sustainable forestry.

Latest available and analyzed data, related to women's place in given regions are gathered by [JRC and Directorate General "Regional and Urban Policy" in the field of women \(FemAI\)](#), which measures women's achievements, the level of women's achievements at regional level in 33 areas, grouped into 7 areas: Work and funding; knowledge; time; positions; health; safety, security and trust and quality of life. According to these data from 2021, countries such as Bulgaria have modest to moderate results in terms of [The European Innovation Scoreboard \(EIS\)](#).



FEMALE ACHIEVEMENT INDEX IN EUROPE Source: FemAI Map 2021

Women's entrepreneurship, especially in the field of research, has gained significant popularity and importance in recent years both in academia and among international organizations. This dynamically growing interest is reflected in the increasing number of research and initiatives aimed at women-led enterprises. Although women's entrepreneurship is a global phenomenon, the differences in its level and nature across countries are significant. Although the situation varies from country to country, a common feature in these regions is the lower number of women entrepreneurs. The data show that women's participation in self-employment and in the management of both smaller and larger enterprises remains less than that of men.

For example, according to data from the Global Monitoring of Entrepreneurship in 2022, the gender gap is much larger for women-owned businesses (W/M 0.68) than for start-ups (W/M 0.80)

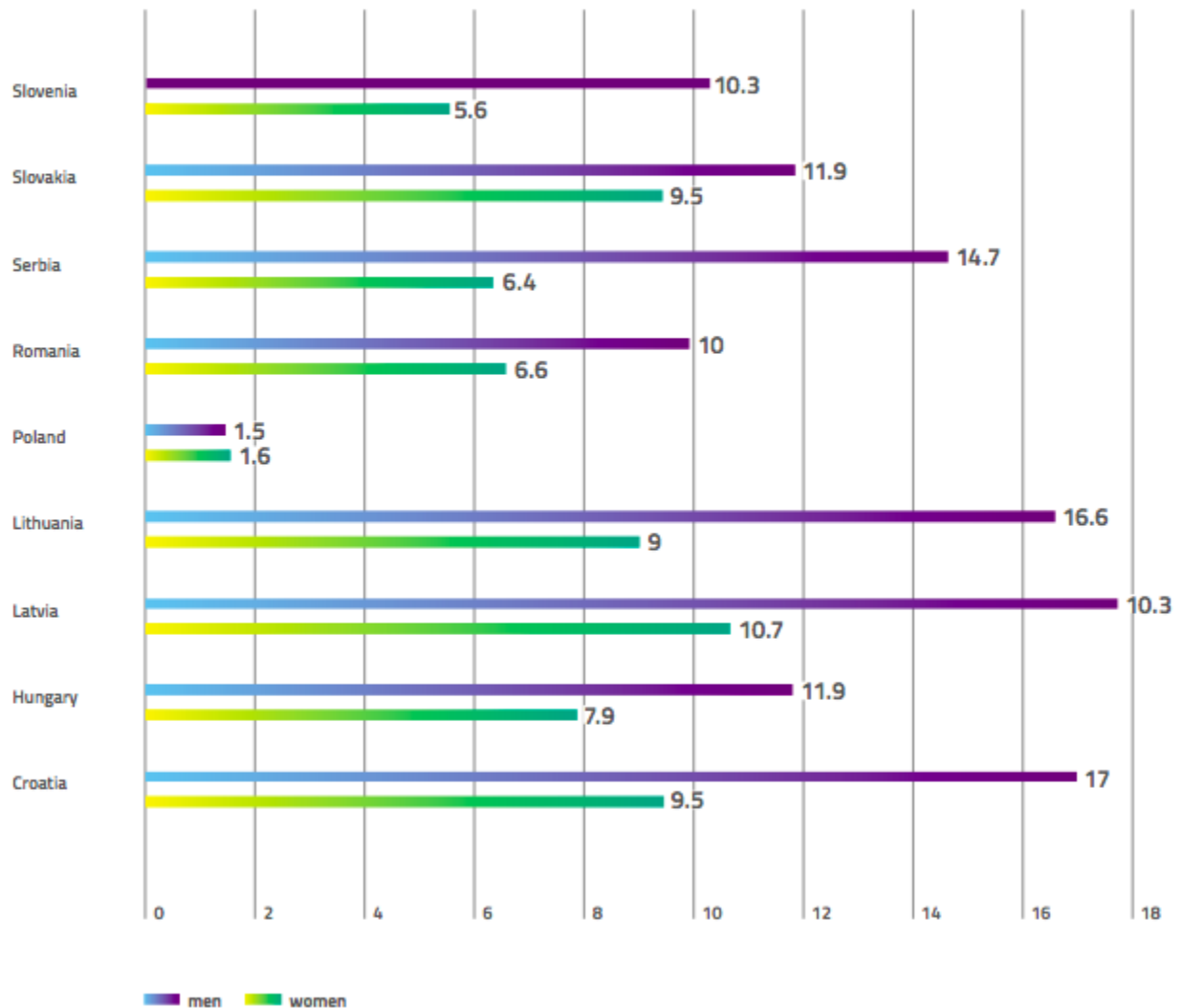
In the agricultural sector, the trend of increasing female participation is similar, but the specifics of the sector nevertheless bring further diversification.

The variety of factors that influence women in entrepreneurship, such as the economic context, cultural conditions, access to finance, legal specificities and support from the business environment, highlights the complexity and multifacetedness of this issue. Given the diversity of its manifestations, it is not possible to conduct a comprehensive or fully adequate comparison using a single method. Therefore, in the framework of this analysis it is counted mainly data collected within the Global Entrepreneurship Survey Monitor 12 (research project). Started in 1997, from [Babson College](#) (Boston) and [London Business School](#), the GEM project enabled the first comparative study of different aspects of entrepreneurship. According to the definition adopted by GEM, entrepreneurship includes activities undertaken by individuals, teams, and companies to create new enterprises or expand existing enterprises. Global entrepreneurship provides comprehensive information on the characteristics of business owners, including their motivations for setting up businesses and the cultural aspects that influence their decisions to set up new businesses. In the following analysis are analyzed the data regarding the percentage of adults who have started their entrepreneurial activity, as well as those who have been functioning for at least three years. One of the indicators analyzed in the annual surveys is the General Entrepreneurial Activity in the Primary Stage (GAP), which refers to the share of the adult population that is either in the process of starting or actively new business.

