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Contributing to resilience through the integration of gender perspective in the defence sector reform in four countries of the Western Balkans

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Women in the Western Balkans (WB) region face challenges related to equal access and advancement opportunities in the military. The imbalance can be in part attributed to the male-dominated defence sector and persisting gender stereotypes. Women bring skills and perspectives, which the armed forces (AFs) require to address increasingly complex security risks in the WB region. How can gender equality in the AFs increase as part of a defence sector reform agenda? This policy brief attempts to offer possible responses. The emphasis is twofold: Regular gender-disaggregated data gathering is *sine qua non* for gender-responsive policymaking. Regional thematic cooperation can work as an accelerator of gender equality processes while also contributing to the resilience of the region.²

Introduction

Women face persistent challenges related to equal access to decent jobs in the WB region, including positions in the military. Some of the challenges that cause perpetuating gender inequality in traditionally male-dominated AFs include a limited understanding of creating gender-responsive policies and integrating a gender perspective in all activities. In addition, military institutions have a low capacity to address gender-based discrimination and sexual harassment.

Gender equality in the military is essential from a human rights perspective, and it is paramount for building resilient and peaceful societies. The Sustainable Development Agenda (2030 Agenda) emphasizes that peace and development are inextricably linked and spells out the determination to foster peaceful, just and inclusive societies, free from fear and violence.³ The Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus approach is based on the understanding that gender

inequalities and discrimination represent drivers of vulnerability in communities across the globe. Women's active participation can serve as a source of resilience and contribute to the effectiveness of conflict prevention efforts and sustain peace.⁴ The Women, Peace and Security Agenda is of paramount importance for integrating women in matters of peace and security, with strong interlinkages with both HDP Nexus approach and 2030 Agenda. The defence sector is central to implementing gender equality and inclusion of women as outlined in these key strategic global agendas. In order to align with the global level policies and ensure their implementation on the ground, defence sector needs to change and become more inclusive and gender diverse.⁵

This policy brief describes the process of regional collaboration in drafting the [2nd regional Study](#),

[The Position of Women in the Armed Forces in the Western Balkans](#) (the 2nd Regional Study) and outlines key findings. The 2nd Regional Study was prepared by the Ministries of Defence (MoDs) of the four WB countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Republic of North Macedonia and the Republic of Serbia) with [UNDP SEESAC](#) (SEESAC) support.⁶ While the focus is on the WB region, lessons learned through the process of regional cooperation and knowledge exchange can be used in different contexts to increase resilience through engagement with the MoDs and AFs on promoting gender equality in the institutions that are mandated to safeguard the human security. In order to act in a gender-responsive way, the institutions themselves have to transform to incorporate the gender perspective. The first step starts with opening the door to women's participation in the military.

The context: A fragile security and quest for resilience in the Western Balkans

The resilience and development of the WB region depend on long-term political stability. Armed conflicts in the region in the 1990s destroyed the economy across the region. The situation was further exacerbated by the knock-on effects of the global economic crisis in the first decade of the 21st Century and, more recently, the impact of the global economic and security crisis. The WB region continues to experience a downturn due to the COVID-19 pandemic combined with growing political tensions. Unresolved issues from the past armed conflicts in the WB region resulted in a frozen conflict, underpinned by the challenges in the rule of law area, and slow progress related to the EU accession, which contributes to volatility.⁷

Gender equality: The international policy framework and the Western Balkans states

All four WB countries subscribe to the values of the European Union (EU), the WPS Agenda and 2030 Agenda, which is conducive to the readiness of defence sectors in the region to work on engendering their policies. All four countries are signatories to the international conventions establishing, guaranteeing and protecting women's human rights and gender equality and have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). All four have submitted their national reports on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration. Importantly, all four have ratified the

Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention). Finally, all four countries observe the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and implement related National Action Plans (NAPs), demonstrating their strong commitment to the WPS Agenda.

Notwithstanding perpetuated political volatility, the EU accession process continues to represent a strong incentive for the WB countries to embrace gender equality.⁸ The WPS Agenda is the main driver for introducing gender-friendly policies in the defence sector, recognizing the role of women as key actors in promoting peace and security. Two out of four countries are NATO members (Montenegro and North Macedonia), while two countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia) joined the Partnership for Peace (PfP), which represents one more driver for introducing gender equality in the military, given the NATO Bi-Strategic Command Directive (Bi SCD) 040-001 focused on integrating UNSCR 1325 and gender perspective.

