Bulgaria Gender Landscape

JULY 2024

The World Bank
Poverty and Equity Global Practice
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Overall Picture

According to the 2023 Gender Equality Index (EIGI) by the European Institute for Gender Equality, which measures gender equality across six dimensions, Bulgaria has closed critical gaps in gender equality. Still, more progress is needed to catch up with EU peers. Bulgaria has improved its Gender Equality Index scores, which are consistently and significantly lower than the EU average. In 2023, Bulgaria scored 65.1 out of 100 on the EIGI, ranking in the 12th-lowest place among the EU-27 countries and 5.1 points below the average score for the EU (figure 1). Since 2020, Bulgaria’s score has increased by 4.4 points, one of the biggest improvements among EU member states. Despite improvements, the country ranks lower than the European average on all subindicators, except in the power dimension. In addition, its progress in gender equality was slower, ensuring growing disparities between that country and the EU over time. Comparing the six available subindicators with the EU averages, Bulgaria performs well in the power and time dimensions. Still, it performs poorly in the money and health dimensions, falling significantly behind the European average.

Going beyond composite indicators, the country lags in several dimensions. These include selected aspects of human endowments, economic opportunities (as measured by participation in economic activities and access to and control of critical productive assets), and voice and agency, as expressed in political participation, freedom from gender-based violence, and the ability to make key decisions.

Figure 1: Gender Equality Index, 2023

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1 The Gender Equality Index measures gender gaps between women and men in 6 core domains—work, money, knowledge, time, power and health, comprising 31 indicators. The data for 2023 Index are mostly from 2021 and 2022. A value of 100 would mean that a country had reached full gender equality. The “work” dimension evaluates aspects related to labor market participation and segregation, while “money” examines economic resources and gender pay gaps. “Knowledge” assesses educational attainment and achievements and “time” focuses on the division of unpaid work and caregiving responsibilities. The “power” dimension analyzes political and decision-making participation, while “health” considers gender-based health disparities. The main sources are Eurostat (education statistics, European Union Labor Force Survey, European Health Interview Survey, European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions, Structure of Earnings Survey), Eurofound (European Working Conditions Survey, European Quality of Life Survey), and EIGE (Women and Men in Decision-Making).

2 As of the 2023 Global Equality Index (GEI), the European average for the money dimension stands at 82.6, whereas Bulgaria ranks last among all member states with a score of 67. In terms of health, the respective scores are 88.5 for the European average and 77.8 for Bulgaria.
Human Endowments

As is the case in other countries in the EU, Bulgarian girls are better off than boys in the dimensions the Human Capital Index (HCI) measures. According to the HCI 2020, a girl born in Bulgaria today will be 63 percent as productive when she grows up as she could be if she enjoyed complete education and full health, a level higher than boys (60 percent). These ‘reverse’ gender gaps are similar to those observed in other countries in the region (figure 2). However, it is worth noting that the levels of HCI measures for both boys and girls are among the lowest in the EU and the overall Europe and Central Asia (ECA) region, even when considering GDP per capita levels (figure 3). Higher adult survival rates and learning-adjusted school years among girls explain the reverse gender gaps. For example, the number of years of education a girl born today can expect to achieve at 18 is slightly below that for a boy (12.2 vs. 12.4 years). Still, factoring in what children learn, significant differences favoring girls appear (8.8 vs. 8.6 years), as girls have better learning outcomes than boys, as reflected in harmonized test scores (table 1).

Figure 2: Human Capital Index Gap (Girls-Boys), 2020, selected EU and enlargement countries

Figure 3: Human Capital Index for Girls and GDP per capita levels, 2020, selected countries in Europe and Central Asia

Sources: Author’s estimates based on the World Bank, Human Capital Index, and GDP per capita from World Development Indicators.

