

Policy Brief

Advancing the Participation of Young Women in Montenegro

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Executive summary

This policy paper analyses the position of young women in Montenegro based on the findings of the ninth edition of the Youth Participation Index (YPI), a regional monitoring instrument that measures the political, economic and social participation of young people across the Western Balkans and Türkiye. Drawing on YPI data and an analysis of the relevant national and European public policy framework, the paper examines the extent to which existing policies respond to the needs of young women and contribute to their equal participation in society.

The analysis demonstrates that Montenegro has made significant progress in developing its legislative and strategic framework for youth and gender equality, particularly through the Law on Youth, the Youth Strategy 2023–2027, and the National Gender Equality Strategy. National policies are largely aligned with European priorities in the areas of youth participation, gender equality and social inclusion. Nevertheless, the YPI findings indicate that formally established mechanisms are insufficient unless accompanied by consistent implementation, effective cross-sectoral coordination and policies that recognise the diverse life circumstances and experiences of young women.

The paper adopts a feminist public policy perspective, which understands gender equality not merely as equal access to rights, but also as the removal of structural barriers that shape the unequal distribution of power, resources, time and opportunities. From this perspective, the participation of young women cannot be analysed separately from economic inequalities, gender stereotypes, the unequal distribution of unpaid care and domestic work, prevailing social norms and expectations, and other structural factors that influence their life choices and opportunities for active participation in society.

The YPI findings confirm that, despite their high educational attainment, young women continue to experience less favourable outcomes in several dimensions of participation. Although, for the first time, the proportion of young people in NEET status (not in employment, education or training) has equalised between women and men, young women remain more exposed to long-term unemployment, are less likely to establish their own businesses, have more limited access to economic resources, and remain underrepresented in decision-making processes. Particularly disadvantaged are young women from rural areas, members of the Roma and Egyptian (RE) community, young women with disabilities, beneficiaries of the social protection system, and other marginalised groups facing multiple and intersecting forms of exclusion.

The paper argues that policies based solely on universal measures are insufficient to reduce existing gender inequalities. Effective public policies require a gender-responsive and intersectional approach that recognises the diverse needs and lived experiences of young women, as well as the systematic application of gender mainstreaming throughout all stages

of policy planning, implementation and evaluation. Particular attention is given to the role of civil society organisations which, through research, advocacy, the development of innovative services and direct engagement with young people, contribute to evidence-based policymaking and strengthen the participation of young women.

The policy paper concludes that further progress requires moving beyond formal towards substantive gender equality. This entails a stronger integration of the gender perspective across youth, education, employment and social policies, the development of gender-responsive and intersectional measures, the improvement of gender-disaggregated data systems, and continuous monitoring of the impact of public policies on different groups of young women. Only such an approach can contribute to building a more inclusive society in which all young women, regardless of their background, have equal opportunities to realise their full potential and participate equally in the economic, political and social life of Montenegro.

Introduction

Creating the conditions for the full, equal and meaningful participation of young people is one of the key priorities of contemporary development, democratisation and social cohesion policies. In Montenegro, as in other countries of the region, the strategic and legislative framework recognises young people as important actors of social development and emphasises the need for their active participation in education, the labour market, decision-making processes and social life. However, despite these commitments, numerous indicators suggest that a significant gap still exists between public policies and their effective implementation.

This gap is not experienced equally by all young people. Gender, socio-economic status, place of residence and other factors shape young people's opportunities to exercise their rights, develop their potential and participate in society. Differences between young women and young men are particularly evident in areas such as economic empowerment, political representation and access to development opportunities. At the same time, young people living in poverty, beneficiaries of the social protection system, those residing in correctional institutions, and members of other marginalised groups face additional barriers to meaningful participation.

Designing effective public policies requires reliable data that enable an accurate understanding of the position of young people, the monitoring of changes over time and the identification of areas where targeted interventions are needed. It is precisely in response to this need that the Youth Participation Index (YPI) was developed. Through 25 indicators, the Index monitors the political, economic and social participation of young people across the

Western Balkans and Türkiye. In addition to measuring levels of participation, the YPI identifies structural barriers affecting young people's opportunities to participate equally in economic, political and social life and enables the comparison of trends across countries in the region.

This policy paper is based on the findings of the ninth edition of the Youth Participation Index and focuses on the position of young women in Montenegro. Drawing on YPI data, the paper analyses key gender disparities in the political, economic and social participation of young people, examines the existing public policy framework and identifies areas where additional policy measures are needed. Based on the available evidence, the paper aims to provide recommendations for improving public policies that will contribute to the more equal participation of young women and the creation of a more inclusive society in which all young people have equal opportunities to realise their potential and actively participate in decision-making processes and social development.

Political and Institutional Framework for the Participation of Young Women in Montenegro

Enhancing youth participation has become one of the key priorities of contemporary youth policy in Montenegro. Over the past decade, a more comprehensive legal and institutional framework has been established with the aim of promoting the active participation of young people in social, economic and political life. This framework is largely aligned with European policy directions, particularly the principles set out in the European Union Youth Strategy 2019–2027 and the European Youth Goals, which emphasise meaningful youth participation in decision-making processes, equal access to development opportunities, and the removal of barriers affecting different groups of young people.

Nevertheless, although national strategic documents increasingly recognise young people as partners in societal development rather than merely beneficiaries of public policies, the findings of the Youth Participation Index (YPI) indicate that the mere existence of legal and institutional mechanisms is still insufficient to ensure the equal participation of all young people. This is particularly evident in the case of girls and young women, whose opportunities for participation are shaped not only by youth policies but also by gender norms, economic inequalities, societal expectations and other structural factors that influence access to education, the labour market and decision-making processes.