The goal and the scope of the 2nd Regional Study

The main goal of the 2nd Regional Study was to identify both the improvements achieved and the gaps related to the equal treatment of women in the AFs in four WB countries compared to the data gathered in 2012, published in the seminal 1st Regional [Study on the Position of Women in the AFs](#)

in the WB. The 2nd Regional Study, [The Position of Women in the Armed Forces in the Western Balkans](#), presents the results of comprehensive research aimed at monitoring progress towards increased equality of women in the four participating MoDs and the AFs. For the first time, the 2nd Regional Study made it possible to examine changes and trends occurring in the period 2012-2019 regarding women employed as uniformed personnel in the military.⁹ The MoDs view the 2nd Regional Study as the go-to data source recognizing the value of longitudinal monitoring of gender-related aspects in the AFs, which will contribute to policy changes and shape gender-related actions still to be implemented.

The process of regional cooperation and participatory approach

The 2nd Regional Study represents a result of a unique regional process in which the MoDs jointly participated through their continuous engagement and full ownership of both the process and the end product. For this purpose, the Regional Working Group was established with support from SEESAC, comprised of the representatives nominated by each MoD.¹⁰

It is essential to note that the 2nd Regional Study represents the result of the participatory regional analysis. While the regionally agreed conclusions and recommendations do not apply equally to the AFs of all the countries involved in the process, they enable comparisons to the regional average. In that fashion, each country can measure their own evidence-based progress towards gender equality between the 1st and the 2nd Regional Study, as well as their status compared to the regional average. Importantly, developing the regional recommendations galvanized knowledge exchange and cooperation for more gender-equal AFs.

The four MoDs have a strong sense of ownership related to the 2nd Regional Study. They invested their time and expert resources to gather information and also review the 2nd Regional Study through a structured process facilitated by SEESAC. Working closely together, they arrived at an end product that met their needs for evidence to inform policies for further improving the position of women in the AFs.

The 2nd Regional Study covered the following areas: normative and policy frameworks and gender equality mechanisms in the AFs in four systems of defence, policies and practices for employment and careers in the AFs, career development and working conditions, work-life balance and protection against gender-based discrimination, mobbing, sexual harassment and abuse.¹¹

Methodology used for developing the 2nd Regional Study:¹²

Institutional research of practices and processes was used by administering a jointly developed questionnaire to inform the quantitative analysis.¹³ The Regional Working Group agreed on the methodology, including the questionnaire structure and formulation of recommendations following the completion of the country reports and the regional study. MoDs played a vital role in data gathering. While doing so, they benefitted from building their capacities for gender-disaggregated data gathering through 'learning by doing'. SEESAC facilitated multiple rounds of comments with MoDs to ensure that the final report content fully reflected the research evidence.¹⁴

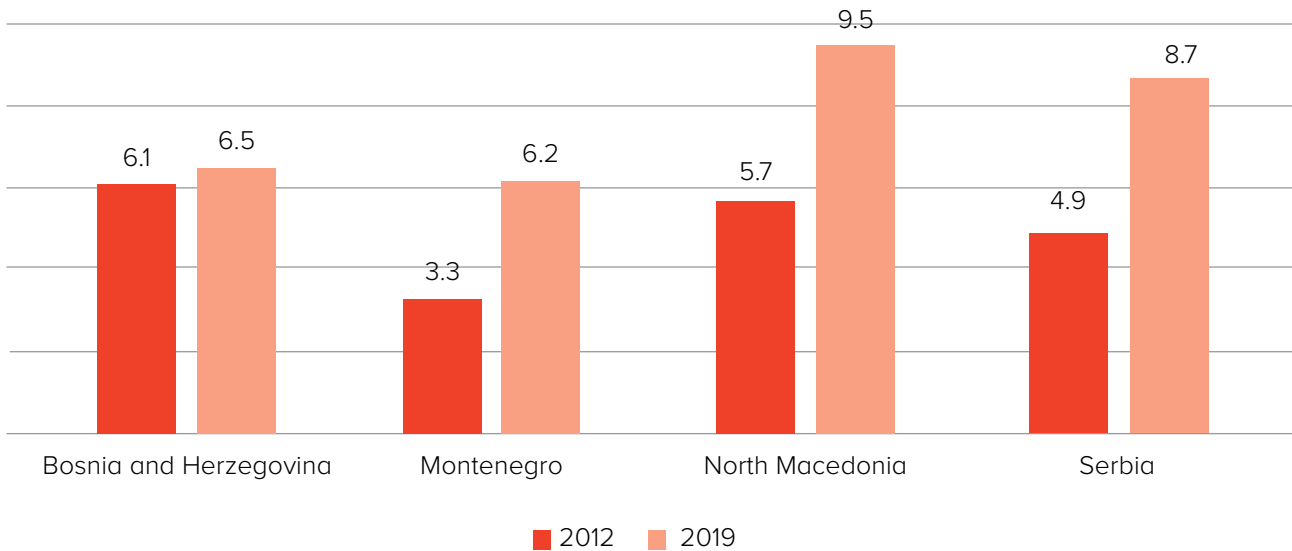
The importance of such hands-on participatory regional research and knowledge exchange was recognized at the [Ministerial Conference](#) organized in December 2021 in Montenegro as Ministers referred to the results of the 2nd Regional Study and the gaps that needed to be closed to achieve gender equality in the AFs. On that occasion, [the Ministerial Declaration on Support for Gender Equality in Security Sector Reform in the Western Balkans](#) was signed by high-level representatives of four MoDs. All four MoDs committed to further deepening the cooperation that has been ongoing since 2012 with the support of SEESAC. While focused on gender equality, this high-level event was an opportunity for bilateral meetings at the outskirts of the Ministerial Roundtable to tackle topics important to the security, peace and resilience of the WB region. Therefore, gender equality and WPS Agenda served both as an end and as a means to broach important security-related issues in the WB region and discuss further steps towards advancing gender equality and security sector reform. The main topic thus served as a segway for broader conversations about the regional cooperation for increased security and resilience, therefore using gender equality agenda to address broader security sector reform topics and future cooperation within that realm.

