

# 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.<sup>2</sup>

## 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

This policy brief describes the process of regional collaboration in drafting the 2<sup>nd</sup> regional Study,

[The Position of Women in the Armed Forces in the Western Balkans](#) (the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regional Study) and outlines key findings. The 2<sup>nd</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

### 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 25<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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 2<sup>nd</sup> Regional Study

The main goal of the 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> The MoDs view the 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

It is essential to note that the 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 1<sup>st</sup> and the 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 2<sup>nd</sup> Regional Study. They invested their time and expert resources to gather information and also review the 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>

### Methodology used for developing the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regional Study:<sup>12</sup>

*Institutional research of practices and processes was used by administering a jointly developed questionnaire to inform the quantitative analysis.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup>*

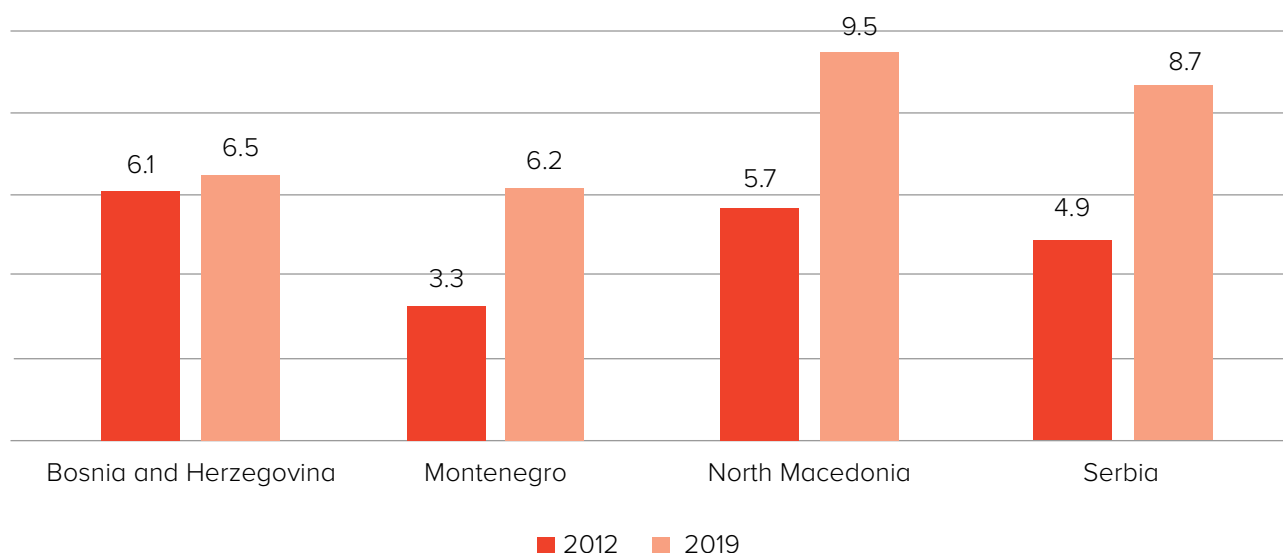
The importance of such hands-on participatory regional research and knowledge exchange was recognized at the [Ministerial Conference](#) organized in December 2021 in Montenegro as Ministers referred to the results of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regional Study and the gaps that needed to be closed to achieve 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**