Note: A positive gap means girls are better off. No more recent estimates are available as of January 2024.
Regarding education levels, Bulgarian girls tend to have similar enrollment rates than boys at the preprimary, primary, and secondary levels. However, there are some worrisome trends, and the levels are significantly below the EU averages; women outnumbered men in tertiary enrollment. Preprimary gross enrollment rates slightly increased for girls from 2014 to 2020, from 79.3 percent to 84 percent (WDI 2023). In the case of boys, they stood at similar levels. In this regard Bulgaria is behind in the European Union, where most countries have already achieved full coverage of preprimary education (WDI 2023). There are some worrisome trends in gross (and net) primary enrollment rates, which have decreased since 2011 for both boys and girls (WDI 2023). Here again, Bulgaria underperforms compared to most European countries. Similar observations can be made for secondary gross (and net) enrollment rates, which have decreased for both boys and girls since 2014 and are lower than the EU average. On the other hand, tertiary enrollment rates are subject to reverse gender gaps. There have been significant improvements in gross tertiary enrollment rates for both girls and boys and in 2020, enrollment rates for girls were comparable to the OECD average of 84 percent.

With regard to women’s fields of study in Bulgaria, the trend for typical female fields of study follows the European trend. In 2021, women in Bulgaria made up the majority in fields of study such as “Education” (83 percent), “Humanities and arts” (65.2 percent), and “Social sciences, journalism and information” (63.2 percent). Nevertheless, the trend for typical male fields of study shows a different picture: compared to the EU-27, a higher share of women in Bulgaria pursue typical male fields of study, such as “Natural sciences, mathematics, and statistics” (64.2 percent compared to the EU-27 average of 50.8 percent) and “Information and communication technologies” (28.9 percent compared to the EU-27 average of 19.7 percent) (Eurostat 2023).

Although there seem to be no sizable gender gaps in digital skills in Bulgaria, Bulgarian men and women trail their counterparts in other European countries. For example, 31 percent of Bulgarian women (16–74) reported having basic or above basic digital skills in 2021 (Eurostat 2022b). There are no differences between men and women in Bulgaria. In comparison, more than half of women in EU-27 countries reported having basic or higher than basic digital skills in 2021, and similar observations apply to men.

Bulgarian women lived significantly longer and had similar health access and outcomes than men; however, they tended to rate their health worse than men; adolescent birth rates were particularly high. Women’s life expectancy at birth continuously increased over the last decades, but there was a drop between 2019 and 2021 (from 78.8 to 75.1 years) (WDI 2023). A slightly lower drop was observed among men (from 71.6 to 68.1 years), and although life expectancy at birth has steadily increased for

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1 Male preprimary gross enrollment rates were 84.7 percent in 2020, an increase of 4.8 percentage points compared to 2014 (WDI 2023).
2 Gross secondary rates decreased in 2020 to a level of 87 percent (89 percent in the case of boys) in Bulgaria (WDI 2023).
3 In 2020, they stood at 67.1 percent for boys compared to 84.3 percent for girls (WDI 2023).
men since 1990, the reverse gender gap is still significant. Access to health is similar across sexes, with a small share of males and females ages 15 and over-reporting unmet health needs for medical and dental examination (EIGI 2022). The lifetime risk of maternal death is negligible in Bulgaria and among the lowest values worldwide (WDI 2023). In addition, the full universe of births was attended by skilled health staff in 2015 (WDI 2023). Yet Bulgarian women are significantly less likely than men to rate their health as very good or good (EIGI 2022), there is scope for improvements in some outcomes. For example, in 2021, adolescent birth rates per 1,000 population (ages 15–19) were still significantly higher than the EU average for girls (38.6 vs. 9.2) (figure 4). Early childbearing can derail girls’ otherwise healthy development into adulthood and have negative impacts on their education, livelihoods, and health.

**Figure 4. Births per 1,000 women ages 15–19, selected ECA countries, 2021**

Source: World Bank, World Development Indicators. No more recent estimates are available.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected male and female health outcomes differently. Excess mortality due to the COVID-19 pandemic was higher for men than for women (23 percent vs. 19 percent) (EIGI 2022). It was also higher in Bulgaria for both sexes than the EU average (17 percent for men and 14 percent for women).