The research results: Representation of uniformed women in the armed forces

The research results indicate a significant increase in women’s participation in the AFs in 2019

compared to 2012 in the MoDs and the AFs in all four countries of the WB region.

Figure 1: Share of uniformed women in MoDs and AFs, 2012 and 2019

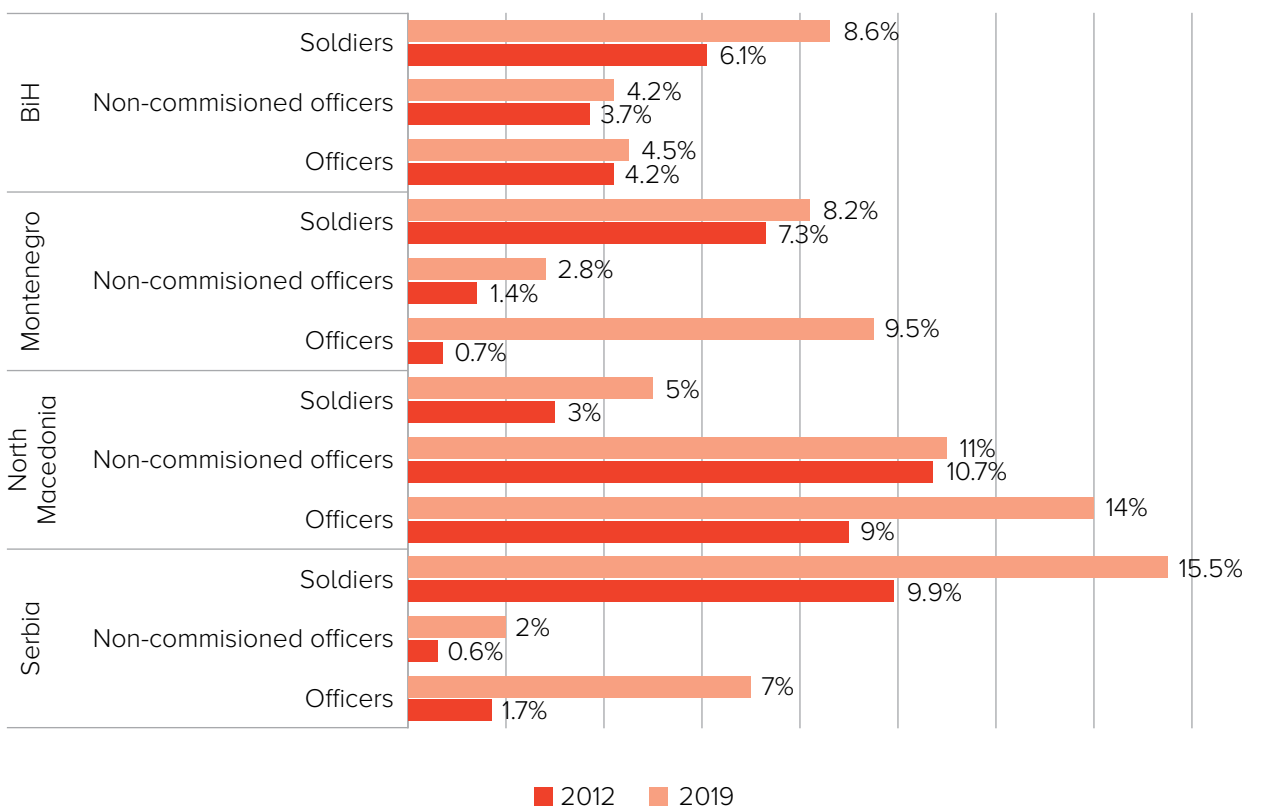


Source: SEESAC, 2021

The share of women has also increased among the ranks of soldiers, non-commissioned officers¹⁵ (NCOs), and officers. It is noticeable in all countries

that the percentage of women among NCOs is lower than among officers.

