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# IDENTIFYING THE CAUSES OF LONG-TERM UNEMPLOYMENT AMONG WOMEN 50+ IN SERBIA AND NORTH MACEDONIA:

**-Key Findings and Policy Recommendations for North Macedonia-**

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## 1. ИЗВРШНО РЕЗИМЕ

- *Цели на проектот*

Главната цел на ова истражување е да формулира препораки засновани врз релевантни емпириски наоди за унапредување на политиките насочени кон тешко вработливите групи, со посебен фокус на жените на возраст од 50 и повеќе години кои се соочуваат со долгорочна невработеност, во контекст на пазарот на труд во Скопскиот регион. Студијата опфаќа неколку конкретни цели:

- Да се иницира и продлабочи дијалогот меѓу клучните засегнати страни со цел воспоставување партнерства за имплементација на предложените мерки и зајакнување на споделената одговорност во справувањето со социјалните и економските последици од развојот на работна сила која има релевантни знаења и вештини.
- Да се мотивираат и поттикнат невработените жени на возраст од 50+ години за поактивно вклучување во процесите на барање работа, со што ќе се придонесе кон надминување на стереотипите и промена на перцепциите за нивната улога и капацитети на пазарот на труд.
- Да се зголеми јавната и институционалната свест за специфичните предизвици со кои се соочуваат повозрасните жени и да се обезбеди поддршка за системско и континуирано подобрување на нивната позиција преку активно вклучување на истражувачките институции, невладините организации и други релевантни чинители.
- Да се интегрираат искуства и добри практики од две земји од Вишеградската група со слични карактеристики на пазарот на труд, со цел дополнително унапредување на препораките врз основа на емпириски докази добиени преку анкетни истражувања и фокус групи.

Проектот беше реализиран со споредливи цели на два локални пазари на труд – Скопје во Северна Македонија и Белград во Србија. Наодите укажуваат на изразени сличности во структурните предизвици што ја засегаат оваа група учесници на пазарот на труд. Воедно, проектот ја нагласува потребата и потенцијалот за унапредување на регионалната соработка, особено во рамките на иницијативата „Отворен Балкан“, насочена кон продлабочување на институционалната поврзаност. Иако анализата примарно се фокусира на состојбите во Скопје, вклучени се и компаративни согледувања од Белград со цел појасно идентификување на прашањата што бараат понатамошна истражувачка и интервенција во политиките.

- *Целни групи*

Целната група на проектот ја сочинуваат долгорочно невработени жени на возраст од 50 и повеќе години во Скопскиот регион, кои претставуваат еден од најструктурно ранливите сегменти на пазарот на труд во Северна Македонија. Иако вкупната стапка на невработеност кај жените на возраст од 50–64 години бележи опаѓање во последните години, административните податоци покажуваат дека оваа возрасна група и понатаму е

значително застапена во регистрираната невработеност. Жените на возраст од 50+ години учествуваат со повеќе од една третина од вкупниот број регистрирани невработени жени на национално ниво, при што особено висока концентрација е забележана во Скопскиот регион. Најизразен е проблемот со должината на невработеноста: повеќе од четири петтини од регистрираните жени во оваа возрасна група се долгорочно невработени, а многу од нив и пет или повеќе години, што упатува на длабока и долготрајна исклученост од пазарот на труд.

Од социо-демографски аспект, станува збор за хетерогена група, но со повеќе заеднички ранливости. Поголемиот дел имаат средно или пониско ниво на образование, а значителен процент поседува застарени квалификации и вештини кои не одговараат на актуелните барања на пазарот на труд. Многу од нив имаат претходно работно искуство, најчесто во понискоквалификувани занимања. Сепак, продолжената невработеност ја ослабнува нивната поврзаност со пазарот на труд, ја намалува самодовербата и го ограничува пристапот до професионални мрежи.

Семејните обврски имаат централна улога во обликувањето на нивните работни траектории. Значителен дел од овие жени обезбедуваат неплатена грижа за деца, внуци, постари родители или сопружници. Овие обврски за грижа, во комбинација со здравствени ограничувања поврзани со возраста, ја намалуваат нивната достапност за полно работно време или за помалку флексибилните форми на вработување. Традиционалните родови норми дополнително ги зацврстуваат очекувањата жените да ги ставаат семејните обврски пред платената работа, што резултира со прекини во кариерата и намален континуитет на вработување во текот на животниот циклус.

Од психолошки аспект, долгорочната невработеност има значајни последици. Многу жени пријавуваат намалена самодоверба, зголемен стрес, социјална изолација и пад на мотивацијата поради повторени неуспешни обиди за вработување. Стереотипите поврзани со возраста и перцепираната дискриминација во процесите на вработување дополнително ги засилуваат чувствата на маргинализација. Истовремено, истражувањето покажува дека мотивацијата за работа останува висока: повеќето жени јасно ја изразуваат својата определба за вработување наместо користење социјална помош и ја гледаат работата не само како извор на приход, туку и како пат кон достоинство, независност и сигурност во однос на пензиските права.

Во целина, долгорочно невработените жени над 50 години во Скопје претставуваат група со значајно животно искуство, издржливост и недоволно искористен потенцијал. Сепак, нивната исклученост од пазарот на труд е резултат на меѓусебното дејствување на структурни бариери, несовпаѓање на вештините со побарувачката, обврски за грижа, здравствени ограничувања и институционални слабости. Подобрувањето на нивната состојба бара таргетирање, возрастно сензитивни и родово одговорни интервенции кои истовремено ќе им ја зајакнат вработливоста, ќе им ја обноват самодовербата и ќе ги приспособат пазарните механизми на нивните специфични потреби и околности.

- *Методолошки пристап*

Истражувањето се темели на комбиниран (mixed-methods) истражувачки дизајн, кој ги обединува квалитативниот и квантитативниот пристап со цел да се опфатат и структурните димензии и личните искуства на долгорочно невработените жени на возраст од 50+ години во Скопскиот регион. Овој пристап овозможи триангулација на наодите и дополнително ја зајакнува валидноста на заклучоците и препораките за политики.

Квалитативната компонента опфаќа две фокус групи. Првата фокус група ги вклучува клучните засегнати страни, меѓу кои претставници на јавни институции, Агенцијата за вработување, невладини организации, работодавачи и центри за обуки. Нејзината цел беше да ги истражи институционалните перспективи во однос на состојбите на пазарот на труд, структурните бариери, ефективноста на постојните политики и можните решенија. Втората фокус група беше реализирана со невработени жени на возраст од 50+ години од Скопскиот регион. Преку полуструктурирана дискусија беа анализирани нивните работни биографии, перципираните пречки при вработување, недостигот на вештини, мотивациските фактори, искуствата со институционална поддршка и очекувањата во однос на идното вработување. Квалитативниот пристап овозможи подлабоко согледување на психолошките, социјалните и културните аспекти кои не можат целосно да се опфатат со статистички податоци.

Квантитативната компонента се засноваше на структуриран прашалник спроведен меѓу невработени жени на возраст од 50 и повеќе години во Скопскиот регион. Со прашалникот се прибраа податоци за социо-демографските карактеристики, образовната структура, работната историја, должината на невработеноста, однесувањето при барање работа, учеството во обуки, користењето институционални услуги, како и финансиските и емоционалните последици од продолжената невработеност. Дополнително, прашалникот ги испитуваше мотивациските фактори, преферираните форми на вработување и перципираните потреби од поддршка. За обработка на податоците беше применета дескриптивна статистичка анализа со цел идентификување на клучните трендови и обрасци во примерокот.

Прибирањето на податоците беше реализирано во соработка со Агенцијата за вработување на Северна Македонија, која овозможи пристап до регистрираните невработени жени преку мотивациски обуки. Дополнително, беа воспоставени контакти со невладини организации и беа искористени неформални мрежи со цел зголемување на опфатот на испитаничките. Иако конечниот примерок беше релативно ограничен по обем, комбинираните квалитативни и квантитативни докази обезбедуваат сеопфатна и конзистентна слика за позицијата на долгорочно невработените жени на возраст од 50+ години на пазарот на труд во Скопскиот регион.

Севкупно, методолошкиот пристап беше конципиран така што ги интегрира статистичките податоци, институционалните согледувања и личните наративи, обезбедувајќи препораките на студијата да бидат засновани и на емпириски докази и на реалните искуства на целната група.

- *Клучни наоди*

Имајќи ја предвид примената на комплементарни истражувачки методи во рамките на оваа студија (статистичка анализа, дискусии во фокус групи и анкетно истражување), добиените резултати овозможуваат сеопфатно разбирање на проблемот на долгорочната невработеност кај жените на возраст од 50+ години во Скопскиот регион. Врз основа на интегрираните емпириски докази, се издвојуваат неколку суштински наоди кои најјасно ја отсликуваат структурната природа на овој проблем.

Клучните наоди се презентирани во продолжение:

Клучни наоди	Метод на утврдување
<p><b><i>Долгорочната невработеност кај жените 50+ има структурен, а не привремен карактер.</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Жените на возраст од 50+ години претставуваат несразмерно висок удел во вкупната долгорочна невработеност во Скопскиот регион.</li> <li>• Над 80% од регистрираните жени од оваа возрасна група се долгорочно невработени, а 52,6% од анкетираниите жени се невработени повеќе од четири години.</li> <li>• Засегнатите страни посочија дека ваквата состојба е поврзана со економската транзиција, затворањето на претпријатија и структурната неусогласеност помеѓу понудата и побарувачката на пазарот на труд.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Административни податоци/Статистички податоци</li> <li>• Фокус група со релевантни чинители</li> <li>• Прашалник</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Мотивацијата за работа останува висока и покрај продолжената исклученост од пазарот на труд.</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Поголемиот дел од жените (78,9%) претпочитаат плата наместо социјална помош.</li> <li>• Финансиската независност, сигурноста во однос на пензиските права и чувството на достоинство претставуваат силни мотивациски фактори.</li> <li>• Жените изразуваат желба да останат социјално активни и економски независни.</li> <li>• Долгорочната невработеност довела до намалување на самодовербата (27%), зголемен стрес (22,9%) и социјална изолација (19,3%).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Фокус група со невработени жени над 50 години</li> <li>• Прашалник</li> </ul>

<p><b><i>Возрасната дискриминација и перципираната неправичност во процесите на вработување ја поткопуваат самодовербата.</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Истражувањето покажува дека 36,1% од испитаничките сметаат дека возраста претставува пречка за вработување.</li> <li>• 22,9% пријавуваат чести одбивања при аплицирање за работа.</li> <li>• 37% веруваат дека личните врски се пресудни при вработување.</li> <li>• Жените опишуваат дека често се перципирани како „премногу стари“ или како „изгубена инвестиција“.</li> <li>• Овие искуства дополнително ја засилуваат недовербата и доведуваат до психолошко повлекување од пазарот на труд.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Фокус група со невработени жени над 50 години</li> <li>• Фокус група со релевантни чинители</li> <li>• Прашалник</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Недостигот на вештини е резултат на ограничен пристап, а не на неподготвеност.</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 74% од жените не посетувале обука во последните две години, главно поради недостиг на информации и финансиски ограничувања.</li> <li>• Речиси 39% изразиле интерес за обуки во областа на дигиталните вештини и странски јазици.</li> <li>• Жените ги препознаваат барањата на пазарот на труд, но немаат структуриран и континуиран пристап до доживотно учење.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Фокус група со невработени жени над 50 години</li> <li>• Прашалник</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Обврските за грижата за други лица и здравствените ограничувања го обликуваат однесувањето на пазарот на труд.</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 65% од жените се грижат за членови на домаќинството.</li> <li>• 37,3% ја посочуваат грижата за семејството како пречка при барање работа.</li> <li>• 44% наведуваат здравствени проблеми како причина за невработеност.</li> <li>• Традиционалните родови улоги и понатаму влијаат врз континуитетот на вработувањето и подготвеноста за прифаќање работа.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Фокус група со невработени жени над 50 години</li> <li>• Прашалник</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Институционалниот опфат е недоволен и слабо таргетиран.</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 73% од жените не користеле услуги на Агенцијата за вработување во изминатата година.</li> <li>• Голем дел од жените добиваат информации преку неформални канали.</li> <li>• Иако постојат активни мерки на пазарот на труд, тие не се специфично приспособени на потребите на жените 50+.</li> <li>• Комуникацијата со оваа целна група и индивидуализираниот пристап остануваат ограничени.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Фокус група со релевантни чинители</li> <li>• Прашалник</li> </ul>

<p><b>Емоционалните и психолошките последици дополнително ја продлабочуваат исклученоста.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Финансиските тешкотии се широко распространети (речиси половина од испитаничките пријавуваат сериозни финансиски проблеми).</li> <li>• Намалената самодоверба, стресот и социјалната изолација ја намалуваат истрајноста при барање работа.</li> <li>• Повторените одбивања создаваат обесхрабреност и внатрешна несигурност.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Фокус група со невработени жени над 50 години</li> <li>• Прашалник</li> </ul>
<p><b>Постојат изразени преференции за стабилно и флексибилно вработување.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 50% претпочитаат полно работно време, додека 30,6% претпочитаат скратено работно време.</li> <li>• Флексибилноста, сигурните договори и пристојните услови за работа се од клучно значење.</li> <li>• Работата од далечина во најголем дел се отфрла, најверојатно поради ниско ниво на дигитални вештини.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Фокус група со невработени жени над 50 години</li> <li>• Прашалник</li> </ul>
<p><b>Самовработувањето се перципира како можност, но е ограничено од реални пречки.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Една третина размислувале за започнување сопствен бизнис, но биле ограничени од недостиг на финансиски средства (36,1%), знаење (13,3%) и самодоверба (12%).</li> <li>• Неформалните вештини (рачно изработени производи, готвење, шиене, грижа) остануваат недоволно препознаени и институционално поддржани.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Фокус група со невработени жени над 50 години</li> <li>• Фокус група со релевантни чинители</li> <li>• Прашалник</li> </ul>
<p><b>Проблемот е повеќедимензионален и бара интервенција од повеќе сектори.</b></p> <p>Исклученоста на жените 50+ од пазарот на труд произлегува од меѓусебното дејствување на:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Структурни економски промени</li> <li>• Родови норми</li> <li>• Возрасна дискриминација</li> <li>• Несовпаѓање на вештините со побарувачката</li> <li>• Обврски за грижа околу други лица</li> <li>• Институционални ограничувања</li> </ul> <p>Станува збор не за неподготвеност на жените да работат, туку за системски бариери и недоволно таргетираны политики.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Фокус група со невработени жени над 50 години</li> <li>• Фокус група со релевантни чинители</li> <li>• Прашалник</li> </ul>
<p><b>Недоволна достапност на услуги за вработување специјално дизајнирани за повозрасни жени.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Долгорочно невработените жени на возраст од 50+ не се третираат како приоритетна подгрупа во рамките на пошироката категорија тешко вработливи лица при спроведувањето на мерките за поддршка на вработувањето.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Фокус група со невработени жени над 50 години</li> <li>• Фокус група со релевантни чинители</li> <li>• Прашалник</li> <li>• Релевантни национални документи и стратегии</li> </ul>

- *Препораки и примери на добри практики*

Предложените препораки се формулирани врз основа на наодите добиени преку применетите истражувачки методи, како и врз основа на согледувањата произлезени од тркалезната маса и работилницата одржани во Скопје. Работилницата беше организирана со цел да се овозможи размена на знаења и примери на добри практики за унапредување на можностите за вработување на повозрасни жени на пазарите на труд во Словачка и Полска, со дополнителни осврти релевантни за Северна Македонија.

*а) Врз основа на истражувањето спроведено преку анкетата и фокус групите, земајќи ги предвид специфичностите на локалниот пазар на труд во Скопје, во Северна Македонија.*

Препораки	Вклучени страни
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Воведување посебен пакет мерки за жени 50+ години во рамки на политиките за вработување и родова еднаквост, со јасно дефинирани критериуми, цели и механизми за мониторинг (вработување, завршени обуки, задржување на работа).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Влада, Агенција за вработување, релевантни институции.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Агенцијата за вработување треба да воведо структурирана подготвителна фаза пред вклучување на невработени жени 50+ во активните мерки на пазарот на труд. Оваа фаза треба да опфати индивидуална проценка на вештините, мотивацијата и подготвеноста, како и сеопфатно информирање за достапните мерки, вклучително нивните цели, критериуми за учество, обврски, времетраење, очекувани резултати и потенцијални придобивки, со цел да се обезбеди информирано учество и поголема ефикасност на програмите.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Влада, Агенција за вработување</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Агенцијата за вработување треба да ја зајакне соработката со Стопанската комора и Организацијата на работодавачи, имајќи го предвид нејзиното значајно влијание врз работодавачите и нејзиниот капацитет за поттикнување инклузивни практики на вработување. Ваквата соработка може да придонесе кон креирање и промоција на таргетирано политики за вработување на жени на возраст од 50 и повеќе години.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Влада, Агенција за вработување, Стопанска комора, Организација на работодавачи</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Проширување на јавно финансирани, кратки и практични обуки прилагодени на жени 50+ (дигитална писменост, основни компјутерски програми, онлајн комуникација, услуги за корисници, сертификати за негувателство, основи на странски јазици), реализирани локално и со флексибилен распоред.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Влада, локална самоуправа, Агенција за вработување, релевантни институции.</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Поддршка на формализација на типични активности на жени 50+ (негувателство, чистење, готвење, ракотворби, домашно производство на храна) преку поедноставени процедури, микро-лиценцирање и намалени административни бариери.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Влада, Агенција за вработување, Министерство за образование, Центри за доживотно учење.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Зајакнување на инфраструктурата за грижа (достапни услуги за стари лица, дневни центри, заедничка грижа) со цел намалување на неплатената грижа која го ограничува вработувањето.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Влада, Министерство за социјална политика, демографија и млади, локална самоуправа.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Воведување и системско проширување на возрастно и родово сензитивни субвенции за плати и/или даночни олеснувања за работодавачи кои вработуваат долгорочно невработени жени на возраст од 50+, со утврдена минимална должина на договорот и обезбедени пристојни услови за работа (формален договор и редовна уплата на социјални придонеси).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Влада, Агенција за вработување, работодавачи.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Воведување финансиски механизми за поддршка на прилагодени услуги за посредување при вработување, кои ќе ги поврзат животните вештини и работното искуство на жените со конкретните потреби на работодавачите.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Влада, Агенција за вработување, работодавачи.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Интегрирање на механизми за спречување и санкционирање на дискриминацијата во политиките за вработување, вклучително и кампањи за инклузија по основ на возраст и насоки за работодавачите за прилагодување на работните места на повозрасни работници и лица со здравствени ограничувања.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Влада, Агенција за вработување, работодавачи.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Обезбедување интегрирана финансиска и нефинансиска поддршка за самовработување, преку комбинирање на грантови и/или поволни кредити со менторство, поддршка при изработка на бизнис-план, маркетинг поддршка и поедноставени административни процедури.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Агенција за вработување, релевантни засегнати страни.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Воведување специјализиран систем на индивидуално водење на случај (case-management) за жени 50+, преку назначување посебни советници или контакт-точки, со комбинирање на проценка на вработливоста, зајакнување на самодовербата и дефинирање реалистични патеки кон вработување.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Агенција за вработување.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Подобрување на комуникацијата и теренскиот опфат преку редовни СМС/е-пошта известувања за слободни работни места и можности за обука, како и</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Агенција за вработување.</li> </ul>

проширување на директните активности во заедницата (средби во мали групи, посети во рурални средини, мобилни тимови).	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Поврзување на обуките со конкретни слободни работни места преку партнерства со работодавачи и модели „обучи и вработи“, со цел обуката да биде практично насочена и директно да води кон вработување, наместо да остане општа и теоретска.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Агенција за вработување, работодавачи.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Обезбедување подготовка за интервју и советување за барање работа прилагодено на повозрасни жени (зајакнување на самодовербата, дигитално барање работа, поддршка при изработка на CV), како и вклучување мотивациски сесии како континуирана поддршка, а не како еднократни активности.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Агенција за вработување.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Проширување на советодавната поддршка за самовработување преку практична административна помош (регистрација, даноци, усогласеност со прописи), како и упатување кон менторски мрежи и локални центри за поддршка на бизнис.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Агенција за вработување, работодавачи, релевантни засегнати страни.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Делување на институциите како доверливи посредници за да се дојде до неактивни и тешко достапни жени (особено од рурални средини, Албанки и Ромки), преку обезбедување менторство, групи за врсничка поддршка и придружба при користење институционални услуги.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Агенција за вработување, невладин сектор.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Спроведување на програми за зајакнување кои би се реализирале во заедницата, а кои комбинираат основи на дигитални вештини, меки вештини, психолошка поддршка и информации за достапните активни мерки на пазарот на труд.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Агенција за вработување, невладин сектор, локална самоуправа.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Поддршка на признавањето на неформалните вештини преку микро-квалификации и стекнување на сертификати (негувателство, готвење, чистење, ракотворби), како и помош за пристап до пазари (саеми, посредници за онлајн продажба, задруги).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Агенција за вработување, невладин сектор, локална самоуправа, центри за обука.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Примена на возрастно-инклузивни практики при вработување (отстранување возрастни ограничувања во огласите, структурирани интервјуа, селекција врз основа на вештини) и обезбедување кратки обуки на работното место со јасно дефинирани работни задачи.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Агенција за вработување, работодавачи.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Поактивно користење на субвенции за плати и поддршка за обуки наменети за жени 50+, како и соработка со Агенцијата за вработување за таргетирани вработувања и</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Агенција за вработување, работодавачи.</li> </ul>

<p>програми за повторно вклучување на пазарот на труд („return-ship“ модели).</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Воведување флексибилни форми на работа каде што е изводливо (скратено работно време, прилагодување на смени, споделено работно место, работа од дома), со цел усогласување со здравствените состојби и обврските за грижа за други лица, а притоа да се обезбеди заштита од можни злоупотреби.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Агенција за вработување, работодавачи.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Воспоставување менторства кои ќе поврзуваат повозрасни жени со помлади вработени со цел поддршка при дигитална адаптација и размена на знаење, што ќе придонесе кон подобро задржување на работното место и интеграција во работната средина.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Агенција за вработување, работодавачи.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Инвестирање во насочено унапредување на вештините, особено во областа на дигиталните и јазичните компетенции. Дури и умерено подобрување на дигиталната писменост може значително да го прошири пристапот до огласи за работа, можности за работа од далечина и административни позиции.</li> <li>• Активно користење на услугите за поддршка што ги нудат институциите и невладиниот сектор. Жените се охрабруваат да побараат индивидуализирани планови за вработување, редовни информации за обуки и огласи, како и да се вклучат во активности организирани од невладини организации или општини.</li> <li>• Препознавање и вреднување на неформалните вештини. Согледувањето на неформалното искуство како предност, наместо како „неработно“ искуство, може да ја зајакне самодовербата и да отвори алтернативни можности за вработување.</li> <li>• Зајакнување на самодовербата и меѓусебната поддршка. Учество во групи за поддршка, менторски програми или мотивациски работилници може да помогне во обновување на самодовербата, намалување на изолацијата и одржување на истрајноста при барање работа. Вмрежувањето во локалната заедница, исто така, може да го зголеми пристапот до информации и можности.</li> <li>• Разгледување на флексибилен и постепен влез на пазарот на труд. Во случаи кога здравствените состојби или обврските за грижа за други лица го ограничуваат полното работно време, тогаш скратеното</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Невработени жени 50+ години</li> </ul>

работно време, флексибилните распореди, сезонската работа или постепеното вклучување преку обука на работно место, можат да претставуваат пореални чекори кон стабилно вработување.	
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*б) Врз основа на примери на добри практики од словачкиот пазар на труд и нивната потенцијална применливост на македонскиот пазар на труд*

<b>Препорачана мерка</b>	<b>Применливост во Северна Македонија</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Придонес и поддршка на локално и регионално вработување</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Соработка меѓу Агенцијата за вработување и општините за креирање субвенционирани работни места во рамки на општински/јавни претпријатија, усогласени со вештините на барателите на работа.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Кариерно советување насочено кон занимања помалку застапени кај жените</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Жените 50+ при избор на обука често се одлучуваат „сигурни“ специјализации/ работни места, кои најчесто се во ограничен број (на пр. сметководство или здравство). Кариерното советување кое ги насочува кон нетипични занимања (на пр. возач на јавен автобус) се покажало како добра практика во повеќе земји на ЕУ.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Кариерно советување надополнето со обука.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Советниците треба да ги насочуваат барателките на работа кон обуки што одговараат на нивните способности и на локалните можности за вработување, со цел дополнително зајакнување на нивната вработливост. Преквалификациските обуки треба да бидат усогласени со реалните потреби на работодавачите.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Обезбедување на жените кои ќе се вработат со привремено право на дел од социјалните надоместоци.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Постепено намалување на надоместоците што ги примаат невработените лица по нивното бришење од евиденцијата поради вработување, во период до 12 месеци, со цел олеснување на транзицијата кон пазарот на труд.</li> </ul>

*в) Врз основа на примери на добри практики од полскиот пазар на труд и нивната потенцијална применливост во македонскиот пазар на труд*

<b>Препорачана мерка</b>	<b>Применливост во Северна Македонија</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Субвенции за плати.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Потенцијално применлива, доколку се обезбеди прецизно таргетирање, мерки за задржување и соодветни комплементарни интервенции.</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Поддршка базирана на инструменти за лица во посебни состојби на пазарот на труд (Полска, Закон 2025)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Високо применливо, со флексибилен модел на таргетирање кој може да се адаптира на институционалните системи во земјите од Западен Балкан.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Концепт на активација преку насочување на невработени жени на возраст од 50+ кон ангажмани во секторот на услуги за грижа.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Потенцијално применливо во контексти со изразена неформална грижа, но бара паралелно надминување на структурните и институционалните пречки за активно вклучување.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Мерка за субвенционирано вработување во секторот на услуги за грижа (пример: програмата „Активен родител“).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Потенцијално применливо во контексти со недоволен капацитет за детска грижа, при што може да отвори специфични ниши за вработување на жени од повозрасните возрасни групи.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Интервенции насочени кон психолошка поддршка и мотивациско зајакнување, вклучително мотивациско интервјуирање и развивање на психолошка отпорност.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Високо применлива интервенција, со релативно ниски трошоци и можност за проширување, која ефективно ги намалува мотивациските пречки за активно учество на пазарот на труд.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Специјализирани услуги за социопсихолошка поддршка обезбедени преку надворешни даватели (аутсорсинг модел).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Високо применлива мерка, административно остварлива и со висока релевантност во контексти со слични структурни пречки.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Работилници за обновување на меките вештини.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Високо применлива, со ниски трошоци и лесно применлива практика.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Проценка на работната способност базирана на МКФ рамката (Меѓународна класификација на функционирање, попреченост и здравје), во комбинација со насоки за работодавачите за прилагодување на работното место.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Високо применлива мерка, со оглед на преносливоста на МКФ рамката и административната изводливост на насоки за работодавачите.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Менторства и краткорочни работни ангажмани.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Средно до високо применлива и изводлива, но зависна од активна вклученост и ангажман на работодавачите.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Зајакната институционална соработка (Агенција за вработување – социјална заштита – социјална економија).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Средно до високо применлива мерка, која подразбира засилена институционална координација и е остварлива со дополнителни административни ресурси.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• „Отворена и пријателска канцеларија“ – модел за теренска работа со неактивни жени во рурални средини.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Високо применлива, бидејќи пристапот базиран на работа во заедницата е усогласен со постојните рурални, социјални и институционални структури.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Развивање соработка со социјални претпријатија.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Средно применлива, зависно од развиеноста, поддршката и капацитетот на социјалните претпријатија.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Програми за оние лица кои се враќаат на работа, како структуриран модел за повторно вклучување по подолг период на грижа.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Високо применлива, поради сличните обрасци на женска неактивност.</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Поддршка базирана на позитивни примери (role models) во рамки на програми за повторно вклучување на пазарот на труд.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Високо применлива интервенција, со ниски трошоци и лесна адаптабилност во различни културни контексти.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Иницијативи за подигање на свеста кај работодавачите за борба против возрасната дискриминација.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Високо применлива, со оглед на широката распространетост на возрасната пристрасност и можноста за трансфер на вакви мерки во различни ситуации.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Заеднички дизајнирани програми со работодавачите за обука и преквалификација.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Високо применлива, со силен потенцијал за ефект во сектори каде има недостиг на вештини.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Промоција на добри практики кај работодавачите, со нагласување на искуството, сигурноста и менторскиот капацитет на повозрасните жени.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Средно до високо применлива, зависно од отвореноста и ангажманот на работодавачите.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Иницијативи за инклузивно регрутирање.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Средно до високо применлива и прилагодлива на специфичните услови на локалниот пазар на труд.</li> </ul>

## 2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- *Overview of the project goals*

The main goal of this research is to formulate evidence-based recommendations for strengthening the policy framework addressing hard-to-employ groups; particularly women aged 50+ experiencing long-term unemployment, with specific reference to the labour market of the Skopje region. The study follows several specific objectives:

- To foster dialogue among key stakeholders in order to build partnerships for implementing policy proposals and to promote shared responsibility in addressing the social and economic costs of developing a labour force equipped with relevant skills and competencies.
- To stimulate and encourage unemployed women aged 50+ to engage more actively in job-search activities, thereby contributing to a shift in perceptions regarding women's roles and capacities within the labour market.
- To raise public and institutional awareness of the challenges faced by older women and to support continued advocacy for improving their labour market position, through the engagement of research institutions, non-governmental organizations and other relevant bodies.
- To integrate relevant experiences and good practices from two Visegrad countries with comparable labour market characteristics, refining policy recommendations based on empirical evidence gathered through surveys and focus group discussions.