**Economic Opportunity**

Both male and female labor force participation rates increased in the 2014–20 period, but gender gaps expanded from 2012 to 2020 due to slower activity growth rates among women, with some reduction observed in 2020–22. One building block of ensuring economic prosperity amid current aging demographic trends is facilitating labor force participation of women and men, particularly in their prime working years. The country did register increases in the labor force participation of males and females, though the gender gaps expanded in 2012–20 as the activity rates of women grew more slowly. The gaps have been narrowing in the more recent period, from 2020 to 2022. These trends differ from the average across the EU27 in this regard, which shows consistently declining gender gaps (figure 5, panels a and b).

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6 No data are available for this indicator for after 2015.
Figure 5. Though Bulgaria registered an increase in labor force participation for males and females, the gender gaps expanded, which contributed to a rising gender gap in employment.

(a) Labor Force Participation (% population 15–64) by sex, 2013–22

(b) Gender Cap in Labor Force Participation (Percentage Points), Bulgaria vs. EU27, 2013–22

(c) Gender Gap in Employment Rate (Percentage Points), Bulgaria vs. EU27, 2013–22

(d) Gender Gap in NEETS Rate (Percentage Points), Bulgaria vs. EU27, 2013–22

Source: Author’s calculations based on Eurostat [lfsa_ipga] and [lfsi_emp_a].

Note: The gender gap in labor force participation refers to the difference (in percentage points) between the labor force participation of men and women 15–64. The gender employment gap refers to the difference (in percentage points) between the employment rate of men and women 15–64. The gender gap in NEETs (young people neither in employment nor in education and training) refers to the difference (in percentage points) between the NEETS rate of men and women 15–29.

The rising gap in labor force participation in 2014–20 translated into a rising employment gap, with some groups (i.e., women with young children) experiencing wider gender gaps. The increasing disparity in labor force participation between 2014–20 led to a growing employment gap (figure 5, panel c) that particularly affected certain groups (such as women with young children). This trend reversed recently, but the gap remained large. In 2022, the employment rate for women was 7 percentage points lower than for men. In 2014, it was only 5.4 percentage points lower. Some groups experienced more significant gaps. For example, in 2021, the employment rate of women aged 25–54 with one child younger than six was only 72.3 percent, compared to 93.2 percent among their male counterparts. The employment gap among those with three or more young children was even higher (Eurostat 2022c).
Overall, Bulgaria experienced fluctuations in its gender gap in NEETs (young people neither in employment nor in education and training), with a notable peak followed by a downward trend, while the EU’s gap remained comparatively steadier during the same period at a lower level. In 2013, Bulgaria had a higher gender gap in NEETs at 4.2 percentage points, compared to the EU (3.1 percentage points). However, the gap in Bulgaria increased significantly in the following years, peaking at 8.5 percentage points in 2017, while the EU experienced a milder increase. Subsequently, Bulgaria’s gender gap in NEETs gradually decreased, down to 4.5 percent in 2022, demonstrating improvement, but still above the average EU levels (figure 5, panel c). This disparity indicates potential challenges and barriers young women may face in accessing education and employment opportunities.

When looking at unemployment, women in Bulgaria experienced lower levels than men in 2022 and, on average, faced better employment prospects than their counterparts in the ECA region and the EU. In 2022, the female unemployment rate in Bulgaria was 4.04 percent, which was lower than the male unemployment rate (4.71 percent) and also below the averages for the ECA region (6.6 percent) and the EU (6.5 percent) (WDI).

The labor market gender differences observed in Bulgaria might be related to many factors, including the gender gap in unpaid work and the unequal distribution of caring responsibilities between women and men within the household. Bulgarian women typically spend disproportionately more time on unpaid care work than men, creating a “double burden” of work for women. Nearly 4 out of 10 women indicated that they either cared for and educated (or both) their children, grandchildren, elderly, or people with disabilities every day. At the same time, this only applied to one-fourth of men (EIGI 2022). Bulgaria is close to the EU-27 average on these indicators. Only 18.7 percent of children three or younger have access to formal childcare, well below the EU27 average (figure 6). In addition, nearly three-fourths of women indicated that they cooked or did the household chores daily, while this only applied to one-tenth of men (EIGI 2022). The share of men engaging in household activities was much lower than the EU-27 average of 31.6 percent. Over time, there have been barely any developments in the distribution of care and social work between men and women in Bulgaria (EIGI 2022). The double burden can be particularly high for Bulgarian women, considering that when they work, a low share of them work part-time.\(^7\) In comparison, nearly half of the women in the EU work part-time (WDI 2023). During the pandemic, there was also an increase in domestic violence and care burdens for women (WDI 2023; World Bank 2021).