As can be seen in 2022, in most countries, the number of men who own businesses that have been operating for less than three years is greater than that of women. The most significant differences - over seven percentage points - are observed in countries such as Serbia, Lithuania and Latvia, and Croatia. Only in Poland is this percentage slightly higher for women than for men, although the values of this indicator for both sexes are significantly lower than in other countries. However, the ultimate goal of any entrepreneur is to create a business that succeeds in the market.

TOTAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP ACTIVITY (TEA) BY GENDER AND COUNTRY [%]

Source: own study based on GEM data



According to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitoring methodology, established enterprises are those that have been operating in the market for at least 3.5 years. As the graph shows, in the case of such enterprises, for all countries the indicators are lower for women than for men.

The largest gender gap was observed in Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary and Slovakia. In Poland, the difference between women and men is small, but also the percentage of people who run established companies is definitely lower (9.6% for women and 10% for men) than the percentage of people who hold a general entrepreneurial activity in the primary stage. This situation is probably related to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has adversely affected businesses in Poland. In addition, the beginning of the war in Ukraine brought additional difficulties for entrepreneurs. It is also worth studying how women and men differ in their perceptions of the difficulties that arise when starting their own business. Starting one's own enterprise by men is perceived as easier than by women. After Poland, Slovenia has a significant proportion of people who believe it is easy to start a business: 70.7% of men and

64.5% of women. The lowest rates are observed in Slovakia (24.5% for men and 16.5% for women) and Latvia (33.2% for men and 25.5% for women).

In the context of disaster risk reduction and building environmental and climate resilience, actions have been taken over the past five years to stimulate the participation of farmers in interventions related to environmental protection – eco schemes and interventions within the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development. Measures are included to ensure equal access to resources and training for men and women to support better natural disaster preparedness and response. Sustainability building programs have been developed with an emphasis on involving women in decision-making processes and implementing measures to mitigate the effects of climate change.

One of the main problems in rural areas is the deteriorating age structure and the outflow of people, which leads to a decrease in the population and a lack of human potential. Smaller settlements are dominated by older people over 65, while urban areas mainly concentrate people of active working age. Financial support for the development of economic activity in rural areas is aimed at creating jobs and attracting people. The establishment of new farmers contributes to the change of generations and retention of the population in those areas that are in a situation of depopulation.

Economic development in rural areas should facilitate economic activity and stimulate local competitiveness, which will lead to an improvement in the vitality of settlements and the quality of life. The increase in the number of new holdings in the sector will lead to increased investment and the recruitment of additional labour, which will increase income from agricultural activity and the average gross wage of employees. Supporting new entrepreneurs in agriculture will stimulate economic development in rural areas and create conditions for improving human capital, including job creation and attracting people.

The analyzes in the field of agriculture carried out in preparation for the Strategic Plan for the Development of Agriculture and Rural Areas for the period 2023-2027 show that investments in machinery, plant and equipment are of priority importance for existing agricultural holdings. The wage gap between men and women is still significant, with women in the agricultural sector in 2018 receiving an average of BGN 829 and men BGN 938. However, the difference is not much greater compared to European values. Equality between women and men is included in Specific Objective 8 of the Strategic Plan for the Development of Agriculture and Rural Areas for the period 2023-2027, according to Regulation (EU) 2021/2115 „Promoting employment, growth, gender equality, including the participation of women in agricultural activity, social inclusion and local development in rural areas, including the circular bioeconomy and sustainable forestry“.

Needs have been identified with high priority: P.8.2. Improvement of health and social services; P.8.3. Improvement of public infrastructure and technical and communication systems in rural areas ; P.8.4. Improvement of sites for the development of traditions and cultural and historical sites; P.8.5. Improving the state of the educational infrastructure in order to increase the share of the population that has access to improved services; P.8.6. Maintaining multi-fund financing, expanding territorial implementation and simplifying the application of the LEADER/VOMR“ approach.

A need for P.8.1 has been identified with medium priority. Diversification of economic activity. Stimulation of new productions in the field of bioeconomy and circular economy. The plan is a major source of funding for projects and measures to achieve socio-economic goals, including equality of women and men in agriculture. Access to information, training and upgrading of women's qualifications contributes to improving the viability of agricultural holdings and rural communities.

The strategic plan includes awareness measures, training, consultation and promotion of cooperation to develop good practices, investment and support new farmers.