The cornerstone of youth policy in Montenegro is the Law on Youth (2019), which establishes the institutional mechanisms for youth policy development, defines the responsibilities of public institutions, introduces youth services, and sets out the obligations of the State and local self-government authorities in planning and implementing youth

policies. The significance of the Law lies in the fact that it is the first legislative act to systematically regulate youth policy as a distinct area of public policy by introducing mandatory strategic planning and the development of participation mechanisms at both the national and local levels.

However, an analysis of the legislative framework indicates that, while the Law establishes universal mechanisms for youth participation, it recognises the diverse needs of different groups of young people only to a limited extent. The gender dimension is not systematically integrated into participation mechanisms, nor are there sufficiently developed instruments to address the specific barriers faced by girls, particularly those belonging to multiple marginalised groups. This includes young women in NEET status, girls from rural areas, beneficiaries of the social protection system, Roma and Egyptian girls, girls with disabilities, and other groups experiencing multiple and intersecting forms of exclusion.

For this reason, international organisations, including the European Commission and the OECD, increasingly emphasise that effective youth policies cannot be gender-neutral. Formally equal mechanisms often produce unequal outcomes for young women and young men because they do not take into account their different starting positions. The findings of the YPI confirm this assumption, demonstrating that certain gender disparities persist despite improvements in the legislative framework.

A significant step forward in the development of youth policy was made through the adoption of the Youth Strategy 2023–2027, which introduces a more contemporary approach to youth policy based on cross-sectoral cooperation, youth participation and results-based monitoring. One of the Strategy's key strengths lies in the process through which it was developed. The document was prepared through an extensive consultative process involving more than 200 participants and over 100 institutions and organisations, including civil society organisations and young people themselves. This approach is fully consistent with the European principle of co-creation, recognised by the European Union as one of the fundamental principles of quality youth policymaking.

The vision of the Strategy is based on the understanding that young people represent an important societal resource whose potential should be fostered through the creation of an enabling environment for education, employment, civic engagement and active participation in decision-making. Its operational objectives focus on developing a sustainable support system for young people, strengthening civic participation, enhancing cross-sectoral cooperation, expanding youth services, and improving monitoring and evaluation systems.

From the perspective of young women's participation, it is particularly important that the Strategy acknowledges the need to promote equal opportunities for all young people. However, the gender perspective remains implicit in most of its measures, as girls are not consistently recognised as a distinct target group in policy areas where available evidence

demonstrates the existence of gender disparities. This confirms one of the key findings of the YPI—that universal measures are often insufficient to address the specific challenges faced by young women.

Local self-government authorities also play an important role in implementing youth policy. The legislative framework provides for the establishment of youth councils and the adoption of Local Youth Action Plans (LYAPs), thereby bringing youth participation closer to local communities. This approach reflects the European principle of subsidiarity, according to which decisions should be taken at the level closest to citizens. Local Youth Action Plans have the potential to respond to the specific needs of young people in different communities and to develop tailored support mechanisms.

However, practice shows that the quality of implementation varies considerably across municipalities. Differences exist in terms of financial capacities, the availability of youth services, the extent to which young people are involved in policy planning, and access to support programmes. Of particular importance is the extent to which girls are represented within local participation mechanisms and whether they have equal opportunities to influence decision-making processes. Available evidence indicates that the formal existence of youth councils does not automatically guarantee the equal participation of young women, confirming the need to continuously monitor the quality of participation rather than merely the existence of institutional mechanisms.

Institutional responsibility for youth policy development primarily rests with the Ministry of Sports and Youth, which coordinates the implementation of the Youth Strategy, develops youth services and facilitates cooperation with other institutions. However, improving the position of girls requires a much broader institutional approach. The Ministry of Human and Minority Rights, the Parliamentary Gender Equality Committee, local self-government authorities and civil society organisations together constitute the institutional framework that shapes opportunities for girls to actively participate in social life.

Indeed, cross-sectoral cooperation represents one of the key prerequisites for the successful implementation of youth policy. Issues related to the participation of young women cannot be addressed in isolation from policies on education, employment, gender equality, social protection and local development. In this context, institutional coordination becomes just as important as the quality of individual public policies.

The findings of the Youth Participation Index demonstrate that Montenegro has established a relatively well-developed normative and institutional framework for youth policy development; however, the main challenges remain in the area of implementation. Formal participation mechanisms constitute an important prerequisite for youth engagement, yet their effectiveness depends on the availability of resources, institutional capacities, political commitment and the ability to respond to the diverse needs of young women.

Consequently, the future development of youth policy should focus on the stronger integration of the gender perspective throughout all stages of public policy design, implementation and evaluation, ensuring that the participation of young women becomes not only formally guaranteed but genuinely realised.

Gender Equality and the Economic Empowerment of Young Women in Public Policies

The position of young women in Montenegro is shaped through interconnected public policies that extend beyond the scope of youth policy alone. Young women's opportunities to participate in the labour market, establish their own businesses, engage in decision-making processes and realise their full potential are determined by the interaction of gender equality, employment, education, entrepreneurship, rural development and social protection policies. Consequently, analysing the position of young women requires viewing public policies as an interconnected system rather than as a collection of individual strategies.