The fact that women typically spend disproportionately more time on unpaid care work can be strongly related to gendered social norms that view unpaid care work as a female responsibility. More than one-fourth of the population in Bulgaria in 2022 (strongly) agreed with the statement that a preschool child suffers when a mother works (World Value Survey 2022). Both men and women were equally convinced of the truth of this statement. Similarly, most Bulgarians believe it is a woman’s duty toward society to have children (World Value Survey 2022).

\(^7\) In 2021, the rate stood at 14 percent (WDI 2023). The share of part-time working women thus barely changed since 2014.
When women worked, they earned less, with the largest gaps in financial and insurance activities and those between 35 and 44 years old. The unadjusted gender pay gap was 12.2 percent in 2021, close to the EU-27 average of 12.7 percent. Since 2014, the gap decreased by only 2 percentage points. In 2021, the unadjusted gender pay gap varied significantly by age group (from 6.2 percent for those younger than 25 to 17.2 percent for those between 35 and 44 years old) and economic activity (from 7.7 percent in electricity, gas, steam, and air conditioning supply to 33.5 percent in financial and insurance activities). It was larger in the private than in the public sector (14.3 vs. 12.3 percent) (Eurostat 2022a). The pay gap in Bulgaria might be related to the fact that a larger share of women worked in education, human health, and social work activities (EIGI 2022), which tend to be lower-paid sectors. The overall earning gender gap was larger than the unadjusted gender pay gap but below the European average.

Employed men and women concentrated in different economic sectors. In 2022, the largest proportion of men (17.9 percent) was employed in “Manufacturing,” whereas the predominant sector for women was “Wholesale and Retail,” with 20.1 percent of women working in this field. Manufacturing was the second-most popular occupation for women at 18.6 percent, while “Wholesale and Retail” ranked second for men at 14.4 percent (Eurostat). In contrast, a significantly lower share of females in the EU were in “Manufacturing” (10.5 percent). Beyond these primary sectors, a consistent pattern emerges: women tended to be more concentrated in service-based industries, while men were more inclined to work in “Construction” and “Transportation and Storage.” Moreover, less than one-third of ICT specialists (15+) and scientists and engineers in high-technology sectors (ages 25–64) were females (EIGI 2022). Sectoral and occupational segregation, when highlighting genuine disparities that reflect discrimination against women in male-dominated workplaces, can perpetuate gender inequalities by limiting individuals’ access to certain industries and career paths. Yet, segregation can also arise from distinct preferences in trade and profession between women and men.

Vertical segregation was more pronounced in Bulgaria in terms of certain dimensions than in the EU. In 2022, only 14.8 percent of board positions were held by women, compared to 32.2 percent for men.
the EU average (Eurostat). In 2022, the share of women in executive positions was 22 percent, slightly above the EU average of 21.1 percent (Eurostat).

A relatively high share of firms in Bulgaria have a top female manager, and women also make up a significant share of senior and middle managers. Four out of 10 senior and middle management workers were female in 2020, up from 1 out of 3 in 2014 (WDI 2023). This share is similar to that in Sweden, Chile, or Poland. Moreover, one-third of firms had a top female manager in 2019 (up from one-fourth in 2014) (WDI 2023). Bulgaria outperformed most European countries on this indicator, and its share was way above the European average of 18.2 percent in 2021. However, one-third of the population in 2022 believed that men make better executives than women (World Value Survey 2022).

The financial inclusion of women is relatively high in Bulgaria. In 2021, 84.3 percent of women older than 15 owned an account at a financial institution or with a mobile money service provider (WDI 2023). The share was similar for men (83.6 percent). A larger share of men borrowed money from a formal institution or using a mobile account than females in 2021, 29.71 vs. 23.17 percent, respectively (2021 Global Findex).