The project was implemented with comparable objectives in two local labour markets, the Skopje region in North Macedonia and the Belgrade region in Serbia. The findings reveal notable similarities in the structural challenges affecting this specific group of labour market participants. At the same time, the project builds on the potential for enhanced regional cooperation, particularly within the framework of Open Balkan initiatives aimed at

strengthening institutional collaboration. While this study primarily concentrates on the findings related to the Skopje labour market, comparative insights from Belgrade are incorporated to identify the issues that need further analysis and policy attention.

- *Description of the target group*

The target group of the project consists of long-term unemployed women aged 50 and over in the Skopje region, representing one of the most structurally vulnerable segments of the labour market in North Macedonia. Although the overall unemployment rate among women aged 50–64 has declined in recent years, administrative data show that this age group remains heavily represented within registered unemployment. Women aged 50+ account for more than one third of all registered unemployed women nationally, with a particularly high concentration in the Skopje region. Most striking is the duration of unemployment: over four-fifths of registered women in this age group are long-term unemployed, many for five or more years, reflecting deep and persistent labour market exclusion.

Socio-demographically, the group is heterogeneous but characterized by several shared vulnerabilities. The majority have secondary or lower levels of education and a significant proportion possess outdated qualifications or skills that do not correspond to current labour market demands. Many have previous work experience, typically in lower-skilled occupations. Despite this experience, prolonged unemployment has weakened their attachment to the labour market, reduced confidence and limited access to professional networks.

Family responsibilities play a central role in shaping their labour market trajectories. A substantial share of these women provide unpaid care for children, grandchildren, elderly parents or spouses. These caregiving obligations, combined with health limitations associated with ageing, restrict their availability for full-time or inflexible employment. Traditional gender norms further reinforce expectations that women prioritize family responsibilities over paid work, contributing to intermittent careers and reduced employment continuity over the life course.

Psychologically, long-term unemployment has had significant consequences. Many women report loss of self-confidence, increased stress, social isolation and diminished motivation following repeated unsuccessful job search attempts. Age-related stereotypes and perceived discrimination in hiring processes reinforce feelings of marginalization. At the same time, the research demonstrates that motivation to work remains strong: most women express a clear preference for employment over social assistance and view work not only as a source of income, but also as a pathway to dignity, independence and pension security.

Overall, long-term unemployed women over 50 in the Skopje region represent a group with substantial life experience, resilience and untapped potential. However, their labour market exclusion is shaped by the interaction of structural barriers, skills mismatches, caregiving responsibilities, health constraints and institutional limitations. Addressing their situation requires targeted, age-sensitive and gender-responsive interventions that simultaneously strengthen employability, rebuild confidence and adapt labour market structures to their specific circumstances.

- *Methodological approach*

The study applied a mixed-methods research design, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches in order to capture both the structural dimensions and the lived experiences of long-term unemployed women aged 50+ in the Skopje region. This approach enabled triangulation of findings and strengthened the validity of conclusions and policy recommendations.

The qualitative component consisted of two focus groups. The first focus group brought together key stakeholders, including representatives of public institutions, the Employment Service Agency, NGOs, employers and training providers. Its objective was to explore institutional perspectives on labour market conditions, structural barriers, policy effectiveness and potential solutions. The second focus group was conducted with unemployed women aged 50+ from the Skopje region. Using a semi-structured discussion framework, this session examined participants' employment histories, perceived barriers, skills gaps, motivational factors, institutional support experiences and expectations regarding future employment. The qualitative method allowed for in-depth exploration of psychological, social and cultural dimensions that cannot be captured through statistical data alone.

The quantitative component involved a structured questionnaire administered to unemployed women aged 50 and over in the Skopje region. The survey collected data on socio-demographic characteristics, educational background, employment history, duration of unemployment, job-search behaviour, participation in training, use of institutional services and the financial and emotional consequences of prolonged unemployment. The questionnaire also explored motivational factors, preferred forms of employment and perceived support needs. Descriptive statistical analysis was used to identify key trends and patterns within the sample.

Data collection was carried out in cooperation with the Employment Service Agency of North Macedonia, which facilitated access to registered unemployed women through motivational training sessions. Additional outreach was conducted via NGOs and informal networks to increase participation. Although the final sample size was modest, the combined qualitative and quantitative evidence provides a comprehensive and consistent picture of the labour market position of long-term unemployed women aged 50+ in the Skopje region.

Overall, the methodological approach was designed to integrate statistical evidence, institutional perspectives and personal narratives, thereby ensuring that the study's recommendations are grounded both in empirical data and in the lived realities of the target group.

- *Key findings*

Considering the combination of complementary research methods applied in this study, statistical analysis, focus group discussions and survey data, the findings provide a comprehensive understanding of the problem of long-term unemployment among women aged 50+ in the Skopje region. Based on this integrated evidence, several core findings emerge that most clearly illustrate the structural nature of the issue. The key findings are presented below:

Findings	Method of identification
<p><b><i>Long-term unemployment among women 50+ is structural, not temporary.</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women aged 50+ represent a disproportionately high share of long-term unemployment in the Skopje region.</li> <li>• Over 80% of registered women in this age group are long-term unemployed, and 52.6% of surveyed women have been unemployed for more than four years.</li> <li>• Stakeholders emphasized that this is linked to economic transition, enterprise closures and structural labour market mismatches.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Administrative/statistical data</li> <li>• Stakeholder focus group</li> <li>• Questionnaire</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Motivation to work remains strong despite prolonged exclusion.</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The majority of the women (78.9%) prefer a salary over social assistance.</li> <li>• Financial independence, pension security and dignity are strong motivators.</li> <li>• Women expressed desire to remain socially active and economically independent.</li> <li>• Long-term unemployment has led to loss of self-confidence (27%), stress (22.9%) and social isolation (19.3%).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus group with unemployed women</li> <li>• Questionnaire</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Ageism and perceived unfair recruitment undermine confidence.</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The study shows that 36.1% believe age prevents hiring.</li> <li>• 22.9% report frequent rejection.</li> <li>• 37% believe personal connections are decisive for employment.</li> <li>• Women described being perceived as “too old” or a “lost investment.”</li> <li>• This reinforces distrust and psychological withdrawal from the labour market.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus group with unemployed women and with relevant stakeholders</li> <li>• Questionnaire</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Skills gaps reflect lack of access, not unwillingness.</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 74% did not attend training in the last two years, mainly due to lack of information and financial constraints.</li> <li>• Nearly 39% expressed interest in digital and foreign-language training.</li> <li>• Women understand labour market demands, but lack structured access to lifelong learning.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus group with unemployed women</li> <li>• Questionnaire</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Care responsibilities and health constraints shape labour market behaviour.</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 65% care for household members;</li> <li>• 37.3% identify caregiving as a job-search barrier;</li> <li>• 44% cite health problems as a reason for unemployment.</li> <li>• Traditional gender roles continue to influence employment continuity and job acceptance.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus group with unemployed women</li> <li>• Questionnaire</li> </ul>

<p><b><i>Institutional outreach is insufficient and weakly targeted.</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 73% of the women did not use ESA services in the past year.</li> <li>• Many women receive information informally.</li> <li>• Active labour market measures exist but are not specifically tailored to women 50+.</li> <li>• Communication and personalization are limited.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stakeholder focus group</li> <li>• Questionnaire</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Emotional and psychological consequences deepen exclusion.</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial hardship is widespread (almost half report serious financial difficulty).</li> <li>• Loss of confidence, stress and isolation reduce job-search persistence.</li> <li>• Repeated rejection creates discouragement and internalized self-doubt.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Questionnaire</li> <li>• Focus group with unemployed women</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Strong preference for stable, flexible employment.</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 50% prefer full-time employment; 30.6% prefer part-time.</li> <li>• Flexibility, secure contracts and decent working conditions are crucial.</li> <li>• Remote work is largely rejected, likely due to low digital literacy.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Questionnaire</li> <li>• Focus group with unemployed women</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Self-employment is attractive but constrained.</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One third considered starting a business but were limited by lack of financial resources (36.1%), knowledge (13.3%) and self-confidence (12%).</li> <li>• Informal skills (crafts, cooking, sewing, caregiving) remain under-recognized.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Questionnaire</li> <li>• Focus group with unemployed women and with relevant stakeholders</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>The problem is multidimensional and requires cross-sectoral intervention.</i></b></p> <p>Labour market exclusion of women 50+ is driven by the interaction of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Structural economic changes</li> <li>• Gender norms</li> <li>• Age discrimination</li> <li>• Skills mismatches</li> <li>• Care burdens</li> <li>• Institutional limitations</li> </ul> <p>It is not a problem of women's unwillingness to work, but of systemic barriers and inadequate targeting of policies.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Questionnaire</li> <li>• Focus group with unemployed women and with relevant stakeholders</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Insufficient availability of employment services designed specifically for older women.</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Long-term unemployed women aged 50+ are not treated as a priority subgroup within the broader category of hard-to-employ individuals in the implementation of employment support measures.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Questionnaire</li> <li>• Focus group with unemployed women and with relevant stakeholders</li> <li>• Relevant national documents and strategies</li> </ul>

- *Recommendations and good practice examples*

The proposed recommendations are formulated on the basis of the findings generated through the applied research methods, as well as on the insights emerging from the round table and the workshop held in Skopje. The workshop was organized to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and good practice examples for improvement of the employment opportunities for older women on the Slovak and Polish labour markets, with additional reflections relevant to comparable countries.

a) *Based on research conducted through the survey and focus groups, considering the local labour market of the Skopje region in North Macedonia*

Recommendations	Parties involved
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduce a dedicated policy package for women 50+ within employment and gender-equality frameworks, with clear eligibility, targets and monitoring (employment outcomes, training completion, retention).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The government, Employment Service Agency, relevant stakeholders.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Employment Service Agency should introduce a structured preparatory phase before enrolling unemployed women 50+ into Active Labour Market Programmes. This phase should include an individual assessment of skills, motivation and readiness, as well as comprehensive guidance on available measures, including their objectives, eligibility criteria, obligations, duration, expected outcomes and potential benefits, to ensure informed participation and improve programme effectiveness.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The government, Employment Service Agency</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Employment Service Agency should strengthen its cooperation with the Chamber of Commerce and the Employers' Organization, given their significant influence on employers and their capacity to shape inclusive employment practices. Such collaboration can support the development and promotion of targeted employment policies for women aged 50 and over.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The government, Employment Service Agency, Chamber of Commerce, Employers' Organization</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expand publicly funded, short, practical training programmes tailored to women 50+ (digital literacy, basic office software, online communication, customer service, caregiving certificates, language basics), delivered locally (on municipal level) and with flexible schedules.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The government, Local government, Employment Service Agency, relevant stakeholders.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support formalization pathways for common female 50+ activities (caregiving, cleaning, cooking, crafts, home-based food production) through simplified regulation, micro-licensing and reduced administrative burdens.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The government, Employment Service Agency, Ministry of education; Lifelong learning centres.</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strengthen care infrastructure (affordable eldercare/day-care services, community care) to reduce unpaid care burdens that prevent job search and job retention.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The government, Ministry social policy, demography and youth, Local government.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Scale age- and gender-sensitive wage subsidies and/or tax incentives for employers who hire long-term unemployed women 50+, with minimum contract duration and decent work requirements (formal contract, social contributions).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The government, Employment Service Agency, Employers.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Create financial support measures for tailored job-matching services that connect women's lifelong skills and experience with employers' needs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The government, Employment Service Agency, Employers.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Embed anti-discrimination enforcement and awareness in labour policies, including campaigns on age inclusion and guidance for employers on adapting workplaces for older workers and those with health limitations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The government, Employment Service Agency, Employers.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide integrated financial and non-financial support for self-employment, combining grants/loans with mentoring, business planning, marketing support and simplified administrative procedures.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Employment Service Agency , relevant stakeholders.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Create specialized case-management for women 50+ (dedicated counsellors or focal points), combining employability assessment, confidence-building and realistic pathways to jobs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Employment Service Agency.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improve communication and outreach, via regular SMS/email alerts on vacancies and training opportunities and expand face-to-face community outreach (small group meetings, rural visits, mobile teams).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Employment Service Agency.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Link training to real vacancies through employer partnerships and “train-and-hire” schemes, ensuring that training is practical and leads to placement rather than remaining generic.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Employment Service Agency, Employers.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Offer interview preparation and job-search coaching adapted to older women (confidence, digital job search, CV support) and include motivational sessions as continuous support, not one-off events.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Employment Service Agency.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expand guidance on self-employment with hands-on administrative support (registration, taxes, compliance) and referrals to mentoring networks and local business support centers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Employment Service Agency, Employers, Relevant stakeholders.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Act as trusted intermediaries for reaching inactive and hard-to-reach women (especially rural, Albanian and Roma women), providing mentoring, peer support groups and accompaniment to services.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Employment Service Agency, NGO sector.</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deliver community-based empowerment programmes that combine digital basics, soft skills, psychological support and information on available ALMPs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employment Service Agency, NGO sector, Local government.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support recognition of informal skills through micro-credentialing and certification routes (caregiving, cooking, cleaning, crafts) and help women access markets (fairs, e-commerce intermediaries, cooperatives).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employment Service Agency, NGO sector, Local government, Training centres.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adopt age-inclusive hiring practices (removing age filters, structured interviews, skills-based recruitment) and offer short on-the-job training with clear job design.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employment Service Agency, Employers.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use wage subsidies and training support more actively for women 50+ and cooperate with ESA on targeted placements and return-ship schemes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employment Service Agency, Employers.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduce flexible work options where feasible (part-time, shift adjustments, job-sharing, home-based tasks) to accommodate health and care responsibilities, with safeguards against exploitation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employment Service Agency, Employers.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create mentoring arrangements pairing older women with younger staff to support digital adaptation and knowledge sharing, improving retention and workplace integration.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employment Service Agency, Employers.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Invest in targeted skills upgrading, particularly digital and language skills. Even modest improvements in digital literacy can expand access to vacancies, remote work options and administrative positions.</li> <li>• Actively to use institutional and NGO support services. Women are encouraged to request individualized employment plans, ask for regular updates on training and vacancy announcements, and participate in community-based outreach activities organized by NGOs or municipalities.</li> <li>• Recognize and valorize informal skills. Viewing informal experience as an asset rather than as “non-work” can strengthen self-confidence and open alternative employment pathways.</li> <li>• Strengthen self-confidence and peer support. Participation in peer groups, mentoring programmes or motivational workshops can help rebuild confidence, reduce isolation and maintain job-search persistence. Networking within local communities may also increase access to information and opportunities.</li> <li>• Consider flexible and gradual entry into employment. Where health or caregiving responsibilities limit full-time work, part-time employment, flexible schedules, seasonal work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unemployed women 50+</li> </ul>

or gradual re-entry through on-the-job training may represent realistic intermediate steps toward stable employment.	
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*b) Based on good practice examples from the Slovak labour market and their potential applicability to the Macedonian labour market*

<b>Recommended measure</b>	<b>Applicability to North Macedonia</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contribution to support local and regional employment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cooperation between the PES and municipalities to create subsidized positions within municipal companies aligned with jobseekers' skills.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Career counselling steering towards occupations, less common for female workers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women 50+ when allowed to select training specialization by themselves tend to safe-select few specializations (e.g. in accounting or healthcare). Career counselling steering them out of the usual occupations (e.g. to public bus drivers) was considered good practice in many EU countries</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Career counselling – complemented by training.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Counsellors should advise jobseekers to enroll in training courses suiting her abilities and job opportunities in proximity further to strengthen employability potential. Requalification training should align with the skills employers actually need.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing the successful jobseekers with temporary eligibility of benefits up to 12 months with decreasing amounts.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gradually lower the benefits received by unemployed after exit of register due to the employment.</li> </ul>

*c) Based on good practice examples from the Polish labour market and their potential applicability to the Macedonian labour market*

<b>Recommended measure</b>	<b>Applicability to North Macedonia</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wage subsidies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Potentially applicable with careful targeting, retention incentives, and complementary measures.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instrument-based support for persons in special labourmarket situations (Poland 2025 Act)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Applicable: flexible targeting model adaptable to Western Balkan systems.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Activation concept: engaging unemployed women 50+ in caregiving roles</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Applicable where informal caregiving is widespread; requires addressing barriers to participation.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Subsidized employment in care services (e.g., Active Parent)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Applicable if childcare shortages exist, can create employment niches for older women.</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Psychological and motivational interventions (motivational interviewing, resilience-building)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Highly applicable: low-cost, scalable, addresses motivational barriers.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Specialized socio-psychological support (outsourced model)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High: administratively feasible and relevant to similar barriers.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Soft-skills rebuilding workshops</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High: low-cost and scalable.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work-capability assessments based on ICF + employer guidance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High: ICF framework transferable; employer guidance feasible.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentoring schemes and short-term work placements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Medium–high: feasible; depends on employer engagement.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strengthened institutional cooperation (PES–social welfare–social economy)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Medium–high: requires coordination; feasible with administrative investment.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Open and friendly office” outreach model</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High: community-based outreach aligns well with rural structures.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Database and cooperation with social-economy enterprises</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Medium–high: depends on maturity of social-economy sector.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Returner Programmes (structured re-entry pathways)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High: strong relevance due to similar female inactivity patterns.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Role-model-based support within returner programmes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High: low-cost, culturally adaptable.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employer awareness initiatives to combat age discrimination</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High: age bias is widespread; awareness measures transferable.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Co-designed training and re-skilling with employers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High: strong potential where employers face skills shortages.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employer good-practice promotion (experience, reliability, mentoring capacity of older workers)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Medium–high: depends on employer openness.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incentives for inclusive recruitment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Medium–high: adaptable to local labour market institutions.</li> </ul>

### 3. INTRODUCTION

#### 3.1. Background and Rationale

Demographic ageing is increasingly reshaping labour markets, welfare systems and public policy. The challenges are even more acute in countries where the working-age population is shrinking and the average age of retirement is rising. Serbia and North Macedonia represent striking examples of these trends. Both countries are characterized by low fertility rates, continuous migration abroad and a rising proportion of older adults who remain outside the labour market. These processes exert strong pressure on economic productivity, public finances and the sustainability of pension systems.

Women aged 50 and above account for a growing share of the total working-age female population. This persistent upward trend is observable in both Serbia and North Macedonia. However, the increase is more pronounced in the Serbian labour market, as evidenced by Eurostat EU Labour Force Survey (EU LFS) data over the past six years. In 2019, women aged 50–64 represented 28.5% of the total female labour force in Serbia and 23.0% in North Macedonia. By 2024, this proportion had risen to 31.5% in Serbia and 27.5% in North Macedonia, confirming the continued ageing of the female labour force in both countries.

Within this broader demographic transformation, the women aged 50 and above who are long-term unemployed are disproportionately affected. Their disadvantage is visible in both urban areas of Belgrade and Skopje, where this project is focused. According to the available data, more than 45% of all registered unemployed women in Belgrade are above 50 years old, while in Skopje the share is over 39%. These women are often discouraged from seeking work, struggle with age discrimination and face declining health and skills. When women remain unemployed for a long time, their likelihood of re-entering the labour market decreases sharply, creating a permanent exclusion from employment and a higher risk of poverty.

These developments reflect broader structural imbalances in the labour market, whether related to changes in skill requirements (Janeska & Lozoska, 2021), shifts in occupational structure, or firms' adaptation to technological intensity and competitive pressures. Older workers often face less favourable labour-market conditions, including longer job transitions and a higher risk of long-term unemployment (Monteiro & Simões, 2019). The rapid pace of skill obsolescence and employers' lower propensity to invest in training older employees further compounds these challenges (Ognjenović & Lozoska, 2025). When combined with individual factors such as diminished self-confidence or health-related constraints, labour-market vulnerability is further intensified (Vukmirović & Nedeljković, 2023).

The situation is further aggravated by the adverse relationship between employment and retirement age. The statutory retirement age for women in both countries is increasing towards the level of men, while employment opportunities for women over 50 remain limited. This generates additional pressure on public finances, because the economic inactivity of this group reduces contributions to pension systems and increases dependency on social transfers.

There is an urgent need to address the structural barriers faced by women aged 50+. The problem is multidimensional:

- Lower employability due to outdated skills, long employment breaks or limited education.
- Family responsibilities such as caring for grandchildren or elderly parents, which limit time and mobility.
- Health concerns which lower physical capacity for work.
- Stereotypes and age discrimination, especially in hiring processes.
- Lack of specialized employment services tailored to older women.

Different researches and strategic documents confirm that the older women have insufficient digital skills, low confidence, limited knowledge of active labour market programmes and restricted access to professional support. This reduces their ability to find job vacancies, prepare adequate CVs, participate in training or benefit from re-employment incentives. At the same time, the demand for labour is rising due to emerging shortages in many professions, but older women are rarely targeted as a potential labour reserve. Therefore, it is necessary to mitigate a clear policy gap, that there is no targeted approach currently exists to address the unemployment of women over 50 in Serbia and North Macedonia, despite the fact that they are among the most vulnerable groups in the labour market.

Considering this background, this study focuses on older women participating in the labour market of the Skopje region in North Macedonia, where the structure of long-term unemployment among women aged 50+ is particularly unfavourable. The research forms part of a broader comparative project examining labour-market conditions in both the Belgrade region in Serbia and the Skopje region in North Macedonia.

The National Employment Strategy 2021–2027, adopted by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy of North Macedonia, together with the accompanying Employment Action Plan, provides important evidence and policy directions relevant to unemployed women aged 50+. The Strategy explicitly identifies older workers, women, low-skilled individuals and the long-term unemployed as vulnerable groups with weaker labour-market attachment. Statistical evidence presented in the Strategy shows persistently high inactivity rates among older women. Namely, the inactivity among women aged 50–59 decreased only marginally from 47.7% in 2011 to 45.8% in 2019, while among women aged 60–64 it declined from 83.2% to 79.4% over the same period. These figures indicate that a substantial share of older women remain outside employment and are at risk of long-term labour-market detachment.

The Strategy further highlights the strong relationship between educational attainment and unemployment among women aged 25–64, showing significantly higher unemployment rates among low-educated women. Given that a large proportion of unemployed women aged 50+ have low or incomplete education, this structural disadvantage directly affects their employability. In addition, the document emphasizes the impact of care responsibilities on women's labour-market participation, a factor particularly relevant for women in later working life.

The Employment Action Plan operationalizes these priorities through active labour market measures targeting long-term unemployed persons, low-skilled individuals and social-assistance beneficiaries. Measures such as training, re-skilling, wage subsidies and individualized employment services provide the main institutional instruments for improving labour-market outcomes of unemployed women aged 50+, although the Strategy does not treat them as a distinct category, but rather within broader vulnerable groups.

In order to reduce the structural gender gaps in all spheres of economic and social life, including employment and participation in the labour market, the National Strategy for Gender Equality 2022–2027 establishes a comprehensive policy framework. With the strategic vision of ensuring equal rights, access to resources and opportunities for women and men, the Strategy reinforces North Macedonia's commitment to aligning national policies with international standards and obligations, such as those under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and other human rights instruments. While the Strategy does not disaggregate indicators specifically for women aged 50+, its objectives to integrate a gender perspective across policy sectors and to strengthen women's economic empowerment directly support the removal of barriers faced by older women, such as limited access to continuous education, skills development and decent work. In particular, the Strategy's emphasis on gender equality in economic participation and advancement highlights the need for policy measures that address unequal labour-market outcomes between women

and men over the life course, including persistent unemployment and lower rates of labour-force participation among older women.

Complementing this gender framework, the Adult Education Strategy 2025–2030 outlines the national vision for inclusive and adaptable lifelong learning systems designed to address demographic challenges and evolving labour-market needs. It emphasizes expanding access to non-formal and informal learning opportunities, validation of prior learning and development of digital and green skills, thereby enhancing employability and adaptability among adult learners. Although the Strategy does not exclusively target women aged 50+, its focus on increasing participation and inclusion in lifelong learning is directly relevant for older unemployed women who face barriers to re-entry into the workforce due to outdated skills or low educational attainment. By promoting lifelong guidance services, improved access to training and mechanisms such as individual learning accounts, this strategy supports the acquisition of competences that are essential for the labour-market integration of women later in working life.

Together, these strategic documents reinforce North Macedonia's policy orientation toward advancing gender equality and lifelong learning, both of which are critical to addressing the multifaceted labour-market challenges experienced by women aged 50 and over.

The Strategy for the Development of Women's Entrepreneurship 2019–2023, adopted by the Ministry of Economy of North Macedonia, aims to strengthen economic empowerment and entrepreneurial participation of women by creating a favourable business climate, enhancing systemic support mechanisms and promoting coordinated institutional action. The Strategy's primary objective is to economically empower women through improved access to entrepreneurship opportunities, support for business development, creation of new enterprises, and ultimately increased employment and contribution to overall economic growth. Strategic priorities include establishing a supportive regulatory and institutional environment, ensuring access to tailored financial and non-financial services, promoting collaboration with educational institutions for entrepreneurship training and developing data systems to monitor women's entrepreneurial activity. These priorities aim to increase the number of women starting and developing business ventures and to enhance women's participation in economic decision-making. Although the Strategy is not age-specific, its accent on tailored training programmes, business support infrastructure and enhanced access to finance addresses structural barriers that disproportionately affect women with lower labour-market attachment, such as those aged 50 and over, who face greater obstacles in finding employment and may seek self-employment as an alternative route to economic participation. The Strategy thus contributes to expanding opportunities for women's economic engagement, including through self-employment and business creation, which can be particularly significant for improving labour-market outcomes among older women.

Taken together, all these important strategies and documents and the related operational employment plans establish a comprehensive policy framework in North Macedonia aimed at promoting employment, gender equality, lifelong learning, social inclusion and economic empowerment. They consistently identify women, older workers, low-skilled individuals and the long-term unemployed as vulnerable groups and emphasize activation measures, upskilling,

entrepreneurship support, and improved access to labour-market services. However, although women aged 50+ fall within these broader priority categories, they are rarely addressed as a distinct target group with tailored interventions reflecting their specific structural disadvantages, such as low educational attainment, prolonged labour-market detachment, care responsibilities, and age-related discrimination. Consequently, while the strategic framework provides a solid institutional and policy foundation, there remains a need for more targeted, age- and gender-sensitive measures explicitly designed to address the labour-market challenges faced by unemployed women over 50.

### **3.2. Relevance to regional and European priorities**

This study aims to provide a clearer understanding of long-term unemployment among women aged 50 and over and to formulate key recommendations based on empirical findings and the experience gained from the implementation of effective active labour market measures in the Visegrad countries, particularly Slovakia and Poland.

Prepared within the framework of a project supported by the International Visegrad Fund, through the Visegrad+ Grants, the study contributes to the programme's objective of strengthening public policy development and institutional partnerships. Through cooperation between the two Visegrad countries, Slovakia and Poland, and the two Western Balkan countries, Serbia and North Macedonia, the project seeks to achieve several interrelated goals.

First, by identifying long-term unemployed women aged 50 and over as the primary target group in the local labour markets of the Western Balkan countries, the project proposes targeted support measures aimed at mitigating prolonged unemployment among older female labour market participants. Second, the active involvement of key stakeholders in project activities, including kick-off meetings, focus groups, round tables and knowledge-sharing workshops, helps raise awareness of the challenges faced by this group and supports advocacy for policy priorities that recognise their specific labour market needs. Third, by disseminating the project results in the Belgrade and Skopje labour markets, the project seeks to present the issue to decision-makers and policy practitioners, encouraging a broader perspective that extends further than the analysis of a single pilot region.