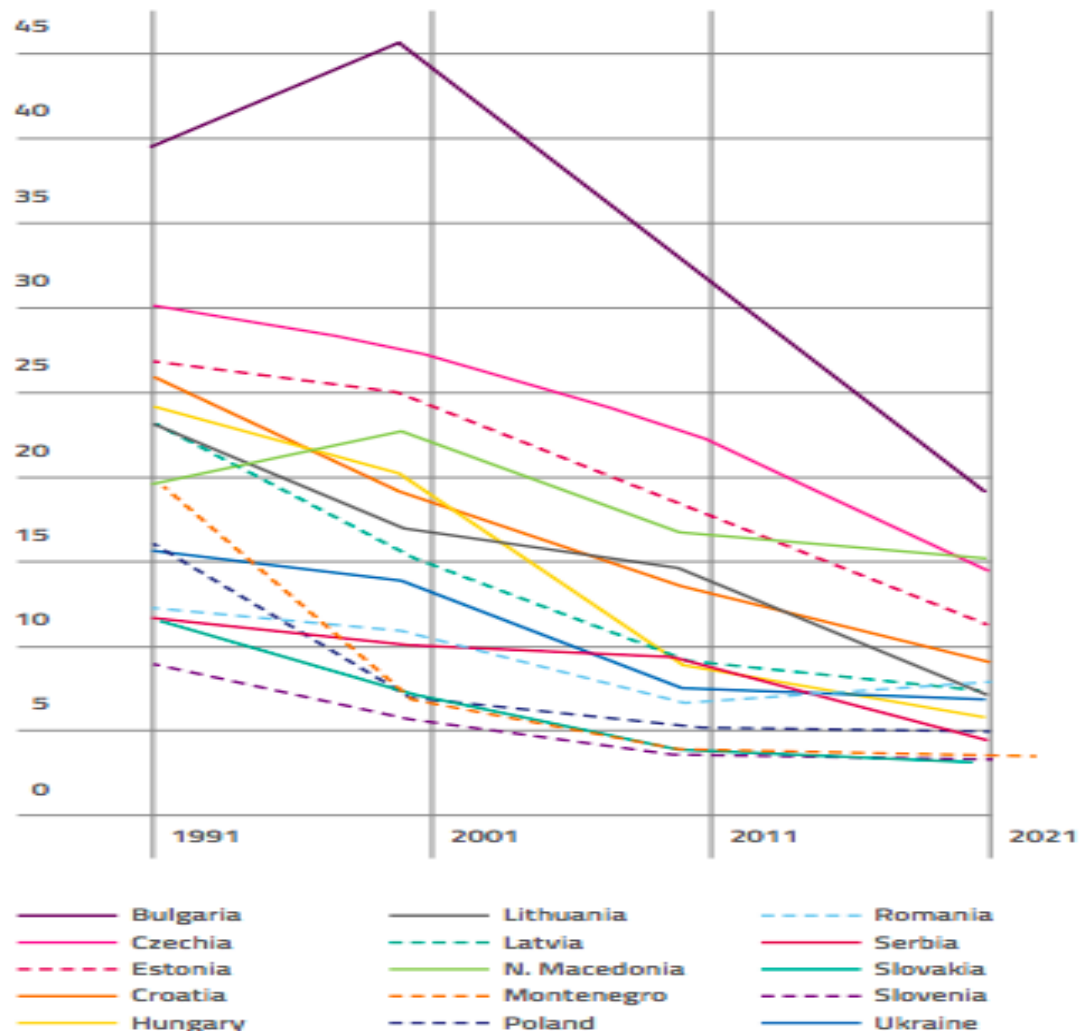
As part of the Global Monitoring for Entrepreneurship), the sectors in which women set up start-ups are also subject to analysis. Agriculture and mining are chosen considerably less by women than by men. In countries such as Hungary, Latvia and Lithuania, this disparity is significant. The only country where women set up agricultural start-ups relatively more often than men was Romania (15.3% compared to 12.5%). Also in Poland these values are close, while in the other countries the gender differences are significant. With regard to data that distinguish agriculture as a separate sector, in many countries these data disaggregated by sex are not available. For example, while data on women's employment in this sector are generally available, data and information are lacking on their occupation in managerial positions or on companies engaged in agricultural activity run by women. It should also be emphasized that in this sector women's unpaid work has an effect on statistics. In the countries where these data are available, it is evident that within this sector there are more men.

Women are more likely to engage in standalone ventures (as solo entrepreneurs) and are underrepresented in the start-up sector, even though many believe that starting their own business is relatively easy.

In each of the countries studied in the field of agriculture, there has been a significant decline in employment over the last two decades, which also affects women. This trend is mainly related to economic transformations, as well as that the service sector, which offers more employment opportunities for women. However, women in agriculture in many countries continue to face obstacles in accessing, controlling and purchasing land and others. The decrease in the share of women's employment in agriculture and the low percentage of women who have their own businesses leads to limiting women's interest in the development of entrepreneurship in this sector. Eurostat data from 2016 show that in countries such as Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Estonia and Poland, the percentage of women running farms is above the EU average. However, given the low participation of women in agriculture, the actual number of women in decision-making positions in this sector is relatively small. It should be emphasized that the above analysis refers to the countries for which data are available. Detailed such, comparative data and analysis on women in agriculture and in its various sectors are currently generally lacking. The information deficit makes it difficult to be able to determine the situation of women in this sector, to assess the changes that have taken place in recent years and to analyse the development of entrepreneurship in agriculture. In order to obtain a comprehensive and accurate assessment, it would be useful to conduct an international comparative study developed in accordance with a specially prepared methodology for this purpose.

EMPLOYMENT IN AGRICULTURE [% OF TOTAL EMPLOYMENT]

Source: International Labour Organization.
ILO modelled estimates database' ILOSTAT.



In recent years, Bulgaria has seen a gradual increase in the number of women entrepreneurs. Data from the National Statistical Institute show that women are approximately 30% of all business owners in the country, which puts Bulgaria around in the middle of the ranking compared to other countries of the European Union where the average percentage of women entrepreneurs is also around 30%. These women entrepreneurs in Bulgaria are mainly engaged in the management of small retail and service enterprises. There has also been a marked increase in the number of women-owned consulting firms, reflecting the expanding influence in various sectors. In addition, there has been a positive trend in the provision of computer and Internet services by women entrepreneurs, suggesting increasing participation in technology-related areas. Data from the World Bank on the employment of women in agriculture in Bulgaria shows a constant over three decades. In 1991, women made up 12% of the agricultural labour force, which declined slightly to 11% in 2000. As of 2010, this number has fallen more significantly to 5%, and in 2021 to 4%. This trend is mainly due to the development of the service sector in Bulgaria, where more and more women are finding work. Despite this general decline in agricultural employment, Eurostat data for 2016 show that

among women still employed in agriculture, 25% are heads of agricultural holdings in Bulgaria, which highlights their significant contribution to the development of agriculture in the country.

We consider the promotion of employment, growth, gender equality, including the participation of women in agricultural activity, to be of utmost importance.

Equality between women and men should be a fundamental principle in policy development. In this context, more specific emphasis should be placed on promoting women's participation in the socio-economic development of rural areas, paying special attention to agricultural practice and therefore affirming the key role of women.

* * *

Section Four: National Institutions and Processes

33. Please describe your country's national strategy or action plan for gender equality, including its name, the period it covers, its priority, funding and alignment with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including the targets under SDG 5.

In the online survey, you will be asked if your country has a valid national strategy or action plan for gender equality (YES/NO). If YES, you will be asked if the gender equality strategy or action plan been costed and have sufficient resources been allocated to its achievement in the current budget (YES/NO). The strategic framework of the policy on equality of women and men in the Republic of Bulgaria is regulated in the Law on Equality of Women and Men (Obn. SG No. 33 of 26.04.2016).