This approach is fully aligned with the European public policy framework. The European Union Youth Strategy 2019–2027 and the European Youth Goals emphasise that the quality of young people's lives depends on coordinated action across different policy sectors. At the same time, the EU Gender Equality Strategy recognises women's economic independence as one of the fundamental preconditions for their full social and political participation. This confirms that economic empowerment is not merely a labour market issue but also a matter of democratic participation, equal opportunities and social inclusion.

Within this context, the Strategy for the Development of Women's Entrepreneurship in Montenegro 2021–2024 represents one of the most significant policy instruments for improving the economic position of women, including young women entering the labour market or developing their first entrepreneurial initiatives. The Strategy recognises that, despite increasing levels of educational attainment, women continue to face greater barriers in accessing finance, business networks, mentoring and investment capital. In response to these challenges, it introduces a range of support mechanisms, including grant schemes, vouchers for women and young entrepreneurs, subsidies for equipment costs, favourable credit lines, mentoring programmes and support for business establishment.

Of particular importance is the fact that several measures explicitly identify women under the age of 30 as a priority target group. This represents a significant shift away from universal employment measures by acknowledging that young women often enter entrepreneurship with more limited financial resources, weaker professional networks and less previous business experience. At the same time, findings from the Youth Participation Index (YPI) indicate that the economic participation of young women continues to lag behind

their educational achievements, confirming that financial support alone is insufficient unless accompanied by business skills development, mentoring and long-term institutional support.

A similar approach is reflected in the National Gender Equality Strategy 2021–2025, which considers women's economic empowerment as one of the fundamental preconditions for achieving gender equality. Unlike the Strategy for the Development of Women's Entrepreneurship, which primarily focuses on business development, the National Gender Equality Strategy adopts a much broader perspective. It starts from the premise that economic inequalities stem from deeply rooted social norms, gender stereotypes and unequal distribution of resources, and therefore require a coordinated response across multiple public policy sectors.

Particular importance is attached to Operational Objective 3, which seeks to increase women's participation in areas providing access to economic and social resources. The envisaged measures include increasing women's participation in political decision-making, improving their position in the labour market, strengthening women's entrepreneurship, promoting STEM education among girls, improving work-life balance, preventing gender-based discrimination and violence, and introducing gender-responsive budgeting. This approach demonstrates that gender equality is not confined to a single policy area but should function as a horizontal principle integrated into the planning, implementation and evaluation of all development policies.

The findings of the Youth Participation Index confirm the relevance of this approach. Although certain indicators, such as the proportion of young people in NEET status, have become more balanced between women and men, young women continue to face economic risks that are not always visible through aggregated statistical data. Their economic participation remains constrained by traditional gender roles, lower representation in decision-making processes, lower levels of entrepreneurial activity and more limited access to financial resources. This confirms that formal equality in access to support programmes does not necessarily translate into equal opportunities for achieving economic outcomes.

Sector-specific policies also make an important contribution to the economic empowerment of young women. The Agrobudget of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management includes dedicated support measures for young farmers under the age of 40, including women. Although these measures are not exclusively targeted at young women, they constitute an important instrument for promoting women's entrepreneurship in rural areas, where employment opportunities are generally more limited than in urban settings. Support for establishing farms, purchasing equipment and expanding agricultural production can contribute to greater economic independence for rural women. However, achieving the full impact of these measures requires addressing broader structural barriers, including access to markets, finance, public services and the reconciliation of family and professional responsibilities.

At the local level, several municipalities have further developed support mechanisms through Local Youth Action Plans and Local Gender Equality Action Plans. Examples from Podgorica and Nikšić demonstrate that local authorities are increasingly recognising the need to develop employment programmes, entrepreneurship support, grant schemes, professional training and mentoring opportunities for young women. Nevertheless, the scope and quality of these programmes continue to depend heavily on the capacities of local governments, the availability of financial resources and local policy priorities, resulting in unequal opportunities for young women across different parts of Montenegro.

Available data indicate several positive trends. According to data from the Tax Administration, the number of women-owned enterprises has been steadily increasing, with women currently owning more than one quarter of all micro, small and medium-sized enterprises in Montenegro. The growing number of women entrepreneurs may be viewed as an indication that public policies are gradually contributing to a more supportive entrepreneurial environment. At the same time, however, these data also show that women continue to account for a considerably smaller share of total employment within the SME sector, suggesting that the expansion of women's entrepreneurship has not yet been accompanied by a corresponding increase in economic influence and employment generation.

An important added value to the existing public policy framework is provided by the active engagement of civil society organisations. Organisations such as NGO Prima, together with other youth and women's organisations, contribute to the development of participatory policies through research, advocacy, education, service provision and the inclusion of young women in decision-making processes. Support from international partners, including the European Union, UNDP, UNICEF, OECD and OSCE, further strengthens institutional capacities for evidence-based policymaking and contributes to aligning national policies with European and international standards.

Despite significant improvements to the public policy framework, findings from the Youth Participation Index demonstrate that the main challenges remain within the area of implementation. Gender stereotypes, limited access to financial resources, insufficient recognition of competences acquired through non-formal education, the unequal distribution of unpaid care work, and disparities in the quality of local policies continue to affect young women's opportunities to participate equally in economic and social life. This confirms that developing new strategies alone is insufficient unless accompanied by consistent implementation, cross-sectoral coordination, systematic monitoring of results and the use of sex-disaggregated data in public policy planning.

In this context, the further development of youth and gender equality policies should focus on strengthening the integration of a gender perspective across all sectoral policies affecting young people's lives. Rather than treating gender equality as a separate policy field,

public policies should systematically assess their impact on different groups of young women and men. Such an approach would enable public policies to address not only formal equality but also the actual differences in opportunities, resources and lived experiences of young women, thereby creating more sustainable conditions for their full economic, social and political participation.