The relevance of the project extends beyond national contexts, as population ageing represents a major policy concern across the European Union. Although Serbia and North Macedonia are Western Balkan countries, both participate in EU policy alignment processes, including those related to employment, social inclusion and gender equality. The project therefore draws on proven European practices and institutional expertise from Slovakia and Poland, whose experts are directly involved in project activities. Knowledge transfer to the Western Balkans is facilitated through workshops, expert exchanges and advisory support, particularly in the areas of active labour market policies and training systems. These countries have accumulated valuable experience in reintegrating vulnerable groups, including older workers, through personalised counselling, subsidised employment schemes, employer incentives and competence-based training. By adapting these experiences to local contexts, the project contributes to broader regional knowledge exchange, social cohesion and policy learning within the Visegrad+ framework.

### 3.3. Objectives of the project

An upward trend is observed in the share of women aged 50–64 within the total female labour force of working age, as previously discussed. This trend is present in all four countries, although it is more pronounced in Serbia and Slovakia, than in North Macedonia and Poland. According to Eurostat EU LFS data for 2024, the corresponding shares were 31.5% in Serbia, 27.5% in North Macedonia, 30.7% in Slovakia, and 26.4% in Poland. Consequently, employment rates for women aged 50–64 have also increased, with Poland recording the largest percentage change, an increase of more than 10% in 2024 compared to 2019. Serbia and North Macedonia also show notable, though somewhat smaller, increases, reflecting both growing labour market participation and employment, alongside the continued presence of unemployment among women with lower employability characteristics. Fertility rates are declining across the observed countries, with Serbia and North Macedonia exhibiting greater annual fluctuations, while Slovakia and Poland show a more gradual, linear decline. These patterns indicate shared demographic trends and illustrate the growing pressures associated with population ageing.

Additional pressures on labour market functioning, pension systems and social protection schemes arise from the gradual equalisation of the retirement age for women. In Serbia, for example, the retirement age for women is expected to reach parity with that of men, which is 65 years by 2030. In North Macedonia, however is still 62 for women and 64 for men, but there are discussions and proposals in public policy to raise retirement ages in the coming years (e.g., to 67 for both sexes), although it is not decided yet.

The overall objective of this research is to provide evidence-based recommendations aimed at improving the policy framework addressing hard-to-employ individuals, particularly women aged 50 and over experiencing long-term unemployment. The specific objectives are as follows:

- To bring together key stakeholders in order to identify solutions, strengthen partnerships for implementing policy proposals and share the social costs associated with integrating unemployed individuals, particularly women aged 50 and over into a labour force equipped with the required competencies.
- To encourage and motivate unemployed women to engage more actively in job search activities by highlighting the broader presence of job seekers in the labour market and by reaching out to the growing number of women who are not registered as unemployed, thereby fostering a more proactive attitude toward employment.
- To raise awareness of the issue and ensure sustained advocacy aimed at improving the labour market position of older women, by disseminating the study findings and engaging research institutions, non-governmental organisations and other relevant stakeholders in employment policy development, including active participation in working groups responsible for drafting public policy documents and promoting the integration of strategic measures addressing women's employment challenges.
- To incorporate relevant policy experiences from the two Visegrad countries, whose labour market characteristics show similarities with those of Serbia and North

Macedonia and to refine recommendations using evidence obtained from a specially designed survey of unemployed women aged 50 and over, as well as focus groups involving key actors addressing long-term unemployment among older female labour market participants in the Belgrade and Skopje regions.

The expected impact of this project is both socioeconomic and institutional. In terms of the socioeconomic impact, the project should raise awareness of the issue, reduce stigma and stereotypes, improve motivation and skills among older women and potentially increase labour market participation. Even small improvements in re-employment rates would reduce poverty and increase pension contributions for this group. Regarding the institutional impact, Public Employment Services in both countries will receive analysis of needs, specific recommendations for training and examples of good practice.

The involvement of experts from Slovakia and Poland will help transfer knowledge, particularly in areas where they have proven results, such as targeted training and employer engagement. This transnational cooperation increases the project's sustainability.

Based on the abovementioned aspects of the project, one can conclude that demographic ageing, labour market inactivity and rising retirement age have created a highly vulnerable group consisting of women aged 50+ who are long-term unemployed in Serbia and North Macedonia. This project responds to a clear and urgent need to support these women by identifying barriers to employment, increasing skills and motivation, sharing European experiences and strengthening institutional cooperation.

Through its comprehensive methodology including surveys, focus groups, stakeholder engagement and knowledge transfer, the project lays a foundation for evidence-based policy recommendations that can improve the employability of older women, reduce poverty and promote social inclusion. It is timely, relevant and strongly aligned with wider European priorities.

### **3.4. Overview of partner institutions and their role**

The leading partner, the [Institute of Economic Sciences \(IES\)](#), has proven experience in implementing similar projects. Previous projects include assessing the impact of employment support measures for vulnerable groups and providing expertise to the ministry responsible for employment in developing the current Employment Strategy. IES coordinated overall project activities and interactions among project team members, ensuring all deliverables were completed on time and quality control was maintained during the production of project outcomes. The IES team participated in developing research instruments, conducted all fieldwork in Serbia, provided comments on joint documents, and drafted sections of the summary reports concerning analysis of the main findings and recommendations, except for the experiences and proposed practices from the two Visegrad countries. The IES team also communicated with key stakeholders and unemployed women aged 50 and over, organised events to introduce project activities, discussed preliminary results in round tables, and invited key participants to the workshop on knowledge exchange. IES concluded this project.

[The Institute of Economics-Skopje \(IE-Skopje\)](#) was selected as a project partner due to its role in advancing scientific and professional thought in the economic field, through contributions

to drafting strategies, policy documents, and implementation plans for the development of specific sectors in the economy of the Republic of North Macedonia. IE conducted the same part of the project in the Skopje region, ensuring that the activities involving focus groups with representatives of the same target groups and the survey formed a comparable component of the overall project. IE prepared the analysis of the main findings and proposed recommendations based on the summary analysis for North Macedonia. IE organised all events in Skopje, discussed the preliminary results at round table, hosted the workshop for knowledge exchange, and ensured the participation of key stakeholders and unemployed women aged 50 and over.

Partners from Slovakia, [the Institute of Economic Research of the Slovak Academy of Sciences \(IER SAS\)](#), and from Poland, [the University of Information Technology and Management in Rzeszow \(UITM\)](#), prepared independent chapters for each study, based on these countries' specific experiences in activating older participants in the labour market. IER SAS and UITM contributed to the development of research instruments and drew on their extensive experience in addressing the problems older female participants face due to prolonged unemployment, skills deficits, personal traits, and other possible reasons that prevent them from seeking employment, overcoming challenges, and remaining in the labour market as long as possible. Experts from both institutions participated in the round tables organised in Belgrade and Skopje, as well as in the workshops, where they encouraged participants to examine the problem in depth and provide feedback on the proposed solutions.

## **4. METHODOLOGY**

The methodological framework applied in the data collection process is based on a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative and quantitative research designs. The qualitative component consisted of focus group discussions, while the quantitative component involved a questionnaire survey administered to a predefined sample of respondents.

Two focus groups were organized. The first included key stakeholders in the field of employment end policy development, while the second comprised unemployed women aged 50 and over residing in the Skopje region, reflecting the study's focus on local labour market conditions. The stakeholder focus group was conducted prior to the survey, whereas the second focus group took place after the survey had been completed. The quantitative component was based on survey, which was conducted through self-administered printed questionnaires. The sample was later supplemented with an online version of the questionnaire.

### **4.1. Description of the research design**

#### **4.1.1. Qualitative component: focus group discussions (FGs)**

Two focus groups were conducted. The first took place at the Institute of Economics-Skopje on 27 March 2025 and gathered eleven participants representing key stakeholders of the labour market and employment policy. Participants included representatives from the the Employment Service Agency of North Macedonia, Ministry of Economy and Labour, Ministry of Education, State Statistical Office of North Macedonia, Organization of Employers of North Macedonia, Public Institution – Adult Education Centre, representative from lifelong learning centre,

NGOs working with women, Federation of Trade Unions of North Macedonia, representatives from companies and representatives of academia and research organizations.

Participants were selected according to their relevance for the research topic. A preliminary list of potential participants was prepared and invitations were sent by email, followed by telephone contact to confirm attendance. Although several invited individuals were unable to participate due to scheduling constraints, a group of relevant discussants was successfully assembled. The focus group was moderated by two project team members and lasted approximately two and a half hours, during which all planned discussion topics were covered.

The primary objectives of the stakeholder focus group were to assess the general labour market situation of women aged 50+ in Skopje; to identify the specific barriers and disadvantages faced by this group; to examine employers' concerns regarding the employment of older women; to review existing policies and support programmes; to identify gaps and bottlenecks in current measures and to collect proposals for innovative approaches to improving employment opportunities for women in this age category.

The discussion was recorded with the participants' consent, and it was explained that the recordings would be used solely for transcription and qualitative analysis purposes.

The second focus group involved seven unemployed women aged 50 and over from the Skopje region and was held on 28 October 2025, at the Institute of Economics - Skopje. Participants were selected from the women who left their contact in the questionnaire, as well as through personal contacts.

The focus group aimed to identify the key obstacles faced by unemployed women aged 50+ when seeking employment in the Skopje labour market and to explore their experiences with active labour market measures, including their perceived usefulness in reducing long-term unemployment among older women. Within the institutional support framework, this group is classified as hard-to-place individuals and is therefore eligible for targeted assistance.

The discussion followed the same methodological approach as the first focus group, lasted approximately two and a half hours and was moderated by two of the project team's members. All participants remained present throughout the sessions. The discussion guide included the following topics: Employment and previous work experience; Barriers to employment; Skills, training, and education; Personal and family circumstances; Institutional and employer support; Motivational factors; and Support through employment measures.

The discussion was recorded with participants' informed consent and used exclusively for transcription and qualitative research analysis.

#### **4.1.2. Quantitative component: structured questionnaire**

Given that the sampling frame consisted of unemployed women registered with the Employment Service Agency, a non-random sampling approach was adopted. Research units self-selected to participate in the survey based on information provided by employment counsellors. The planned sample size was 150 unemployed women aged 50 and over residing in the Skopje region. The sample criteria included: female unemployed persons aged 50+; registration with the Employment Service Agency branch office in Skopje; a preference was to

be long-term unemployed women; representation from both urban and other municipalities; and diversity in educational attainment. Despite the non-random design, the realized sample closely reflects the structure of registered unemployed women in terms of average age, education level and duration of unemployment, thereby supporting the validity of the sample according to the defined criteria.

The implementation of the questionnaire targeting unemployed women aged 50 and above in the territory of the City of Skopje proved to be a significant challenge. Faced with difficulties in reaching these women quickly and efficiently, the Institute of Economics-Skopje entered into a cooperation agreement with the Employment Service Agency of the Republic of North Macedonia. This agreement enabled the Agency to assist in administering the questionnaire. Access to the respondents was organized through motivational training sessions conducted by the Agency, during which the trainers informed the women about the research and distributed the questionnaire for completion. Since participation was not a mandatory activity for unemployed persons, the women were free to decide whether they wished to complete the questionnaire.

Although the administration of the questionnaire in Skopje, compared to Belgrade, was prolonged by nearly two additional months, unfortunately many of the women refused to respond. In order to avoid the risk of ending up with an insufficient number of completed questionnaires, the project team undertook additional efforts and established contact with non-governmental organizations working on women-related issues to help distribute the questionnaire. Through their support, we received an additional number of completed questionnaires. The final method used to implement the questionnaire involved personal contacts and friends, through whom we attempted to identify unemployed women over the age of 50. Ultimately, the total number of completed questionnaires reached 83.

Despite the relatively smaller sample size, given the awareness of the challenges faced by these women, it can be stated that the majority of the responses reflect the current situation on the labour market in North Macedonia and the situation of long-term unemployment among women aged 50 and above in Skopje.

The survey questionnaire consisted of the following modules:

- Demographic and socio-economic profile (age, education, household composition, income);
- Employment history (previous occupation, duration of unemployment, reasons for job loss);
- Job search and challenges (frequency and channels, perceived obstacles, self-assessment, training needs, willingness to attend courses);
- Financial and emotional impact (financial situation and emotional well-being);
- Support and future plans (type of support, employment formats, policy preferences and expectations);
- Assistance for the unemployed and ALMP (type of assistance, used ALMP, self-employment);

- Performance on job interview (experiences from the job interviews).

The full questionnaire is included in the appendix of the report, together with a brief explanation of the survey’s purpose, which employment advisers used when introducing the study to potential participants.

#### 4.2. Ethical considerations

The project adheres to standard ethical principles:

- Informed consent – Participants will receive a written and oral explanation of research aims, confidentiality and voluntary nature.
- Confidentiality and anonymity – Personal identifiers will not be collected or will be removed during transcription.
- Right to withdraw – Women and stakeholders may withdraw at any moment without consequences.
- Sensitivity to vulnerability – Discussions may touch on unemployment, poverty, discrimination, health or family issues. Moderators will ensure psychological safety and respectful communication.
- Data protection – Data will be stored securely, accessible only to authorised researchers and used exclusively for research purposes.
- No harm principle – The research design avoids any physical, emotional or financial burden on participants.

Ethical approval was obtained, where required, through institutional procedures in each country.

#### 4.3. Data collection timeline

Phase	Activity	Timeframe
Preparatory work	Instruments design	2024: Q4 – 2025: Q1
Qualitative	Focus groups with stakeholders and women (2 FGs) in Belgrade	1 <sup>st</sup> : April 11, 2025 2 <sup>nd</sup> : October 14 & 20, 2025
	Focus groups with stakeholders and women (2 FGs) in Skopje	1 <sup>st</sup> : March 27, 2025 2 <sup>nd</sup> : October 28, 2025
Quantitative	Collection of surveys: 169 questionnaires in Belgrade	1 <sup>st</sup> July – 15 <sup>th</sup> August 2025
	83 questionnaires in Skopje	1 <sup>st</sup> July -15 <sup>th</sup> September 2025
Analysis	Data entry, coding, statistical and thematic analysis	September – October, 2025
Integration and roundtables	Triangulation of results, policy recommendations	2025: Q4
	Roundtable in Belgrade	18 <sup>th</sup> of November 2025
	Roundtable in Skopje	20 <sup>th</sup> of November 2025

<b>Phase</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Timeframe</b>
Dissemination	Reports, publications, leaflets	2026: Q1
	Workshop in Belgrade	27 <sup>th</sup> of January 2026
	Workshop in Skopje	29 <sup>th</sup> of January 2026

This timeline ensures sequential and complementary phases with adequate time for analysis and integration.

#### **4.4. Limitations and challenges**

The research acknowledges several anticipated limitations and challenges:

- First, the sample of unemployed women aged 50 and over who were registered as unemployed may be subject to self-selection bias, as participation in the survey was voluntary. This could potentially affect the relevance beyond the sample of the findings at the regional level. However, a post-survey comparison between the realized sample and official data on registered unemployed women, confirmed a strong correspondence in terms of age structure, education level and duration of unemployment, supporting the representativeness of the sample.
- Second, ensuring the participation of invited stakeholders proved demanding due to time constraints and prior professional commitments. Multiple contact attempts were made, including email invitations, formal letters and follow-up telephone calls, in order to secure either the attendance of the initially invited individuals or alternative representatives from the respective institutions. Due to the time constraints of stakeholders, scheduling focus groups with institutional actors was difficult.
- Third, recruiting unemployed women aged 50 and over for the focus group discussions was particularly challenging. Despite announcements disseminated through digital channels and the websites of relevant institutions, the response rate remained limited. Also, there was the fact that the responses may be influenced by recall bias, social desirability or emotional sensitivity regarding unemployment experience. Some women may feel discomfort discussing health, discrimination or financial struggles, which may limit openness in discussions.
- It is also important to emphasize that no financial or other material incentives were offered to participants in the focus groups. Their participation was entirely voluntary, indicating their genuine interest in the topic and willingness to share personal experiences and perspectives openly and honestly.

Despite these limitations, combining multiple data sources increased validity, while purposive sampling ensured relevance to the target groups.

## **5. CONTEXTUAL OVERVIEW**

### **5.1. Socioeconomic and demographic profile of older women in North Macedonia**

The socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of long-term unemployed women aged 50+ can be determined on the basis of statistical evidence derived from the Labour Force

Survey conducted by the State Statistical Office, as well as from administrative records of the Employment Service Agency of the Republic of North Macedonia.

The analysis of Labour Force Survey (LFS) data indicates that between 2017 and 2024 the number of working-age women aged 50–64 steadily declined from 198,009 to 189,862, representing a decrease of 4.1%. Over the same period, the female labour force in this age group increased from 86,139 to 90,270 (by 4.8%), while the number of employed women rose more markedly, from 72,837 to 84,565, reflecting a 16.1% increase. In contrast, the number of unemployed women decreased sharply by more than 57%, reaching 5,704 in 2024, which accounts for 15.4% of the total number of unemployed women aged 15–64. Although subject to certain fluctuations, the number of inactive women aged 50–64 also recorded an overall decline of 11%, amounting to approximately 100,000 persons. Because of these trends, the unemployment rate among women in this age group fell significantly, from 15.4% in 2017 to 6.3% in 2024.

At first glance, these figures may not seem alarming. However, in the context of persistent labour shortages, particularly in specific occupations, the ongoing emigration of the working-age population, and the continuous challenges employers face in filling vacant positions, every potential worker constitutes an important resource. Therefore, appropriate conditions and targeted measures should be established to facilitate their effective integration into the labour market.

Data from the Employment Service Agency refer to registered unemployment. According to the recent available data (2024), the total number of registered unemployed women in the country amounts to 51,874, representing 52.3% of all unemployed persons. Of these, 19,403 are women aged 50 and over, accounting for 37.4%. In terms of educational attainment, 71.5% of women aged 50+ have no education or only primary education, while 8.7% have incomplete secondary education, meaning that nearly 80% have not completed compulsory education. Furthermore, 16.2% have completed secondary education and only 3.6% possess higher education qualifications (including post-secondary education, university degree, master's and doctoral studies). With regard to the duration of unemployment, 80.2% of women in this age group are long-term unemployed (over one year); 28% have been unemployed for 5–7 years and 13.1% for more than 8 years. By ethnicity, 44.3% are Macedonian, 37% Albanian, and 9.3% Roma.

In the Skopje region the number of registered unemployed women is 11,248, representing 21.7% of the total number on national level. Of these, 4,335 are aged 50 and over (38.5%). The educational structure shows that 80.1% have no or only primary education, 5.4% incomplete secondary education, and 10.2% secondary education. Long-term unemployment affects 82.1% of these women; 31% have been unemployed for 5–7 years and 9.6% for more than 8 years. Regarding ethnic composition, 23.2% are Macedonian, 56.5% Albanian, and 15.6% Roma.

The presented data indicate that, despite the overall decline in unemployment rates among women aged 50–64, long-term unemployment remains a serious structural challenge, particularly for those with low levels of education. The very high share of women without completed compulsory education, combined with the predominance of long-term

unemployment, suggests significant barriers to labour market reintegration, including outdated skills, limited employability and reduced access to quality job opportunities. The situation is even more pronounced in the Skopje region, where long-term unemployment and low educational attainment are highly concentrated among women aged 50+. These findings underline the urgent need for targeted, well-designed active labour market measures, especially training and upskilling programmes, tailored to the specific needs of this vulnerable group.

## **5.2. Relevant policy frameworks**

The policy framework in North Macedonia establishes a comprehensive basis for advancing employment, social inclusion and gender equality, particularly for vulnerable groups. Nevertheless, it does not yet fully address the distinct challenges and labour-market disadvantages experienced by unemployed women aged 50+. However, the unemployment and labour-market integration of women aged 50+ in North Macedonia is addressed within several national strategic and operational policy documents that collectively form the country's employment, social inclusion and gender-equality framework.

Labour-market integration of vulnerable groups is more directly addressed in the National Employment Strategy 2021–2027, adopted by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy of North Macedonia, together with the Employment Action Plan 2021–2023. This strategy explicitly identifies long-term unemployed persons, older workers, women and low-skilled individuals as priority target groups. It emphasizes active labour market policies (ALMPs), lifelong learning, skills upgrading and inclusive labour-market services, providing a strategic framework for interventions targeting unemployed women aged 50+.

Operationalization of these strategic objectives is ensured through the Operational Plans for Active Employment Programmes and Measures and Labour Market Services (the last one is for 2025). These annual plans define concrete programmes, including employment subsidies, training, re-skilling, public works and support for self-employment, with specific provisions for women, older unemployed persons and long-term unemployed individuals. As such, they represent the key implementation instruments through which policy measures targeting unemployed women aged 50+ are applied in practice.

The Strategy for the Development of Women's Entrepreneurship 2019–2023, adopted by the Ministry of Economy of North Macedonia, and its accompanying Action Plan provide a policy basis for promoting women's economic participation through entrepreneurship, self-employment and business development support. Although not exclusively focused on older women, the strategy recognizes structural barriers faced by women with limited access to finance, skills and labour-market opportunities, which is particularly relevant for women aged 50+.

The Strategy for the Formalization of the Informal Economy 2018–2022 further complement this framework by addressing informal employment, which disproportionately affects women, particularly older and low-skilled workers. Measures aimed at formalization, activation and access to social protection are directly relevant for improving labour-market security and employability of women over 50.

Complementary frameworks include the National Strategy for Gender Equality, which addresses structural gender gaps in employment and economic participation; the Strategy for Education and Lifelong Learning, which supports adult education and requalification; and strategic documents of the Employment Service Agency of the Republic of North Macedonia, which guide activation, counselling and profiling services for unemployed persons.

The strategic documents referring to the social protection establish the foundation for a more inclusive and sustainable social protection system, focusing on vulnerable groups at risk of poverty and social exclusion. Given that long-term unemployed women aged 50+ often face cumulative disadvantages, low educational attainment, prolonged labour-market detachment, health limitations and limited access to income sources, this framework is particularly relevant. It promotes improved access to social assistance, social services and activation-oriented measures designed to support labour-market reintegration.

Taken together, these documents provide a coherent national policy framework that supports the activation, employability and labour-market integration of older unemployed women, while highlighting the need for targeted, gender-sensitive and age-responsive measures aligned with demographic ageing and labour-market shortages.

## **6. FINDINGS**

### **6.1. Qualitative findings: Focus groups results**

#### **6.1.1. Focus group with relevant stakeholders**

The focus group with relevant stakeholders was organised to explore and identify the key obstacles faced by unemployed women in Skopje when looking for employment. The discussion brought together representatives involved in the creation and implementation of employment policies, private-sector employers, non-governmental organisations working on labour-market inclusion of older women and other social partners. The exchange of perspectives enabled the development of a shared understanding of the challenges involved, as well as the identification of concrete support mechanisms considered feasible for implementation. These include innovative labour market measures, initiatives to raise employers' awareness of the underutilized female labour force and targeted actions aimed at improving the employability of older women.

The thematic framework for the focus group was developed based on existing policy documents, including national strategies and implementation plans, relevant academic and policy-oriented research, theoretical considerations and expert knowledge.

Participants were selected according to their institutional roles and expertise in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of economic, social and employment policies, as well as their involvement in addressing unemployment among older women. The focus group included representatives from the public employment service in Skopje, relevant ministries, regional development agencies, local chambers of commerce, employers' associations, trade unions and non-governmental organisations working with vulnerable groups. Recruitment was carried out through formal email invitations and follow-up telephone communication. In addition,

participants were informed about the focus group during the project's introductory event, where they were invited as special guests.

The focus group was designed to last approximately three hours and included a scheduled break between the main discussion segments. The discussion was organised around four thematic areas, each further elaborated through guiding questions. The topics were presented using a PowerPoint presentation in the venue where the session was held. An experienced moderator facilitated the discussion, ensuring balanced participation and comprehensive coverage of all themes. At the conclusion of each thematic segment, the moderator guided participants toward summarising key points and agreed conclusions. The constructive and open atmosphere of the session contributed to honest and functional interactions among participants.

The focus group discussion was structured around the following thematic areas:

- General labour-market conditions for women aged 50+
- Challenges and disadvantages faced by women aged 50+
- Existing policies and support measures
- Solutions and innovative approaches

Regarding the quality assurance and research control, the moderator played a central role in maintaining the integrity and flow of the discussion, particularly given the presence of both labour-supply and labour-demand perspectives. This ensured that all planned topics were adequately addressed within the allocated timeframe. The moderated format encouraged open dialogue and balanced participation, contributing to the collection of open, reliable and unbiased insights. Overall, the research process was conducted in a manner that ensured objectivity and alignment with the objectives of the focus group.

#### **6.1.1.1. General labour market conditions for women aged 50+**

##### *Overview of the labour market situation*

At the beginning of the session, participants were provided with statistical data on the labour market situation in North Macedonia, with a particular focus on unemployed women aged 50+ in the Skopje region. This information served as a common analytical basis for the discussion.

Participants agreed that the labour market situation for women aged 50+ in the Skopje region is highly unfavourable. More than half of all registered unemployed women in the country are concentrated in this region, with women aged 50+ accounting for nearly 40% of unemployed women locally. The discussion highlighted that the majority of these women have very low educational attainment, with over four-fifths having no education or only primary education. Long-term unemployment is particularly pronounced, as nearly 83% of unemployed women in this age group have been without work for several years, many for more than five years.

Participants also pointed out that unemployment among women aged 50+ is more prevalent in rural areas of the Skopje region and disproportionately affects ethnic minority groups, particularly Albanian and Roma women. It was further noted that official unemployment figures underestimate the scale of the problem, as many women from this age group are either economically inactive or engaged in informal work.

The discussion converged on the aspect that the disadvantaged position of these women is shaped by a combination of structural and individual factors. Low educational levels, outdated qualifications, gender inequality, economic restructuring, traditional social norms, health issues and declining motivation were repeatedly mentioned. Participants emphasized that re-entry into employment becomes increasingly difficult the longer women remain outside the labour market.

#### *Impact of economic developments and crises*

Participants reflected on the long-term impact of economic development on women aged 50+, particularly the country's transition process. The closure and restructuring of enterprises during the transition period led to mass job losses, pushing many women into long-term unemployment. The historically high unemployment rates experienced during this period were identified as having lasting consequences that continue to shape labour market outcomes today. The COVID-19 crisis was discussed as an additional shock, although participants noted that its negative impact was partly mitigated by government support measures. Nevertheless, the current global economic instability continues to exacerbate existing labour market challenges, including skills mismatches and limited employment opportunities for women.

Participants pointed out that the situation of the women aged 50+ must be understood within broader demographic trends, including population ageing, labour force ageing and intensified emigration abroad. These processes were seen as having critical implications for labour supply and future employment dynamics.

#### *Sectoral employment opportunities*

The discussion identified several sectors in which women aged 50+ are more likely to find employment. These include care services for older or sick persons, retail, hospitality and tourism (particularly cleaning and cooking), agriculture, cleaning and maintenance services and certain crafts.

Participants acknowledged that employment in other sectors is not impossible; however, women's lack of confidence in their skills and experience was highlighted as a major barrier. Representatives from the Employment Service Agency and non-governmental organisations noted that many women are reluctant to engage in training or reskilling, particularly when jobs require new or unfamiliar competencies.

In contrast, employers emphasized that women aged 50+, despite skills gaps, often demonstrate reliability, consistency and strong work ethics derived from life experience. It was also noted that prolonged unemployment leads to the loss of work habits, suggesting the need for habit-formation and activation-oriented training. However, participants agreed that willingness to participate in training is closely linked to financial support, as most women are unwilling or unable to pay for training themselves.

#### *Reasons for poorer labour market outcomes*

Participants identified multiple interrelated demand and supply side factors contributing to poorer labour market outcomes for women aged 50+. Prolonged absence from employment, results in skills obsolescence, making it difficult for these women to compete in a rapidly

changing labour market. Low levels of education, limited digital, soft and entrepreneurial skills and declining self-confidence further compound their disadvantage.

Health issues associated with age were also frequently mentioned as barriers to employment, particularly in physically demanding occupations. In addition, persistent gender inequality was repeatedly emphasized as a structural factor shaping women's labour market position. Participants noted that traditional gender roles, expectations within households and employer perceptions continue to limit women's access to employment opportunities.

#### *Unwillingness to work versus structural constraints*

The issue of unwillingness to work generated diverse perspectives. Some participants argued that women aged 50+ often demonstrate limited willingness to accept formal employment, citing caregiving responsibilities, preference for flexible arrangements, or financial support from family members.

However, representatives from Non-governmental organizations strongly challenged this interpretation, arguing that what appears as unwillingness is often the result of deep-rooted gender inequality and social pressure. Women are frequently expected to prioritise unpaid care work within the household, limiting their autonomy in labour market participation. This dynamic was noted as particularly prevalent among women from more traditional and conservative backgrounds.

Participants also discussed the role of informal employment, highlighting that many women engage in domestic work, caregiving, or agricultural activities as unpaid family workers. Such arrangements offer flexibility and compatibility with family obligations, making formal employment less attractive despite its potential benefits.

