

# WESTERN BALKANS: Feminized pathways, severe deskilling and a protection gap in transit contexts



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Since 1990, women have consistently accounted for around half of emigrants from the Western Balkans.<sup>1</sup> Gender-specific factors – limited access to decent work, discrimination, low availability of childcare and eldercare,<sup>2</sup> and restrictive gender norms – intersect with strong demand for women’s labour in destination countries, especially in health, long-term care, domestic work and services.

**Education is a strategic driver for women migration.** By 2023, over **55,000** Western Balkan students were studying abroad, and **58 per cent** were women.<sup>3</sup> This highlights the increasing role of education as a channel of international mobility for women from the region.

**Labour-market outcomes remain unequal.** Despite higher educational attainment on average, women migrants generally show weaker employment outcomes than men. Skills underutilization is striking: overqualification rates reach **45 per cent** for women from North Macedonia, **50 per cent** from Albania and **55 per cent** from Kosovo – far above Organisation for

Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) averages for foreign-born populations.<sup>4</sup> This is not a ‘skills deficit’. Rather, it reflects systemic barriers: weak recognition of qualifications, limited access to employment-related networks, language constraints and care responsibilities that shape women’s time and job opportunities.

**Regular immigration to the Western Balkans has increased steadily**, revealing clear gendered patterns in entry channels and integration.<sup>5</sup> All six countries report rising numbers of foreign residents, driven mainly by labour migration, family reunification and, to a lesser

<sup>1</sup> UNDESA. 2024. [International Migration Stock 2024](#). Table 2, Lines 185, 187, 194, 195, 198.

<sup>2</sup> European Institute for Gender Equality. 2023. [Gender Equality Index: Measuring Progress in the Western Balkans](#).

<sup>3</sup> OECD. Undated. “[Education and skills indicators database](#).”

<sup>4</sup> OECD. 2022. [Labor Migration in the Western Balkans: Mapping Patterns, Addressing Challenges and Reaping Benefits](#).

<sup>5</sup> Institute of Statistics of Albania. 2024. [Foreigners in Albania 2024 and 2023](#); IOM (International Organization for Migration). 2021. [Migration in North Macedonia: A Country Profile](#); Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia. 2024. [Migration Profile Republic of Serbia](#).

**58%**  
of students  
abroad  
are women



**55,000+**  
of Western Balkan  
students  
study abroad

**45–55%**  
of women  
are overqualified



**50%** of emigrants  
**93%** and  
of arrivals  
are women



Only  
**~5%**  
of migrant women  
are unregistered

\*32% of migrant men are unregistered

extent, education and digital nomads in Montenegro in particular.<sup>6</sup> Men dominate employment- and study-related migration, reflecting labour demand in male-dominated sectors, while women are more present in family reunification and long-term settlement, and in some countries constitute a majority of permanent residents.<sup>7</sup> These pathways provide many women with legal stability and enjoyment of social and economic rights, yet they often delay labour-market entry and limit upward mobility.<sup>8</sup> As migrant origins diversify within and beyond the region, gender-responsive integration measures are critical to ensuring that regular migration promotes economic inclusion rather than reproducing existing gender inequalities.

**Women are less visible in irregular migration and face higher and gendered risks.** Available evidence suggests that irregular migration in the Western Balkans remains predominantly male.<sup>9</sup> Sex-disaggregated data are available in several countries across the region, but coverage remains uneven. Where available, data suggest that women are less frequently represented in unauthorized border crossings and more often found in situations of administrative irregularity. This

pattern is commonly linked to legal entry through family-related channels, followed by expired permits, complex renewal procedures, or residence statuses dependent on spouses or sponsors. For women, risks centre on legal insecurity, limited access to services and economic vulnerability.

**Trafficking remains sharply gendered.** Women and girls constituted most identified trafficking victims across the region (**74 per cent** in Albania, **93 per cent** in Kosovo and **81 per cent** in Montenegro).<sup>10</sup> Children account for more than half of victims in most countries.<sup>11</sup> Sexual exploitation predominates in several contexts. Identification and long-term reintegration remain weak,<sup>12</sup> especially for Roma women and girls and women exploited in informal domestic and care work.