Alignment of the national framework with European Policies

Montenegro's legal and strategic framework in the areas of youth policy and gender equality is largely aligned with contemporary European policy directions. As a candidate country for membership in the European Union, Montenegro is progressively aligning its public policies with European standards in the fields of youth participation, gender equality, employment and social inclusion. This is particularly evident through the Youth Strategy 2023–2027, the National Gender Equality Strategy, and sectoral policies that promote active citizenship, equal opportunities and the economic empowerment of women. At the same time, the European policy framework emphasises that equality is not solely a matter of equal access to rights, but also of removing structural barriers that place different groups of young people in unequal positions.

The European Union Youth Strategy 2019–2027 is built around the principles of Engage, Connect and Empower, recognising young people as equal partners in shaping public policies rather than merely their beneficiaries. These principles are also reflected in Montenegro's Youth Strategy, which promotes the development of youth services, civic participation and cross-sectoral cooperation. However, European policies increasingly emphasise that participation is not simply a matter of establishing formal mechanisms, but also of ensuring that these mechanisms are equally accessible to different groups of young people. From a feminist policy perspective, this requires acknowledging that girls and young women do not enter participation processes from the same starting positions as their male peers, meaning that universal measures often produce unequal outcomes.

This approach is particularly evident in the European Youth Goals, which recognise gender equality, inclusive societies and quality employment as mutually reinforcing preconditions for the full participation of young people. In this respect, Montenegro's national framework is largely aligned with European priorities. Nevertheless, the analysis indicates that the gender dimension within youth policies continues to be treated primarily as a horizontal principle, while targeted measures addressing the specific needs of girls and young women remain less developed. Although such an approach may contribute to formal equality, it does not necessarily ensure equal opportunities for exercising rights and participating in public life.

A similar level of alignment can be observed in the field of gender equality. The National Gender Equality Strategy identifies women's economic empowerment, the development of women's entrepreneurship, increased participation of women in decision-making, and the improvement of women's position in the labour market as key priorities. These objectives closely correspond to those of the EU Gender Equality Strategy, which recognises women's economic independence as one of the fundamental preconditions for social autonomy, political influence and equal access to resources. At the same time, the European framework clearly emphasises that gender inequalities cannot be addressed in isolation from other forms of social inequality, which is why European policies increasingly incorporate an intersectional approach into the planning and evaluation of public policy measures.

This is particularly relevant in light of the findings of the Youth Participation Index (YPI). The data demonstrate that the situation of girls is far from homogeneous and that opportunities for participation vary considerably depending on place of residence, socio-economic status, minority background, disability or labour market status. Girls from rural areas, young women in NEET status, beneficiaries of the social protection system and other marginalised groups frequently encounter multiple barriers that are not sufficiently addressed through universal policy measures. For this reason, European policies increasingly promote the principle of Leave No One Behind, which calls for the development of measures tailored to the diverse experiences and needs of young people.

The European Pillar of Social Rights also provides an important reference framework by promoting equal opportunities, quality education, decent work, social protection and work-life balance. These principles are directly linked to the findings of the YPI, which demonstrate that the participation of young women is determined not only by their individual competences or educational attainment. Their opportunities are significantly influenced by the availability of public services, access to financial resources, the unequal distribution of unpaid care work, gender stereotypes and social norms that shape professional choices, economic opportunities and participation in decision-making processes.

Overall, it can be concluded that Montenegro's normative and strategic framework is largely aligned with European policies in the areas of youth and gender equality. However, the findings of the Youth Participation Index indicate that the principal challenge no longer lies in adopting new strategies or formally aligning legislation with European standards, but rather in ensuring their consistent implementation and their capacity to respond to the diverse needs of young women. From a feminist policy perspective, the success of public policies should not be measured solely by the number of adopted policy documents or established institutional mechanisms, but by their ability to reduce existing inequalities in access to resources, opportunities and decision-making processes. Consequently, the further development of public policies should focus on strengthening the integration of a gender

perspective across all sectors shaping the lives of young people, while systematically monitoring the impact of policies on different groups of girls and young women in order to achieve not only formal equality but genuine equality in practice.

Key Challenges and Findings of the Youth Participation Index

The findings of the Youth Participation Index (YPI) for 2024 indicate that Montenegro has made certain progress in improving the position of young people in recent years; however, gender disparities remain evident across almost all dimensions of participation. Although some indicators suggest a narrowing of the gap between young women and young men, particularly with regard to the proportion of young people in NEET status, the data confirm that a formal reduction in disparities does not necessarily translate into equal opportunities for participation. Young women continue to face structural barriers arising from gender norms, the unequal distribution of resources and societal expectations, resulting in less favourable outcomes across several dimensions of political, economic and social participation.

From a feminist policy perspective, these findings confirm that participation cannot be understood solely through the lens of young people's individual choices and competences.

Young women's opportunities to participate in society are equally shaped by gender stereotypes, socio-economic status, place of residence, access to public services and the availability of institutional support. Multiple and intersecting inequalities are particularly evident among girls from rural areas, young women in NEET status, beneficiaries of the social protection system, girls with disabilities, and young women belonging to minority communities. Consequently, the findings of the Youth Participation Index highlight not only disparities between young women and young men, but also inequalities within the population of young women themselves, underscoring the need for targeted and gender-responsive public policies.