Health considerations were again raised as a key factor influencing women's decisions, with participants noting that fear of worsening health conditions often discourages job acceptance.

#### *Long-term unemployment versus inactivity*

The discussion concluded with reflections on the distinction between long-term unemployment and inactivity. Participants agreed that when unemployment extends beyond four to five years, the distinction becomes largely nominal. Despite formal registration with employment services, many long-term unemployed women experience conditions similar to inactivity.

Participants emphasized that regardless of classification, prolonged detachment from the labour market leads to erosion of skills, confidence, self-esteem and overall well-being. These factors significantly reduce employability and contribute to a cycle of continued unemployment or inactivity, underscoring the need for targeted activation and support measures.

#### *Key discussion points:*

- Women over 50 make up a significant portion of the unemployed population, particularly in the region of Skopje.
- The labour market is undergoing demographic and structural changes, including the emigration of younger workers and technological transformation, but older women are often not positioned to take advantage of these shifts.

- Education and qualifications remain a major barrier, especially among women from rural or low-income urban areas who often lack secondary or vocational education.
- Participants emphasized that structural unemployment among women aged 50+ is closely tied to gendered social roles, patriarchal norms and a lack of institutional outreach tailored to this age group.

The conclusion is that there is a strong consensus that the problem is not merely economic, but deeply cultural and systematic. Effective intervention requires a cross-sectoral approach involving education, employment and social policy institutions.

### **6.1.1.2 Challenges and disadvantages faced by women aged 50+**

#### *Challenges women aged 50+ face in accessing job*

The discussion on this thematic area was focused on identifying the structural, social and individual challenges that women aged 50+ face in accessing, retaining and succeeding in employment. Participants approached these challenges from the perspectives of employers, public institutions, civil society organizations and training providers, highlighting the multifaceted nature of labour market disadvantage among older women.

#### *Access to employment and the role of age and gender bias*

Participants identified age as a significant limiting factor in hiring decisions. From the employers' perspective, women aged 50+ are often perceived as lacking up-to-date knowledge and job-specific skills, particularly in sectors undergoing rapid technological and organizational change. Employers expressed concern about the return on investment in training older women, given their shorter remaining working life. Health-related issues were also frequently cited, with employers noting higher absenteeism due to illness or caregiving responsibilities for elderly family members or grandchildren.

In addition, employers reported that some women in this age group show reluctance to participate in training or to adapt to changes in job requirements, which further reduces their attractiveness as potential hires. These perceptions contribute to both explicit and implicit age bias in recruitment processes.

From the perspective of public institutions, a central challenge lies in motivating women aged 50+ to engage in active labour market measures and to accept available job offers. Representatives from the Employment Service Agency noted that some women refuse formal employment in order to retain social assistance benefits while continuing to work in the informal economy.

Civil society representatives emphasized that these patterns must be understood in the context of gender inequality. Many women internalize feelings of inferiority in relation to men and younger workers, reinforcing low self-confidence and fear of failure. Traditional gender roles within families and society further constrain women's choices, as many lack either the desire or the perceived ability to change long-established ways of life. NGO research was cited indicating that a proportion of women appear disengaged from formal employment, being relatively satisfied with informal work arrangements and social transfers.

Despite these challenges, participants agreed that ongoing labour shortages on the Macedonian labour market should prompt greater recognition of the potential contribution of women aged 50+. Employers highlighted their life experience, reliability and work discipline as valuable attributes, particularly in comparison to younger cohorts.

#### *The role of education, skills and work experience in women's employability*

There was broad consensus that low educational attainment, lack of digital skills and limited access to continuous learning significantly reduce employability among women aged 50+. Long-term unemployment was identified as a critical factor contributing to skills obsolescence and reduced competitiveness.

Participants emphasized that rapidly changing job requirements require continuous upskilling, particularly in digital and transversal skills. Greater participation in training and lifelong learning programmes offered by the Employment Service Agency and other institutions was seen as essential for improving employment prospects. However, low motivation, fear of failure and limited confidence, often prevent women from taking advantage of these opportunities.

Training providers strongly underlined the positive impact of skills development, particularly digital skills, on job retention and career development. Participation in training increases confidence, competence and productivity, while reducing stress and fear of workplace change.

Updated skills enable women aged 50+ to access a broader range of employment opportunities, including remote work, administrative roles, customer service, healthcare support and self-employment. Participants agreed that continuous skills development is crucial not only for labour market entry but also for long-term employment stability and advancement.

#### *Psychological and health-related barriers*

Psychological factors emerged as a major constraint in the job-seeking process. Participants noted that many women aged 50+ perceive themselves as “too old” or “not skilled enough”, particularly after prolonged periods outside paid employment due to caregiving or homemaking responsibilities. Fear of rejection, lack of self-confidence and anxiety related to new technologies and fast-paced work environments often discourage women from applying for jobs.

Health-related challenges further complicate labour market participation. Physical health limitations may restrict the types of jobs women can perform, while mental health issues such as anxiety or depression, often linked to social isolation or long-term unemployment, reduce motivation and energy for job search.

Employers confirmed that these factors affect job retention, citing absenteeism, low motivation for skills development and difficulties balancing work with family responsibilities. Participants stressed the importance of continued institutional support through employability programmes, alongside incentives for employers, such as training subsidies or tax benefits when hiring older women.

### *Employment opportunities and age-inclusive sectors*

Participants agreed that caregiving responsibilities represent one of the most significant barriers to job retention and career progression for women aged 50+. Many women continue to provide care for elderly or ill family members and grandchildren even after entering employment, creating ongoing challenges in meeting job demands.

Long-term unemployment exacerbates these difficulties by reducing skills, work experience and self-confidence, limiting opportunities for advancement. Flexible working arrangements, such as part-time work or flexible hours, were discussed as potential solutions that could facilitate labour market entry and retention. However, employers expressed concerns about operational feasibility and the potential misuse of such flexibility.

The discussion identified several sectors that tend to be more age-inclusive and offer opportunities for employment and advancement. These include healthcare and social care, education support roles, retail and customer service, administrative and office work, hospitality and tourism and various forms of self-employment.

Participants noted that many women already possess relevant experience for these sectors, often acquired through informal work. Formalizing these activities through targeted support and training could improve job quality, income security and long-term prospects. Overall, participants concluded that sectors valuing reliability, interpersonal skills and life experience, while also offering opportunities for learning, are best positioned to integrate women aged 50+ into the labour market.

Overall, the discussion revealed that labour market disadvantage among women aged 50+ results from the interaction of age and gender bias, skills mismatches, caregiving responsibilities, health constraints and long-term disengagement from formal employment. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated action across employment services, training systems, employers and social policies.

#### *Key discussion points:*

- Older women face health-related limitations (e.g., menopause, chronic conditions) which are not accommodated in many working environments.
- Digital illiteracy and the absence of lifelong learning opportunities prevent reintegration into the labour market.
- Many women have lost motivation and self-confidence, often after years outside the labour force due to caregiving responsibilities or job loss.
- Stereotypes regarding the productivity and adaptability of older women persist among employers.
- Family dynamics, especially in traditional or rural settings, often reinforce economic dependence on male family members, making job-seeking less likely.
- Opportunities for women 50+ are concentrated in informal sectors, such as caregiving, cleaning, domestic crafts and seasonal or part-time work.

- These jobs are often low-paid, insecure or physically demanding, limiting the potential for stable reintegration.
- There is very limited availability of part-time or flexible work arrangements, although there is significant interest from older women in such formats.
- Participants noted a mismatch between the formal training programs being offered and the actual job opportunities available to this demographic.

Beyond technical skills, this group requires mental health support, social reactivation and targeted motivational strategies. Programs should address not only women, but also their families and communities, to shift perceptions and expectations. Employment programs should consider non-standard job formats (e.g., part-time, home-based, job sharing) and actively recognize informal skills (e.g., caregiving, cooking, manual skills) through certification or micro credentialing.

### **6.1.1.3. Existing policies and support measures**

#### *Overview of institutional support framework*

This thematic area reviewed the existing policy framework, programmes and institutional mechanisms supporting unemployed women aged 50+ on the labour market. The discussion brought together perspectives from public institutions, employers, civil society organizations and training providers, highlighting both the scope of existing measures and the gaps in their implementation.

#### *Social protection and employment-related benefits*

Participants discussed the benefits available to unemployed women aged 50+ who are registered with the Employment Service Agency. It was clarified that, under current legislation, women in this age group are entitled to the same rights and benefits as other unemployed persons. These include access to health insurance in accordance with healthcare regulations, as well as monetary compensation for those who meet the eligibility criteria. In addition, unemployed women who are within 18 months of meeting retirement conditions, but lack the required minimum insurance period, are entitled to pension and disability insurance coverage until they fulfil the necessary requirements. Women who are materially deprived and unable to secure means of subsistence through other regulations may also qualify for social financial support, subject to income and property criteria. Participants noted that while this framework provides a basic safety net, it does not in itself address employability barriers or ensure labour market reintegration.

#### *Active labour market policies and programmes*

The Operational plan for active employment programmes and measures and labour market services was identified as the key strategic and operational document guiding employment policies in North Macedonia. Participants highlighted that the Plan is based on principles of equal regional, ethnic, gender and age representation and that measures are designed to be inclusive rather than targeted exclusively at a single group, in order to avoid discrimination.

The Plan encompasses a broad range of measures, including employment subsidies, support for job creation and self-employment, on-the-job training, training for professional qualifications aligned with employers' needs and programmes for home and community care services. Women aged 50+ are included among the target groups alongside long-term unemployed persons, young people and NEETs.

Participants discussed the use of performance indicators to monitor programme outcomes, with the State Statistical Office and other institutions tracking success rates over several years. Particular attention was given to start-up grants, which require beneficiaries to undergo entrepreneurial training. Employers and business representatives emphasized the value of practical exposure to real business operations, noting that initiatives for formalizing already existing informal activities tend to be more successful than entirely new ventures.

However, divergent views emerged regarding the effectiveness of start-up grants. Some participants expressed concerns about political misuse and questioned their real impact, while representatives of state institutions stressed that monitoring mechanisms, inspections and multi-year evaluations are in place to ensure accountability and assess effectiveness.

#### *Outreach, fieldwork and institutional cooperation*

Participants from the Employment Service Agency emphasized that, although programmes are generally well designed, reaching unemployed women aged 50+, particularly those in rural areas, remains a significant challenge. Limited access to digital tools, low institutional trust and reluctance to participate in formal information sessions reduce programme reach.

The discussion highlighted that conventional communication methods are often ineffective for this group. Instead, informal, face-to-face outreach within local communities was identified as the most successful approach. Small group meetings, typically involving five to ten women, were seen as particularly effective in building trust and encouraging participation.

NGO representatives stressed the crucial role of women's organizations and local coordinators, who often serve as trusted intermediaries. Participants agreed that closer cooperation between state institutions, municipalities and NGOs, potentially formalized through memorandums of cooperation, could significantly improve outreach, counselling and programme implementation. Limited financial resources and staffing constraints within the Employment Service Agency were identified as major obstacles, which could be partly mitigated through stronger inter-institutional collaboration.

#### *Career guidance, counselling and mentorship*

Participants confirmed that all registered unemployed persons, including women aged 50+, are entitled to career guidance and counselling services provided by the Employment Service Agency. These services include vocational testing, interviews, information on labour market demand and individual counselling aimed at aligning personal interests and abilities with labour market opportunities.

While career guidance is formally available, participants suggested that its effectiveness for women aged 50+ depends on tailored approaches that address confidence, motivation and realistic employment pathways. Although mentorship was not discussed as a formalized

system, participants implicitly acknowledged its potential value, particularly when delivered through NGOs, peer networks, or employer-based initiatives.

#### *Reaching unregistered and inactive women aged 50+*

The discussion also addressed the challenge of reaching unemployed and inactive women aged 50+ who are not registered with the Employment Service Agency. Participants emphasized that many of these women possess valuable skills acquired through unpaid household work, caregiving, agriculture or informal economic activities. However, these skills are often unrecognized by the women themselves and therefore they usually remain outside the formal labour market.

Cleaning, cooking, caregiving and agricultural services were identified as areas with labour demand, but many of these activities operate within the informal economy. Participants questioned whether existing state mechanisms are sufficient to formalize these services and support women's labour market entry. While progress has been made, additional regulatory and support mechanisms were deemed necessary.

A specific example discussed was the registry of trained caregivers maintained by the Red Cross of the Republic of North Macedonia. Participants noted that low awareness of this registry, even among public institutions, illustrates broader coordination failures. Strengthening cooperation and information exchange between government institutions, municipalities, NGOs, the Red Cross and training providers was identified as a key priority.

#### *Social norms, care responsibilities and structural constraints*

NGO representatives highlighted that patriarchal norms and traditional gender roles, particularly in rural areas, remain major barriers to labour market participation. Even when women are supported to find employment, many eventually withdraw due to family expectations or caregiving responsibilities for grandchildren or elderly relatives.

Participants shared examples of women leaving paid employment despite successful placement, underscoring the tension between labour market activation policies and deeply rooted social norms. The high cost of formal caregiving services further reinforces women's withdrawal from the labour market.

An illustrative policy example was discussed involving subsidies for agricultural machinery granted to women farmers in 2022. In practice, this measure led to increased formal registration of women, as men registered businesses in their wives' names to access subsidies. While this resulted in short-term improvements in women's employment statistics, participants expressed uncertainty about the long-term sustainability of such effects.

Overall, the discussion revealed that while a comprehensive policy and programme framework exists to support unemployed women aged 50+, its effectiveness is constrained by limited outreach capacity, weak inter-institutional coordination and persistent social norms. Strengthening cooperation between state institutions, municipalities, NGOs and community-based actors, alongside more tailored, trust-based outreach, emerged as a critical condition for improving labour market outcomes for this group.

*Key discussion points:*

- A comprehensive policy and institutional framework exists to support unemployed women aged 50+, but it is general and insufficiently tailored to their specific labour-market barriers.
- Social protection benefits provide a basic safety net (health insurance, monetary compensation, pension coverage close to retirement), yet they do not ensure employability or reintegration.
- Active labour market measures include women aged 50+ as a target group, but mixed views persist on their effectiveness, particularly regarding start-up grants and their real labour-market impact.
- Outreaching remains a major challenge, especially in rural areas. The most effective measures to overcome this are face-to-face, community-based approaches and NGO involvement.
- Career guidance services exist, but their impact depends on tailored counselling addressing confidence, motivation and realistic job pathways.
- Many inactive and unregistered women possess valuable informal skills, which remain unrecognized and difficult to formalize.
- Patriarchal norms and care responsibilities continue to constrain women's employment, often undermining policy interventions.
- Overall effectiveness is limited by weak coordination, limited institutional capacity and persistent social norms, highlighting the need for stronger cooperation and targeted outreach.

This focus group highlighted that unemployment among women aged 50+ is not a marginal issue, but one that intersects with core societal structures such as gender, age, education and health. Addressing it effectively will require a multidimensional strategy that empowers the women themselves while simultaneously transforming the environments in which they live and seek work.

### **6.1.2. Focus group with unemployed women 50+**

The second focus group was organized on October 28, 2025 at the Institute of Economics - Skopje and brought together unemployed women aged 50 and over from the Skopje region. The focus group aimed to explore the lived experiences of older unemployed women and to gain deeper insight into the key barriers preventing their entry and retention in the labour market. The objective was to better understand the factors influencing long-term unemployment, including skills gaps, motivation, health and family constraints, as well as women's perceptions of institutional and employer support and potential solutions for improving their labour market inclusion.

A qualitative focus group methodology was applied to capture in-depth perspectives and shared experiences of unemployed women aged 50+. This approach enabled interactive discussion

and collective reflection on labour market challenges, institutional support mechanisms and individual coping strategies. A semi-structured framework, covering work experience, barriers to employment, skills and training needs, personal and family circumstances, institutional support and motivational factors, guided the discussion.

Participants were selected based on the following criteria: women aged 50 and over, registered as unemployed and residing in the Skopje region. The selection aimed to ensure diversity in educational background, employment history, duration of unemployment and family circumstances. Recruitment was carried out with the support of relevant institutions and local networks, ensuring voluntary participation.

The focus group was conducted in a safe and supportive environment to encourage open and honest discussion. A friendly and respectful atmosphere was established from the outset, enabling participants to freely share their experiences, perceptions and opinions. The discussion was moderated by experienced facilitators and each session was structured around specific thematic areas to ensure coherence and comprehensive coverage of the research objectives.

The focus group discussion was structured around the following thematic areas:

- Work experience
- Barriers to employment
- Skills, training and education
- Personal and family circumstances
- Support from institutions and employers
- Motivational factors
- Support through active employment measures

#### **6.1.2.1. Employment history and previous work experience**

Participants reported diverse employment histories, with most having previous experience in the private sector or self-employment. However, their career trajectories were strongly shaped by family responsibilities, caregiving duties and traditional gender roles. Long-term unemployment, exceeding four years for most participants, is widespread and often linked to job loss, health problems or family-related interruptions. Women emphasized that age discrimination, reduced motivation following prolonged unemployment and the legacy of economic transition significantly limit re-employment opportunities, regardless of education or prior experience.

##### *Overview of participants' employment backgrounds*

The discussion began with an exploration of participants' previous work experience. The women participating in the focus group reported diverse employment trajectories. With the exception of one participant who had never been formally employed, most women had work experience in the private sector and one participant had previously owned a company.

Participants emphasized that their employment histories were strongly shaped by their roles within the family. Many reported prolonged interruptions in paid employment due to childcare responsibilities, caregiving for elderly family members or other unpaid household duties. These responsibilities often took precedence over labour market participation and significantly influenced their long-term attachment to employment.

One participant shared a particularly illustrative experience, explaining that following a divorce, she lost both her ownership stake in a jointly run company and her employment. As a single parent responsible for her children, she faced significant difficulties re-entering the labour market. Most participants reported being unemployed for more than four years, with only one woman experiencing a shorter unemployment spell of approximately one year. In this case, unemployment resulted from health-related issues and the absence of appropriate job reassignment that would have matched her qualifications, experience and changed health condition, ultimately forcing her to leave employment.

#### *Work experience and re-employment prospects*

Participants expressed a shared perception that prior work experience does not necessarily translate into improved re-employment prospects for women aged 50+. While acknowledging the broader economic context and the long and difficult transition process in North Macedonia, women consistently emphasized the role of family responsibilities, social norms, gender inequality and health conditions as more decisive barriers than formal education or qualifications.

Several participants highlighted that even women with higher education—such as degrees in law or engineering—remain unemployed despite being willing to accept jobs below their qualification level. Participants noted that they had previously participated in training or skills-upgrading programmes, yet these efforts had not significantly improved their employment outcomes. Long periods outside the labour market were identified as particularly unfavorable, as they eroded motivation and made re-entry increasingly difficult over time.

#### *Reasons for long-term unemployment*

The discussion identified multiple, interrelated factors contributing to long-term unemployment among women aged 50+. Participants reflected on the historical impact of economic restructuring and enterprise closures during the transition period, which led to widespread job losses and long-lasting labour market exclusion.

At the individual level, participants pointed to age discrimination in hiring processes, skills mismatches, especially in digital and technical domains, as well as the health problems that restrict work capacity. Family obligations, particularly caregiving for elderly parents or grandchildren, were described as major constraints limiting the ability to accept full-time or inflexible employment.

Low wages, insufficient institutional support for retraining and limited availability of flexible work arrangements were cited as additional disincentives. Repeated unsuccessful job searches contributed to declining self-confidence and loss of motivation, reinforcing cycles of prolonged unemployment.

### *Withdrawal from job search and job acceptance*

Participants described job searching as a demanding and discouraging process. Although many were willing to accept entry-level or lower-skilled positions, such as office administrator or sales assistant, they reported that job interviews frequently revealed excessive job requirements. Employers were perceived as combining multiple roles into a single position while offering minimal wages, creating expectations that participants felt were unrealistic and unfair.

Participants emphasized that such practices, combined with a lack of sensitivity to their age and health conditions, contributed significantly to their demotivation. They reported feeling perceived as a burden rather than as potential contributors, which discouraged them from applying for or accepting job offers.

Another recurring theme was the perceived importance of personal connections, recommendations and political affiliations in securing employment in both the private and public sectors. Participants widely agreed that merit-based recruitment was often secondary to informal networks.

### *Informal employment and working without contracts*

The discussion also addressed experiences with informal employment and working without signed contracts. Participants acknowledged that traditional gender roles and employer perceptions place older women in a disadvantaged position in the formal labour market, often leaving informal work as the only viable option.

Women were acutely aware of the negative consequences of informal employment, particularly the lack of pension and social insurance coverage, which they viewed as critical for future security. Nevertheless, many reported accepting such work out of necessity. Typical informal jobs included cleaning, sales, hairdressing, sewing and similar services.

Despite recognizing the risks, participants described informal work as a means of securing income, maintaining a sense of usefulness and preserving self-esteem. For many, it represented a coping strategy in the absence of accessible and appropriate formal employment opportunities.

Overall, the discussion revealed that women's labour market trajectories are deeply shaped by family roles, gender norms and structural barriers rather than by lack of work experience alone. Long-term unemployment emerges not as a consequence of individual choice, but as the cumulative outcome of economic restructuring, inadequate institutional support, persistent discrimination and constrained employment conditions.

### **6.1.2.2. Barriers to employment**

#### *Perceived employment barriers and labour market exclusion*

Participants in the focus group consistently emphasized that distinctions between short-term unemployment, long-term unemployment and inactivity are of limited relevance from their perspective. Instead, they stressed that prolonged detachment from employment fundamentally

undermines their knowledge, skills, self-confidence, self-esteem and overall well-being. These cumulative effects significantly constrain their ability to re-enter the labour market.

Women demonstrated a clear awareness of ongoing demographic and structural changes in the labour market, including the emigration of younger workers and rapid technological transformation. Despite recognizing these shifts, participants reported that they are rarely positioned to benefit from emerging opportunities. Age-related barriers were described as particularly pronounced, as women felt they lacked up-to-date skills required for many positions and faced substantial difficulties in acquiring new competencies.

Participants perceived employers as largely unwilling to invest in their training, citing age and shorter remaining working lives as key reasons. As a result, women aged 50+ were often described as being viewed as “lost investments.” Health-related issues associated with ageing were also identified as major barriers, with participants reporting that employers frequently prioritize younger candidates due to concerns about absenteeism and reduced work capacity.

In addition, women noted that adapting to workplace changes often requires more time and support, including access to tailored training. However, such opportunities were described as limited or inaccessible, further reinforcing labour market exclusion.

#### *Intersection of age, gender and structural disadvantages*

Participants unanimously agreed that age and gender discrimination, combined with interrupted career trajectories, lack of professional networks and limited or outdated qualifications, represent the primary reasons for high unemployment rates among women aged 50+. Career breaks related to caregiving responsibilities were seen as particularly negative, as they weaken labour market attachment and reduce access to professional contacts.

Women expressed a strong perception that institutional support mechanisms are insufficiently responsive to their needs. Many argued that the role of public employment institutions requires substantial reassessment and strengthening in order to provide more dedicated, targeted and proactive support for this demographic group. Participants also highlighted the underutilized potential of private employment agencies, suggesting that they could play a more active intermediary role between jobseekers and employers.

Several practical suggestions were raised to improve labour market access. Participants proposed the use of SMS-based notification systems to inform them about available training opportunities funded by the government or employers, as well as the regular dissemination of up-to-date job vacancies via email. Such tools were seen as practical, low-cost measures that could significantly reduce the burden of job searching and improve access to employment opportunities.

#### *Perceived strengths and untapped potential*

Despite the extensive barriers discussed, participants highlighted their life experience, reliability and consistency as key strengths that remain undervalued in the labour market. In comparison with younger workers, women emphasized their strong work ethic, sense of responsibility and commitment, suggesting that these attributes could be better leveraged if supported by appropriate institutional mechanisms and employer incentives.

The discussion revealed that key barriers are the limited digital and technical skills, declining health and employers' reluctance to invest in training older workers. Participants frequently reported feeling perceived as a "burden" rather than as a resource. Structural labour market changes, weak job mediation and insufficient institutional responsiveness further aggravate exclusion. Participants expressed dissatisfaction with the Employment Service Agency, particularly regarding communication and outreach and suggested systematic use of digital channels (e.g. SMS and email notifications) to improve access to information.

Based on the abovementioned, the barriers to employment for women aged 50+ are not limited to skills deficits alone, but are deeply embedded in age and gender bias, inadequate institutional mediation and limited access to tailored training and information. Addressing these barriers requires a shift from passive employment services towards more proactive, targeted and trust-based support mechanisms.

### **6.1.2.3. Skills, training, and education**

#### *Labour market knowledge and skill requirements and perceived skills gaps*

Labour market demands increasingly prioritize digital literacy, language skills, adaptability and certified competencies. Many women aged 50+ lack these skills due to limited access to lifelong learning.

Participants demonstrated a clear understanding of the skills and competencies increasingly required in the contemporary labour market. They noted that ongoing processes of digitalization, globalization and economic restructuring have significantly altered job requirements, with employers placing growing emphasis on a combination of technical, digital and soft skills.

Women identified basic and advanced digital skills, such as the use of office software, online communication tools and digital platforms for work and sales, as particularly important. Foreign language proficiency, especially English, as well as possession of vocational licenses and certificates confirming professional qualifications, were also perceived as key prerequisites for employment. In addition, participants recognized that employers increasingly value adaptability, communication, teamwork, problem-solving skills and the ability to learn and apply new technologies.

Despite this awareness, many women reported substantial difficulties in meeting these requirements. Limited access to continuous education and training throughout their working lives, combined with long periods of unemployment, has resulted in outdated skills and a lack of formal certification. While participants emphasized their extensive work experience, reliability and strong interpersonal skills, they acknowledged that these attributes are often insufficient to compensate for missing digital competencies or officially recognized qualifications. This mismatch between their existing skills and labour market demands was described as a major barrier to employability and a significant source of insecurity and reduced self-confidence during job search.

### *Training needs and institutional support*

Participants stressed that improving access to education and training tailored to women aged 50+ is essential for enhancing employability. They emphasized the need for short, practical and accessible training programmes that respond to their specific learning needs, pace and life circumstances. Lifelong learning opportunities were seen as particularly important, especially when combined with recognition of prior learning and informal work experience.

Women highlighted the importance of targeted digital literacy and foreign language training, alongside career guidance and motivational support. Such integrated approaches were viewed as necessary not only to improve technical skills, but also to rebuild confidence and encourage active engagement in job search.

Participants also underlined the need for stronger coordination between educational institutions, the Employment Service Agency and employers. Better alignment between training content and actual labour market needs was perceived as a prerequisite for effective reintegration, ensuring that training leads to real employment opportunities rather than remaining a formal requirement without tangible outcomes.

### *Retraining, skills upgrading and employment prospects*

There was broad consensus among participants that retraining and skills upgrading can play a crucial role in reducing unemployment among women aged 50+. Participants recognized that rapidly changing working conditions affect all workers, regardless of age and that continuous skills development is essential for maintaining employability.

Women expressed willingness to participate in training and lifelong learning programmes, provided that such opportunities are accessible, relevant and supported by institutions. Engagement in training was seen as a necessary step towards regaining labour market relevance and increasing chances of employment.

### *Recognition of informal skills and creative activities*

An important suggestion that emerged from the discussion was the recognition and valorization of skills acquired through informal and creative activities. Participants described a wide range of products they create in their free time, including handmade jewellery, knitted hats, gloves and scarves, sewn clothing items and homemade food products. These activities were often perceived as hobbies rather than economic opportunities, despite requiring significant skill, effort and creativity.

Participants suggested that targeted measures providing financial and logistical support for the promotion and market placement of such products could help transform informal skills into recognized sources of income. Supporting the presentation, certification and marketing of these products was seen as a way to acknowledge women's existing competencies, enhance self-esteem and facilitate entry into formal or semi-formal economic activities.

Overall, the discussion highlighted that skills deficits among women aged 50+ are not solely a result of individual shortcomings, but reflect long-standing gaps in access to continuous education, certification and institutional support. Addressing these challenges requires a dual

approach: upgrading formal skills in line with labour market needs, while recognizing informal competencies already possessed by this group.

As a conclusion, participants identified retraining and short, practical, targeted training programmes as critical for improving employability. They also stressed the importance of recognizing informal skills acquired through life experience and supported initiatives to formalize and commercialize creative and home-based activities, such as handmade products and food preparation.

#### **6.1.2.4. Personal and family circumstances**

##### *Impact of personal and family responsibilities on employment*

Participants consistently emphasized that personal and family circumstances play a decisive role in shaping their labour market trajectories. Care responsibilities, including caring for spouses, elderly parents and grandchildren, were described as dominant factors influencing both job search behavior and the ability to retain employment. These responsibilities are deeply rooted in traditional gender roles, which continue to assign unpaid care work primarily to women.