**The Western Balkans remains a major transit corridor along the Eastern Mediterranean route,** accounting for a significant share of irregular entries into the European Union despite a sharp decline in overall movements in 2024.<sup>13</sup> Some estimates indicate that around **5 per cent** of migrant women surveyed are not registered with authorities, compared to 32 per cent of men.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>6</sup> International Organization for Migration. 2021. [Migration in North Macedonia: A Country Profile](#); International Organization for Migration. 2024. [Migration Profile of the Republic of Serbia 2024](#); Montenegro Business Country Gateway. [Temporary Residence Permits for Digital Nomads in 2024](#).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Pavlov, T., & Petronijević, V. 2024. [Position and Needs of Children and Mothers Displaced from Ukraine in Serbia](#). Save the Children; Pavlov, T., & Petronijević, V. 2024. [Position and Needs of Migrant Children and Mothers from Russia in Serbia](#). Grupa 484.

<sup>9</sup> Institute of Statistics of Albania. 2024. [Foreigners in Albania 2024 and 2023](#); Ministry of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina. 2024. [Migration Profile Bosnia-Herzegovina](#); International Organization for Migration. 2021. [Migration in North Macedonia: A Country Profile](#); Republic of Kosovo. 2022. [Annual Migration Profile 2022](#); Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia. 2024. [Migration Profile Republic of Serbia](#)

<sup>10</sup> Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative. Undated. [WB-MIDEX 2.0 Database](#).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Council of Europe. 2023. [Report concerning the Implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings by Albania](#) (3rd evaluation round). Strasbourg: Council of Europe; Council of Europe. 2023. [Report concerning the Implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings by Serbia](#) (3rd Evaluation Round); Council of Europe. 2022. [Report concerning the Implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings by Bosnia and Herzegovina](#) (3rd Evaluation Round); Council of Europe. 2025. [Report concerning the Implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings by Montenegro](#) (4th Evaluation Round); Council of Europe. 2023. [Report concerning the Implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings by North Macedonia](#) (3rd Evaluation Round). <https://www.coe.int/en/web/anti-human-trafficking/country-reports-and-evaluation-rounds>.

<sup>13</sup> IOM. 2024. [Western Balkans Displacement Tracking Matrix Annual Report 2024](#).

<sup>14</sup> IOM calculations based on IOM. 2025. DTM flow monitoring point surveys 2023–2025.

Flows are overwhelmingly dominated by young men, who represent 93 per cent of recorded arrivals,<sup>15</sup> while women constitute a small but distinct group with specific vulnerabilities. Transit dynamics, data, and policy responses largely reflect male experiences, with limited sex-disaggregated data obscuring women's migration patterns and needs. Security-driven approaches including intensified policing, restrictions on movement, and the downsizing of reception systems have reshaped transit conditions, increasing reliance on smugglers and informal accommodation.<sup>16</sup> This has made women's movements less visible and harder to reach with protection services, while exposing them to heightened risks such as gender-based violence, exploitation, and severe deprivation in access to shelter, healthcare, and psychosocial support.<sup>17</sup>

**The Western Balkans continues to function primarily as a transit region rather than a destination for international protection**, reflected in the low number of asylum applications- around 1,100 in 2024- despite far higher numbers of people expressing intent to seek asylum.<sup>18</sup> Women and girls account for roughly one fifth of applicants, though their protection needs remain underrepresented.<sup>19</sup> A key challenge lies in the gap between declared intentions and formal applications, as many applicants move onward before procedures

are completed. Women face additional structural and gender-specific barriers, including limited access to information, lack of privacy, male-dominated staffing and interpretation, and weak trauma-informed practices, all of which hinder disclosure of gender-based violence and persecution. While legal and support frameworks exist across the region, their reach is uneven and often dependent on external funding, resulting in inconsistent access to gender-sensitive asylum procedures and services.

**Return migration in the Western Balkans is not gender neutral.** In 2024, more than 29,000 Western Balkan citizens were ordered to leave the EU.<sup>20</sup> Women represented **18.5 per cent** and children 8.3 per cent.<sup>21</sup> Although men constitute the majority of returnees, women who return often face distinct reintegration barriers linked to interrupted employment histories, care responsibilities and limited access to independent income. Reintegration systems remain fragmented and underfunded, with particularly acute challenges for Roma women, single mothers and women returning from informal or domestic work abroad.<sup>22</sup> Without targeted support for employment, childcare and social protection, returning can reinforce economic dependency and heighten exposure to poverty and social exclusion.