Political Participation of Young Women

The findings of the Youth Participation Index (YPI) indicate that political participation remains one of the areas in which gender disparities continue to be evident. Although formal mechanisms exist to involve young people in decision-making processes, young women remain underrepresented in youth councils, consultative bodies and other forms of institutional participation. Their participation often remains at the level of formal representation, while their opportunities to influence decision-making processes or assume leadership roles are considerably more limited.

These findings demonstrate that the existence of institutional mechanisms alone is insufficient to ensure meaningful participation. Gender stereotypes, traditional models of leadership and the lack of mentoring support contribute to the fact that young women are less likely to perceive politics and public engagement as spaces in which they can exercise influence. At the same time, the limited visibility of women in leadership positions reduces the availability of role models and further reproduces existing gender patterns of participation. From a public policy perspective, this highlights the need to develop mechanisms aimed not only at increasing the number of young people involved in decision-making processes but also at creating the conditions for their equal and meaningful participation.

Economic Participation of Young Women

Economic participation remains one of the areas in which disparities between young women and young men are particularly pronounced. Although 2024 marked the first year in which the proportion of young people in NEET status became equal between women and men, this indicator does not fully capture the different circumstances shaping young women's position in the labour market. Young women continue to experience higher levels of long-term unemployment, are less likely to establish their own businesses, and achieve economic independence more slowly.

The Youth Participation Index (YPI) demonstrates that these economic disparities are not solely the result of individual competences or educational attainment but rather reflect the influence of a broader social and economic context. Gender norms, the unequal distribution of unpaid care work, limited access to financial resources, lower representation in entrepreneurial networks, and more restricted access to the labour market continue to constitute significant barriers to the economic empowerment of young women. These barriers particularly affect girls and young women living in rural areas, as well as other marginalised groups, where gender inequalities intersect with economic and territorial disparities.

An additional challenge is the ongoing digital transformation of the labour market. Although digital competences are becoming one of the key prerequisites for employability, young women remain underrepresented in STEM fields and innovation-driven sectors. In the long term, this may adversely affect their employment opportunities, earning potential and professional development.

Social Participation of Young Women

The findings of the Youth Participation Index indicate that the social participation of young women depends not only on their motivation to engage in their communities but also on the availability of services, programmes and safe spaces that support their development. Young women are less likely to participate in volunteering, non-formal education programmes and certain youth activities, particularly in communities where opportunities for such programmes are limited.

At the same time, the mental health of young women is becoming an increasingly important public policy issue. Economic insecurity, societal expectations, experiences of discrimination and gender-based violence represent additional risk factors that may affect their well-being and their active participation in society. Of particular concern is the fact that young women from marginalised groups often face more limited access to appropriate support services, including mental health services, social protection and non-formal education.

The findings of the Youth Participation Index confirm that improving the position of young women requires more than individual support programmes. Coordinated and gender-responsive public policies are needed to address the economic, political and social dimensions of participation simultaneously, while taking into account the diverse experiences and needs of different groups of young women. Such an approach is a prerequisite for achieving not only formal equality but genuine equality of participation.

Regional and European Comparison of the Position of Young Women

Regional Comparison: Montenegro in Relation to the Western Balkans and Türkiye

The findings of the Youth Participation Index (YPI) confirm that the challenges faced by young women in Montenegro cannot be viewed in isolation but rather form part of a broader regional pattern characteristic of the Western Balkans. Despite differences in institutional frameworks and the pace of reforms, all countries in the region share similar structural barriers that limit the full political, economic and social participation of young people, particularly young women.

According to the overall Youth Participation Index for 2024, Montenegro achieved the highest score among all countries covered by the Index (69.7), ahead of Serbia (68.7), Albania (65.9), North Macedonia (64.3), Türkiye (59.9), Kosovo (55.4) and Bosnia and Herzegovina

(55.3). This result indicates that Montenegro's institutional and public policy framework for youth participation is more developed than that of most countries in the region. At the same time, the fact that no country has achieved a score even approaching the Index's target value of 100 confirms that considerable scope remains for improving youth participation throughout the region.

Regional data show that the greatest differences among countries relate to the level of institutional development and the maturity of public policies, while the underlying challenges remain remarkably similar. Across all Western Balkan countries, young people continue to be underrepresented in political decision-making, face barriers to quality employment and entrepreneurship, and a significant proportion remain at risk of poverty or social exclusion. From a feminist policy perspective, it is particularly important to recognise that these barriers do not affect young women and young men equally. Gender norms, the unequal distribution of unpaid care work, limited access to finance and traditional models of leadership systematically place young women at a disadvantage across all countries in the region.

In the area of economic participation, Montenegro performs comparatively better than most countries in the region. The NEET rate stands at 17%, representing one of the lowest levels in the Western Balkans and approaching Serbia's performance (14.9%), while considerably higher rates are recorded in Albania (22.2%), North Macedonia (22.6%), Bosnia and Herzegovina (20.1%), Türkiye (25.9%) and particularly Kosovo (35.4%). Of particular significance is the fact that Montenegro is the only country covered by the YPI where no gender gap has been recorded in the NEET rate, whereas in all other countries young women are more likely than young men to belong to this category. Nevertheless, this positive indicator should not be interpreted as evidence that gender inequalities have been overcome. The report shows that, in Montenegro as well as throughout the region, young women continue to face more limited access to the labour market, fewer opportunities for self-employment and a greater impact of family responsibilities on their economic position.