Voice and Agency

One-fourth of women in Bulgaria are subject to violence in their lifetime; the level of gender discrimination in social institutions is low when compared to the global rate but higher than in most European countries. One-fourth of women are subject to violence in their lifetime, a share similar to other European countries (OECD 2022). Moreover, many women justify violence against women (OECD 2022). In addition, laws on domestic violence discriminate against women (OECD 2022). In 2017, Bulgaria ranked the lowest on the EIGI composite subindicator on violence against women (New Eastern Europe 2021). Relatedly, Bulgaria is ranked the second lowest in five categories on the SIGI Index 2019, which measures discrimination against women in social institutions, such as “Discriminatory family code,” “Restricted physical integrity,” “Resources and assets,” and “Civil liberty” (SIGI 2022). This means that gender discrimination in social institutions is low. However, the country ranks below most European countries and even below some Latin American countries, such as El Salvador. Compared to 2014, its relative performance has worsened, a worrisome trend.

Available gender-based violence statistics underscore the importance of understanding and addressing intimate partner violence, with Bulgaria situated in the midrange compared to its European counterparts. Intimate partner violence was by far the most prevalent form of violence against women globally. In 2018, the modeled estimate of the proportion of women who ever experienced intimate partner violence (IPV) among ever-partnered women ages 15–49 in Bulgaria was 19 percent. Compared to other European countries, Bulgaria’s prevalence was in the mid-range. Although countries like Latvia, Denmark, and Finland report higher rates (25, 23, and 23 percent, respectively), Bulgaria fares worse than several EU nations, including Croatia, Poland, and Romania (figure 7). These variations underscore the need for targeted efforts to address IPV, with Bulgaria positioned within a diverse range of prevalence rates among its European counterparts. In 2018, the proportion of women subjected to physical and/or sexual violence in the previous 12 months, as a modeled estimate among ever-partnered women ages 15–49, was 6 percent in Bulgaria. Bulgaria’s share was comparable to that of several other EU countries, including Romania, Hungary, Latvia, Slovakia, and Sweden. Notably, Bulgaria’s prevalence was lower than the rates observed in some EU nations like Finland, which reported 8 percent or higher. The actual estimates were likely higher,

10 In 2019, 18.2 percent of women agreed with the statement that a husband/partner is justified in beating his wife/partner under certain circumstances.
considering the challenges women encounter in openly discussing experiences of violence. Research indicates that IPV may frequently go unreported, primarily due to social stigma and women’s reluctance to exacerbate their situations (Ackerman 2016; Murray 2015).

Figure 7. Proportion of women who have ever experienced intimate partner violence (modeled estimate, % of ever-partnered women ages 15–49)

Following a period of 5 national elections in the last 3 years, currently, only 24 percent of all seats in the National Assembly were held by women in 2022 (WDI 2024). Bulgaria fell short of the EU average, which recorded a rate of 33 percent for 2022. There have been minimal developments since 2014. In 2020, Bulgaria had 38.9 percent of women in ministerial-level positions, above the ECA and EU averages (25.9 and 32.3 percent, respectively). This represents a substantial decline from 2016, when the proportion was 52.9 percent. Moreover, discriminatory gender beliefs persist, especially for men. In Bulgaria in 2022, 4 out of 10 people believed men make better political leaders than women (World Value Survey 2022). A lower share of women (strongly) agree with this statement (nearly 30 percent). These gender social norms can help explain why, even with the elimination of numerous formal barriers to political office, women continue to encounter challenges in gaining and wielding political influence. Bulgaria currently has no gender quota system (Idea 2022).

Multidimensional Vulnerabilities

Roma women face multiple dimensions of vulnerability. The Roma is one of Bulgaria’s largest ethnic minority groups, with a population size estimated to be between 325,00011 and 750,000,12 or between 4.4 and 8.8 percent of the total population. The Roma community faces multiple vulnerabilities, such as low-income levels, lower education rates, spatial segregation, and low social inclusion (Council of Europe 2016). Importantly, Roma women face worse than Roma men in all dimensions. For example, the functional illiteracy rate of Roma women is three times as large as that of Roma men (Council of Europe 2016). Among Roma populations, the gender gaps in NEETS are extremely high: 79 percent of Roma women are NEETs, compared to 52 percent of Roma men (FRA 2018). The gender employment gap among the Roma population reached 32 percentage points in 2020 (FRA 2022, based on BNSI/FRA 2020 Survey). There are reports about Roma women’s being vulnerable to forced prostitution, trafficking, abuse, and violence (FRA 2022). Another problem relates to Roma women’s limited access to social justice (FRA 2022). Roma tend to be less familiar with existing laws and regulations and do not know about filing complaints. In addition, the United Nations Human Rights Treaty Body (2020) raises concerns about the persistence of child and forced marriage of Roma women.