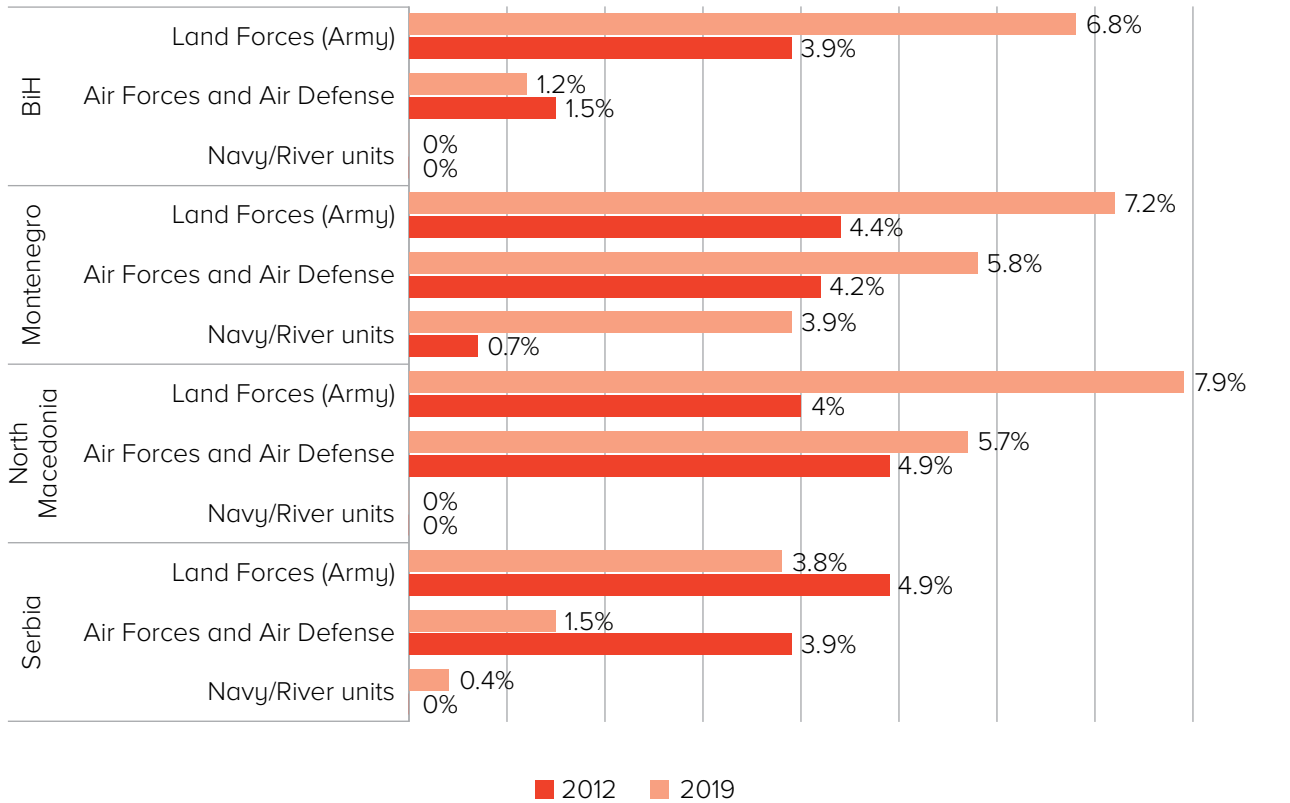
Figure 2: Share of uniformed women among officers, NCOs and soldiers, 2012 and 2019, in %



Source: SEESAC, 2021

Gender inequalities persist in both the horizontal (military branches) and vertical (ranks) distribution of women and men.