Many participants reported that long-standing societal expectations position women as primary caregivers, often at the expense of their professional aspirations. Participants noted that such perceptions undermine self-confidence and reduce motivation to seek employment, particularly when combined with fears of not being able to meet job expectations due to skills gaps or health limitations.

Health-related issues were also highlighted as an important constraint, affecting both the type of work women can perform and their willingness to engage in employment that may jeopardize their physical well-being. These combined pressures often result in withdrawal from active job search or reluctance to accept available positions.

Despite these challenges, participants acknowledged that labour shortages in the Macedonian labour market could represent an opportunity for women aged 50+. They agreed that, with adequate motivation, skills upgrading and institutional support, their life experience, reliability and consistency could be better utilized. Participants compared these attributes with what they perceived as lower commitment and stability among younger workers, arguing that their potential contribution remains underestimated.

Drawing on their personal experiences, participants offered several recommendations aimed at improving labour market inclusion for women facing similar challenges. They emphasized that many women aged 50+ possess valuable informal skills acquired through caregiving, homemaking, hairdressing, typing and other activities, which remain unpaid and unrecognized in the formal economy. Participants argued that formal recognition of such skills requires targeted legal and regulatory changes.

They stressed the importance of accessible and flexible vocational training programmes tailored to older women, including part-time, online or locally delivered courses. Training should focus on sectors aligned with both local labour demand and women's interests, such as

healthcare, education support, retail, hospitality and basic administrative services. Improving digital literacy was identified as a cross-cutting priority.

Participants also highlighted the need for career counselling and mentoring services to support women in identifying suitable employment opportunities, preparing CVs and navigating job interviews. Flexible working arrangements, including part-time employment and adaptable working hours, were viewed as essential for balancing paid work with ongoing family responsibilities. Overall, participants acknowledged that successful labour market integration requires a comprehensive and coordinated approach rather than isolated measures.

#### *Accepting jobs below expectations: Conditions and limits*

Participants generally agreed that accepting jobs below their initial expectations may be necessary as a pathway out of unemployment. However, they clearly distinguished between compromise and exploitation. A job was considered acceptable if it offered regulated working hours, appropriate equipment, clearly defined responsibilities aligned with qualifications and health conditions and respectful treatment regardless of age or gender.

The main point of contention was not the level of work itself, but the conditions attached to many job offers. Participants reported that job advertisements frequently combine responsibilities from multiple positions into a single role, while offering only minimum wages. For example, positions advertised as sales assistants often require digital skills, proficiency in office software, invoice preparation, inventory management and foreign language skills, without corresponding compensation.

Participants emphasized that such expectations make many job offers economically and physically unsustainable, particularly given their health constraints and caregiving responsibilities. As a result, they cannot afford to accept jobs that demand high levels of responsibility and continuous upskilling while offering minimal financial security.

The discussion demonstrates that personal and family circumstances are not peripheral but central to understanding women's labour market behavior. Employment decisions among women aged 50+ are shaped by the intersection of caregiving responsibilities, health limitations, gender norms and the quality of available jobs. Policies aimed at increasing employment in this group must therefore address not only employability, but also job quality, flexibility and social support systems.

In conclusion, traditional gender roles and caregiving responsibilities remain major constraints on labour market participation. Health issues, self-doubt and reduced motivation further limit job search efforts. Nevertheless, participants highlighted that demographic decline and labour shortages in North Macedonia create an opportunity to reassess the role of older women in the workforce. They stressed that maturity, reliability and extensive life experience should be recognized as assets rather than barriers.

#### **6.1.2.5. Support from institutions and employers**

##### *Expectations from employment services and state institutions*

Participants emphasized that institutional support for unemployed women aged 50+ should move beyond generic employment measures and focus explicitly on overcoming long-term

unemployment, the digital divide, age- and gender-based stereotypes and the undervaluation of women's experience. Women stressed that they seek employment options that ensure financial independence, stability and a degree of control over working time, particularly in light of persistent family and caregiving responsibilities.

Participants highlighted that their maturity, life experience and work ethics should be treated as assets rather than liabilities. In this context, they expressed a strong preference for secure and sustainable employment solutions, rather than short-term or temporary interventions that do not address their long-term economic security.

A major barrier identified was the gap in digital skills and difficulties keeping pace with technological change. Participants argued that broad or theoretical training programmes are of limited value and should be replaced with practical, short and targeted digital training that leads to immediate improvements in employability. Following prolonged unemployment, psychological support and confidence-building interventions were also seen as essential components of effective support.

Women proposed that institutions expand targeted grants and training for self-employment, building on existing self-employment measures. Such support was viewed as particularly effective because it bypasses employer-related barriers and enables women to leverage their existing skills. Participants also stressed the importance of training in essential workplace tools, including Microsoft Office, email communication, basic database management and specialized skills for remote work, such as freelancing and virtual administrative support. They expected the Employment Service Agency to play a more active role in connecting them with employers in sectors such as administration, accounting, education and elder care. Structured programmes enabling women to transfer their experience through mentoring younger workers were also considered highly valuable.

#### *Role of private employment agencies*

Participants reported limited reliance on private employment agencies, perceiving them as largely uninterested in older, long-term unemployed women. According to the participants, private agencies tend to focus primarily on younger jobseekers, leaving older women excluded from their services.

As a result, participants placed greater expectations on the Employment Service Agency to adopt a more proactive and interactive role. They repeated the importance of targeted grants and self-employment measures, including innovative approaches such as combined family-based self-employment schemes (for example, supporting joint self-employment initiatives involving unemployed women aged 50+ and younger family members). Such measures were seen as practical ways to overcome employer reluctance and promote intergenerational economic activity.

#### *Employers' role in labour market integration*

Participants viewed employers as central actors in improving employment outcomes for women aged 50+. They stressed that employers should be encouraged to make greater use of active labour market measures and subsidies provided by the Employment Service Agency.

Beyond existing incentives, participants suggested that employers, in cooperation with business associations, should advocate for higher or longer-lasting subsidies specifically targeted at hiring long-term unemployed women over 50. Structured workplace programmes that allow women to gradually re-enter employment, supported by mentoring arrangements with younger workers, were identified as particularly effective. Flexibility in work organization was also seen as critical for enabling sustainable employment while accommodating health and family-related constraints.

#### *Importance of other institutions and actors*

Local municipalities were identified among the most crucial institutions for addressing long-term unemployment among older women. Participants emphasized that municipalities are the closest institutional actors to citizens and can play a key role in outreach, guidance and trust building. By working closely with local offices of the Employment Service Agency, municipalities could help bridge communication gaps and compensate for limited institutional capacity and staffing constraints.

Non-governmental organizations were also recognized as vital intermediaries. Participants highlighted NGOs' ability to reach vulnerable women, provide mentorship, guide them towards suitable training opportunities and support them throughout the job application process. NGOs were perceived as particularly effective in offering personalized, trust-based support.

The role of career guidance services was strongly emphasized. Participants stressed the need for career counsellors trained in addressing prejudice, rebuilding self-confidence and supporting older women in identifying realistic and dignified employment pathways.

#### *Institutional relevance and need for coordination*

When asked to assess institutional relevance, participants consistently ranked the Employment Service Agency as the most important actor, given its direct role in job matching, training provision and counselling. The Ministry of Economy and Labour and local municipalities were also identified as key institutions responsible for designing and implementing targeted employment measures and providing social support at the community level.

Educational and academic institutions were seen as important partners in retraining, mentoring and entrepreneurial skills development, while NGOs contributed through empowerment, motivation and personalized guidance. Participants stressed that effective cooperation and coordination among all these institutions is essential for achieving sustainable labour market integration of women aged 50+.

The discussion highlights that institutional support for women aged 50+ must be proactive, coordinated and tailored to their specific life circumstances. Effective interventions require not only skills development and financial incentives, but also psychological support, flexible employment arrangements and strong cooperation between public institutions, employers, municipalities, educational bodies and civil society.

Considering all previously said, it was clear that the participants called for targeted institutional support, including practical digital training, psychological counselling and accessible self-employment grants. They emphasized the need for stronger cooperation between the

Employment Service Agency, NGOs, local municipalities and academic institutions to deliver personalized and trust-based assistance. Employers were encouraged to make greater use of wage subsidies, value older women's experience and develop mentoring schemes linking older and younger workers. Local municipalities were identified as the most accessible entry point for unemployed women aged 50+, particularly at the community level. NGOs and career guidance services were seen as essential providers of mentoring, counselling and empowerment. Effective coordination among municipalities, the Employment Service Agency, NGOs and the Ministry of Economy and Labour was considered crucial for overcoming long-term unemployment among older women.

#### **6.1.2.6. Motivational factors**

##### *Awareness of labour market position and structural constraints*

Participants demonstrated a clear and realistic awareness of their position on the labour market. They acknowledged that women aged 50+ are rarely the first choice for employers and are not a primary target group in the design of employment measures, given the non-selective nature of public labour market policies. This awareness contributed to a shared perception of being in an unfavorable position when seeking employment.

Despite these structural constraints, participants did not express resignation. Instead, they articulated a range of motivational factors that continue to encourage their interest in labour market participation, even under adverse conditions.

##### *Key motivators for labour market participation*

Participants emphasized that their motivation to seek employment is shaped by a combination of financial, social and personal factors. Financial security emerged as the most dominant motivator. The need for a stable and regular income was closely linked to financial independence, long-term security and the ability to meet retirement eligibility requirements. Continued employment was seen as a way to ensure pension contributions, reduce dependence on family members and maintain independence in later life.

Beyond financial considerations, participants highlighted the importance of keeping a sense of usefulness, independence and self-worth. Employment was perceived as a source of dignity and social recognition, providing opportunities for social interaction, learning and personal development. Many women associated work with feeling valued and included in society, rather than marginalized or dependent.

Learning new skills and engaging with other people were also identified as important motivational drivers, particularly for women seeking to remain mentally active and socially connected. Expectations from future employment included respect, flexibility and the opportunity to contribute accumulated life and professional experience.

##### *Individual motivational priorities*

When reflecting on personal priorities, participants consistently identified financial stability, social interaction, personal fulfilment and self-worth as the most important motivating factors. For some women, health-related considerations played an additional role. Access to health and

social insurance was described as a critical source of security, particularly for those managing chronic health conditions.

Specific personal circumstances further shaped motivation. One participant emphasized financial independence as essential due to her responsibility for caring for an elderly family member. Another highlighted the necessity of stable employment as a single parent following marital separation, stressing the need to secure her children's future.

One participant described how employment would alleviate the psychological burden of being the sole income provider in a household where both spouses are unemployed. While she currently supplements household income through informal sewing work at home, she viewed formal employment in the textile sector as a pathway to stable income, reduced stress and improved quality of life.

Across the group, participants agreed that employment would enhance self-confidence, improve mental and physical well-being and support continued social engagement.

#### *Influence of motivation on job preferences*

Motivational factors strongly influenced the type of employment participants were willing to accept. Stable and secure jobs offering regular income, social and health insurance and safe working conditions were clearly preferred. Participants expressed openness to jobs that enable social interaction, learning opportunities and meaningful contributions to their communities.

Flexibility emerged as a critical condition, particularly for women with health limitations or ongoing caregiving responsibilities. Supportive work environments that acknowledge personal constraints and value experience were seen as essential for sustainable employment.

Participants also expressed interest in self-employment as an alternative pathway, provided that adequate institutional support is available. This support was understood to include not only financial assistance, but also professional guidance, business planning support and legal and administrative advice. Self-employment was viewed as a way to combine income with flexibility, independence and skill utilization.

#### *Additional factors encouraging job acceptance*

Several practical and contextual factors were identified as decisive in accepting a job offer. These included a respectful and supportive workplace culture, reasonable working hours, proximity of the workplace to home and fair wages. Stable employment contracts and opportunities for professional development were also considered important.

Participants stressed that recognition of prior experience and skills, as well as a healthy work-life balance, would significantly increase their willingness to accept employment. Feeling appreciated and having the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to an organization were described as powerful motivators.

#### *Factors contributing to demotivation*

Participants identified multiple factors that discourage job search and job acceptance. Low wages and unstable or short-term contracts were among the strongest demotivating factors, as

they fail to provide sufficient financial security. Poor working conditions, lack of respect from employers and limited opportunities for advancement or training further reduced motivation.

Health issues, long commuting distances and difficulties in balancing work with family responsibilities were also cited as significant barriers. Participants expressed particular frustration when their qualifications and work experience were undervalued or when age discrimination limited their employment opportunities.

The discussion indicated that women aged 50+ remain strongly motivated to work, despite structural exclusion and repeated setbacks. Motivation is driven not only by economic necessity, but also by the pursuit of dignity, independence and social inclusion. However, motivation alone is insufficient in the absence of decent job quality, institutional support and age-sensitive employment practices.

A conclusion is that the financial stability, independence and preparation for retirement emerged as the strongest motivators for labour market participation. Social interaction, personal fulfilment and a sense of usefulness were also highly valued. Many women expressed willingness to accept jobs below their initial expectations, provided that working conditions are fair, dignified and compatible with their health and skills. Self-employment was viewed as an attractive option when supported by adequate institutional, financial and academic assistance. Employment was perceived not only as a source of income, but as a pathway to dignity, self-confidence and improved mental well-being.

#### **6.1.2.7. Support through active employment measures**

##### *Awareness and access to active employment measures*

Participants demonstrated a relatively high level of awareness of the active employment measures implemented by the Employment Service Agency of the Republic of North Macedonia. They were familiar with various forms of support, including financial assistance for unemployed persons, information on job vacancies, active employment programmes and measures, training opportunities and support for self-employment.

However, despite this general awareness, participants expressed dissatisfaction with the way information about active employment measures is communicated. Many women reported that they often learn about available programmes through informal channels, such as personal contacts, friends or acquaintances, rather than through systematic communication from the Employment Service Agency. Participants emphasized that information provision should be more frequent, transparent and structured, suggesting regular communication via email or SMS as a practical improvement. They perceived existing communication practices as insufficiently proactive and not tailored to their needs.

##### *Perceived gaps in targeting women aged 50+*

Participants consistently noted that existing active employment measures are not specifically designed to address the needs of long-term unemployed women aged 50+. While measures are formally open to multiple categories of unemployed persons, women felt that they are effectively disadvantaged when competing with younger jobseekers who possess greater mobility, digital skills and fewer health or family constraints.

A particular concern was raised regarding eligibility criteria for certain measures. Participants cited the example of self-employment support, which is restricted to unemployed persons below a certain age threshold, thereby excluding women aged 50+ or limiting their access. According to the participants, none of the existing measures are explicitly targeted at unemployed women over 50, which significantly reduces their chances of benefiting from state support. They agreed that the introduction of measures specifically dedicated to this group would represent a major step forward in improving their employment prospects.

#### *Experience with existing support measures*

Participants reported direct experience with a wide range of active employment measures, including job search assistance, employment counselling, preparation of CVs and motivation letters, support for self-employment, wage subsidies, training for occupations in demand, public and municipally beneficial work, employment mediation upon employer request and on-the-job training.

All participants had attended motivational training sessions, through which they also became informed about the present project addressing the challenges faced by unemployed women aged 50+. While acknowledging the value of these measures, participants expressed the view that interaction with the Employment Service Agency should be more continuous and personalized, rather than limited to sporadic contacts linked to specific programmes.

#### *Assessment of the relevance of active employment measures*

Participants emphasized that nearly all active employment measures are relevant for improving employment opportunities for women aged 50+. Nevertheless, they identified several interventions as particularly important.

Support for self-employment was considered one of the most effective measures, as it enables women to generate income independently and engage in flexible forms of work that are compatible with their health conditions and family responsibilities. On-the-job training, designed in cooperation with employers, was also highlighted as highly valuable, as it allows women to acquire practical, job-specific skills directly linked to available positions.

Personalized career counselling and vocational guidance were viewed as essential for identifying realistic employment pathways, strengthening job-search skills and rebuilding confidence after prolonged unemployment. Wage subsidy programmes were seen as crucial incentives for employers, helping to offset perceived risks associated with hiring older women. Motivational and activation programmes were described as particularly important for re-engaging long-term unemployed women and supporting their gradual reintegration into the labour market.

#### *Messages to state institutions and policy implications*

In their concluding reflections, participants addressed a clear message to relevant state institutions. They emphasized that women aged 50+ represent a valuable but underutilized segment of the labour force, whose potential can only be realized through inclusive, age-sensitive and human-centered employment policies.

Participants stressed the need to strengthen lifelong learning and skills development opportunities, particularly in digital literacy and occupations in demand on the labour market. Support for self-employment should be expanded beyond financial assistance to include mentoring, especially from academic and professional experts, to assist women in business planning, market research and legal compliance.

The Employment Service Agency was encouraged to adopt a more interactive and supportive role, with motivated staff working in closer cooperation with NGOs, volunteers and local actors to provide continuous and personalized assistance. Such collaboration was seen as essential for building trust and ensuring sustained engagement.

Finally, participants emphasized that institutions should approach unemployed women aged 50+ not merely as statistical categories, but as capable individuals with experience, resilience and a strong desire to contribute meaningfully to society and the economy.

The discussion revealed that while a wide range of active employment measures exists, their impact on women aged 50+ is limited by insufficient targeting, weak communication and competitive access conditions. Improving effectiveness requires dedicated measures, proactive outreach and a more personalized, trust-based approach that recognizes both the structural barriers and the human dimension of long-term unemployment.

The main point from the discussion on this thematic area is that the participants were generally aware of existing active employment measures but viewed them as insufficiently targeted to women aged 50+. The most valued interventions included self-employment support, on-the-job training, personalized counselling and wage subsidies for employers. Participants stressed the need for more interactive engagement with institutions and inclusive policies that recognize older women as capable contributors rather than marginalized jobseekers.

The findings demonstrate that unemployed women aged 50+ in North Macedonia face multiple, overlapping barriers to employment rooted in economic transition, entrenched gender norms, skills mismatches and institutional limitations. Despite these challenges, women in this age group remain motivated to work and possess significant experience, resilience and adaptability.

Effective labour market reintegration requires comprehensive, age-sensitive policies that prioritize lifelong learning, digital upskilling, flexible work arrangements and support for self-employment and entrepreneurship. Strengthened cooperation among state institutions, local municipalities, NGOs, employers and academic institutions is essential to unlock the full potential of this underutilized segment of the labour force and to promote inclusive and sustainable employment outcomes.

### **6.1.3. Differences and similarities between the Belgrade and Skopje regions**

While overall labour market conditions for women aged 50 and over are largely comparable in the Belgrade and Skopje regions, particularly regarding to the unfavourable age structure of registered female unemployment, which indicates a significant share of women in the 50+ age group, certain *differences* remain, primarily in the scope and design of institutional support available to this age group. These include the following:

- Labour markets tend to move in similar directions, reflecting the persistent status of long-term unemployed women and highlighting the importance of youth policies due to high unemployment and the uncertain transition from school to work. Unfavourable demographics and structural changes put pressure on young people, who often seek opportunities abroad and are more willing to adapt to technological changes. These shifts affect older women to a lesser or even negative extent due to significant gaps in digital literacy and lower propensity to mobility.
- Sectors providing employment opportunities in the Belgrade region, such as hospitality, tourism, tailoring and other crafts, agriculture, healthcare, and especially caregiving services in social welfare institutions for the elderly, are similar to those in the Skopje region. However, pronounced informal employment is present in the North Macedonian labour market to an even greater extent. Some changes in Serbia's regulatory system have reversed an otherwise growing trend in informal employment. The institutional framework for seasonal employment in agriculture in Serbia has contributed to the formalisation of work. The institutional framework is evolving further with the extension of this practice, considering the establishment of a special law that will involve the hospitality, tourism, domestic assistance, and residential building maintenance sectors – sectors that predominantly employ women, including older women – ensuring more formal employment and greater security.
- Regarding support through active labour market policy measures, neither Serbia nor North Macedonia provides specialized employment services tailored specifically to this age group of unemployed women. However, in the Serbian employment support system, implemented through the National Employment Service, a special category of hard-to-employ individuals is recognized. This broader group includes people aged 50 and over, women, and the long-term unemployed, but no specific effort is made to increase employment opportunities specifically targeting women aged 50 and over who are long-term unemployed.
- To reach and activate inactive individuals not recorded in the unemployment register, the Belgrade branch office of the National Employment Service introduced an activity aimed at reaching inactive individuals. Although this measure is primarily targeted at young people, older women may also benefit from accessing information in local communities designed to inform the non-employed about opportunities and encourage them to become active in their job search. However, for this measure to be effective, a good communication strategy with potential beneficiaries, specifically women aged 50 and over, is of primary importance. There is still limited knowledge about the effects of this measure. The labour market in the Skopje region still lacks institutional outreach tailored to women aged 50 and over.

The *similarities* identified through the views of relevant stakeholders include the following general trends:

- Low employment prospects for women aged 50 and over in both labour markets are linked to a lack of digital and other transversal skills, an inadequate level of education

or insufficient qualifications at both secondary and tertiary levels, prolonged absence from the labour market, reduced motivation to search for jobs, and health or other personal issues that make reintegration of older women into the labour market more difficult.

- Employment opportunities through subsidies for self-employment are institutionally available in Serbia via support from the National Employment Service, Ministry of Economy, Development Fund, and RADEI. However, administrative inconsistencies and security measures prevent older women from accessing these funds. Although self-employment grants from the National Employment Service are available, a small number of women 50+ are interested in using these grants, mainly due to a lack of self-confidence and insufficient additional resources to ensure the sustainability of such business ventures. In North Macedonia, employment support measures include women aged 50 and over as a target group, but there is limited knowledge about the effectiveness of start-up grants and their actual impact on the labour market.
- In addition to personal and structural barriers to entering the labour market under fair and inclusive conditions, employers' concerns and age discrimination also hinder higher hiring rates among older women. A lack of age-inclusive working environments, limited flexible employment options, and low tolerance for health issues or caregiving responsibilities place older female workers in a group perceived as less productive and less employable. This situation characterises both labour markets, despite recent developments indicating that older workers in general are valued for their experience, reliability, and dedication.

When considering women's self-evaluation of employment opportunities in the Belgrade and Skopje labour markets, based on focus group conclusions consisting of unemployed women aged 50 and over, there are almost *no significant differences* between the two markets, except for cultural and ethnic divisions, which are less apparent in the Belgrade region. There are some common conclusions worth mentioning:

- Women rated the reasons for long-term absence from the labour market, giving the greatest weight to personal factors, both in significance and variety, followed by structural and economic factors. Personal factors include health and physical limitations, family and caregiving responsibilities, psychological issues, lower flexibility regarding variable schedules and work formats, feelings of disrespect and undervaluation of their experience connected to lower actual wages, and facing age discrimination in the form of age-related scepticism from employers due to doubts about productivity and adaptability. There is also a mismatch between advertised and actual job conditions, leading to disappointment and withdrawal. Structural factors are primarily embodied in skills mismatch, which arises because older workers may develop barriers due to not adapting to technological shifts, particularly given employers' lower intent to train older workers and provide upskilling. Economic factors in both countries are linked to late and prolonged transitions.

- All these factors constitute barriers to employment. In addition to those already mentioned, women in particular highlighted age and gender bias, inadequate institutional mediation between unemployed women and potential employers, limited access to active labour market policy measures – especially tailored training – absence of tailored counselling and career guidance, and poor flow of information about support measures. The absence of motivational factors may also create a barrier to more active engagement in job searching. Therefore, keeping motivational factors high on the priority list can help older women regain self-confidence and adopt a more active approach to job searching.
- When requirements for skills, training, and education are considered, women highlighted the importance of their own experience in the job search process. Among basic skills, they identified gaps in digital skills and foreign languages, in addition to job-related skills, which are usually provided in the workplace. Some soft skills are in high demand, such as adaptability, communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and the ability to learn and apply new technologies. Therefore, potential needs for tailored training can be linked to improving these skills, along with increasing access to lifelong learning opportunities. Unemployed women aged 50 and over would rely more on institutional support. Recognition of prior knowledge and micro-credentialing are highlighted as methods of increasing the skills portfolio.
- Among personal and family circumstances, care responsibilities were identified as the main factors limiting job search activities and the ability to retain employment. When institutional support is restored, women prioritise external support, such as organizing networking workshops, increasing public employment service adviser awareness, and reducing employer prejudice, as key to improving employment opportunities for older women. Women emphasized that proactive outreach and communication from institutions are insufficient. In some cases, they mentioned support from informal groups and non-governmental organisations involved in issues of women's well-being. Women expect that support should explicitly focus on overcoming long-term unemployment, digital gaps, age- and gender-based stereotypes, and the undervaluation of women's experience.
- Regarding the hiring process, women agreed that employers could play a valuable role by providing guidance and mentoring to help them understand what is expected of candidates in the labour market. They further emphasized that employers' involvement should focus on sharing clear expectations and guidance, while systemic support from public employment services should be improved to connect women with suitable job opportunities. In relation to creating conditions for the employment of older women, employers should be encouraged to make greater use of active labour market policy measures and employment subsidies. These require a more inter-sectoral approach to involve all relevant parties.

## **6.2 Quantitative findings: Survey results by questionnaire modules**

The structured questionnaire was conducted among unemployed women aged 50 and over in Skopje, with the aim of better understanding their socio-demographic profile, employment history, job-search behavior and the financial and emotional consequences of long-term unemployment. The survey examined not only who these women are (age, education, household situation, income), but also what they have experienced on the labour market (previous jobs, duration of unemployment, reasons for job loss) and how they experience the process of looking for work (barriers, skills gaps, attitudes towards training and support services). By combining descriptive statistics with qualitative comments from respondents, the analysis identifies key structural and personal obstacles, such as care responsibilities, health problems, age discrimination, insufficient training opportunities and weak institutional support and translates them into concrete policy recommendations. In this way, the questionnaire serves as an evidence-based tool to design more targeted measures for improving the employment prospects, economic security and social inclusion of women aged 50+.

Conducting the questionnaire among unemployed women aged 50 and over in the city of Skopje was a challenge. Faced with the difficulty of easily and quickly reaching these women, the Institute of Economics-Skopje signed a cooperation agreement with the Employment Service Agency of the Republic of North Macedonia. This agreement enabled the Agency to assist in administering the questionnaire. Access to these women took place through motivational trainings organized by the Agency, during which the staff delivering the trainings informed the women and handed out the questionnaire for them to fill in. Since this was not a mandatory activity for an unemployed person, the women could decide whether they wanted to complete the questionnaire.

Although the administration of the questionnaire in Skopje, compared to Belgrade, was prolonged by almost two additional months, a considerable number of women refused to participate in the survey. In order to avoid the risk of obtaining an insufficient number of completed questionnaires, additional efforts were undertaken, including establishing cooperation with non-governmental organizations working on women's issues to support the distribution of the questionnaire. Through these organizations, a number of additional completed questionnaires were collected. The final approach used for questionnaire implementation involved personal networks and informal contacts to identify unemployed women over the age of 50. Ultimately, 83 completed questionnaires were obtained.

Despite the relatively small sample size, taking into account the well-documented challenges faced by this target group, the majority of the responses are considered to adequately reflect the current labour-market situation in North Macedonia and the position of long-term unemployment women aged 50+ in Skopje.

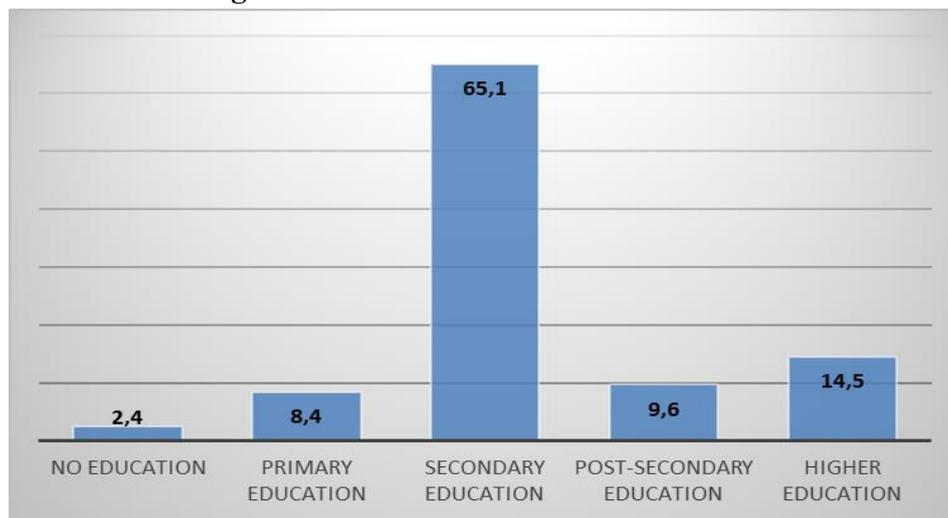
### **6.2.1. Sample characteristics**

The average age of the surveyed women is 55. Nearly two-thirds (65%) have secondary education, 8.4% only primary education and 2.4% have no education. In the group of surveyed women, 9.6% have post-secondary education and 14.5% have higher (university) education (Figure 1).