The regional analysis also reveals common institutional weaknesses across the Western Balkans. In Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, the lack of systemic and long-term reforms in youth employment policies is identified as a major challenge. In Montenegro and North Macedonia, fragmented institutional responsibilities and insufficiently developed systems for monitoring the impact of public policies are highlighted as key constraints. In Albania, additional concerns relate to the limited availability of sex-disaggregated data and weaker coordination among institutions, while Serbia, despite improvements across most indicators, points to significant demographic changes and the declining youth population as long-term challenges for the labour market. Across all countries, gender stereotypes, unpaid care responsibilities and the limited availability of childcare services continue to disproportionately constrain the economic participation of young women.

With regard to political participation, Montenegro achieves one of the strongest performances in the region, with a political participation index score of 48.6, second only to Albania (50.0), while Bosnia and Herzegovina (39.7), Serbia (42.4), North Macedonia (42.5) and particularly Türkiye (28.1) record lower scores. Nevertheless, the report clearly demonstrates that no country in the region has succeeded in ensuring adequate youth representation in decision-making processes. Across all countries, the proportion of members of parliament under the age of 30 remains very low, while young people are almost entirely absent from ministerial and other senior executive positions. These findings are particularly significant for young women, who face a double underrepresentation—as both young people and women—which further limits their visibility, political influence and leadership opportunities.

A similar pattern is observed in the area of social participation. Although Montenegro, together with Serbia and North Macedonia, performs better than several other countries in the region, the Youth Participation Index indicates that the risk of poverty, limited participation in non-formal education and insufficient access to certain services remain common challenges across the Western Balkans. Of particular concern is the fact that girls from rural areas, beneficiaries of the social protection system, members of minority communities and young women with disabilities are those most frequently excluded from existing support mechanisms. This confirms that gender inequalities often intersect with other forms of social exclusion.

The regional comparison demonstrates that Montenegro has developed a more advanced strategic framework and achieves stronger overall results than most Western Balkan countries. Nevertheless, it faces almost identical structural challenges regarding the real opportunities available to young women to participate equally in political, economic and social life. This confirms that improving the position of girls depends not only on the adoption of public policies but, above all, on their consistent implementation, gender-responsive budgeting, the development of robust monitoring and evaluation systems, and the systematic removal of gender-based barriers that continue to shape the opportunities available to young women across the region.

□ Montenegro in Comparison with the European Union

A comparison between Montenegro and the Member States of the European Union shows that, over recent years, significant progress has been made in developing the normative and strategic framework for youth and gender equality. Nevertheless, substantial differences remain regarding the actual opportunities available to young women to participate equally in economic, political and social life. While national policies are largely aligned with European priorities, the findings of the Youth Participation Index (YPI) indicate that the greatest

challenges lie in their implementation and in their capacity to respond to the diverse needs of young women.

Within the European Union, youth participation is increasingly viewed through the lenses of equal opportunities, social justice and gender equality. The EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027, the Gender Equality Strategy, and the European Pillar of Social Rights are all based on the recognition that young people do not participate in society under equal conditions, and that public policies must actively remove barriers arising from gender, socio-economic status, place of residence, disability or minority background. This approach represents an important shift from traditional understandings of equality by focusing on real opportunities rather than merely formally guaranteed rights.

The findings of the Youth Participation Index demonstrate that Montenegro shares many of the challenges faced by EU Member States, although their consequences are often more pronounced due to more limited institutional capacities and a narrower range of available support services. Although 2024 marked the first year in which the NEET rate was equal among young women and young men, this indicator does not fully capture the gender differences that persist in employment quality, access to economic resources, entrepreneurship and career advancement. European experience shows that reducing gender inequalities requires long-term, interconnected interventions across education, employment, social protection, childcare, mental health and gender equality policies, rather than isolated measures targeting individual issues.

From a feminist policy perspective, one of the key questions is not whether girls and young women have formally equal access to education or the labour market, but whether they enjoy equal opportunities to achieve economic independence, develop their careers and participate in decision-making. European policies increasingly recognise that gender inequalities stem from the unequal distribution of power, time, resources and unpaid care responsibilities. Consequently, they place particular emphasis on work-life balance, the development of childcare systems, women's economic empowerment and increasing women's participation in decision-making processes. In Montenegro, these priorities are reflected in strategic documents; however, the YPI findings indicate that their implementation is not yet sufficiently systematic nor equally accessible to all girls.

Comparison with the European Union also highlights the importance of adopting an intersectional approach to public policymaking. European institutions increasingly emphasise that young women are not a homogeneous social group and that girls' experiences differ depending on their socio-economic background, place of residence, ethnicity, disability or other characteristics. The YPI findings confirm that girls from rural areas, beneficiaries of the social protection system, members of the Roma and Egyptian (RE) communities, and girls with disabilities are exposed to multiple forms of exclusion. As a result, universal measures alone are often insufficient to address their specific needs.

At the same time, European policies increasingly emphasise the importance of gender-sensitive planning, the collection of sex-disaggregated data and the assessment of public policy impacts on different social groups. Such an approach makes it possible to evaluate not only the number of beneficiaries of particular measures, but also their actual effectiveness in reducing inequalities. In this context, the Youth Participation Index represents an important tool for Montenegro, as it enables the continuous monitoring of the position of young women and the identification of policy areas requiring further improvement.

Overall, comparison with the European Union demonstrates that Montenegro has made significant progress in aligning its legislative and strategic framework with European standards. However, European experience confirms that the success of public policies is determined not by the number of adopted strategies but by their capacity to reduce actual inequalities. Consequently, the future development of youth policies in Montenegro should focus on strengthening gender-responsive planning, enhancing cross-sectoral cooperation and systematically removing the structural barriers that continue to limit the full and equal participation of girls in society. Such an approach is not only a prerequisite for further alignment with European standards, but also a necessary condition for achieving substantive gender equality and enabling young women to realise their full social potential.