<sup>15</sup> IOM calculations based on IOM. 2025. DTM flow monitoring point surveys 2023-2025.

<sup>16</sup> Interviews with IOM representatives, CSOs working with the migrants along the route and experts.

<sup>17</sup> IOM. 2024. [Western Balkans Displacement Tracking Matrix Annual Report 2024.](#); Stojanović, T. 2023. [Gender-Sensitive Policies in the Field of Migration.](#) Grupa 484

<sup>18</sup> UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees). 2025. [UNHCR Data Visualization: Displacement Overview.](#)

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Author's calculations based on Eurostat. [Third-Country Nationals Ordered to Leave by Citizenship, Age and Sex \(Quarterly Data\).](#)

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> UNDP. 2023. [Assessment of Policy, Institutional and Service Gaps Related to Sustainable Socio-Economic Reintegration of Returnees in Bosnia and Herzegovina](#); UNDP. 2023. [Assessment of Policy, Institutional and Service Gaps Related to Sustainable Socio-Economic Reintegration of Returnees to Kosovo](#); Cvejic, S. 2012 [Anketa o potrebama povratnika u Republiku Srbiju, CBMM.](#)

**93%**  
of trafficking victims  
in Kosovo are women



Women make up just  
**18.5%**  
of returnees

**29,000+**  
people  
were ordered to  
leave the EU

**47%**  
of the unemployed  
among displaced,  
are women

Women are only  
**1 in 5**  
asylum  
applicants



**74–93%**  
of trafficking  
victims  
are women

**Protracted internal displacement continues to shape gendered vulnerability in the region.** Serbia hosts approximately **194,000** internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Kosovo<sup>23</sup> and Metohija;<sup>24</sup> while earlier data<sup>25</sup> show **51 per cent** are women and **17 per cent** of households are female-headed and the most vulnerable. In Kosovo, labour-force participation among IDPs is **55 per cent** for men and **31 per cent** for women,<sup>26</sup> with female unemployment reaching **47 per cent**. For displaced women, prolonged uncertainty compounds economic marginalization and increases exposure to social exclusion and gender-based violence.

**The Western Balkans is increasingly affected by climate change and natural hazards, which are important drivers of both temporary and longer-term mobility.** Rising temperatures, recurrent floods, droughts, and environmental degradation, particularly in countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania, intensify

existing socio-economic vulnerabilities and disrupt livelihoods in climate-sensitive sectors. For example, the 2014 floods affected more than two million people across the region and displaced around 85,000,<sup>27</sup> while in Bosnia and Herzegovina over 80 per cent of municipalities are at risk of floods or landslides.<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, Albania was forced to import 80 per cent of its electricity during the 2017 drought due to low water levels.<sup>29</sup> These impacts are unevenly distributed, as women, especially in rural and low-income households, face disproportionate risks due to their reliance on natural resources, caregiving responsibilities, and limited access to recovery resources. While climate shocks can trigger displacement and distress migration, they also reinforce pre-existing gender inequalities, even as women continue to play critical but often under-recognized roles in community resilience and recovery efforts.

<sup>23</sup> This and all further references are to be understood under UNSCR 1244.

<sup>24</sup> Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia. 2024. [Migration Profile Republic of Serbia](#).

<sup>25</sup> UNHCR. 2018. [The Situation and Needs of Internally Displaced Persons in Serbia](#) (Assessment Report).

<sup>26</sup> JIPS. 2018. [The Use of Profiling in Kosovo](#).

<sup>27</sup> Expert Group of the International Military Council on Climate and Security. 2022. [Climate Security Snapshot: The Balkans](#).

<sup>28</sup> IOM. [Exploring the Links between Migration, Environment and Climate Change in Bosnia and Herzegovina](#).

<sup>29</sup> Expert Group of International Military Council on Climate and Security. 2022. [Climate Security Snapshot: The Balkans](#).

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