11 2011 Population Census.
12 Mean estimates from Council of Europe (2010).
Legal and Institutional Framework

Bulgaria’s government approved the 2021–2030 National Strategy for Promoting Gender Equality, replacing the previous strategy covering 2016–20. This document serves as the central policy framework for gender equality and mainstreaming. The strategy adopts a dual approach, integrating a gender perspective across all policies and levels while also implementing specific actions to address the needs of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. Annual national plans are developed to operationalize the strategy that outlines concrete actions, responsible entities, and performance indicators. These plans encompass contributions from institutions, social partners, and nongovernmental organizations involved in implementing state policies on gender equality. The strategy prioritizes achieving gender equality in the labor market, reducing the pay gap, combating violence, and protecting and supporting victims. The Ministry of Labor and Social Policy is responsible for executing state policies on gender equality and overseeing the strategy and national plans. The effectiveness of these plans is evaluated annually through the publication of the Report on Equality between Women and Men in Bulgaria (European Institute for Gender Equality).

Bulgaria has implemented important legislation targeting gender equality, but there is a need for systematic assessments of these. In 2016, Bulgaria introduced the Law on Equality between Women and Men (UN Women 2017). The law enhanced the alignment of national legislation with EU standards and international legal instruments related to gender equality. The state policy on gender equality and nondiscrimination is a cross-cutting initiative by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy. At the central level, the National Council on Equality between Women and Men, established in 2004 as a consultative body to the Council of Ministers of Bulgaria and chaired by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, supervises this policy. This council fosters sustained collaboration on gender equality among government institutions, social partners, and civil society. To operationalize the state policy, a gender equality coordinator position was established in each government institution in 2016. This move aimed to ensure the practical implementation of the policy at the operational level. These coordinators, reporting to the Secretariat of the National Council on Equality between Women and Men, play a key role in fostering gender equality within their respective institutions.

Bulgaria signed the Convention of the Council of Europe on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) (UN Women 2017), but it has not yet ratified it. The Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence is a major human rights treaty establishing comprehensive legal standards to ensure women’s right to be free from violence. The Constitutional Court Decision No. 13/2018 of 27 July 2018 ruled that the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) was incompatible with the Bulgarian Constitution, which may further prevent ratification of the convention. According to UN Women (2022), Bulgaria currently has in place 91.7 percent of the legal frameworks that promote, enforce, and monitor gender equality under the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicator. At the same time, data are only available for 45.9 percent of the indicators needed to monitor the SDGs from a gender perspective, and many available indicators lack comparability, leading to important gender data gaps (UN Women 2022). The European Council approved the EU’s accession to the Istanbul Convention on 1 June 2023.

In August 2023, Bulgaria implemented a new legal framework addressing domestic violence, with changes in the criminal code and law on protection from domestic violence. Key changes included extending the complaint filing period to three months (with an option for six months in specific cases), broadening eligibility for protection to include parents, accelerating procedures and ensuring quick access to the judiciary, imposing a complete ban on contact with victims through all channels, introducing a specific risk assessment methodology for courts, establishing a national information
system, creating a National Council for prevention, and providing free legal services for the poor. These reforms aimed to enhance victim protection, streamline legal processes, and strengthen preventive measures against domestic violence.