The Role of Civil Society in Advancing the Participation of Young Women

The findings of the Youth Participation Index (YPI) demonstrate that improving the position of young women requires action that extends beyond the mandates of individual institutions and sectoral policies. Civil society organisations therefore constitute an essential component of the broader youth support ecosystem by complementing institutional mechanisms, developing innovative approaches to service delivery, and ensuring that the needs and experiences of young women are reflected in public policymaking. Their comparative advantage lies in their close engagement with local communities, their flexibility in responding to emerging social challenges, and their capacity to pilot innovative approaches that can subsequently be integrated into mainstream public services.

From a feminist policy perspective, the contribution of civil society is particularly important because it recognises that girls and young women are not a homogeneous social group and that their opportunities for participation are shaped by diverse social, economic and territorial circumstances. Through their work with girls from rural communities, members of the Roma and Egyptian (RE) communities, young women with disabilities, beneficiaries of the social protection system and other marginalised groups, civil society organisations contribute to the development of more inclusive policies and services that better respond to the diverse realities of young women.

An important contribution to this approach in Montenegro has been made through the regranting programme, which supported local civil society organisations in developing initiatives aimed at strengthening youth participation. The supported projects addressed a broad range of issues directly corresponding to the challenges identified by the Youth Participation Index, including economic empowerment and entrepreneurship, digital skills development, mental health, social inclusion, the promotion of gender equality, the prevention of gender-based violence and the strengthening of active citizenship. The programme's added value lies in enabling local organisations to design solutions tailored to the specific needs of their communities, thereby expanding access to support services in areas where institutional provision remains limited.

Projects implemented through the regranting programme demonstrated the diversity of approaches required to strengthen the participation of young women. Civil society organisations developed initiatives promoting employability and economic empowerment, entrepreneurship and digital competencies, mental health support, human rights and gender equality, leadership development and political participation, as well as programmes aimed at improving the inclusion of girls from marginalised groups. These initiatives confirm that advancing the position of young women requires an integrated approach linking education, employment, social protection, health, human rights and active citizenship.

Within this process, NGO Prima played an important coordinating and developmental role as the organisation responsible for preparing the Youth Participation Index (YPI) for Montenegro and coordinating the regranting programme under the regional project Youth Hub for the Western Balkans and Türkiye. Through the continuous collection and analysis of data, the preparation of annual reports and policy briefs, and the coordination of support programmes for civil society organisations, Prima contributed to strengthening an evidence-based approach to youth policymaking. At the same time, through mentoring, capacity-building activities and direct support to local organisations, it helped translate research findings into practical initiatives responding to the needs of young people across different local communities.

The experience generated through the work of civil society organisations confirms that the sustainable advancement of young women's participation depends on strong partnerships between public institutions, local communities and civil society. While public institutions retain primary responsibility for designing and implementing public policies, civil society organisations enhance their quality through research, innovation, the development of new support models and policy advocacy. Such cooperation contributes to making public policies more responsive to the needs of young women and better equipped to address the challenges identified by the Youth Participation Index.

Priorities for Improving Public Policies

The findings of the Youth Participation Index indicate that Montenegro has established a relatively well-developed normative and strategic framework for promoting youth participation and gender equality. However, the results also demonstrate that the existence of laws, strategies and programmes alone is not sufficient to ensure the equal participation of girls and young women in economic, political and social life. The primary challenge is no longer the adoption of new public policies, but rather their consistent implementation, effective cross-sectoral coordination and systematic monitoring of their impact on the lives of young women.

The analysis suggests that strengthening gender mainstreaming across youth policies should become a strategic priority. Young people continue to be treated as a homogeneous group, despite YPI findings clearly demonstrating that girls and young men experience unequal outcomes in employment, political participation, access to economic resources and opportunities for leadership. Future policies should therefore adopt a more gender-responsive and intersectional approach, recognising the diverse realities of young women, particularly those from rural areas, young women in NEET status, women with disabilities, members of the Roma and Egyptian (RE) communities and other groups facing multiple forms of disadvantage.

Promoting the economic empowerment of young women remains one of the most important policy priorities. The YPI findings confirm that economic independence is a key prerequisite for greater political participation, civic engagement and social inclusion. Public policies should therefore move beyond improving access to employment alone and invest in expanding women's access to entrepreneurship support, financial services, digital skills, STEM education, future-oriented occupations and quality employment. At the same time, greater attention should be devoted to addressing structural barriers—including gender stereotypes, unequal distribution of unpaid care work, limited professional networks and unequal access to financial capital—that continue to constrain young women's economic participation.

Strengthening the meaningful participation of girls and young women in decision-making processes should represent another key priority. Increasing the number of young women participating in youth councils, consultative bodies and other participatory mechanisms should not be regarded as an objective in itself, but rather as a means of ensuring that public policies better reflect their experiences, priorities and needs. Particular attention should therefore be given to creating safe, inclusive and supportive environments that encourage leadership, mentoring and active citizenship among young women.