Figure 3: Share of women in various units, 2012 and 2019, in %

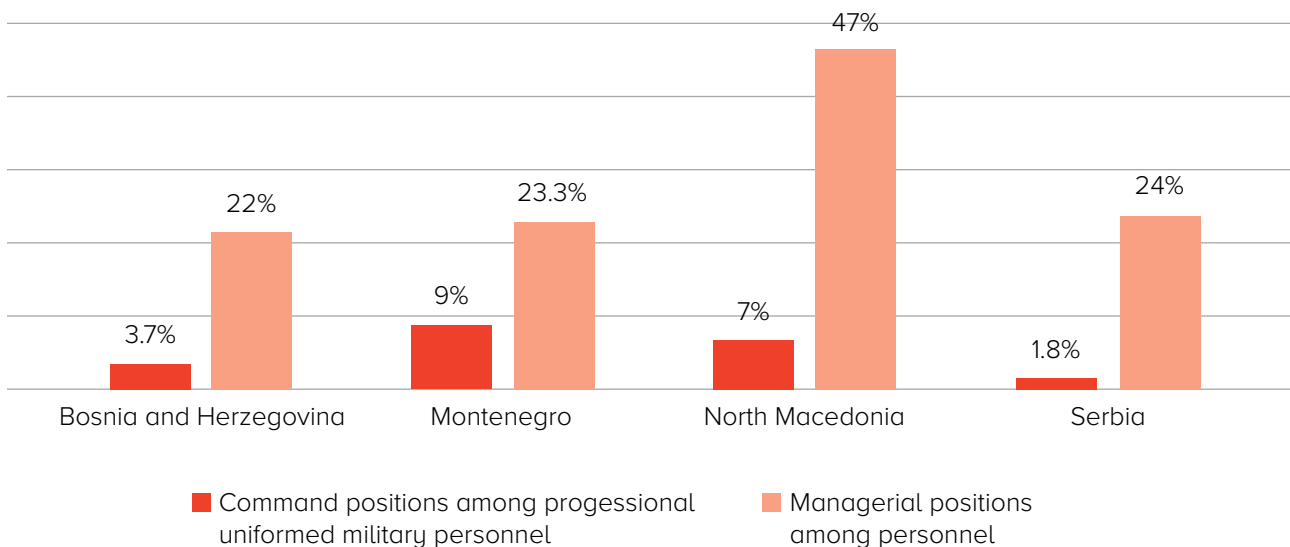


Source: SEESAC, 2021

When it comes to vertical mobility, women take on leadership positions held by non-uniformed

personnel in the MoDs more often than any other type of leadership or command position.

Figure 4: Share of uniformed women in command positions and women at managerial positions in MoD and AFs, in 2019, in %

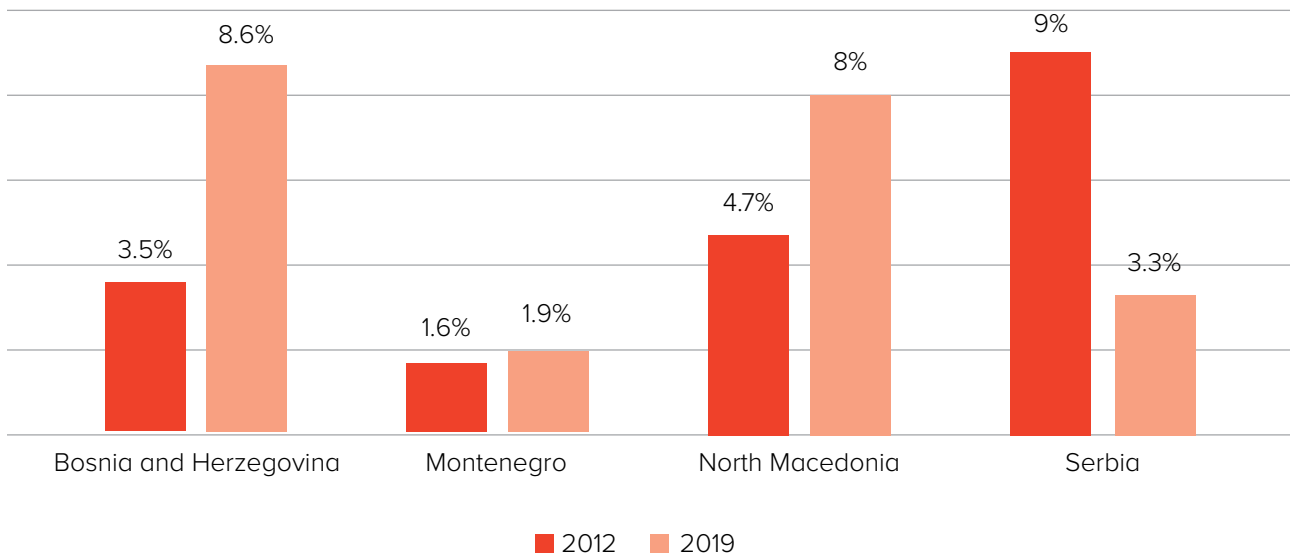


Source: SEESAC, 2021

The data indicate an increase in the participation of women in peacekeeping missions (including UN,

NATO and the EU multinational missions), except in Serbia.¹⁶

Figure 5: Share of women among military personnel engaged in peacekeeping missions



Source: SEESAC, 2021

Policies and practices for engaging women in the AFs, career development opportunities and working conditions

The 2nd Regional Study registered a noticeable increase in the number and variety of policy measures and activities undertaken to ensure women's equal access to employment in the MoDs and the AFs. Policy measures are mainly related to human resources policies focused on ensuring equal access to jobs as well opportunities for career advancement for both women and men in the military. Given that gender-based discrimination is one of the key barriers to gender equality in the military, all four MoDs and AFs continue improving their policies and practices related to recognizing and addressing gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment and abuse.