Bulgaria’s maternity leave is notably generous, offering mothers one of the lengthiest periods of full-pay leave compared to other countries in the OECD and EU. Bulgaria provides a notably extended period of paid maternity leave, totaling 58.6 weeks or 410 days. This duration is considerably longer than the averages in both the OECD (18.5 weeks) and the EU (21.1 weeks) (figure 7, panel a). Additionally, the average payment rate during paid maternity leave is 90 percent of the national average earnings, comparable to rates in other countries within the region. Maternity leave and payments can be transferred from the mother to the father or one of the grandparents (provided they are still working) once the child reaches six months of age. In such instances, the benefit will be equivalent to 90 percent of the social insurance income of the father or grandparent for the subsequent six months. The option for grandparents to access this benefit was introduced starting 1 January 2023. Following the initial period of maternity leave with pay, mothers are eligible for a further 51.9 weeks of less-generous parental leave, paid at an average rate of about 44.5 percent of prior earnings. This parental leave, theoretically available to mothers, is also more generous in Bulgaria than most countries and also significantly above the EU and OECD averages (43.5 and 32.3 weeks, respectively) (figure 7, panel b).

Figure 7. Paid Maternity and Paternal Leave

Panel a. Paid Maternity Leave (Length and Payment Rate), Bulgaria vs. Selected Countries, 2022

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13 The maternity benefit amounts to 90 percent of the mother’s social insurance income for the 24 months preceding childbirth. It’s worth noting that this income may be lower than the actual earnings, because it is based on the officially declared salary. Additionally, there is a cap on the social insurance income for high-skilled or high-paid workers, which was increased to 3750 leva starting from January 2024.

14 For comparison, the payment rates are 100 percent in Croatia and 85 percent in Romania, for example. OECD Family Database, OECD Family Database - OECD.

15 OECD Family Database, OECD Family Database - OECD.

16 OECD Family Database, OECD Family Database - OECD.
**Panel b. Paid Parental Leave (Length and Payment Rate), Bulgaria vs. Selected Countries, 2022**

Source: OECD 2023; [https://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm](https://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm)

Note: Maternity leave (or pregnancy leave) is an employment-protected leave of absence for employed women directly around the time of childbirth (or, in some countries, adoption). Some countries integrate maternity/pregnancy leave into overall parental leave schemes and do not list them separately. Parental leave is an employment-protected leave of absence for employed parents, which is often supplementary to specific maternity and paternity leave periods and frequently, but not in all countries, follows the period of maternity leave. Panel a shows the duration of paid maternity leave and the average payment rate across paid maternity leave for an individual in terms of national average earnings. Panel b shows the duration of paid parental and home care leave available to mothers and the average payment rate across paid parental and home care leave available to mothers for an individual in terms of national average earnings.

Paternity leave was significantly shorter than maternity leave; however, a recent reform made it more generous. In 2022, paternity leave, which can only be taken by fathers, was only 2.1 weeks in Bulgaria.\(^{17}\) While the length of paternity leave was generally low, in Bulgaria it was below both the EU and OECD averages (figure 8). Again, this value is generally low for all countries, but other countries have been pioneers in this field (for example, the Republic of Korea and Japan). The Bulgarian government recently changed its Labor Code, expanding paternity leave entitlements and establishing the right to flexible work arrangements for parents of young children and caregivers. These adjustments have aligned Bulgaria with the European Union Directive No. 2019/1158, which focuses on promoting work-life balance for parents and caregivers. The changes became effective on 1 August 2022. With the updated legislation, fathers now have the right to an extra two months of paid paternity leave, which can be utilized until the child turns eight. This leave can be taken as a continuous block or in multiple shorter periods, contingent upon submitting a 10-day written request to the employer. In addition, the current parental policy framework does not grant fathers any father specific parental leave.\(^{18}\) The current design of compulsory parental leave policy in Bulgaria does not encourage more redistribution of child-rearing responsibilities from women to men. While fathers can decide to take non-earmarked parental leave, international evidence shows they do not often do so.

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\(^{17}\) OECD Family Database, [OECD Family Database - OECD](https://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm).

\(^{18}\) OECD Family Database, [OECD Family Database - OECD](https://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm).
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Figure 8. Duration of paid paternity leave and paid father-specific parental and home care leave in weeks, Bulgaria vs. Selected Countries, 2022

Source: OECD Family Database, OECD Family Database - OECD.

Note: Paternity leave is an employment-protected leave of absence for employed fathers at or in the first few months after childbirth. Father-specific parental and home care leave covers all weeks of employment-protected parental or home care leave that can be used only by the father or ‘other parent.’