Further progress also requires strengthening evidence-based policymaking through the systematic collection and use of sex-disaggregated data, gender-sensitive indicators and regular policy impact assessments. More robust monitoring systems would improve the

understanding of the diverse realities of young women and enable the design of more effective, targeted and evidence-based interventions. Continued cooperation between public institutions, local governments, academia, civil society organisations and international partners will remain essential for developing sustainable, inclusive and gender-responsive public policies capable of reducing structural inequalities and creating equal opportunities for all young women.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings of the Youth Participation Index (YPI) confirm that Montenegro has made measurable progress in improving the position of young women, particularly through the development of a more comprehensive legislative and strategic framework for youth participation and gender equality. Nevertheless, gender disparities remain evident in economic empowerment, political representation and access to development opportunities, especially among girls and young women belonging to vulnerable and marginalised groups.

This policy paper demonstrates that the principal challenge is no longer the adoption of new strategies, but rather their effective implementation, stronger cross-sectoral coordination and the development of evidence-based public policies. Gender equality should therefore not be treated as a separate policy area, but as a horizontal principle that is systematically integrated into youth, education, employment, economic and social policies through a gender mainstreaming approach.

The findings of the Youth Participation Index constitute an important instrument for monitoring progress and identifying areas requiring additional policy intervention. Their value lies not only in measuring the current situation, but also in guiding decision-makers towards policies that ensure every girl—regardless of her place of residence or socio-economic background—has equal opportunities to participate in the economic, political and social life of Montenegro.

Based on the findings of the Youth Participation Index and the analysis of the existing public policy framework, the following priority recommendations have been identified to strengthen the participation of young women in Montenegro. The recommendations are grouped according to the institutions and stakeholders responsible for their implementation, with the aim of strengthening cross-sectoral cooperation and promoting evidence-based policymaking.

Ministry of Sports and Youth

- Systematically integrate a **gender mainstreaming** approach into the planning, implementation and evaluation of the Youth Strategy and all youth policy programmes.

Introduce mandatory collection, analysis and reporting of **sex-disaggregated data** for all key youth policy indicators.

Strengthen participatory mechanisms to ensure the equal representation and meaningful participation of girls in youth councils, working groups and decision-making processes at both national and local levels.

Establish a regular monitoring system for the position of young women by incorporating the **Youth Participation Index** and complementary national indicators into policy monitoring and evaluation.

Ministry of Human and Minority Rights

- Strengthen cross-sectoral coordination between gender equality, youth, employment, education and social protection policies.
- Apply an **intersectional approach** to policy design to ensure that measures adequately address the needs of girls from rural areas, young women in NEET status, members of the Roma and Egyptian (RE) communities, young women with disabilities and other vulnerable groups.
Expand programmes promoting the economic empowerment, leadership development and political participation of young women.
- Further strengthen the implementation of **gender-responsive budgeting** and gender impact assessments across public policies.

Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation

- Increase the participation of girls in **STEM** through scholarships, mentoring programmes, career guidance and stronger cooperation with educational institutions and the private sector.
- Establish a sustainable system for recognising competencies acquired through **non-formal and informal learning**, volunteering and youth work.
Strengthen civic education, digital literacy and leadership skills among young women.

- Integrate content promoting gender equality, active citizenship and the prevention of gender stereotypes across all levels of the education system.

Employment Agency of Montenegro and Labour Market Institutions

- Develop targeted **active labour market measures** for young women, with particular attention to young women in NEET status and those experiencing long-term unemployment.

Improve access to financial instruments, grants, business mentoring, entrepreneurship support and advisory services for young women entrepreneurs.

Expand reskilling and upskilling programmes, particularly in digital skills and sectors with high employment potential.

Strengthen cooperation with employers to reduce gender disparities in the labour market and promote quality employment opportunities for young women.

Local Governments

- Ensure the consistent implementation of Local Youth Action Plans and Local Gender Equality Action Plans through adequate and sustainable budget allocations.
- Establish functional youth councils and ensure the balanced representation of girls within local participatory bodies.
- Develop accessible local services supporting young women's mental health, employment, entrepreneurship and social inclusion.
- Promote partnerships between local authorities, schools, social welfare centres, healthcare institutions, the private sector and civil society organisations to provide integrated support for young women.

Civil Society Organisations

- Continue developing innovative services and programmes tailored to the needs of diverse groups of young women, particularly those living in rural areas and other vulnerable communities.
- Strengthen the role of civil society in promoting **evidence-based policymaking** through research, policy analysis, monitoring and evaluation of public policy implementation.

- Expand mentoring, leadership and civic participation programmes that empower girls and young women to engage actively in decision-making processes at local and national levels.
- Enhance cooperation with public institutions, educational institutions and the private sector in developing sustainable programmes promoting economic empowerment, digital competencies and the social participation of young women.

International Organisations and Donors

- Continue providing financial and technical assistance for reforms in youth policy, gender equality and the economic empowerment of young women.
- Support long-term **capacity-building programmes** for both civil society organisations and public institutions, including mentoring, institutional development and **regranting mechanisms**.

Promote evidence-based policymaking by supporting research, strengthening systems for data collection and improving the evaluation of public policy outcomes.

- Facilitate the exchange of good practices and regional cooperation among the Western Balkans and European Union countries in the fields of youth participation, gender equality and women's economic empowerment.

Support the development and evaluation of **pilot initiatives** and innovative policy models that can enhance the participation of young women and, following successful evaluation, be integrated into mainstream public policies and public service delivery.

This document is based on the results of the "Youth Participation Index 2024" research, which is being conducted for the ninth consecutive year with the support of the European Commission. Using a unique methodology, the level of youth participation in political, economic, and social life is monitored every year. More information about the research results is available at: <https://youthwbteu/>.

For more details on the project, visit:



youthwbt.eu

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