Almost three quarters (74%) live in an urban municipality. More than 60% are married and over one-fifth (21%) have never been married.

According to the responses, 65% of the women stated that there are persons in their household for whom they care. Most of them care for children or grandchildren (almost 52%), while 29% care for older persons and 13% for their husbands. This confirms that women in the targeted age group have family obligations and care responsibilities for other members of the household.

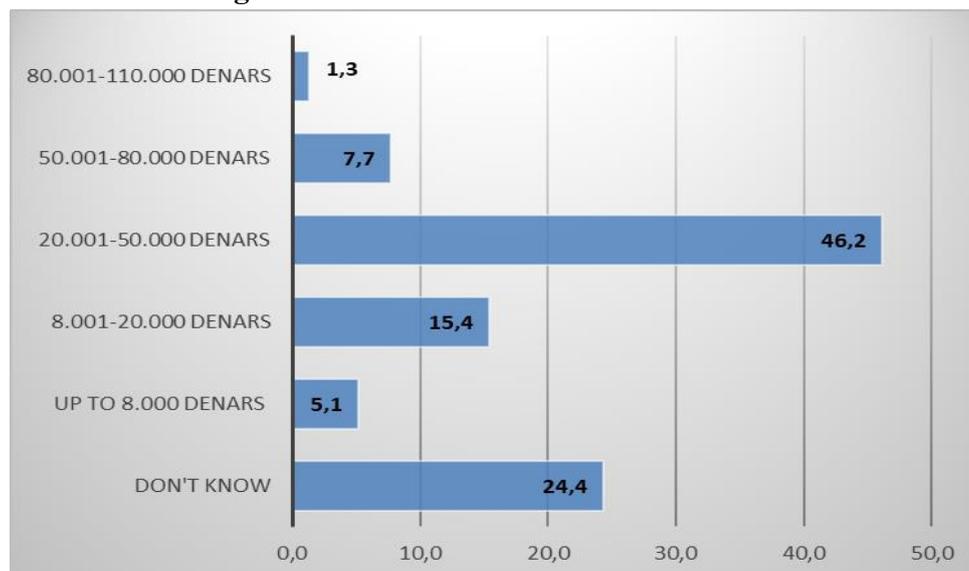
**Figure 1. Educational level of women 50+**



Source: Own calculations

Regarding income, 5.1% have income up to 8,000 MKD (around 130 euros), 15.4% between 8,001 and 20,000 MKD (130–325 euros) and more than 46% have household income between 20,000 and 50,000 MKD (325–815 euros) (Figure 2). Taking into account the cost of living, the high prices of basic products and utility costs, the income of the majority of surveyed women is insufficient for a decent standard of living.

**Figure 2. Household income of women 50+**



Source: Own calculations

From the obtained data, it can be concluded that most of the surveyed women aged 50+ belong to the group with secondary education and predominantly live in urban areas. A significant share have family responsibilities and care for other household members, which increases their overall burden and can affect their ability to participate in the labour market. Although some of them have income, it is usually at a low or moderate level, insufficient to secure a decent standard of living, especially under conditions of rising living costs. These indicators point to the economic vulnerability of women in this age group and the need for targeted measures to improve their financial and social situation.

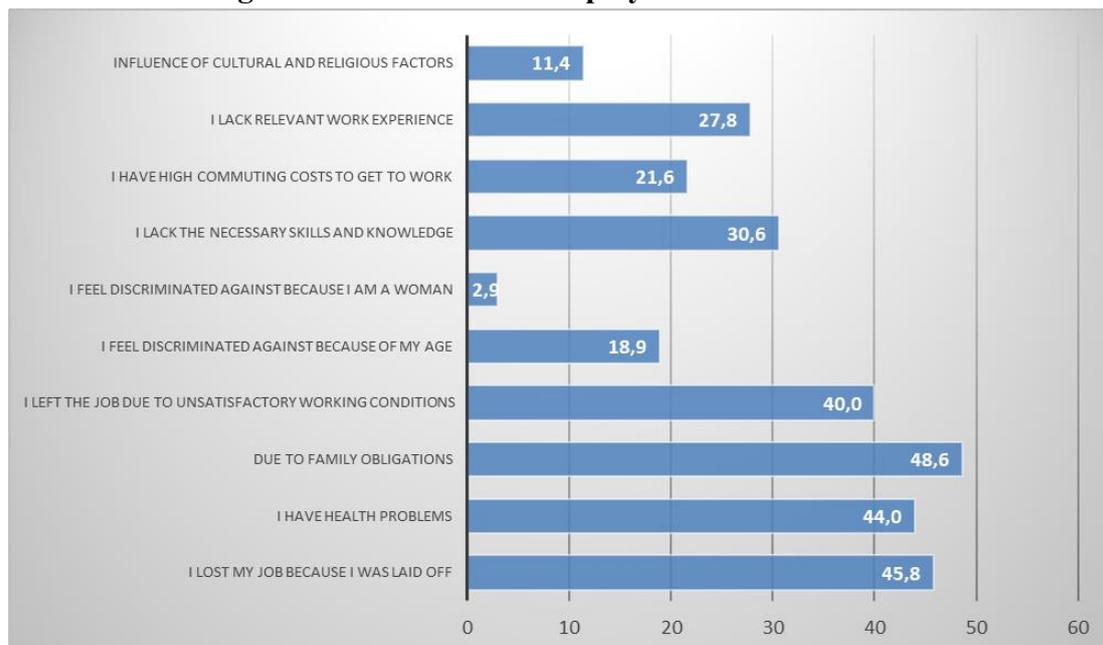
### 6.2.2. Employment history

The questionnaire results show that 71.6% of the women have some prior work experience. The most common jobs they previously held were shop assistants, clerks (although many did not specify what kind), cleaners, cooks, caregivers, economists, etc. These answers were expected, particularly bearing in mind that most unemployed women have only secondary or primary education.

The data show that 15.4% have been out of work for 1–3 years and 52.6% for 4 or more years, which confirms our assertion that women aged 50 and over belong to the group of long-term unemployed. Regarding the question of how long they have been actively looking for work, among those who responded, one quarter (25.3%) have been looking for 1–8 years, 16.9% have actively sought work for 10–20 years and 4.8% have attempted to find employment for more than 20 years.

When it comes to the main reason why they are not working, 48.6% of the women stated the family reasons, 45.8% because they were laid off, 44% due to health problems, 40% because of unsatisfactory working conditions, 30.6% due to a lack of necessary skills and knowledge and 27.8% because they lack relevant work experience (Figure 3).

**Figure 3. Reasons for unemployment of women 50+**



Source: Own calculations

These figures correspond to the insights obtained from the focus group discussions with the women. Among other reasons mentioned, which were not on the list of offered responses, were the end of a project, closure of the company where they worked, expiry of contract, the COVID crisis, seasonal work, etc.

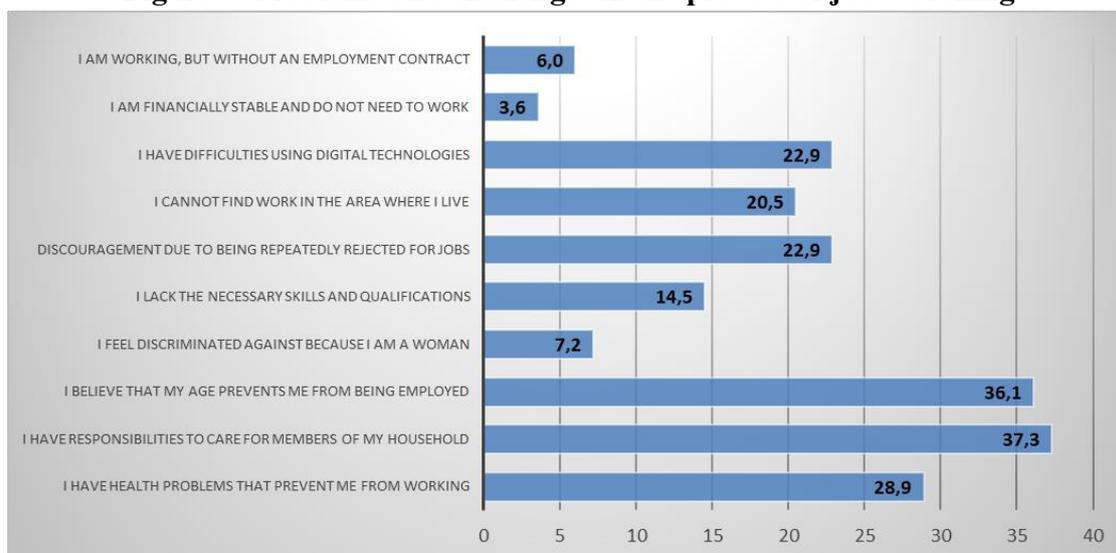
The data clearly show that the majority of surveyed women have previous work experience, but face long-term unemployment. They mainly come from lower-skilled occupations, such as sales assistants, cleaners, cooks and administrative workers, which is in line with their predominantly secondary or primary education. The fact that more than half have been unemployed for more than four years and that some have been actively seeking work for over two decades, points to serious and persistent barriers to their reintegration into the labour market.

The main reasons for unemployment are multifactorial: family responsibilities, health problems, dismissals and a lack of appropriate skills and experience. These findings confirm the conclusion from the focus groups that women over 50 face combined personal, structural and institutional obstacles. Among the most important are insufficient support for reconciling family and professional life, limited opportunities for retraining and age discrimination in the labour market.

### 6.2.3. Job search challenges

The survey data show that the most important problems and challenges which women are facing in the job-search process are obligations to care for family members (37.3%), the personal belief that their age prevents them from being hired (36.1%), health problems (28.9%), frequent rejection when applying for jobs (22.9%) and difficulties using digital technologies (22.9%) (Figure 4).

**Figure 4. Problems and challenges in the process of job searching**

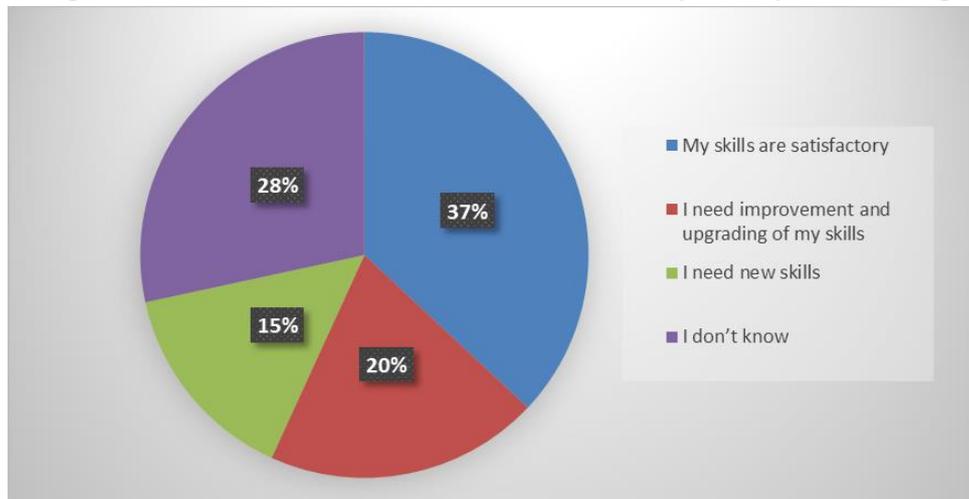


Source: Own calculations

In assessing their skills related to the jobs they are seeking, 37% of the women consider their skills satisfactory, 19.8% believe they need to improve their skills and 14.8% that they need

new skills. This shows that the women themselves are aware of today's labour market conditions, which require of them to upgrade their knowledge and skills (Figure 5).

**Figure 5. Assessment of skills in relation to the job they are seeking**



Source: Own calculations

It is disappointing that almost 74% of the surveyed women have not participated in any training to improve their knowledge and skills in the past two years, while 6.3% were interested, but did not know where to start looking. Asked why they had not taken part in any training, more than 62% of the women replied that they were unaware of opportunities to participate in such programmes. Given that the focus group discussions highlighted women's lack of financial resources to independently finance training, there is a clear need to increase both the availability of and access to training programmes organized by the competent institutions and financed by state institutions. Among those who did participate in some training, 21.7% attended trainings organized by the Employment Service Agency, and 10.8% in trainings organized by employers. Abovementioned results lead to the conclusion that there is a need to change the way in which these women can receive more direct information about available trainings.

Regarding the types of basic-skills trainings almost 39% opted for foreign language courses and the same share for digital skills. As for the type of training to improve their job-related skills, the most prominent were computer skills (37.3%), communication skills and workplace adaptation (32.5%).

The results indicate that women over 50 face multiple barriers in the job-search process stemming from both personal and structural factors. The most frequent obstacles are care-related family responsibilities, health limitations, age and limited digital competencies. These factors significantly reduce their competitiveness in the labour market and increase their insecurity when applying for jobs. Although some women consider their skills satisfactory, many are aware that they must upgrade or acquire new competences. However, almost three quarters have not participated in any training in the past two years, mainly due to a lack of information and financial resources. Poor awareness of available programmes and limited access to institutional services further deepen their passivity. The strong interest in foreign-

language, digital and communication skills trainings shows that these women are willing to invest in their own development, provided they are given adequate support and access.

#### **6.2.4. Financial and emotional impact of unemployment**

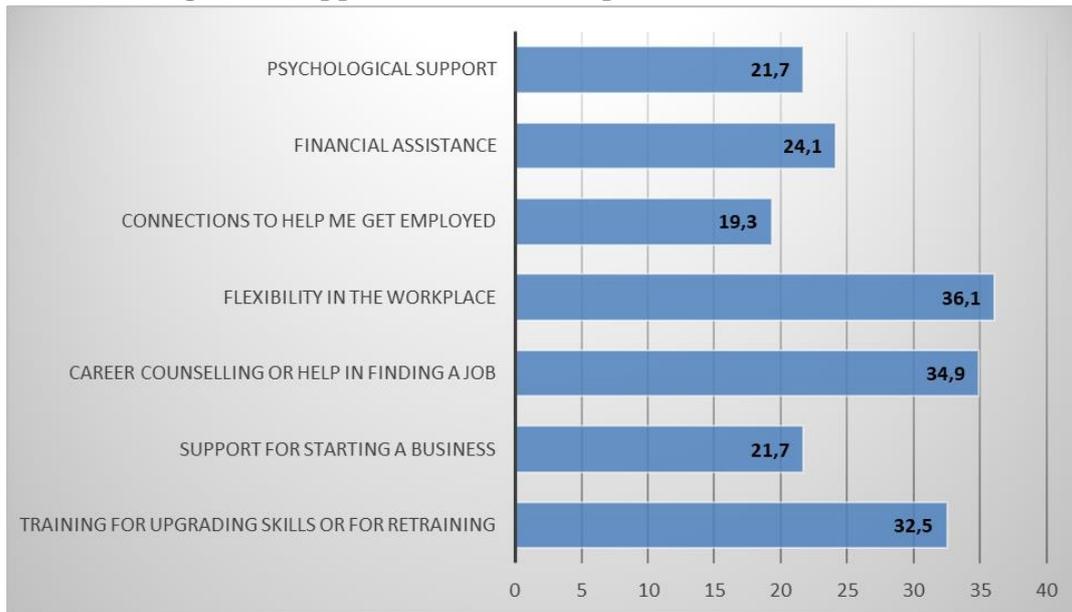
The responses to the question of how unemployment has affected women's financial situation confirm that one of the most severe consequences is not having enough money for a decent life. Almost 49% of the women stated that unemployment has caused serious financial difficulties and a little over 47% reported partially severe, but somewhat manageable financial difficulties. Almost 72% of the surveyed women have not received any financial support in the past two years, while 15% have received unemployment benefits. Unemployment also affects the emotional state of women: 27% have lost self-confidence, 22.9% feel stress and anxiety and 19.3% feel socially isolated.

Unemployment has deep and multi-layered consequences on the lives of women over 50, with the most pronounced being financial and emotional. Most of them face serious or partially tolerable financial difficulties, indicating that long-term unemployment directly undermines economic security and the possibility of a decent life. The lack of regular income, combined with limited access to financial support from institutions, places these women in a particularly vulnerable position. Beyond the economic aspect, unemployment has a strong emotional impact because some women experience loss of self-confidence, increased stress and anxiety, and social isolation. These psychological effects further reduce their motivation and ability to reactivate on the labour market, creating a cycle of discouragement and withdrawal from active economic and social life.

#### **6.2.5. Needs for support and further plans**

For unemployed women, the support they need to return to work is an extremely important segment. Given the possibility to choose multiple answers, the most important forms of support identified were the following: workplace flexibility (36.1%), career counselling or job-search assistance (34.9%) and skills-upgrading or retraining programmes (32.5%). These responses confirm earlier statements by the women that, due to family care responsibilities and health problems, they need workplace flexibility, but also that in order to be competitive on the labour market they must upgrade their skills and receive career guidance (Figure 6).

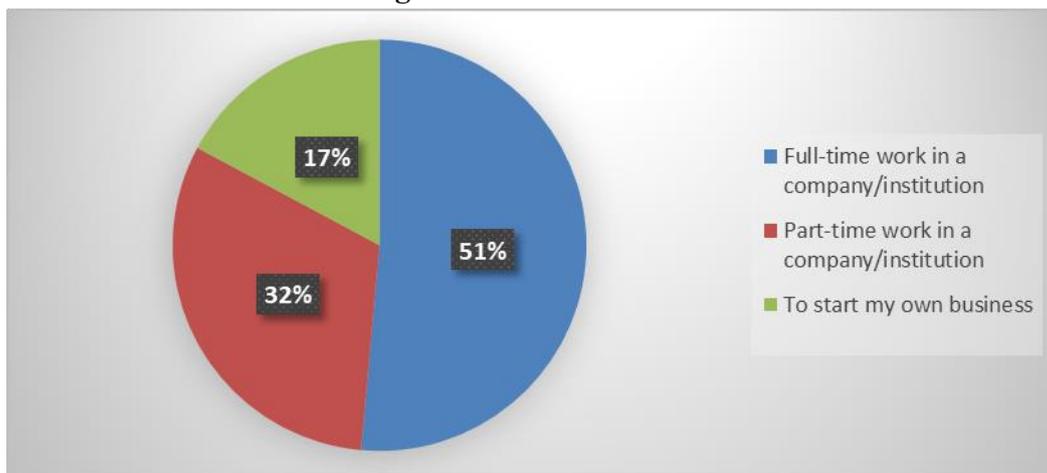
**Figure 6. Support that would help women return to work**



Source: Own calculations

Half of the surveyed women stated that the most suitable option for them would be a full-time job in a company or institution, 30.6% preferred part-time work, and 16.7% would start their own business (Figure 7). Among those who answered, as many as 68% would not accept remote work (working from home or online), which we assume is due to insufficient computer skills. Among those who said they would be willing to work remotely, the most important reasons were flexible working hours (30.1%) and the opportunity to balance work and domestic responsibilities (24.1%).

**Figure 7. Forms of work**



Source: Own calculations

The results show that unemployed women over 50 are aware of the type of support they need for reintegration into the labour market. Most of them point to workplace flexibility, career counselling and skill-upgrading trainings as key preconditions for employment. This confirms that many face family responsibilities and health limitations, for which they need greater

adaptability in working conditions. Women show interest in traditional forms of employment, with half of them preferring full-time and a third of them part-time jobs, while a relatively small share would start their own business. Although only a small number are prepared for online work, this reluctance likely stems from a lack of digital literacy rather than resistance to new forms of employment. The interest in flexible work conditions and self-employment indicates that, given adequate support and training, these women could become a more active and productive segment of the labour force.

### 6.2.6. Assistance for unemployed and active labour market policies

During the period of the questionnaire, 88.3% of surveyed women stated that they were not receiving any benefits from the Centre for social work. Among those who did, 22.9% received an allowance due to disability and 10.8% guaranteed minimum assistance. When asked, if they had a choice, whether they would prefer to receive regular social assistance or a salary, 21.1% would choose social assistance and 78.9% a salary.

Regarding if they had used any services of the Employment Service Agency in the past year, almost 73% stated that they had not and only 27% had. This means that only those women who had actually used the Agency’s services responded to the following four questions about the type of support/service they had received. Among the more frequently used services were: motivational trainings (32.5%); assistance in job search (profiling and preparation of Individual Employment Plans, employment counselling, preparation of CVs and cover letters) (24.1%); receiving information on active employment programmes and measures (22.9%); professional orientation and career counselling (13.3%); and job placement (upon employer request) (13.3%) (Figure 8).

**Figure 8. Type of support/service from Employment service agency**



Source: Own calculations

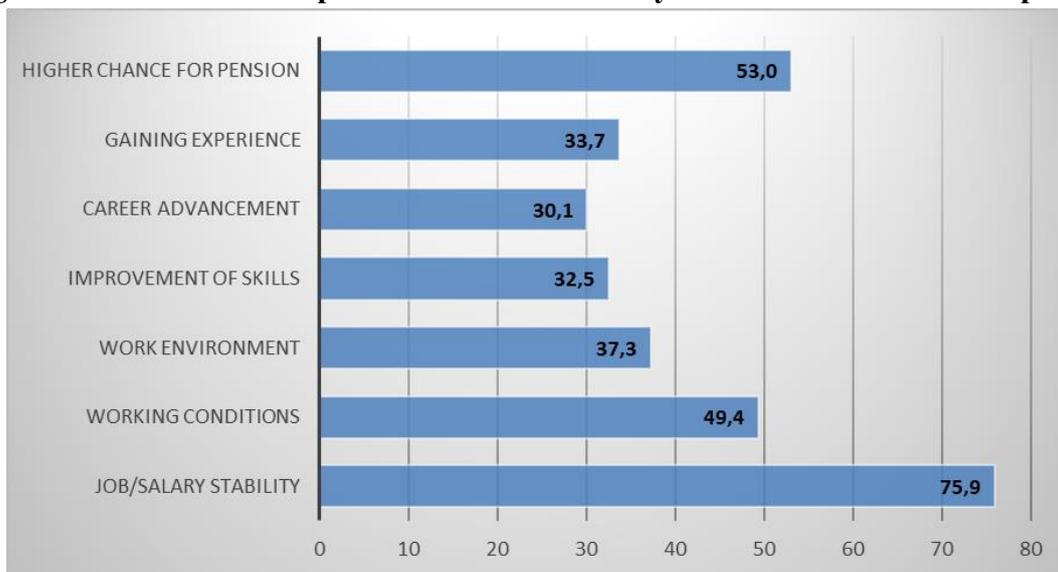
The usefulness of the services was assessed on a three-level scale: very satisfied, satisfied and dissatisfied. For the most commonly used services, women generally indicated that they were satisfied. What stood out, however, was that for job-placement services (upon employer

request), 31.6% of the women who used this service stated that they were dissatisfied. Among those who used some type of support or service from Employment Service Agency, 65.1% remained unemployed afterwards, while 12% reported that they had found a job.

While unemployed, only 34% of the women had considered starting their own business, but had not done so for various reasons. Specifically, 36.1% did not start their own business because they lacked sufficient resources, 13.3% due to a lack of knowledge and 12% because of low self-confidence. The importance of employment for women aged 50+ is also reflected in their responses to the question of what would matter most if they had the chance to work. For 75.9% that would be the salary, for 53% a greater chance of earning their own pension rights and for 49.4% working conditions (Figure 9).

The results show that the majority of unemployed women over 50 do not use social or institutional support, even though they are in an economically vulnerable position. A striking 88.3% do not receive any benefits from the Centre for Social Work and among those who do receive some assistance, it is most often disability allowance or guaranteed minimum assistance. It is notable that nearly four out of five women (78.9%) prefer a salary to social assistance, indicating a strong desire for economic independence and active labour-market participation.

**Figure 9. What is most important for women if they have the chance to be employed**



Source: Own calculations

At the same time, the data reveal limited use of the services of the Employment Service Agency. Namely, 73% of the women did not contact the institution in the preceding year. Among those who did, the most common forms of support were motivational trainings, counselling and job-search assistance, but the effects were limited, because only 12% succeeded in finding employment after using these services. This points to insufficient effectiveness of active labour-market measures and the need for greater accessibility and adaptation of these measures to the needs of this age group.

Although one third of the women have considered self-employment, the main obstacles are lack of financial resources, knowledge and self-confidence. At the same time, their priorities clearly show that employment is not only a source of income, but also a way to secure pension rights and better working conditions, underscoring the importance of active policies to support their economic independence.

#### **6.2.7. Self-assessment of job interview performance**

The questionnaire includes questions related to women's success when they attend job interviews. In response to whether they were satisfied with how they presented themselves at the last interview, 52.5% were satisfied, 8.8% were not and as many as 25% had never attended a job interview. Among those who were not satisfied with their last interview, when asked what they would change for the next one, almost 34% said they would not change anything, 26.5% believe they need additional training to improve their knowledge and skills and 19.3% would like to have greater self-confidence in order to make a better impression.

Asked what they think is most important for getting hired, 61% answered work experience, almost 50% choose good education and practical knowledge and nearly 45% being in what they consider the most productive age. It is also important that 37% of the women feel that good personal connections are important for getting a job.

Finally, from the comments and suggestions written by some of the women, a few key points can be singled out. Some indicated that they had never received a call from Employment Service Agency offering them a job interview with a company. For others the opinion is that they cannot be employed because all hiring is done through connections and political affiliation. In addition, some women think that they lack self-confidence to more courageously engage in job search. At the end, in their own view, basic human rights are violated when a candidate's age is a decisive factor in recruitment.

The results indicate that experience with job interviews among women over 50 is limited and often burdened with feelings of insecurity and distrust in the system. It is also important that the respondents believe work experience and education are key for employment, yet 37% think that personal connections and party affiliation play a decisive role, reflecting their sense of injustice and mistrust in the transparency of the labour market. The women's comments further confirm the perception of high levels of clientelism, age discrimination and institutional passivity. This creates frustration, loss of motivation and a feeling that efforts to seek work are not valued.

#### *Questionnaire results conclusion*

The research on the situation of unemployed women aged over 50 in North Macedonia clearly shows that this group faces a complex combination of economic, social and institutional barriers that hinder their reintegration into the labour market. Although most women have previous work experience, usually in lower-skilled occupations, long-term unemployment, limited training opportunities and age discrimination contribute to their continued marginalization.

Socio-demographic data show that most women have secondary education, live in urban areas and carry significant family obligations, caring for children, grandchildren or older persons, which further restricts their availability for work. Low incomes and a lack of social support lead to economic insecurity, while prolonged unemployment results in loss of self-confidence, stress and social isolation.

Most women do not participate in skills-upgrading trainings, mainly due to a lack of information and financial resources, even though they express strong willingness to learn, especially in the areas of digital competences and foreign languages. At the same time, there is a low level of utilization of Employment Service Agency services, pointing to insufficient institutional proactivity and a need for better communication and outreach work.

In the job-search process, women face age discrimination, clientelism and nepotism, which generate feelings of injustice and discouragement. For them, employment is not only a source of income, but also a way of ensuring a dignified life, personal independence and pension security.

Overall, the results indicate that a comprehensive strategy is needed for the economic and social activation of women over 50, combining programmes for re-skilling and digital education, flexible forms of employment, psychological support, improved institutional coordination and active measures to combat discrimination based on age and gender.

Only through an integrated approach and full utilization of their potential, these women can be re-included in economic flows, contribute to a more inclusive, and fair labour market, which represents an important step towards sustainable development and social cohesion.

#### **6.2.8. Comparative insights between the Belgrade and Skopje regions**

The structure of the samples of unemployed women aged 50 and over in the Belgrade and Skopje regions is similar, despite differences in the total number of sample units realized in these two regions (Table A10.3.1 in the Appendix). The average age of respondents is 56 in Belgrade and 55 in Skopje. Women with secondary education are somewhat more represented in Skopje (65.1% compared with 56.8% in Belgrade), while those with tertiary education are more represented in Belgrade (34.9% compared with 24.1% in Skopje). The distribution by type of settlement is similar in both samples, while long-term unemployed women are more represented among respondents in Belgrade (71.9%) than in Skopje (68%). A significantly higher proportion of unemployed women aged 50 and over in Belgrade were previously employed (88.6%), while the survey conducted in Skopje includes 71.6% of unemployed women with work experience. Caregiving duties are more common among unemployed women aged 50 and over in Skopje (65%) than in Belgrade, where only two-fifths of women currently have these responsibilities.