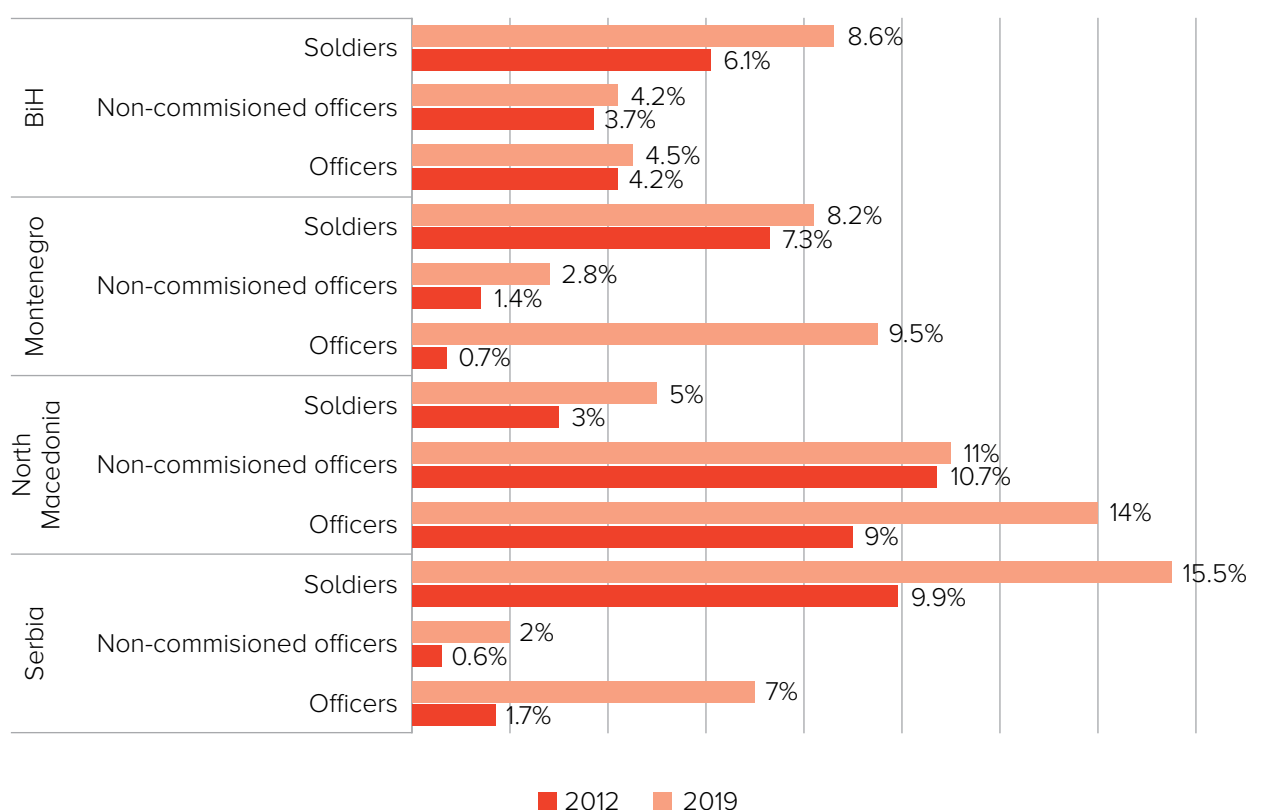


Source: SEESAC, 2021

The share of women has also increased among the ranks of soldiers, non-commissioned officers<sup>15</sup> (NCOs), and officers. It is noticeable in all countries

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

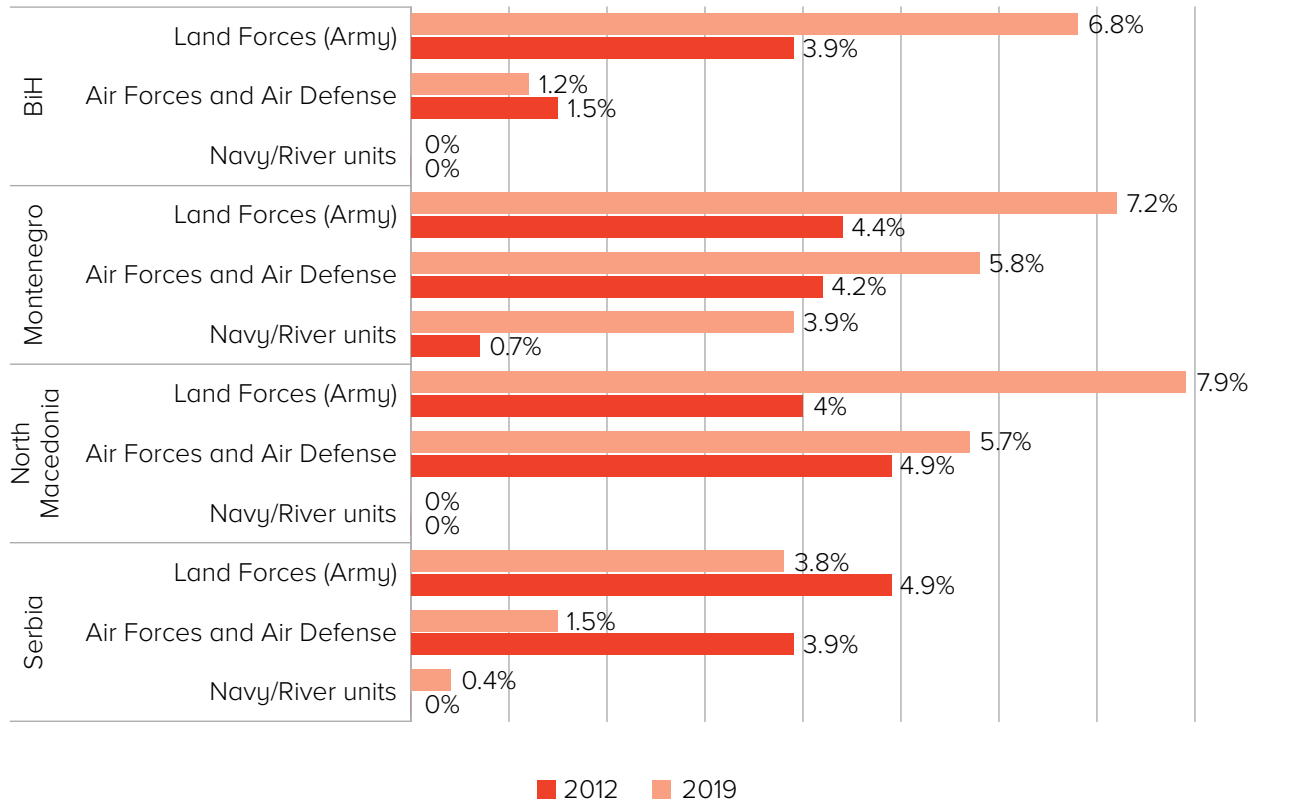
**Figure 2: Share of uniformed women among officers, NCOs and soldiers, 2012 and 2019, in %**