The National Strategy for the Promotion of Equality for Women and Men is the main program document adopted by the Council of Ministers to the Republic of Bulgaria, which determines the state policy on equality between women and men. The central and territorial bodies of the executive branch conduct the policy of equality between women and men in accordance with the national strategy.

In the previous five years, two strategies are in place - one for the period 2016-2020., accepted with RMS№ 967/14.11.2016. and the current strategy for the period 2021-2030, adopted with RMS № 969/30.12.2020 and developed based on a conducted needs analysis.

The national village strategy for the promotion of equality between women and men for 2021-2030. it consists of seven parts. They outline the policy on equality between women and men, the status and challenges of equality between women and men, vision, guiding principles, strategic objective, priority areas and key actions, implementation mechanism, monitoring of implementation, evaluation of the strategy and indicators.

The strategy is in line with the relevant national legislation and programs. It corresponds to EU documents and international documents in the field of equality of women and men, non-discrimination and human rights, including with The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including the SDG 5 targets, to which the Republic of Bulgaria has acceded and has commitments for their implementation.

The guiding principles in the development and implementation of the strategy are a multi-stakeholder horizontal cross-sectoral approach, the coordination and cooperation, transparency, continuity and sustainability over time, monitoring and control of implementation.

The target group of the national strategy is women and men in Bulgaria.

The goal of the National village it is a strategy to contribute to the achievement of de facto equality between women and men in Bulgaria, by implementing a unified, consistent and sustainable state policy.

For the implementation of the strategic goal, conducting a coherent and change-adaptive policy for promoting equality between women and men is focused on five priority areas:

- equality of women and men in the labour market and an equal degree of economic independence;
- reducing gender gaps in pay and earnings;
- promoting equality of women and men in decision-making processes;
- fighting violence and victim protection and support;
- overcoming gender stereotypes in various spheres of public life and sexism.

The strategy has a framework character and sets the guidelines for actions in the mentioned five priority areas.

The strategy is implemented through **National action plans to promote the equality of women and men**, which follow the principles, objectives and priorities of the strategy. Plans include measures, activities, responsible institutions, necessary financial means, indicators of the implementation of activities and possible reasons for non-implementation. The plans are two years old and are adopted by the Council of Ministers. For the previous five years 2019-2024, the action plans for the periods 2019-2020, 2021-2022 and 2023-2024 have been developed and implemented, or are ongoing. The 2025-2026 plan is under development.

The current plan currently covers the period 2023-2024. Objectives to implement the unified policy on equality between women and men through the included measures of various institutions and organizations. The measures in the plan are structured in the five priority areas laid down in the Strategy.

The National Plan of Action to Promote Equality for Women and Men draws attention to measures to better reconcile professional and private life and to provide employment to unemployed women, by providing childcare opportunities, encouraging employers to employ unemployed persons with young children, flexible forms of employment, orientation activities, advice, training of unemployed women and men to improve their access to the labor market, etc. Also included are measures aimed at supporting an equal degree of economic independence and reducing gender differences in income. Equality in decision-making and increasing the participation of the underrepresented gender in management positions are promoted. It contains prevention measures, legislative changes, provision of services to victims of violence, etc., given the importance of combating violence as one aspect of the policy on equality between women and men. In order to overcome existing gender stereotypes and sexism in different spheres of public life, awareness-raising measures, media monitoring, training activities, etc. are planned.

The National Action Plan contains measures universal for all groups of women and men, as well as measures aimed at vulnerable groups. Such are, for example, measures to improve the employment of women and men with disabilities. Information and service delivery activities are conducted to migrant and refugee women and girls. Measures are complex for women and girls marginalized by ethnicity (Roma) to improve access to education, employment, health care, services, prevention of early births, information, etc. Measures are being carried out for younger women to promote their employment and qualifications within the framework of the initiatives aimed at young people. Preventive activities are carried out and services are provided for victims of trafficking and violence, including for people of different sexual orientations and gender identities. Awareness and support measures for farmers in remote and rural areas apply equally to their male, female and girl residents.

The national action plan for the promotion of equality between women and men is drawn up within the framework of an interdepartmental working group, including all interested institutions and organizations, which, according to their competences, set measures, indicators, deadlines for their implementation, responsible institutions and the budget. Its implementation

is ensured within the approved funds under the budgets of the responsible institutions, as well as from alternative financing from other sources. The main sources of financing the implementation of the measures are the state budget of the Republic of Bulgaria, departmental and municipal budgets, international and European sources. The plan is an open document, and institutions and organizations can implement additional measures to promote the equality of women and men.

The national strategy is implemented in a coordinated and consistent manner through the measures set out in the action plans. Tracking, reporting, progress and the achieved results in the implementation of the measures laid down in the plan, the strategy and the policy pursued it is carried out annually through the reliable tool **National report on equality between women and men**.

The document reflects the achieved results and remaining challenges from the implementation of the measures and additional initiatives set out in the plan the five priority areas. The preparation of the annual reports involves many stakeholders who provide administrative and competence information. National statistics are also used for the analysis. The reports are adopted by the Council of Ministers.

* * *

34. Please describe your country's system for tracking the proportion of the national budget that is invested in the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women (gender-responsive budgeting), including the approximate proportion of the national budget that is invested in this area.

In the online survey, you will be asked if your country tracks the proportion of the national budget that is invested in the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women (YES/NO) and/or, in the case of donor countries, the proportion of official development assistance (ODA) that is invested in the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women (YES/NO/not applicable).

Policies to promote the equality of women and men are financed through the institutional budgets provided by the state budget of the Republic of Bulgaria and by programs and projects from national, European and international sources. The responsible institutions and organizations implement the measures they set out in the National Action Plans to promote the equality of women and men with funds from their budgets and under national, European and international programs and projects.

The program budgets of budget organizations describe policies, programs and measures, recommending that those whose activity specificity implies opportunities to present costs in different sections (e.g. according to criteria such as gender, age, income, region) also apply an alternative way of presenting costs, which illustrates the financial impact of the implemented policies on different target groups.