According to the Women, Business, and Law (WBL) Index 1.0, as of 2024, Bulgaria had closed nearly all gender gaps concerning laws and regulations that affect women’s economic opportunities; however, there are still gender gaps in its pension system. Bulgaria scored 90.6 points on the WBL Index 2024 (figure 9), a value above the ECA average (85.8) but below the OECD average (95.4). The country scores the highest possible value on seven out of eight subindicators, but lags in terms of the pension indicators due to age differences between men and women for retirement. While women are eligible for full (partial) pension benefits from 62.2 years (60.7 years) onward, men are only eligible from 64.6 years (63.3 years) onward. Similar differences apply to the mandatory retirement age. Related to these gaps, a lower share of women above the statutory pensionable age receive a pension (82.5 vs. 100 percent) (UN Women 2022). This, together with lower lifetime earnings, longer life expectancies, and fewer required years of service, can lead to significant inequalities in retirement wealth. Despite the ongoing faster increase of the retirement age for women with the aim of achieving an equal age of 65 for both sexes by 2037 as part of pension reform, similar differences still remain with respect to the mandatory retirement age. Given the ongoing pension reform that started in 2016 and under which retirement ages for both sexes are to be gradually equalized, this pension indicator is expected to improve every year.

Figure 9. Bulgaria - Scores for Women, Business and the Law 1.0, 2024.

Source: Bulgaria Women, Business and the Law 2024.

19 The eight indicators measured by WBL 1.0 are built around a woman’s key interactions with the law throughout her life cycle. These eight indicators are Mobility, Workplace, Pay, Marriage, Parenthood, Entrepreneurship, Assets, and Pension.
The Women, Business and Law (WBL) Indexes 2.0 incorporate two new indicators and include a new framework for measuring the enabling environment for women’s economic opportunities. The new indicators are Safety (addressing violence against women) and Childcare. Additionally, it introduces two new measurements to track global progress toward legal gender equality: the WBL 2.0 Supportive Frameworks Index, which analyzes the existence of frameworks such as policy instruments and access to justice designed to support the implementation of laws, and the WBL 2.0 Expert Opinions Index, which captures experts’ perceptions of the implementation and effectiveness of these laws.

The WBL 2.0 legal framework score for Bulgaria (82.5 out of 100) indicates that, on average, Bulgarian women have about four-fifths of the legal rights of men. This is higher than both the global average (64.2) and the ECA average (77.0). Bulgaria's performance is lower in the safety (75/100), childcare (75/100), and entrepreneurship (50/100) dimensions. The safety score means women have access to only about 75 percent of the legal protections necessary against domestic violence, sexual harassment, child marriage, and femicide. Though the country has legislation on domestic violence, sexual harassment, and child marriage, there is no legislation on femicide. In childcare, the law does not establish quality standards for center-based childcare services. In entrepreneurship, the score is impacted by the absence of gender quotas for corporate boards and gender-sensitive provisions in public procurement processes. The WBL 2.0 Supportive Frameworks Index shows that only 65.8% of the supportive frameworks are in place, indicating a moderate lag in the processes needed to implement these women’s legal rights effectively. The score is particularly low on women’s safety, suggesting a substantive implementation gap in this area. By contrast, the Expert Opinions Index, averaging 90.6, is closer to the legal framework’s average score, suggesting that experts’ perceptions of women’s rights are quite positive and more aligned with the legal situation than with the supportive frameworks in place (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Bulgaria, Index and Indicator Scores for Women, Business and the Law 2.0, 2024

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WBL 2.0 legal framework score</th>
<th>WBL 2.0 supportive frameworks score</th>
<th>WBL 2.0 expert opinion score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>82.5</td>
<td>65.8</td>
<td>90.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Bulgaria Women, Business and the Law 2024.

20 These areas were not considered in the previous Entrepreneurship dimension of the WBL 1.0 Index.
Sources


Friedrich Naumann Foundation. 2022. Women in Journalism in East and Southeast Europe. #FEMALEFORWARDINTERNATIONAL : Women in Journalism in East and Southeast Europe (freiheit.org).


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