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 %**

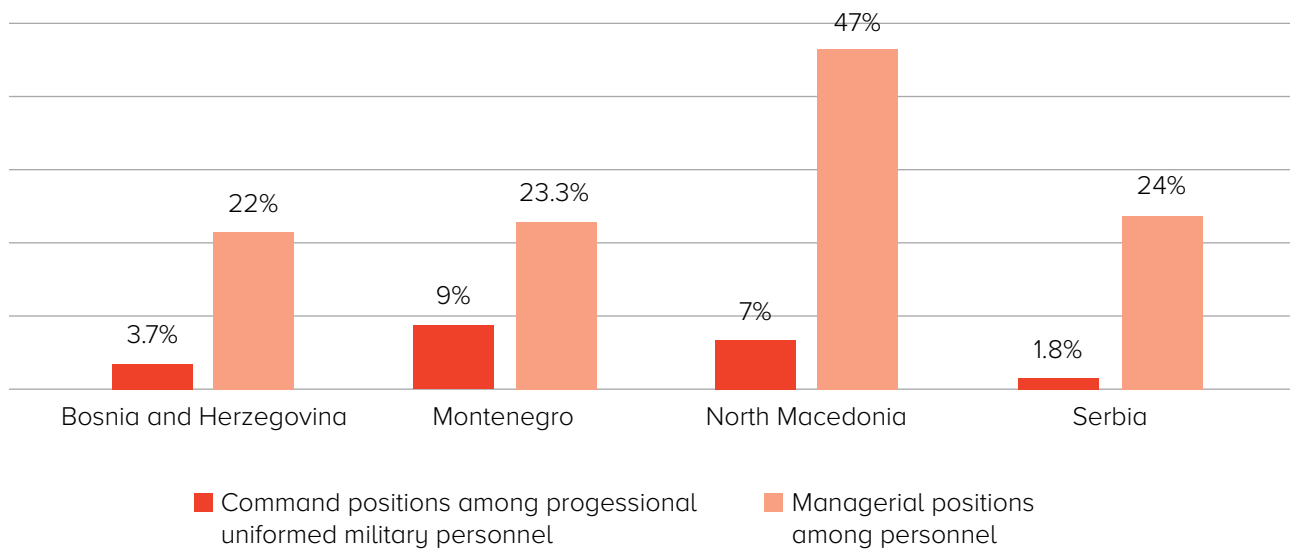


Source: SEESAC, 2021

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 %**

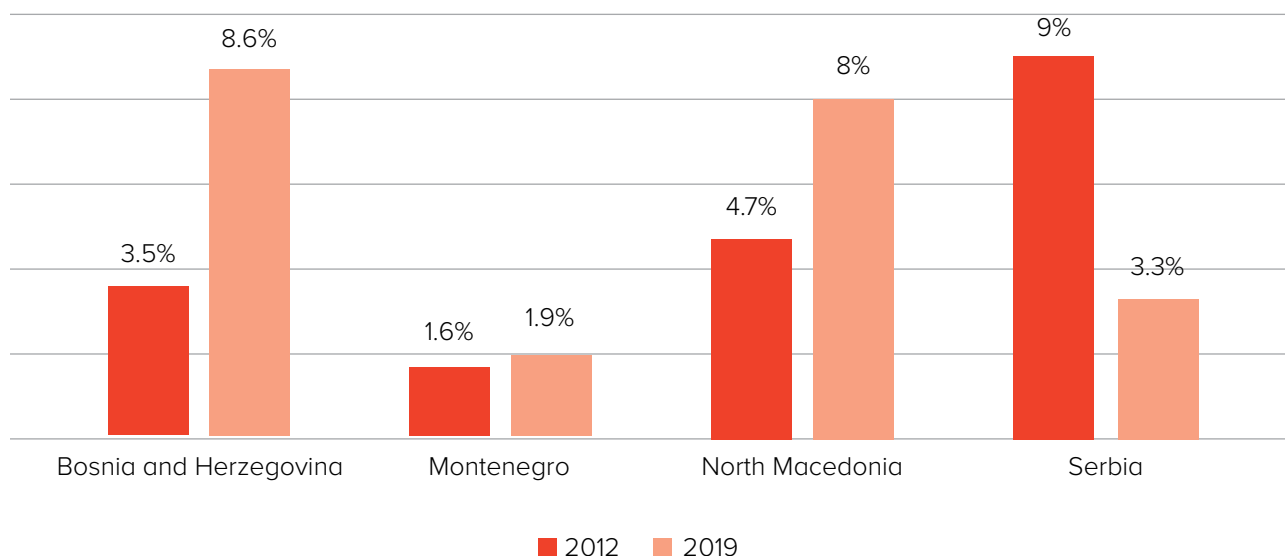


Source: SEESAC, 2021

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

NATO and the EU multinational missions), except in Serbia.<sup>16</sup>

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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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

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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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

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