* * *

35. What formal mechanisms are in place for different stakeholders to participate in the implementation and monitoring of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development?

In the online survey you will be asked whether participation mechanisms are in place (YES/NO) and you will select the interested parties who have participated through official channels from the list below:

- Civil society organizations
- Women's rights organizations
- Academia and think tanks
- Faith-based organizations
- Parliaments/parliamentary committees
- Private sector
- United Nations system
- Not applicable
- Other actors, please specify –
-

You will also be asked if gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls included as a key priority in the national plan/strategy for SDG implementation (YES/NO).

In the Republic of Bulgaria, mechanisms for the participation of various interested parties in the implementation and monitoring of The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

S Decree № 52 of the Council of Ministers of April 10, 2023. for organization and coordination of monitoring and reporting on the implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals is created **national coordination mechanism to follow up on the implementation of the Goals.** The mechanism describes the responsibilities and commitments of all institutional actors, the process of ensuring compliance of the national strategic framework with the SDGs, the individual stages of tracking and reporting progress in the implementation of the SDGs.

According to the created mechanism:

1. **The Council of Ministers** leads the process of monitoring and reporting on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals at the national level, commissioning the preparation and approving the voluntary national reviews for the implementation of the Goals.

2. In performing these functions, the Ministerial council is assisted by **Development Council**, who coordinates the reporting of progress on the implementation of the SDGs, agrees and proposes for approval by the Council of Ministers the voluntary reviews of their implementation and monitors the compliance with the Sustainable Development Goals of all documents from the national strategic framework, which are submitted for consideration by the Council. When preparing a proposal for the development of a new document from the national strategic framework, its compliance with the Sustainable Development Goals should necessarily be described.

3. By Order of the Prime Minister № R-119 of 04.07.2023, it was created and functions on purpose **standing Working Group of the Development Council**, which:

- supports the work of the Development Council in the organization and coordination of the monitoring and reporting of the implementation of the Goals;
- summarizes and provides information on the challenges, measures taken and progress made in implementing the Goals;

- monitors progress, reports and analyzes the dynamics of indicators to monitor progress towards the Goals.

The standing working group includes **coordinators for the individual Goals** at expert level – representatives of **leading institutions** on every goal. By order of the Prime Minister № P-60 dated 04.04.2024, the composition of the permanent working group has been updated, including:

- representatives of **partner institutions for individual goals**, whose main task is to provide the necessary information to the coordinators from the leading institutions of each SDG;

4. **A national coordinator for statistical matters has also been appointed** – The National Statistical Institute, which has the express task of assisting and advising institutions – members of the permanent working group regarding information provision with statistical data in reporting progress on the SDGs.

IN Republic Bulgaria is functioning **National Human Rights Coordination Mechanism**. This mechanism enables stakeholders to also participate in the implementation and monitoring of The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The National Coordination Mechanism for Human Rights was established by Decision 796/19.12.2013 of the Council of Ministers, as a result of the need to take concrete steps towards improving coordination between state bodies and independent institutions dealing with various aspects of human rights.

The existing national coordination mechanism on equality between women and men in the Republic of Bulgaria also allows interested parties to participate in the implementation and monitoring of the PPD. The National Council for the Equality of Women and Men at the Council of Ministers participates and supports the implementation and monitoring of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. It is represented together with ministries and state institutions, civil society organizations, women's rights organizations, scientific circles, employers' organizations and trade unions. They participate on equal terms in the development of The National Strategy for Equality of Women and Men, its action plans and reporting reports, as well as other significant documents on equality policy, for example the national reports in the context of the global review processes Beijing +25 and Beijing +30. Also the National Council on the equality of women and men at the Ministry of Justice provides opinions on draft strategic documents and normative acts that contain provisions related to the equality of women and men before their submission to the Council of Ministers and proposes measures to promote the state policy for the equality of women and men.

* * *

36. Please describe how stakeholders have contributed to the preparation of the present national report.

This national report of the Republic of Bulgaria has been prepared with the wide participation and contribution of many interested parties. They are sustainably provided institutional participation, constant communication and publicity in the process of preparing the national report.

The broadly participatory process began with the formation by order of the Minister of Labour and Social Policy of an inter-ministerial working group to conduct a review and prepare a draft national report on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in the context of the global review process Beijing +30. The participants in the group are nominated by the institutions and organizations on the basis of letters from the Minister of Labor and Social Policy, who directs and coordinates the national policy on equality between women and men, in accordance with the provisions of the Law on Equality between Women

and Men. The subscriber group is composed of 60 representatives of 33 institutions and organizations, including all ministries, relevant agencies, national commissions, councils, institutes, equality and non-discrimination bodies, social partners, academia.

The working group is headed by the Deputy Minister of Labor and Social Policy. It is coordinated by the competent department „Equal Opportunities, Anti-Discriminations and Social Assistance“ in the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, which is also the secretariat of the National Council for Equality of Women and Men under the Council of Ministers.

The Working Group, at its meeting, reviewed and apportioned by competence the issues in the „UN-Women Guidelines“ outlining the framework for the preparation of the national reports. Establish the need to provide information on competence from other institutions not represented in the group. Institutions, participants through their representatives in the working group and institutions additionally addressed by letters from the Ministry of Education and Science developed meaningful information in response to the relevant questions in the „Guidelines“.

Department of „Equal Opportunities, Anti-Discriminations and Social Assistance“ in the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, supporting management and coordinating the working group, summarized the information received from the institutions and that of its competence in a draft national report, including the answers to the questions in the online questionnaire. Submitted the draft national report to the Working Group on Additions and Verification of the Correctness of the Information Included. Reflected feedback from the Working Group in the draft national report.

To ensure even wider participation and input of stakeholders, as well as greater publicity, the draft national report has been consulted with the The National Strategy for the Promotion of Gender Equality. There are a total of 73 members of the The National Strategy for the Promotion of Gender Equality (46 holders and 23 deputies) from 44 organizations and institutions. In addition to all ministries at the deputy minister level, representatives of local authorities, 9 non-governmental organizations operating in the field of equality of women and men, equal opportunities, human rights, agencies, commissions, equality and non-discrimination bodies participate in the council, academia, social partners, etc. The appropriate proposals and comments received from the The National Strategy for the Promotion of Gender Equality are taken into account in the report.