Considering the perceived barriers to employment, women in both regions cited age bias and caregiving responsibilities as the most common obstacles. Women in the Skopje region also identified health issues as a threat, while in the Belgrade region, women often reported disappointment due to frequent job rejections, which discourages them from continuing their job search. The percentage of women who responded to these questions is higher in Belgrade

(40%), whereas in Skopje (22.9%), women were more hesitant to answer, which may also indicate disappointment.

More than three-fifths of women in the Belgrade region are satisfied with their skills, while in the Skopje region only slightly more than one-third of women aged 50 and over reported satisfaction. Additionally, one-third of these women indicated a need to improve their current skills or acquire new ones. A significant number of women did not answer this question, stating that they could not independently assess their skill level. Two basic skills training areas are most frequently mentioned in both regions, particularly those addressing gaps in digital and foreign language competences. In job-related skills training, self-assessed needs include computer, communication, and work adaptability skills. Women believe that the main factors that would help them return to work are not skills, but rather personal connections (68.1% of women aged 50 and over in Belgrade) and flexible job opportunities (36.1% of women aged 50 and over in Skopje). Skills are rated as the third most important factor in both regions.

The representation of unemployed women aged 50 and over who received support through active labour market policy measures from the public employment service is rather limited in both regions. However, when considering services related to information, mediation, and counselling provided by employment advisors, the proportion of women receiving these services is disproportionately higher. Survey results show that more than three-fifths of unemployed women aged 50 and over in the Belgrade region received some type of support from the public employment service, including general information about services for the unemployed, employment mediation, and participation in job fairs. More than half of women in this age group received some form of professional orientation and career counselling, as well as assistance with active job searching. In the Skopje region, the number of women receiving support from the public employment service is also limited. Those who did receive support identified it as information about ALMP, employment mediation, professional orientation and career counselling, and assistance with job searching, with the proportion of women ranging between 13.3% and 24.1%. Motivational training was offered to a somewhat higher percentage, exceeding one-third of unemployed women aged 50 and over.

More women in the Skopje region than in the Belgrade region are interested in self-employment (34% compared to 27.3%). Among those interested, the main reasons for not starting a business are lack of resources and lack of self-confidence. If unemployed women aged 50 and over were given the opportunity to work, they would value employment stability, a regular salary, and an increased chance of earning a pension. Although most women aged 50 and over in both regions were satisfied with their performance at the last interview, a proportion of women (one-quarter in Skopje and over 15% in Belgrade) have no experience attending job interviews. This is closely linked to self-confidence and the potential for early withdrawal from the labour market, indicating that support measures in active job search should place particular emphasis on these issues.

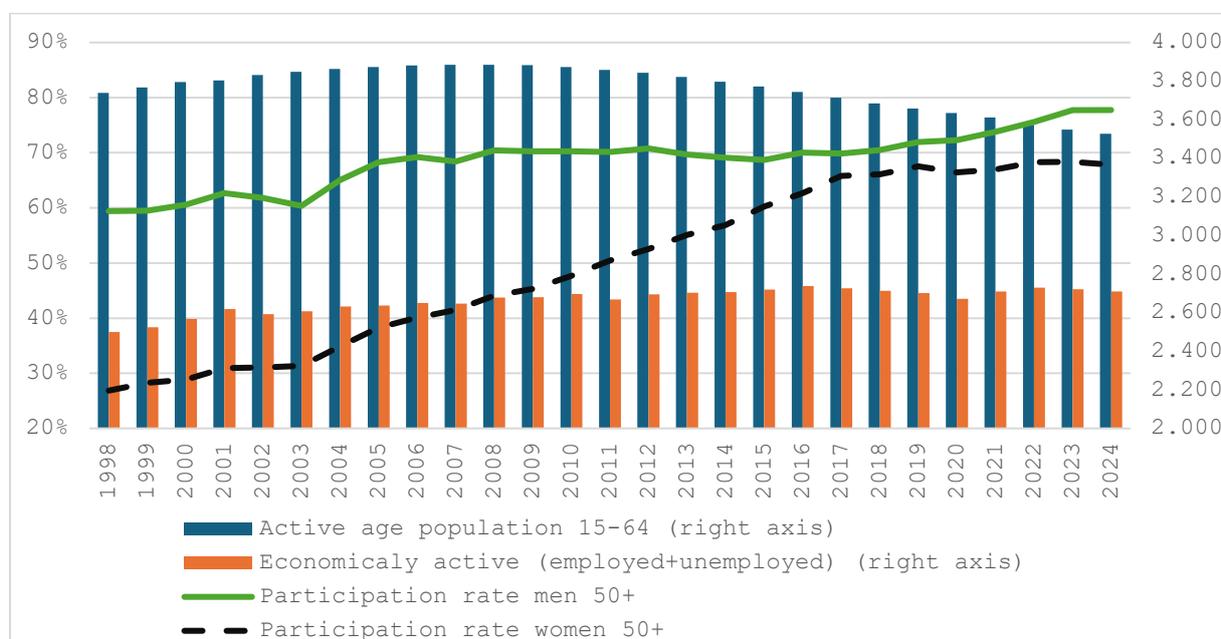
## 7. EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICES RELATED TO THE EMPLOYABILITY OF OLDER WOMEN IN THE SLOVAK AND POLISH LABOUR MARKETS

### 7.1. Disadvantaged groups activation – Slovakia

#### 7.1.1. Slovak labour market

The population ageing has significantly shaped the labour market landscape in Slovakia over the past decades (Figure 25). This has also affected the employment prospects of the active-age population over 50 years. Most striking is the increase in the participation rate development of women aged 50-64 years, which almost tripled between the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the period after 2019, during which it stabilized at around 67-68%. Changes in the demographic structure have led to citizens over 50 constituting a sharply increasing proportion of the economically active population, with a share of almost one-third in 2024 (Table 6).

Figure 25 Economic activity, labour market participation and population developments (thousands of persons)



Source: Eurostat [demo\_pjan; lfsa\_agan].

Progressing ageing of the population over the coming 20 years will make the age cohort of 50 to 64 years (for females and males together) close to 40% of the active-age population. This will lead to a more pronounced need to implement targeted measures for this age group. Slovak legislation has acknowledged this group as having severe difficulties finding job opportunities since the very early years of the existence of the Slovak Republic. In Act 387/1996 on employment, a group of citizens older than 50 years (among others) was defined as requiring increased care in job placement. This perception was further reinforced by the new Act 5/2004 on employment services, which redefined the target group of interest as disadvantaged job-seekers.

Over the last decade, the number of unemployed has significantly dropped. While in the aftermath of the global financial crisis (GFC), the total number of unemployed was peaking

(together with population in active age, Figure 25) above 400 thousand just before COVID-19 kicked in, the number of unemployed in the country decreased to below 187,000. Following the COVID-19 period, the labour market gradually stabilized, and the unemployment rate steadily returned to pre-pandemic levels. However, in 2025, the Slovak labour market began to show the first signs of cooling. Currently, the unemployed are having difficulty finding jobs, and outflows from unemployment are decreasing.

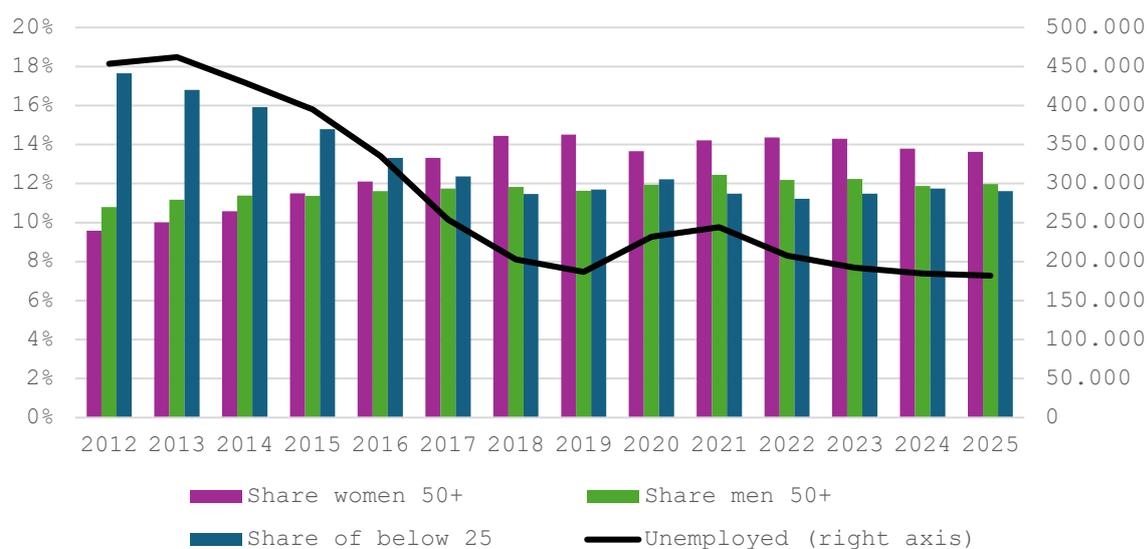
Table 6. Share of citizens over 50 years in the active age population

	1998	2004	2005	2010	2015	2019	2024
<i>Women 50+</i>	12.8%	14.5%	14.6%	15.2%	14.8%	15.0%	16.3%
<i>Men 50+</i>	9.2%	11.0%	11.3%	13.0%	14.2%	14.3%	14.7%

Source: Eurostat [demo\_pjan].

Weaker labour-market attachment among older women has also been identified and discussed by OECD (OECD, 2022, Fodor et al., 2022). Once older women exit employment, they have lower re-employment prospects than men. Their disadvantaged labour-market position is often connected to structural factors. Older women are more likely than men to care for other family members and usually leave the workforce earlier. When looking at the development of the population of unemployed aged over 50 years, this cohort would be among the losers, given their prospects in the labour market. Even though their total numbers declined, the share of the aged over 50 years of age in total employment surpassed 25% in 2025 (Figure 26). The share of the unemployed (aged below 25 years), also thanks to the active labour market policies implemented after the GFC, targeting them specifically, shrank from almost 18% in 2012 to a 11 – 12% range in the 2020s. This should also be partially attributed to more positive attitudes from employers toward this group of job seekers compared with cohorts aged over 50 (Winton and Subosa, 2023). After refocusing on the structure of the population of unemployed people over 50 by gender, there is a clear divide in how successful males or females were. In the post-crisis period, the share of men was higher than that of women. However, strong demand from employers for manual workers in Slovakia during the economic boom period suited the male population slightly better. Just before the pandemic, 15% of the unemployed in Slovakia were women aged 50 or older. During the first year of COVID-19, this share slightly decreased as a result of the significant financial support for employment retention in sectors of social care and kindergartens, from which more than 23 thousand women over 50 years benefited (compared to fewer than 2 thousand men in the same age category).

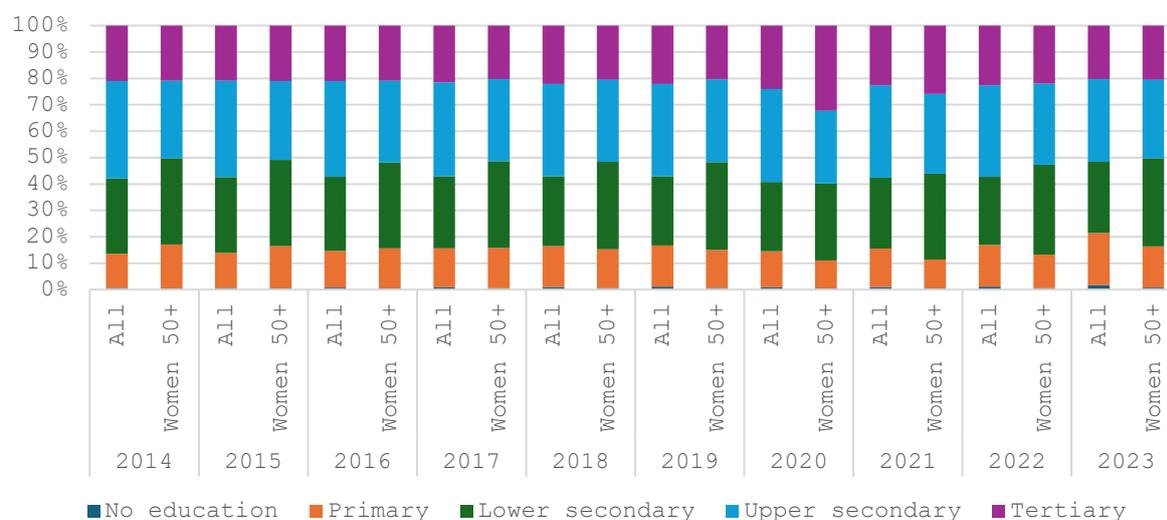
Figure 26 Unemployment and share of disadvantaged groups, 2012-2025



Source: COLSAF.

The recent developments and comparisons clearly document that women over the age of 50 represent one of the most vulnerable groups on the Slovak labour market. The educational structure of this group is almost normally distributed, with the majority of unemployed having completed secondary education. This educational structure was significantly altered only during the pandemic period (years 2020 and 2021), when large numbers of tertiary-educated individuals registered as unemployed (Figure 27). Women without any formal education are almost absent from the unemployment registers. The education structure of women over 50 and of all women in the unemployment register is very similar. The only exception is the pandemic period, during which tertiary-educated women over 50 temporarily increased their presence in the register.

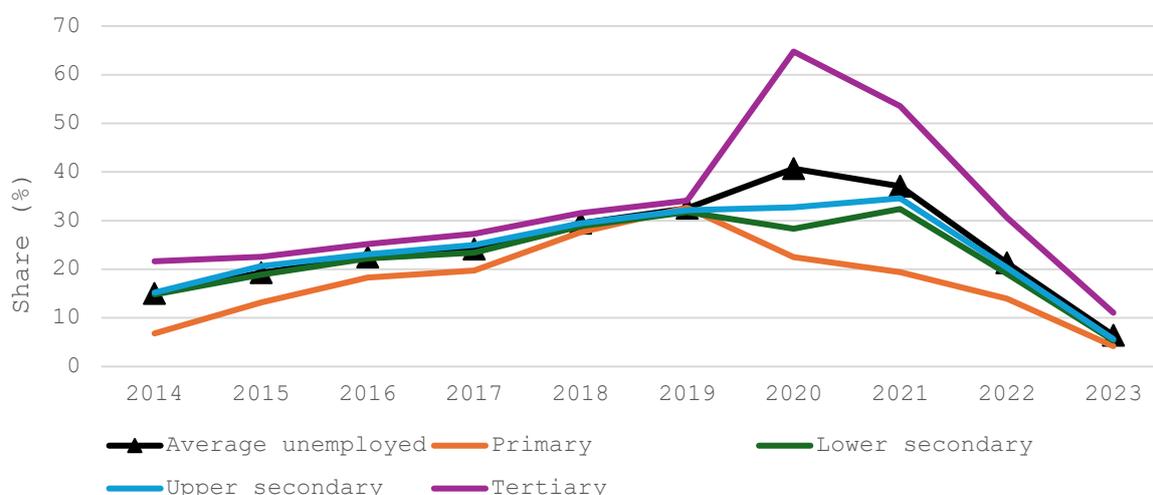
Figure 27 Education structure in the unemployment register (stock of women, total, and age 50+)



Source: COLSAF.

When examining the participation of the target group in active labour market policies (ALMPs), the heterogeneity across education groups is clear. To measure how probable it was that women over 50 years in a given education group participated in ALMP, we calculated the participation ratio (Figure 28). This ratio is the share of unemployed women 50+ participating in ALMPs in a given year relative to all unemployed women 50+ in the same year. We observe heterogeneity by education level. Women aged 50+ with a tertiary education have higher participation rates in ALMPs than lower-educated women in the same age group. The spike among tertiary-educated women over 50 in 2020 is related to financial support for employment retention in kindergartens. Only at the peak of the economic cycle in 2018 and 2019 participation ratios across education groups converge.

Figure 28. Participation ratios in ALPMs of women over 50 years



Notes: own calculations based on stock data provided by COLSAF.

### 7.1.2. Slovak Public Employment Service system

The Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family (COLSAF)<sup>1</sup>, a budget organization of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic, is responsible for the public employment service (PES) in Slovakia. COLSAF operates 46 PES offices that provide employment services and activities related to social affairs at the regional level. These regional offices serve as the front office where unemployed people come to register as job seekers, apply for benefits, receive job mediation and counselling services, or apply for active labour market policy programmes

Based on the European Commission's Labour Market Policy (LMP) methodology, the active labour market policies (ALMPs) are classified as LMP measures and could be grouped into 5 measures:

1. Training,
2. Employment incentives,
3. Supported employment and rehabilitation,
4. Direct job creation,

<sup>1</sup> In Slovak Úrad práce, sociálnych vecí a rodiny (ÚPSVaR).

## 5. Start-up incentives.

The provision of employment services, such as active labour market policy measures, is based on the profiling system of job seekers or clients. Profiling of job seekers is conducted by caseworkers at PES regional offices and serves as a guide for determining which type of intervention could be offered to them. Job seekers are classified according to whether they belong to a disadvantaged group or not. COLSAF defines the following categories of job seekers considered disadvantaged in the Slovak labour market: under 26 years of age, over 50 years of age, long-term unemployed (at least 120 consecutive months), lower-educated, without regular paid employment for at least 12 consecutive months, a third-country national granted asylum, a single adult living with one or more dependents, and with a disability.<sup>2</sup> These categories define the eligibility criteria for ALMP participation. The longer the period in the unemployment register, the more ALMPs are provided to job seekers.

In Slovakia, eligibility for receiving unemployment benefits, in addition to being registered as a job seeker, depends on the period of registered employment (at least 2 years within the last 4 years preceding registration). After fulfilling the requirements, a job seeker applies for the benefit at the Social Insurance Agency. Unemployment benefits are paid for up to 6 months, and the amount depends on the gross salary earned in the last 2 years before the unemployment registration. For individuals who registered as unemployed and applied for unemployment benefits after January 1, 2026, the benefit amounts are gradually reduced over a 6-month period. Previously, job seekers were still eligible to receive 50% of a daily assessment, calculated based on gross income from the 2 years before unemployment registration.

### 7.1.3. Jobseeker management with Public Employment Services

Public Employment Services (PES) in Slovakia operate under a standardised administrative process that governs interactions between jobseekers and labour offices from registration until exit from unemployment, whether through employment, inactivity, or transition into long-term unemployment. The process begins with formal registration as a jobseeker, which establishes eligibility for unemployment-related services and, where applicable, income support. At this stage, basic socio-demographic characteristics, employment history, and formal qualifications are recorded. The initial interaction focuses primarily on administrative compliance and eligibility verification rather than on a comprehensive assessment of employability or labour-market risks. While job seekers are formally assigned to a caseworker, the intensity and depth of early engagement vary widely depending on local capacity constraints and workload. Systematic profiling of job seekers by their risk of long-term unemployment is not embedded in the registration process, limiting the ability to differentiate early service pathways across client groups.

In the early months following registration, PES activities concentrate mainly on *job matching*, *vacancy referrals*, and *monitoring* of job search obligations. For a large share of jobseekers—particularly those with recent work experience—this phase is sufficient to facilitate re-employment without additional support. However, in the absence of structured profiling, this early phase does not consistently distinguish between job seekers with high re-employment

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<sup>2</sup> Section 8 of Act No. 5/2004 Coll. on Employment Services.

potential and those facing latent or cumulative disadvantages. As a result, individuals at risk of prolonged unemployment may remain in a relatively passive service track during a period when preventive intervention would be most effective. This limitation is particularly relevant for older job seekers (50+), especially women, whose employability constraints may not be immediately visible but tend to intensify rapidly with unemployment duration.

Assignment to active labour market policy measures typically occurs after an initial period of unsuccessful job search or when job seekers meet predefined administrative criteria. These measures include wage subsidies, public employment schemes, training and retraining programmes, and various forms of activation support. In practice, access to ALMP measures is influenced by a combination of budgetary availability, programme eligibility rules, and administrative discretion, rather than by a systematic assessment of expected effectiveness for individual jobseekers. This can lead to:

- early participation of low-risk individuals in costly measures with limited additional impact,
- delayed access to intensive support for high-risk individuals, particularly those accumulating multiple disadvantages.

For job seekers aged 50+, especially women, delayed entry into training or tailored activation significantly reduces the likelihood of sustainable labour market reintegration.

If re-employment is not achieved within 12 months, jobseekers *transition into long-term unemployment*, marking a qualitative shift in their status within the PES system. At this stage, employability typically deteriorates due to skill depreciation, reduced employer interest, declining motivation, and potential health constraints. Although long-term unemployed individuals are formally prioritized in PES strategies, interventions at this stage are more resource-intensive and less effective than earlier preventive measures. The system thus increasingly shifts from activation toward containment, particularly for older job seekers with limited retraining opportunities. For women aged 50+, long-term unemployment often coincides with increased caregiving responsibilities and weak labour demand in their previous occupations, further reinforcing labour market detachment.

The final stage of job seeker management at PES represents exit from the unemployment register, which can occur through the following channels:

- placement into employment,
- transition into inactivity (e.g., early retirement, caregiving),
- administrative deregistration due to non-compliance,
- prolonged unemployment with repeated participation in short-term measures.

From a policy perspective, exits to inactivity—particularly among older women—represent a loss of labour supply potential rather than a successful outcome of PES interventions.

Overall, the current PES process in Slovakia is procedurally coherent but only weakly differentiated across job seeker groups. The lack of early profiling and structured service pathways increases the risk that jobseekers at high risk of long-term unemployment—especially women aged 50+—are identified too late, when policy options are more costly and less effective (Ministry of Finance, 2017). This underscores the importance of reorienting PES

processes toward early risk identification, differentiated service tracks, and preventive intervention, in line with international good practice and fiscal efficiency considerations.

#### **7.1.4. Evaluation of the programs and measures with a focus on effectiveness toward the target group**

In evaluating the effectiveness of ALMPs, we assess measures provided by the Slovak PES to women aged 50 and older and focus on employment placement as the desired outcome of the job seeker management process. We evaluate their participation during the pre-pandemic period (2018 and 2019). We compare participants in the ALMPs (treated group) with unemployed women in the same age cohort who did not participate in ALMPs (control group). The period before COVID-19 was selected to avoid the unusual labour market conditions that accompanied the era and, secondly, to ensure a long enough period to evaluate the effects of participation on the measure or program. Although a plethora of programs and measures was implemented to improve job seekers' prospects of finding employment, there was not a single measure exclusively targeting women over 50.

In the evaluation, we looked at the following programs and measures<sup>3</sup>:

- Activation works,
- Commuting allowance,
- Regional and local employment,
- Restart,
- REPAS,
- Work in the school kitchen,
- We want to be active on the labour market (50+).

We follow the approach described in detail in Stefanik et al. (2022), but use double/debiased machine learning (Chernozhukov et al., 2018) to estimate treatment effects. We used the R package “causalweight” by Bodory and Huber (2019).

##### **7.1.4.1. Activation works**

Activation works involve unskilled activities, such as cleaning and maintaining public spaces, auxiliary work in maintaining buildings and areas, or processing and disposing of waste. They are organized by municipalities or PES offices through the following options. Activation works can be implemented through the following options. Activation work organized by municipalities can be carried out on a voluntary basis by unemployed recipients of assistance in material need who receive an allowance. Second, it can be implemented through ALMP organized by the PES offices. Third, they can be linked to the requirement to participate in activation work in order to earn the basic material need benefit. According to Petráš (2020) activation work managed by municipality do not increase employability of average participant, in case of ALMP track the probability increase by 1 pp on the other hand if the activation work represent path to basic benefit the probability of finding a job reduces by 1-2 pp. Activation work is often perceived in Slovakia as synonymous with performing minor municipal services,

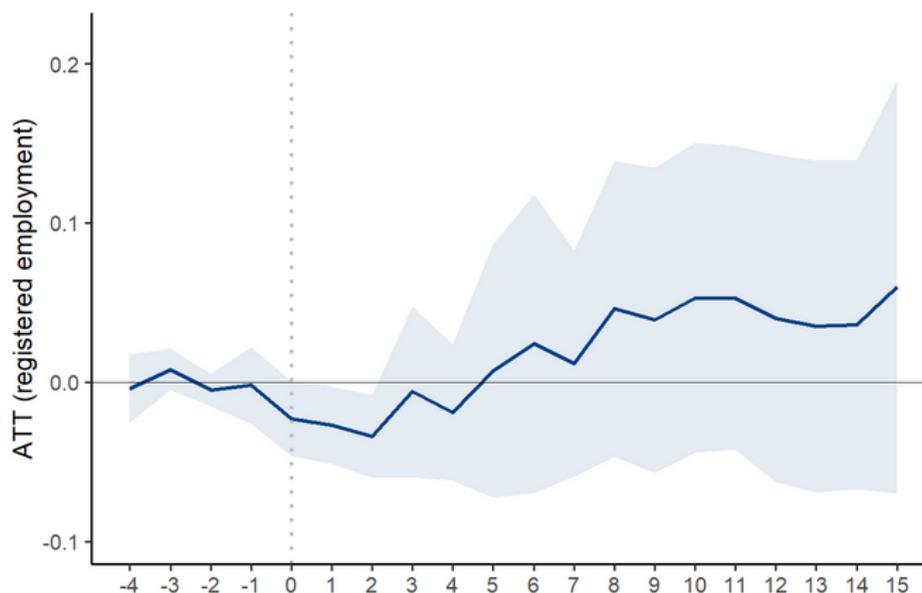
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<sup>3</sup> We exclude measures targeting young unemployed job seekers.

and several assessments suggest (e.g., Mýtna-Kureková et al., 2013) that its impact on increasing employment is minimal.

The effects of the activation work on women over 50 years on their chances of finding a job more than 4 years after participating in the measure are depicted in Figure 29. The results show the estimated employment probability for the treated group compared with that of the control group of similar unemployed women over 50 years old. Over the first 2 quarters after participation, the probability of finding a job is approximately 3 pp lower, reflecting the lock-in effect of the measure. After this point, the probability of finding a job increases and stabilizes around 4 pp after 2 years of participation. However, this improvement in the chances is not statistically different from 0, indicating no effect.

Figure 29. Average treatment effects of activation works on the registered employment of treated

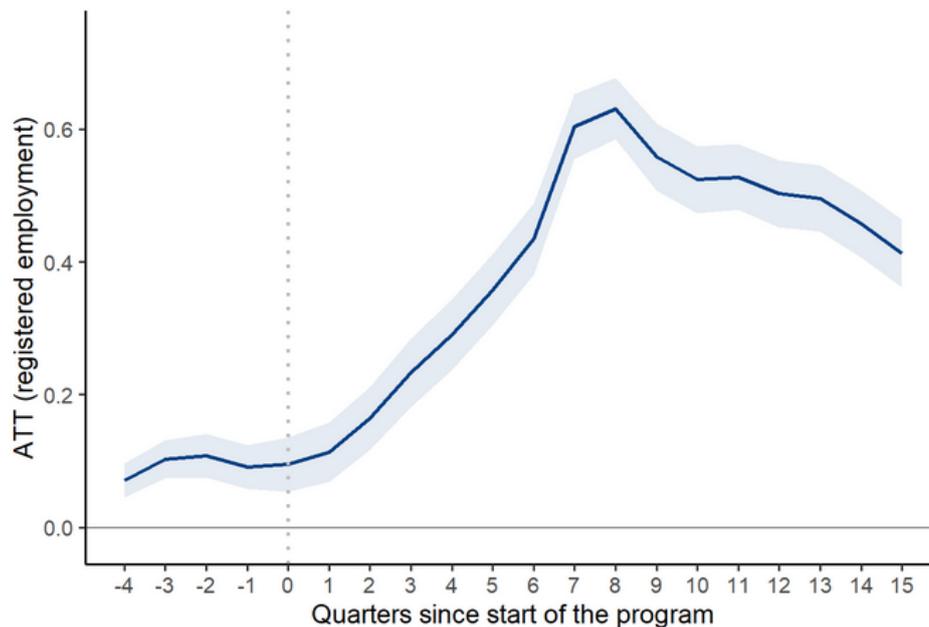


Source: Social Insurance Agency.

#### 7.1.4.2. Commuting allowance

This measure was implemented as a monthly commuting allowance to partially cover employees' travel costs between their permanent/usual or temporary residence and the place of employment. To be eligible for the support, job seekers had to be registered for at least 3 months, be from households receiving material-needs assistance, or be persons in material need immediately prior to commencing employment. The allowance amounts to up to EUR 150 per month, while the exact value of the contribution was determined by the distance between the residence and the workplace. The maximum duration is six months. The period should be extended up to 12 months for employees who were classified as disadvantaged unemployed prior to taking up employment (including women over 50 years).