Despite advances, gaps remain that require further improvements to achieve equitable treatment of women and men, focusing on their equal access to employment in the ranks of professional soldiers and removing structural and cultural barriers standing in the way of women choosing a military career.

In the defence systems of all four countries, gender-responsive frameworks exist for the monitoring and promotion of personnel, including gender-sensitive records and policies related to ensuring equal working conditions. However, in practice, these

policies must be consistently implemented, fully considering the potential and needs of women and providing gender-specific forms of systematic support. In all four countries of the region, the right to pregnancy, maternity and parental leave of women military personnel is guaranteed by law.

Protection against gender-based discrimination, mobbing, sexual harassment and abuse

The 2nd Regional Study includes an overview of anti-discrimination legal frameworks in all WB countries, which are of specific importance for gender equality in the military. Complex legal frameworks have been established to protect against gender-based discrimination, mobbing, sexual harassment and sexual abuse. Several legal documents define these legal frameworks, ranging from key civil laws at the country-level, such as anti-discrimination laws, labour laws, gender equality laws, criminal laws, etc., as well as military laws and laws on civil servants. Specific regulations and bylaws regulate the competencies, procedures and sanctions for cases of discrimination, mobbing, sexual harassment, abuse and violence in the AFs. While the appropriate policies are fundamental to tackling gender-based violence, the implementation is challenging as it requires building new knowledge. It also requires a fundamental change in organizational culture that takes time and sustained efforts. According to the 2nd Regional Study, the number of reported cases

of gender-based discrimination remains very low. MoDs are taking various measures to encourage the reporting of discrimination, mobbing, and sexual harassment and abuse, but judging by the number of complaints, these measures have had limited results so far. Regional knowledge exchange and participatory research efforts play a key role in improving practices and promoting zero tolerance for gender-based discrimination.

Policy recommendations to advance gender equality in the military

Given the political volatility and fragility of peace in the WB region, MoDs' strong commitment to improving gender equality in the defence sector should be recognized as unique and central to the resilience of the region. The process of regional cooperation and knowledge-sharing is equally important as the output of the process — the 2nd Regional Study.¹⁷ Notably, the regional research results were discussed jointly at the regional level, and recommendations were agreed upon in an open and fact-based discussion. Through MoDs' active participation in the regional research on the position of women in the AFs, the defence sectors in all four countries have shown that they have the potential to become leaders in their societies in promoting gender equality, not only related to policy research, but also related to gender-responsive policy development and implementation of jointly agreed recommendations.

Notwithstanding commendable advancements, the findings and recommendations of the 2nd Regional Study indicate that plenty of work lies ahead to support further improvements of policies and practices in the defence sector in all four countries. The Regional Working Group produced the clusters of recommendations for further improvement in the following areas:¹⁸

- **Improving records** – To promote gender equality in the military and develop evidence-based policies, it is vital to improve further gender-responsive data gathering in several areas such as monitoring the average time women and men spend at one rank, and introducing gender-sensitive records on training participation. With the aim of more precise monitoring of trends in the representation of women, particularly regarding aspects that have demonstrated high fluctuation (e.g., deployment in peacekeeping missions, education, etc.), trends should be tracked year on year, rather than summarized in situational overviews of single years. In order to retain a diverse and capable workforce, the Regional Working Group recommended
- **Improving the monitoring of reasons for leaving the military career.** Finally, one area that is still male-dominated is related to the positions of military attachés, therefore regular gender-responsive data gathering on appointments of military attachés is required;
- **Improving gender equality policies** – While advances were made since the 1st Regional Study, gaps were identified and further efforts were recommended towards integrating the gender perspective into the operational planning processes, introducing gender-sensitive language, integrating the gender perspective into reporting processes, introducing regular monitoring and evaluation of measures for advancing gender equality and integrating the gender perspective into education and training programs;
- **Improving the representation of women in uniform** – The 2nd Regional Study found that the participation of women in uniform increased in all four AFs. To sustain a positive trend, continuation and expansion of practices for attracting women to the military career were recommended by the regional Working group, as well as examining the decline in the representation of women in certain units. Counting women in uniform is not going to generate transformative change, however their equal access to jobs in the military is an important stepping stone towards inclusive AFs capable of responding to the complex security risks;
- **Improving working conditions and career development opportunities for women in the military** – Challenges for women in uniform do not stop at job entry. In order to secure equal access to development opportunities and career advancement, recommendations included introducing mentoring programs (for both women and men, with specific emphasis on high-ranking officers), examining latent discrimination practices in the promotion of both women and men, and increasing representation of women in vocational training. To remove barriers to career development opportunities, raising the awareness of employees and decision-makers on the importance of gender-equal career development opportunities was recommended;
- **Improving work-life balance** – Due to traditional gender roles, it is a regular practice that women take maternity leave, which has a knock-on effect on their career opportunities. Therefore the Regional Working Group recommended encouraging fathers to use parental leave to help both parents reconcile family and work responsibilities;