The described process of preparing a national report testifies to the full participation and meaningful contribution of a wide range of interested parties.

37. Please describe your country's action plan and timeline for implementation of the recommendations of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (if a State party), or of the recommendations of the Universal Periodic Review or other United Nations human rights mechanisms that address gender inequality/discrimination against women.

The functioning National Human Rights Coordination Mechanism has improved coordination between government bodies and independent institutions dealing with various aspects of human rights. The main priority areas in its activity are aimed at distributing among state bodies and institutions the fulfillment of obligations related to the permanent dialogue and periodic national reports to the international control and monitoring mechanisms on human rights, incl. which relate to gender inequality/discrimination against women; discussing the advisability of the accession of the Republic of Bulgaria to international treaties in the field of human rights; proposing the initiation of legislative changes, in the field of human rights, as well as to propose measures to improve the human rights situation in the country.

The protection of **The eighth periodic report of the Republic of Bulgaria under the**

UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women it took place on 19 February 2020, in the margins of the 72nd session of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women in Geneva, Switzerland.

Based on the contribution provided by the responsible departments and institutions, in March 2022, Bulgaria prepared and provided additional information on urgent recommendations received after the submission of the country's Eighth Periodic Report under the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. The latter took place on February 19, 2020, within the framework of the 72nd session of **The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women** in Geneva, Switzerland. On the part of the Committee, 49 recommendations were made to Bulgaria with a deadline for reporting implementation in 2024. Some of the recommendations made, the so-called „urgent recommendations“, have a certain shorter reporting period, namely - two years from the passing of the presentation.

In April 2022, after a developed and intensified campaign, Bulgaria was elected a member of the Executive Boards of UN-Women and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) for the period 2023–2025 with a large majority. Our country became part of the Executive Board of UN-Women for the first time. The results of the elections testify to the recognized active policy pursued by Bulgaria in support of the rights of women and girls, as well as the initiatives taken to protect and promote the rights of the child.

On June 23, 2022, in New York, within the framework of the 22nd meeting of the parties to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Bulgarian candidate, Genoveva Tisheva, was elected for a second consecutive term as a member of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women for the period 2023–2026. Despite the huge competition for the twelve seats being vacated and the lack of certain quotas by UN regional groups, the Bulgarian candidacy was elected with 109 votes from the 187 countries present and voting. Both the expertise and proven professionalism of Genoveva Tisheva as a member of the Committee, as well as the efforts of the foreign representations, with the leading role of the Permanent Representation of the Republic of Bulgaria to the United Nations - New York, contribute to the successful result and campaign.

Since 2022 marked the 40th anniversary of our country's ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, on the initiative of Bulgaria, on October 25, 2023, the side event was organized in Geneva within the framework of the 83rd session of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. The event also marked the beginning of the active campaign to elect the Republic of Bulgaria as a member of the UN Human Rights Council for the period 2024-2026.

In implementation of the decisions of the IXth meeting of the National Coordination Mechanism on Human Rights, Bulgaria raised its candidacy for a member of the UN Human Rights Council for the period 2024-2026. The submission of voluntary national commitments is an integral part of each candidate country's application for membership. Based on contributions from the competent national institutions and foreign representations of Bulgaria, the voluntary national commitments have been prepared.

In 2022, Bulgaria participated as an observer in three regular and two special sessions of the United Nations Human Rights Council. The Bulgarian delegation made 27 national speeches on various issues on the agenda, incl. on issues for the rights of the child's, to women and girls, the fight against human trafficking, the rights of the elderly, the rights of people with disabilities, etc.

On 20 May 2022, the Council of Ministers adopted Decision № 324 approving the **Action plan for the implementation of the recommendations adopted by the Republic of Bulgaria within the framework of the Third Cycle of the Universal Periodic Review of the United Nations Human Rights Council (2022-2025)**. For the first time at such a level, an

act reflecting the state's commitments under the Universal Periodic Review was adopted, with which the Bulgarian side confirmed its obligations to this leading mechanism of the UN Human Rights Council. The planned measures mainly include tasks already identified by the departments, with the aim of focusing actions in the field of human rights. The time horizon for the implementation of the plan is until 2025, when the next national report of Bulgaria should be prepared. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is committed to coordinating the reporting of the measures under the Plan.

The government approved a mechanism for the payment of one-time compensation for individual complaints upheld by UN bodies overseeing the implementation of major international human rights treaties, adopting Decree № 316 of the Council of Ministers of 7 October 2022. With the adoption of this act, one of the existing gaps in the regulatory framework related to the lack of grounds for paying adequate financial compensation to the applicant was addressed. The mechanism is aimed at citizens for whom UN bodies have reasoned that they have become victims of illegal actions of the state in the fulfillment of the country's international obligations.

* * *

Section Five: Data and Statistics

38. What are the most important areas in which your country has made most progress over the past five years when it comes to gender statistics at the national level?

In the online survey you will be asked to select specific actions from the list below:

- Promulgated laws, regulations, or statistical programme/strategy setting out the development of gender statistics
- Established an inter-agency coordination mechanism on gender statistics (e.g., technical working group, inter-agency committee)
- Used more gender-sensitive data in the formulation of policy and implementation of programmes and projects
- Re-processed existing data (e.g., censuses and surveys) to produce more disaggregated and/or new gender statistics
- Conducted new surveys to produce national baseline information on specialized topics (e.g., time use, gender-based violence, asset ownership, poverty, disability)
- Improved administrative-based or alternative data sources to address gender data gaps
- Produced knowledge products on gender statistics (e.g., user-friendly reports, policy briefs, research papers)
- Developed a centralized web-based database and/or dashboard on gender statistics
- Engaged in capacity building to strengthen the use of gender statistics (e.g., trainings, statistical appreciation seminars)
- Other, please specify
- None of the above

1) All data produced by the National Statistical Institute (NSI) in the field of demographic and social statistics (poverty, material deprivation, economic activity, remuneration, education, health care) are published by gender.

2) In 2021, in implementation of a Subsidy Agreement with the European Commission, NSI conducted „Research on Gender“-Based Violence. The aim of the project is to provide, through the use of a single methodology and a harmonized toolkit, reliable, comparable,

representative data on the prevalence, frequency and intensity of violence against women at the national level and in the member states of the European Union. The study covered women aged 17 - 84 years.

The results of the study provide up-to-date statistics on the following types of violence: mental, sexual and physical violence (including threats), stalking, sexual harassment in the workplace, childhood violence. Information is also provided on the relationship with the perpetrators - intimate partners (current and former); persons, members of the household; other persons.

3) In 2021. NSI conducted the 18th consecutive population and housing census in the Republic of Bulgaria. The census provides comprehensive population data covering certain demographic, social and economic characteristics of individuals, families and households, as well as the housing stock at national, regional and local level. In parallel with the census, two sample surveys – „Birth rate and reproductive behavior of the population“ and „Migration and migration behavior of the population“ were conducted. All census data and accompanying sample surveys are provided by sex.

4) In 2022, NSI conducted a pilot study on the topic „Equality between women and men in management“. The purpose of the study is to provide detailed and comparable information on the equal participation of women and men in management. The results of the study are available on the NSI website.

5) In the period 2022–2023. NSI conducted the observation „Time budget“ - sample survey among households, source of information on unpaid care and domestic work of the population. The survey is part of the program of the Population Censuses and is conducted every ten years. The research is conducted according to harmonized guidelines of the European Commission (Eurostat). Its results will be available by the end of 2024

6) In 2024. NSI launched a project to update the „Information System Monitorstat“, which is based on a statistical database of studies by NSI, statistical authorities and departments responsible for collecting information for monitoring various strategies and programs. Part of IS „Monitorstat“ is the National Strategy for the Promotion of Equality of Women and Men, to which numerous indicators are also loaded to track the implementation of the strategy. By the end of 2024, the available indicators will be updated in accordance with the strategy period.

7) In 2023. The National Statistical Institute conducted a monitoring of the Wage Structure. The observation has a four-year periodicity and is the main source of information on gender pay disparities.

8) Over the past 5 years, the National Statistical Institute has also conducted numerous additional studies that have enriched statistics on men and women in various areas of working and social life. Additional modules have been conducted to the Labor Force Survey on the topics: Occupational accidents and other work-related health problems (2020), Professional skills (2022), Retirement and labour market participation (2023).

* * *

39. Over the next five years, what are your country's priorities for strengthening national gender statistics?

In the online survey you will be asked to select three specific actions from the list below:

- Design of laws, regulations, or statistical programme/strategy promoting the development of gender statistics
- Establishment of an inter-agency coordination mechanism on gender statistics (e.g., technical working group, inter-agency committee)

- Use more gender-sensitive data in the formulation of policy and implementation of programmes and projects
- Re-processing of existing data (e.g., censuses and surveys) to produce more disaggregated and/or new gender statistics
- Conduct of new surveys to produce national baseline information on specialized topics (e.g., time use, gender-based violence, asset ownership, poverty, disability)
- Greater utilization and/or improvement of administrative-based or alternative data sources to address gender data gaps
- Production of knowledge products on gender statistics (e.g., user-friendly reports, policy briefs, research papers)
- Development of a centralized web-based database and/or dashboard on gender statistics
- Institutionalization of users-producers' dialogues mechanisms
- Statistical capacity building of users to increase statistical appreciation on and use of gender statistics (e.g., trainings, statistical appreciation seminars)
- Other, please specify
- None of the above

Specific social studies are to be carried out, which will provide a wide range of information by gender:

- With the creation of the Employment Register, the access of NSI to which is regulated by law will allow the enrichment of remuneration data by gender with additional breakdowns by age and profession.

- In 2025, the fourth wave of the European Health Interview (EHIS) study is due to take place. The aim is to assess the health status, lifestyle (health determinants) and use of health services by the EU population when using a harmonized toolkit, ensuring a high degree of comparability of data between EU countries. The research is conducted in implementation of European legislation.

- In 2027, the seventh wave of monitoring Wage Structure will take place.

- In 2028, the fifth wave of the study „Education and training for adults“ is due to take place. The aim of the study is to assess the participation of persons aged 16–64 in various forms of education when using a harmonized toolkit ensuring comparability of data between EU countries. The research is conducted in implementation of European legislation.

* * *

40. What gender-specific indicators⁷ has your country prioritized for monitoring progress on the SDGs?

In the online survey, you will be asked if your country has defined a national set of indicators for monitoring progress on the SDGs (YES/NO); if YES, you will be asked how many indicators are included in the national set, how many of those indicators are gender-specific, and whether data collection and compilation on gender-specific indicators has begun (YES/NO).

National list of indicators to monitor progress on achieving Goal 5 United Nations gender equality for sustainable development

- *Positions held by women in high-level management positions*
- *Positions held by women in high-level management positions - board membership*
- *Positions held by women in high-level management positions - Director*

- *Existence or absence of a normative basis for the promotion, enforcement or monitoring of equality and non-discrimination on the basis of gender*
- *Gender pay gap*
- *Difference in employment by sex*
- *Physical and sexual abuse of women and girls*
- *Premeditated murders and sexual crimes according to the legal status and gender of the affected person - share of women victims of sexual violence*
- *Premeditated murders and sexual crimes according to the legal status and gender of the affected person - share of women victims of premeditated murder*
- *Relative share of women aged 16-17 who are married*
- *Inactive population due to caring responsibilities*
- *Share of seats held by women in national parliaments and governments*
- *Share of seats held by women in national parliaments*
- *Share of seats held by women in national governments*
- *Gender Equality Index*

Securing the implementation process of the UN SDGs with reliable and quality data is key to the effectiveness of the process of tracking progress in their implementation at the national level. In this regard, Decision № 613 of the Council of Ministers of September 11, 2023 was adopted **National list of indicators for monitoring and reporting on achieving progress on the United Nations Goals for sustainable development (UN SDGs).**

The National Statistical Institute (NSI), in cooperation with the Directorate „Strategic Planning“ in the administration of the Council of Ministers, coordinates the development of the national list of indicators. A working group led by the National Statistical Institute was formed to develop the List. Representatives of the leading and partner institutions responsible for the coordination and control of monitoring and reporting on the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals participated in the Working Group.