- *Improving protection against discrimination, mobbing and gender-based violence* – Developing relevant standard operating procedures (SOPs) and/or guidelines, awareness-raising among employees and persons in leadership and commanding positions on gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment and abuse, disseminating information about legal protection and

encouraging the reporting of relevant incidents represent vital enabling factors for achieving gender equality in the military. A genuine change in organizational culture takes both time and strong leadership. Good practice examples from all four MoDs and AFs have been captured through regional knowledge exchange to support further efforts on introducing zero tolerance for gender-based discrimination.¹⁹

Lessons learned

Lessons learned through the participatory research process and regional knowledge exchange are applicable beyond the WB region, notably in the regions that share a similar history (which may include the history of conflict) and similar social context.

- Evidence-based policies are key for making advancements in gender equality in the military. Sustained efforts to support gender-responsive data gathering can bring about sustainable results and move the needle towards increased gender equality in the military.
- Research conducted by the institutions for the institutions can provide essential insights on the relevance of reliable gender-disaggregated data for evidence-based policymaking. It can also provide access to a full range of relevant data that would be difficult to access by the researchers outside of the defence system.
- Flexibility and responsiveness are vital to support regional cooperation and knowledge exchange, therefore having in-house expertise is essential to provide timely support to the internal efforts in the MoDs and AFs. Being positioned to provide high-quality on-demand support quickly builds the relationship of trust, which is an essential part of the process.
- Sustained bilateral engagement with MoDs and AFs combined with a strong regional focus based on knowledge-sharing facilitated through the regional knowledge platforms and “learning by doing” are key for building the internal capacities of MoDs for gender-responsive policy research and evidence-based policymaking.
- Participation of high-rank officers and policymakers in the regional knowledge

exchange, formulation of recommendations and development of follow-up plans is of paramount importance. Gender-sensitized leaders that are open to collaboration and act as champions in their MoDs and AFs make change happen. Therefore the composition of the Regional Working Group is of key importance as well as the regular sharing of information with decision-makers in the MoDs and AFs.

- Electoral cycles and political volatility can slow down the processes, therefore it is important to engage with the newly elected officials in the MoDs and AFs in a timely manner to sustain the political will for the activities in support of gender equality to continue.
- Increasing participation of women in the military and developing gender-responsive human resources policies, including policies that prevent and address gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment and abuse represent steps in the right direction, however change in organizational culture takes time. Long-term donor support is essential to bring about measurable and sustainable results.

A combination of external support and internal commitment for integrating a gender perspective in the military brought about an innovative regional approach. Regional knowledge exchange generates measurable results and strengthens future commitments to advancing gender equality in the AFs, thus contributing to enhancing the resilience of the WB through robust regional cooperation of four defence systems, while generating lessons that are applicable globally.