They are included in the national list **215 indicators covering all 17 Objectives**. NSI publishes in a separate section of its website all indicators from the national list, as it is committed to regularly updating the values of these indicators. Gender-specific indicators - 19 indicators under 6 Sustainable Development Goals

Information on gender-specific indicators included in the National List with indicators to monitor progress towards achieving the UN Goals for sustainable development

Goal 2: Prevent hunger	1. Prevalence of anemia among women aged 15-49 by pregnancy status, incl.: general, pregnant and non-pregnant
Goal 3: Good health and well-being	1. Maternal mortality rate
	2. Age fertility in the 10-14 age group per 1,000 women in the same age group
	3. Age fertility in the 15-19 age group per 1,000 women in the same age group
Objective 4: Quality education	1. Gender parity index by level of education completed
Goal 5: Gender equality	1. Positions held by women in high-level management positions
	2. Existence or absence of a normative basis for the promotion, enforcement or monitoring of equality and non-discrimination on the basis of gender
	3. Gender pay gap
	4. Difference in employment by sex
	5. Physical and sexual abuse of women and girls

	6. Premeditated murders and sexual crimes according to the legal status and gender of the affected person - share of women victims of sexual violence
	7. Premeditated murders and sexual crimes according to the legal status and gender of the affected person - share of women victims of premeditated murder
	8. Relative share of women aged 16-17 who are married
	9. Inactive population due to caring responsibilities
	10. Share of seats held by women in national parliaments and governments
	11. Gender Equality Index
Goal 8: Decent work and economic growth	1. Fatal accidents at work per 100,000 workers by sex
Goal 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions	1. Number of victims of human trafficking per 100,000 population by gender
	2. Relative proportion of young women and men aged 18–29 who have experienced sexual violence by the age of 18

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41. Which data disaggregations are routinely provided by major surveys in your country?

In the online survey, you will be asked to select the disaggregations that are routinely provided from the list below, as relevant in your national context:

- ☐ Geographical location
- ☐ Income
- ☐ Sex/gender
- ☐ Age
- ☐ Education
- ☐ Marital status
- ☐ Race/ethnicity
- ☐ Migratory status
- ☐ Disability
- ☐ Sexual orientation
- ☐ Religion
- ☐ Other characteristics relevant to the national context
- ☐ None of the above

All data produced by the National Statistical Institute (NSI) in the field of demographic and social statistics (poverty, material deprivation, economic activity, remuneration, education, health care) are published by gender.

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Section Six: Conclusion and Next Steps

The conducted review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action Bulgaria showed the commitment to the topic of all participants in the process - ministries, agencies, institutes, equality and human rights bodies, councils, commissions,

organizations, social partners. Large at noon, substantive information and data, which are included in the national report, were provided. The review process carried out confirmed in practice the approach of the implementation of state policy in this area in Bulgaria. The state policy on equality has a horizontal nature and unites the actions of the central and territorial bodies of the executive power at all levels and of the interested parties. It is a joint case and responsibility, unites common and concerted actions of all responsible institutions in partnership with a wide range of stakeholders - business, civil organizations, the academic community, social partners, others.

The state policy on equality between women and men and empowerment of women and girls implemented in Bulgaria is consistent and marks significant progress. Remaining challenges in this area are also visible. Socio-economic realities reinforce the importance of some of them, others shift into the background, new ones are also born. This requires adaptive regulatory regulations, adequate measures and practices. The Republic of Bulgaria conducts those in accordance with national specifics and legislation, as well as with commitments under international treaties to which it is a party.

Legal guarantees for the equality of women and men have been created in Bulgaria, which are contained in the current Bulgarian legislation – The Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria, codes and laws. National legislation treats women and men equally in all spheres of public relations regulated by law and thus guarantees their equality. The principle of non-discrimination is horizontal and is contained in all legal acts relevant to the subject.

Over the years, a legal, institutional and strategic framework of the policy on equality between women and men has been gradually built in Bulgaria, management, expert and coordination capacity has been formed.

The implementation of the policy is regulated in the Law on Equality of Women and Men (. SG No. 33 of 26.04.2016), which creates a normative framework for its coordinated implementation. The adoption of the law is proof of upgrading the existing legal guarantees for equality and equal treatment of women and men in the current Bulgarian legislation.

It is built national institutional mechanism. A sustainable model for cooperation between institutions, social partners and civil society has been achieved through the functioning of the National Council for the Equality of Women and Men at the Council of Ministers and coordinators at the national and regional level. Basic documents for the implementation of the policy on equality between women and men have been regulated, which is proof of the existence of a built-in legal framework for the promotion, enforcement or monitoring of equality.

The strategic goal is the achievement of de facto equality between women and men in Bulgaria, through the implementation of a unified, consistent and sustainable state policy. For the implementation of the strategic goal, it will continue conducting a coherent and change-adaptive policy for promotion of equality between women and men, focusing on the five priority areas:

- equality of women and men in the labour market and an equal degree of economic independence;
- reducing gender gaps in pay and earnings;
- promoting equality of women and men in decision-making processes;
- fighting violence and victim protection and support;
- overcoming gender stereotypes in various spheres of public life and sexism.

The progress achieved and the remaining policy challenges that Bulgaria will work on in the coming years are related to these priority areas.

The national priority areas and priority actions for each area set out in the National Strategy for the Promotion of Equality for Women and Men 2021-2030 correspond with the 12

critical areas of concern of the BPfA and Goal 5 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Bulgaria fulfills its commitments to promote the equality of women and men in accordance with the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action , the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Sustainable Development Goals 2030, the European Pillar of Social Rights, the EU Strategy for gender equality and other fundamental international and European documents in this field.

The equality of women and men is important for achieving the national goals of higher economic growth and employment levels, for reducing poverty, for promoting equal opportunities and social cohesion, etc. Integrating the principle of equality of women and men into all policies is a necessary condition and guarantee for good governance and the advancement of society. Gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls is key to achieving social justice and cohesion, a sustainable and inclusive society.

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