Endnotes

- 1 The authors by alphabetical order: Vesna Cipruš, Senior Gender Advisor, UNDP SEESAC, email: vesna.ciprus@undp.org; Danijela Đurović, Project Analyst, UNDP SEESAC, email: danijela.djurovic@undp.org; Ivica Ivanović, Defence Policy Expert, UNDP SEESAC, email: ivica.ivanovic@undp.org; Tatjana Višacki, Project Officer, UNDP SEESAC, email: tatjana.visacki@undp.org. Acknowledgments: The authors would like to thank Bojana Balon, Head of UNDP SEESAC, Annou Borrey, Senior Gender Advisor, UNDP Crisis Bureau, Dragan Božanić, Gender and Research Project Officer, UNDP SEESAC, Leanne McKay, Senior Justice Adviser, UNDP Crisis Bureau, and Tanya Pedersen, Policy Specialist, Bureau for Policy and Programme Support at UNDP for their review and helpful comments to this brief.
- 2 Long-term cooperation of the four WB defence sectors on gender equality is a unique example both in the region and globally. Regional cooperation of four Ministries of Defence and Armed Forces has been made possible through sustained donors' support including funding from the Kingdom of Norway and the Slovak Republic.
- 3 See <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda> for more details.
- 4 OECD (2021) "Gender equality across the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus", OECD Development Co-operation Directorate, Paris (<https://www.oecd.org/dac/gender-equality-across-the-hdp-nexus-july2021.pdf>)
- 5 Equality and the empowerment of women are essential to international peace and security (Bloom R. The Gender Analysis – a CrossCutting Capability featured in Resilience and Resolution A Compendium of Essays on Women, Peace and Security, Office of NATO Secretary General's Special Representative for Women, Peace and Security, 2019). There is a connection between gender equality and conflict prevention. Evidence suggests that nations with higher rates of gender parity, particularly in the political, economic and educational spheres, are significantly less likely to experience internal and external conflict than those with more acute levels of inequality (Pacific Forum 2020 - Rising Together: How the Defense Sector Advances Women, Peace & Security, access at <https://pacforum.org/events/rising-together-how-the-defense-sector-advances-women-peace-security>. Resilient development is only possible when gender-based inequalities are transformed and women and men can fully enjoy their rights (Gender Equality and Resilient Development, Oxfam 2019).
- 6 United Nations Development Programme works through the South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (UNDP SEESAC) on strengthening the capacities of national and regional stakeholders to control and reduce the proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons, advance gender equality, facilitate regional cooperation, thus contributing to enhanced stability, security and development in South Eastern and Eastern Europe. SEESAC is a joint initiative of UNDP and the Regional Cooperation Council, operated by the UNDP's Istanbul Regional Hub (IRH). While focusing on small arms and light weapons control, SEESAC has a proven record and long-term commitment to gender mainstreaming across its programme portfolio. Since 2012, SEESAC has been engaged in facilitating regional cooperation among the MoDs of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia through the project *Strengthening of Regional Cooperation on Gender Mainstreaming in Security Sector Reform in the Western Balkans*. The project has been conceptualized upon request and in close collaboration with the MoDs of the four participating countries in the WB region and is focused on mainstreaming gender in their defence sectors as a prerequisite for human security and development. SEESAC facilitates the networking of gender equality mechanisms in defence and among decision-makers and military commanders, supports gender awareness-raising and integration of a gender perspective in the military, specifically emphasizing human resources policies and military training and education. The goal of this regional project is to bring the WB's defence sector closer to complying with the Women Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda and contribute to the countries' global commitments to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), notably SDG #5 on gender equality and SDG #16 on peace, justice and strong institutions. Gender equality is central to achieving SDGs, which is recognized by all four WB countries and monitored through their national strategies and SDG progress reports. SEESAC website: <https://www.seesac.org/Gender-in-Security-Sector-Reform/>
- 7 All four countries included in the research on the position of women in the military are at the various stages of accession to the EU.
- 8 Three out of four countries have the status of candidates for the EU accession (Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia), while Bosnia and Herzegovina is striving to fulfill the requirements to get the candidate status. To ensure full compliance with EU law, in the accession process countries are required to align their national legislation with all the requirements of the EU directives on gender equality and non-discrimination.
- 9 The scope of the 2nd Regional Study is defined by the aspects of geography, time and topics. The research encompassed four WB states that participated in the first regional research, conducted in 2012 (the 1st Regional Study was published in 2014).
- 10 Due to COVID-19 public health measures, it was not possible to organize face-to-face meetings; however, the communication successfully continued via emails and through a hybrid meeting format.
- 11 The identical areas were covered by the 1st Regional Study, therefore allowing for full comparability of the data.
- 12 The research methodology is comparable with the methodology used for the 1st Regional Study and also builds on the methodology developed for the study on the position of women in police services in SEE and guidelines for gender-sensitive policing. All of these methodologies were developed by the nominated representatives of security sector institutions that participated in the research and were in charge of developing the methodology and process of collecting data.
- 13 The questionnaire is regarded as 'institutional', since it contains questions pertaining to the characteristics, practices and processes of institutions of the MoDs and the AFs.
- 14 Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all consultations were organized online, while the final meeting of the Regional Working Group was organized in a hybrid format.
- 15 A subordinate officer (such as a sergeant) in the Army, Air Force, or Marine Corps is appointed from among enlisted personnel (Merriam-Webster Dictionary).
- 16 However, it should be kept in mind that the presented share of women in military missions is based only on a one-year overview and that annual fluctuations can be significant.
- 17 The focus of both regional studies was on the percentage of women at various levels in the AFs, as well as on policies and structures that facilitate their inclusion. It has yet to be researched how increased participation of women in the military impacts the existing policies and practices.
- 18 Recommendations stemming from the 2nd Regional Study differ from the 1st Regional Study. While all key areas (clusters of recommendations) are still valid and deserve further attention, recommendations are elaborated on in greater detail in the 2nd Regional Study. There are six clusters with 27 recommendations in total compared to 11 recommendations from the 1st Regional Study.
- 19 In parallel with the 2nd Regional Study the four MoDs appointed the Regional Working Group to produce the regional *Handbook on Preventing and Responding to Gender-Based Discrimination, Sexual Harassment and Abuse*. The Handbook was published in December 2021 and presents a useful overview of normative framework and good practices in the region to assist with further improvements in tackling gender-based discrimination in the military as per recommendations of the 2nd Regional Study.