Figure 30. Average treatment effects of commuting allowance on the registered employment of treated



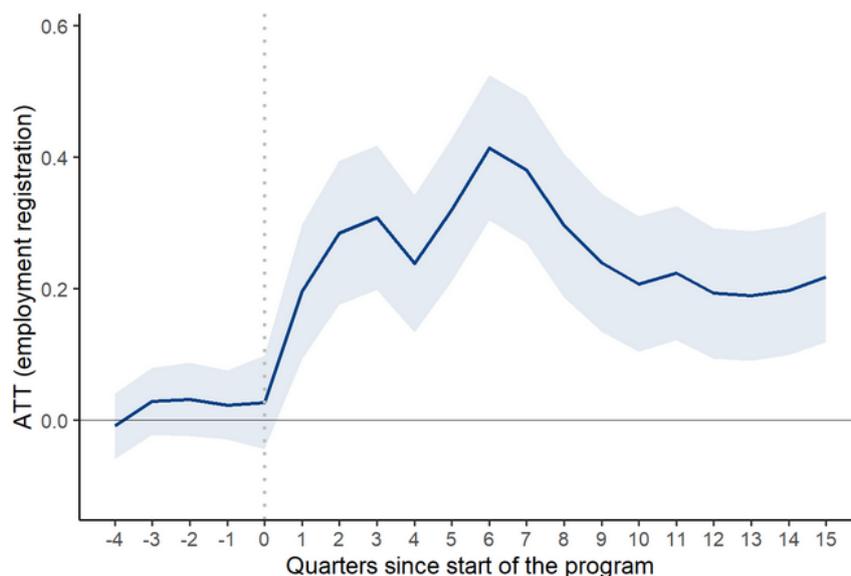
Source: Social Insurance Agency.

The results indicate that the probability of women over 50 years receiving the allowance is approximately 50 pp higher after 1.5 years of participation (Figure 30). This should be a result of increased motivation of the women to keep their job places. There is also a clear divide in the chances even before eligibility to receive allowance, which points to the fact that participants were more likely to find a job before the additional support from PES.

#### 7.1.4.3. Regional and local employment

This measure is implemented as a contribution to support the development of local and regional employment. Eligible employers are a municipality, a self-governing region, or a legal entity founded or established by a municipality or a self-governing region. The contribution should be claimed only if the employer employs a disadvantaged job seeker (older than 50 years or lower secondary educated) who has been registered as a job seeker for at least 3 months or for at least half of the weekly working hours. Employers need to apply for the contribution in writing. The monthly amount of the subsidy is 80% of the employee's total labour cost, with a maximum of 60% of the total labour cost, which is the average wage of an employee in the Slovak Republic. The contribution shall be provided for a maximum of nine calendar months, and it shall not be provided again for the employment of the same employee during the two-year period immediately following the termination of employment.

Figure 31. Average treatment effects of commuting allowance on the registered employment of treated



Source: Social Insurance Agency

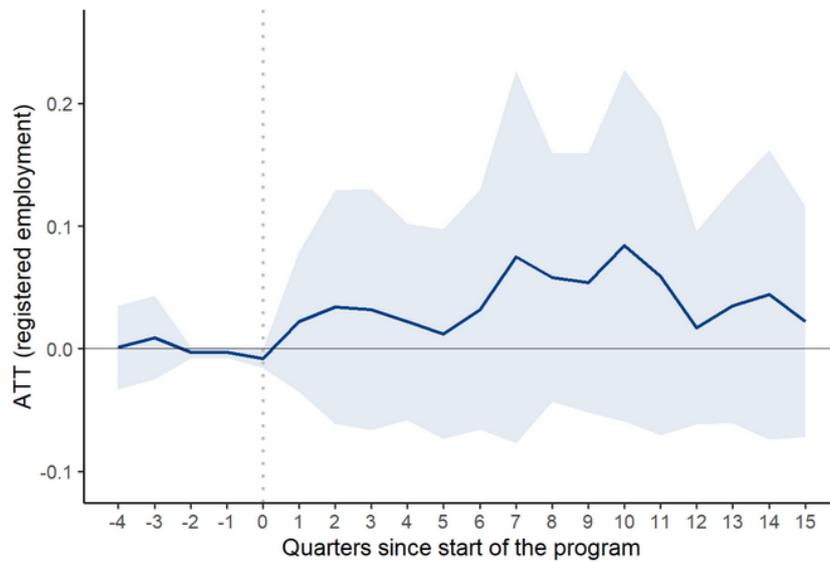
Subsidizing the employment of women over 50 years in positions with municipalities or self-governing regions or in companies established by them seems to be a viable option. The program lasts 9 months, and there is a clear dip in the treatment effect in the 4th quarter, but the positive effect persists in the long run and stabilizes at approximately 20 pp (Figure 31).

#### 7.1.4.4. Restart

The main focus of this measure was to activate long-term unemployed persons (LTU) who had been registered for more than 24 months. The intention was to motivate them to take up employment or engage in an internship, primarily through direct financial incentives. Implementation was structured around two measures. The first provided a monthly financial contribution to active LTU who enter standard employment, with support granted for a minimum of one and a maximum of twelve months, amounting to EUR 126.14 per month during the first six months and EUR 63.07 per month during the subsequent six months. The second element provided LTU with a financial contribution equal to the subsistence minimum, covering essential expenses for meals, accommodation, and commuting between their permanent or temporary residence and the workplace. In addition, employers hiring an LTU received a financial contribution to offset the costs of integrating the jobseeker into the work process. This support was granted for up to 6 months, at a monthly rate equal to 7% of the total labour cost calculated from the average wage in the Slovak economy.

The measure aimed to address the potential loss of eligibility for certain social benefits after finding employment. The loss of some allowances on the one hand and the gain of work income on the other might lead to lower disposable income, which might deter the long-term unemployed from actively seeking a job and returning to the labour force.

Figure 32. Average treatment effects of Restart project on the registered employment of treated



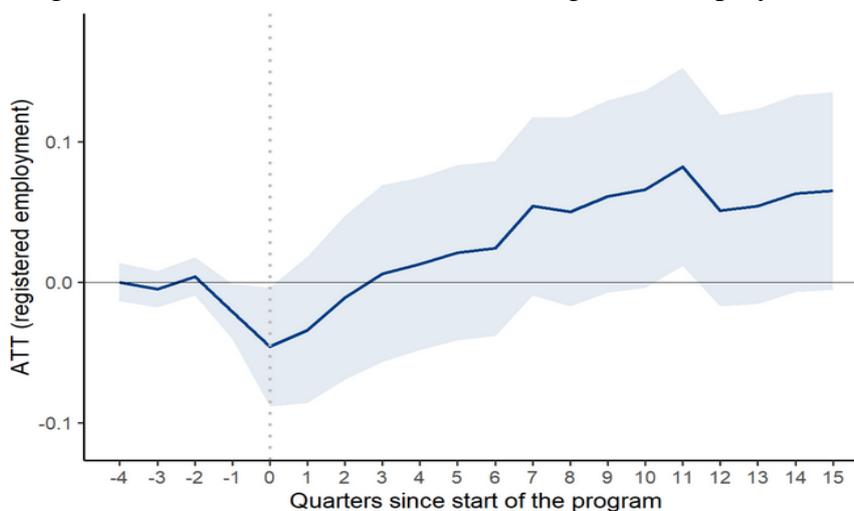
Source: Social Insurance Agency

The evaluation results indicate a positive average treatment effect on the treated. However, it is not statistically significantly different from zero (Figure 32).

#### 7.1.4.5. REPAS

The REPAS project - Retraining as an opportunity for cooperation between job seekers, PES offices, and educational institutions - was launched at the end of 2014. REPAS was an active labour market measure that aimed to increase the employability of the unemployed through flexible, targeted education aligned with the requirements and needs of the labour market. The specific retraining course and provider were chosen by the unemployed. After the application was approved, the PES office provided the unemployed with a contribution equal to the course price.

Figure 33. Average treatment effects of REPAS on the registered employment of treated



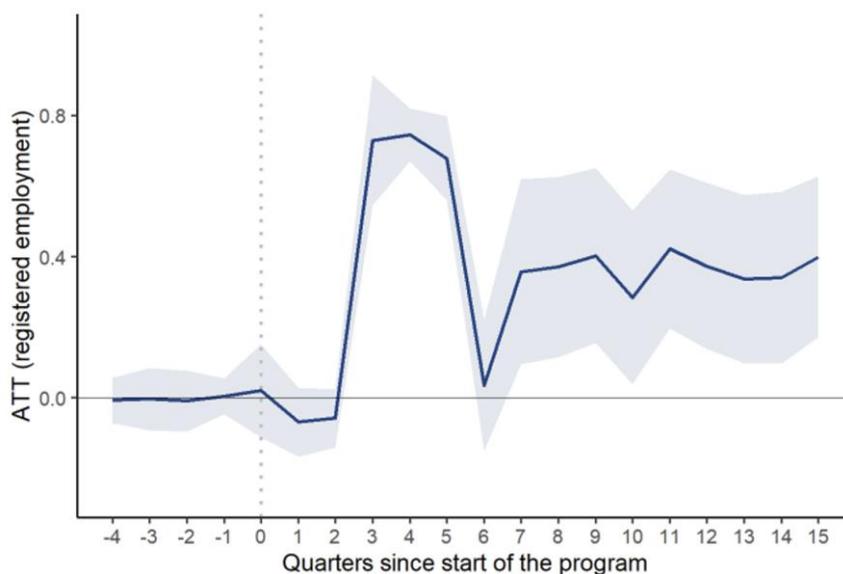
Source: Social Insurance Agency.

According to the Institute of Social Policy (2018), participation in the retraining supported by the REPAS project increased the probability of finding a job by 3-5 pp. Also, a positive effect on income was observed after completing the course; participants achieved an average of 30 euros per month higher gross income than the control group. Similar results regarding the employability of women over 50 years also indicate our analysis: 2 years after participation, the net effect is estimated at approximately 5 pp. However, the confidence interval is much larger, indicating significant internal differences among the participants in the target group of women over 50 (Figure 33).

#### 7.1.4.6. Work in the school kitchen

The main goal of the project was to help schools and their founders in the process of providing free lunches for primary school students. The financial support was a response to the concerns of founders and schools, or a new, never-before-tested solution in Slovakia, to ensure that the provision of lunches would not fail due to a lack of support and professional staff in school kitchens. The eligible applicants for a financial contribution to support the creation of a job within the project were: primary schools, founders of primary schools, kindergartens, founders of kindergartens, and school canteens. Within the project, the employer received a financial contribution to cover part of the total labour cost of an employee hired for a supported job, up to 95% of the total labour cost of the employee per month, but not more than the minimum total labour cost in the Slovak Republic.

Figure 34. Average treatment effects of work in the school kitchen project on the registered employment of treated



Source: Social Insurance Agency.

The employer may also request a one-time financial contribution to cover part of the costs of employment, such as personal protective equipment, work aids, work tools, and accident insurance, in the amount of 4% of the average wage in the Slovak economy. The financial contribution was provided to the employer who hired a job seeker from the eligible target group, provided that the employment relationship was agreed to for at least half of the weekly working hours for a period of at least 6 months, and that the financial contribution was provided

to the employer for a maximum of 10 months (school year), depending on the agreed duration of the employment relationship.

As part of preparing applicants for the aforementioned jobs, employers also received: a one-time financial contribution of €50.00 for a job applicant to take the exam to obtain the so-called "Hygienic minimum" professional qualification, and a one-time financial contribution of €10.00 per jobseeker to issue a health certificate (food certificate).

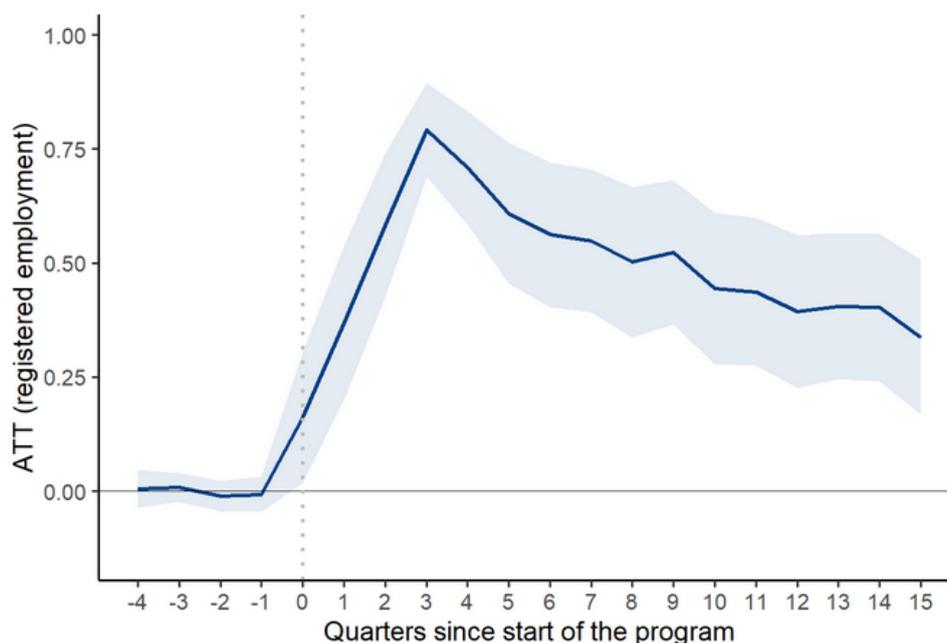
Among unemployed women over 50 years of age who participated in the project, the probability of employment increased during the subsidy period. The net effect compared to the control group was approximately 60 pp. There was no effect during the 2 months after the school year, but the probability of continued employment in the next school year was roughly 30 pp (Figure 34).

#### **7.1.4.7. We want to be active on the labour market (50+)**

The aim of the project was to improve the position of disadvantaged job seekers - citizens over 50 years of age, and increase their employability and employment through the provision of financial contributions to support job creation. The rationale for the project is that several factors negatively affect the employment of the target group. Those include the possibility of early retirement, lack of skills (especially language and IT), low participation in further education, and inflexible labour legislation. On top of those factors, there is also discrimination and prejudice on the part of employers, despite the fact that employees over 50 years offer employers experience, balance, responsibility, and greater gratitude for the job opportunity.

Implementation of the measure was through providing a financial contribution to support the creation of a job for the unemployed aged 50 and over. The financial contribution was provided to an employer who hired unemployed individuals aged 50+ for a job created, provided the employment relationship was agreed upon for at least half of the established weekly working hours for a period of at least 12 months. The financial contribution was provided for up to 12 months. The employer was obliged to maintain the job for which the contribution was provided for at least 12 months. The financial contribution was earmarked for payment of part of the advance payment for compulsory public health insurance premiums, social insurance premiums, and compulsory old-age pension insurance contributions paid by the employer, up to a maximum of 1.5 times the amount of the advance payment for compulsory public health insurance premiums, social insurance premiums, and compulsory old-age pension insurance contributions from the average wage in Slovakia.

Figure 35. Average treatment effects of the We want to be active on the labour market (50+) project on the registered employment of treated



Source: Social Insurance Agency.

The effect on women over 50 years was significantly positive and peaked at 75 pp after the first 12 months of participation (Figure 35). During the additional 12-month mandatory employment maintenance period, the effect slowly diminished to 50 pp. In the following period, the net effect continued to decrease, but even after the next almost 2 years, the average treatment effect was still above 25 pp. Motivating employers to hire women over 50 years seems to be a right option for improving the chances of this disadvantaged group.

### 7.1.5. Concluding comments

In Slovakia, more than half of registered job seekers exit unemployment within the first six months, typically without participating in ALMP measures. At the same time, a substantial share of recruitment into wage-subsidy schemes—among the most expensive labour-market instruments—occurs during this early phase. However, such a pattern is misaligned with the intervention logic of effective employment service in periods of low unemployment and labour shortages. Moreover, if a country allocates a low share of labour market expenditure to training and reskilling, limited capacity and accessibility of training measures constrain labour market transitions and often result in returns to low-productivity, unstable jobs, particularly for disadvantaged groups. It is important to early identify high-risk trajectories at the point of registration, when re-employment probabilities are highest. In international practice, jobseeker profiling is a core instrument for improving the effectiveness of public employment services (Mýtna-Kureková, 2014). Introduction of profiling tools should help to differentiate the assessment of individual risks or support needs. This is particularly pronounced among job seekers aged 50 and above, with women in this age group facing a cumulative set of disadvantages, including:

- longer and more fragmented career trajectories,
- lower participation in lifelong learning,
- concentration in sectors with limited adaptability,
- family and caregiving responsibilities.

If women over 50 receive more intensive support only after becoming long-term unemployed, their employability at that point has already significantly deteriorated due to skills depreciation, declining motivation, and health-related and other constraints. Preventive tools, especially professional guidance and counselling, need to be applied systematically during the early stages of unemployment. For women aged 50+, early and individualised intervention is particularly critical. A combination of career guidance, skills assessment, and targeted reskilling can facilitate transitions from declining occupations into sectors with labour demand (e.g., services, logistics, care-related activities). In the absence of such support, the system would implicitly channel this group into either long-term unemployment or early exit from the labour market. Processes in PES need to be built around the following principles to reduce long-term unemployment risks and improve labour supply utilization among women over 50:

- Systematic profiling at registration, with subsequent segmentation of services based on job seekers' profiles;
- Strengthen access to career guidance with an individualized approach (individual action plans prepared early in unemployment);
- Career guidance with a connection to targeted support;
- Activation programs available, with training provided at the early stages of unemployment, first soft skills, and, if deemed feasible by career counsellors, also vocational training;
- Individualized assessment of spatial and occupational mobility support.

Subsidised employment programs should be targeted to the least employable (based on profiling and previous career counselling).

### 7.1.6. Proposal for the integration of good practice support measures into local labour markets – experiences from Slovakia

Table 7 summarizes the relevant experiences from the Slovak labour market.

Table 7. Selected measures, target groups, and their potential applicability to North Macedonia

Measure	Target group	Country	Effectiveness	Applicability to North Macedonia
Contribution to support local and regional employment	All	Slovakia	For women 50+ net effect after two years from participation increased probability of employment by 20 pp.	Cooperation between the PES and municipalities to create subsidized positions within municipal companies aligned with jobseekers' skills.

Career counselling steering towards occupations, less common for female workers	all	Austria/Slovakia	Positive-based on qualitative assessment	Women 50+ when allowed to select training specialization by themselves tend to safe-select few specializations (e.g. in accounting or healthcare). Career counselling steering them out of the usual occupations (e.g. to public bus drivers) was considered good practice in many EU countries.
Career counselling – complemented by training.	all	Slovakia	For women 50+ net effect after two years from participation increased probability of employment by 5 pp.	Counsellors should advise jobseekers to enroll in training courses suiting her abilities and job opportunities in proximity further to strengthen employability potential. Requalification training should align with the skills employers actually need.
Providing the successful jobseekers with temporary eligibility of benefits up to 12 months with decreasing amounts.	Long-term unemployed persons (LTU) registered for more than 24 months	Slovakia	For women 50+ net effect after two years from participation increased probability of employment by 6-7 pp.	Gradually lower the benefits received by unemployed after exit of register due to the employment.

Source: The authors.

## 7.2. Examples of good practices related to the employability of older women in the Polish labour market

### 7.2.1. Socio-institutional and demographic context

Poland is undergoing a profound demographic transition, characterised most notably by a rapid pace of population ageing. The current demographic structure reveals an age pyramid with a

steadily expanding share of older individuals, accompanied by a continuously rising demographic dependency ratio. The proportion of people aged 65 and over ranks among the highest in the region. At the same time, the fertility rate stands at 1.1 in 2024, far below the replacement rate of 2.1.

The statutory minimum retirement age is set at 60 for women and 65 for men, although there is no legal obligation to retire upon reaching these thresholds. The gender-based differentiation in the statutory retirement age remains a relatively rare approach internationally. The effective retirement age is 61 for women and 63 for men. While the effective retirement age for women has been gradually increasing, it remains significantly lower than average life expectancy, which is 82 for women and 75 for men in 2024. This situation is linked to the low replacement rate, earlier labour market exit among women, and a heightened risk of poverty in older age. The latter is particularly relevant for women, who on average earn less than men and consequently expect lower retirement benefits.

Labour force participation among people aged 50 and over is low, with a marked decline occurring from the age of 50 onwards. Employers frequently perceive individuals above this age threshold as having limited learning capacity and reduced adaptability to new technologies or organisational changes. Efforts to increase labour market participation among this group have produced only marginal effects.

A range of factors contribute to inactivity among older individuals, including health-related limitations and skills mismatches. Reasons for inactivity also differ by gender: men more often cite sickness, while women more frequently identify care responsibilities as the primary barrier. Care obligations—involving both children and older family members—are especially significant for women.

The broader context is shaped by several unfavourable indicators, including low labour market activity, a low effective retirement age, and the existence of pre-retirement protection that begins four years before the statutory retirement age. These factors not only highlight the need for an in-depth analysis of the situation and the design of targeted activation interventions, but also reflect the wider European challenge of extending working lives and improving the re-employment prospects of older individuals, which has become a central priority of national and EU employment strategies (Błędowski et al., 2017).

### **7.2.2. The Polish Public Employment Services (PSZ) system**

The Polish Public Employment System is a multi-level structure designed to support jobseekers, employers, and people at risk of labour-market exclusion. At the national level, the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy sets the overall direction of labour-market policy, allocates funding from the Labour Fund, and oversees the legal and strategic framework within which employment services operate. This central authority also represents Poland in European cooperation structures, ensuring that national policies align with broader EU employment strategies.

Below the national tier, Voivodeship Employment Offices (WUP) operate at the regional level. Their role is primarily strategic and coordinative: they analyse regional labour-market trends,

manage EU-funded programmes, and supervise the activities of District Employment Offices. They also provide training and methodological support to local employment counsellors, ensuring that services across regions maintain consistent quality. Because labour-market conditions vary significantly between regions, WUPs play a crucial role in tailoring activation strategies to local economic realities.

At the frontline of service delivery are the District Employment Offices (PUP), which interact directly with unemployed people and jobseekers. They operate at LAU1 level of a county. These offices handle registration, determine eligibility for unemployment benefits, and provide job-matching, counselling, training, and activation programmes. They also administer job offers submitted by employers (including help to properly describe a job offer according to an occupation and, to some extent, qualifications and job characteristics), subsidies for employers, support entrepreneurship, and coordinate vocational rehabilitation for people with disabilities. PUPs are the primary point of contact for individuals seeking assistance, and their effectiveness depends heavily on the quality of counselling and the strength of local employer networks.

Together, these three levels form an integrated system that combines both active and passive labour-market measures. While passive measures include unemployment benefits and income support, active measures focus on improving employability through training, job placement, and targeted programmes for groups facing barriers to employment. In recent years, the system has been shifting from a model centred on unemployment management toward a more proactive approach aimed at activating economically inactive groups, including older workers, women returning to the labour market, and people with disabilities. This evolution reflects broader demographic and economic pressures, such as labour shortages and population ageing, which require employment services to play a more strategic role in mobilising untapped labour potential.

### **7.2.3. Wage subsidies as a potentially key element of labour market policy**

Among the range of ALMP (*active labour market policy*) instruments, wage subsidies are widely regarded as well suited to stimulating employer demand for older workers, as they compensate firms for perceived productivity deficits or higher labour costs. Their effectiveness depends on factors such as targeting, duration, and retention incentives, and meta-analyses of ALMPs (Martin and Grubb, 2001; Kluge, 2006; Card et al., 2018) consistently identify wage subsidies and private-sector incentives as among the more effective interventions for disadvantaged groups, although relatively few studies focus specifically on older individuals. Evidence on wage-subsidy programmes for older workers remains mixed: positive effects have been observed in Austria (Eppel et al., 2013), Belgium (Desiere, 2022) and, to some extent, Germany (Jaenichen and Stephan, 2011; Boockmann et al., 2012), while evaluations from Finland (Huttunen et al., 2013) and France (Behaghel et al., 2008) show limited or adverse outcomes. Comparative reviews further suggest that favourable results are more likely when subsidies are combined with complementary measures such as training or age-management strategies (Vodopivec et al., 2019; Konle-Seidl, 2017).

In Poland, Under the previously binding legal framework—the Act of 20 April 2004 on Promotion of Employment and Labour Market Institutions (Journal of Laws 2004, No. 99, item

1001, as amended)—individuals aged 50 and above were explicitly designated as persons *in a special situation on the labour market*. This statutory classification directed tailored labour market instruments towards this group, with the intention of supporting their professional reintegration and improving their employment prospects.

One of the notable initiatives introduced under the 2004 Act was subsidised employment for persons aged 50+ and, in the case of men, 60+. Although implemented, these programmes demonstrated relatively low effectiveness when assessed through the rate of return to unemployment registers. Employers participating in the scheme were obliged to maintain employment for at least six months following the subsidy period when hiring an individual aged 50–59, which aimed to ensure a minimum degree of employment stability.

The entry into force of the new Act of 20 March 2025 on the Labour Market and Employment Services (Journal of Laws 2025, item 620) on 1 June 2025 restructured both the scope and the organisation of labour market support. While the detailed approach to assistance changed, the Act broadened the catalogue of instruments available to persons considered to be in a special situation on the labour market. Importantly, the 2025 Act does not contain a formal, enumerated definition of this term. Instead, Articles 143–146 specify the categories of individuals eligible for special support, thereby reconstructing the catalogue of beneficiaries strictly on the basis of the instruments to which they are entitled.

This instrument-based approach shifts the focus away from predefined labels and towards the specific forms of assistance available to persons facing labour market disadvantages. As a result, support for older individuals remains embedded in the system, but is now framed through the lens of access to targeted instruments rather than through explicit statutory designation.

#### **7.2.4. Evidence from targeted activation practices for older individuals**

A relevant example of targeted activation is provided by the project “Support for the implementation of panel surveys of people aged 50 and more, in the international project Survey of Health, Aging and Retirement in Europe”<sup>4</sup>, which focused on women aged 50+. The initiative formulated recommendations for engaging unemployed women in caregiving roles for older people, responding to the rapidly expanding demand for such services. Research conducted within this framework indicated a limited labour-supply potential among registered unemployed women (Galecka-Burdziak et al., 2025), highlighting the importance of interventions that directly address the underlying causes of inactivity.

The idea is connected with ageing society and the insufficiency of workers in caregiving occupations especially for older people. Family caregivers—most often women, including those aged 50 and above, many of whom are inactive or already retired—provide support to older adults who need assistance in their daily lives. Their help typically encompasses the full range of tasks required for the everyday functioning of an older person with disabilities,

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<sup>4</sup> The project “Support for the implementation of panel surveys of people aged 50 and more, in the international project Survey of Health, Aging and Retirement in Europe”, co-financed by the European Social Fund (POWR.02.04.00-00-0059/16) and implemented by the Polish Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy in cooperation with SGH Warsaw School of Economics.

allowing them to remain in their own home (Błądowski et al., 2021). This mostly relates to nonmedical caregiving services, as medical services require more advanced training. However, the needs of nonmedical services are significant. It can be said that the project addresses the needs of older women by women 50+. It is both connected with the fact that it is not uncommon that a woman 50+ provides informal caregiving services to a dependent person. It also draws on understanding of this issue by women 50+.

Related programmes, such as Active Parent, similarly employed subsidised employment in care services, offering work experience, supporting returns to the labour market for younger parents, and providing exemptions from social-insurance contributions. "Active Parent" is a government program supporting parents of children aged 12-35 months. Active working parents get PLN 1,500 a month for a child aged 12-35 months to employ a nanny or grandmother (potentially women 50+) if both parents meet the activity criteria.

Another stream of evidence concerns interventions that go beyond skills acquisition by strengthening psychological and social resilience. Research drawing on the concept of sense of coherence aligns with broader studies on resilience and examines determinants of unemployment beyond formal qualifications. Randomised Control Trials (RCTs) incorporating motivational interviewing and psychological support demonstrated statistically significant improvements in motivation levels. These findings suggest that assistance for older individuals should begin by fostering readiness for labour-market participation rather than expecting an immediate transition into employment.

### **7.2.5. OECD evidence – recommendations for the activation of inactive individuals**

Drawing on insights from the OECD report *Developing Public Employment Services for Economically Inactive People in Poland* (OECD, 2025), several targeted recommendations emerge for strengthening activation pathways for groups particularly prone to long-term inactivity. These include inactive women—especially those re-entering the labour market after childbirth—people with disabilities and individuals approaching retirement age. The OECD emphasises that these groups account for a disproportionate share of Poland's economically inactive population, despite overall unemployment remaining at record-low levels and labour shortages intensifying across multiple sectors.

#### **7.2.5.1. General activation measures**

The OECD highlights a set of foundational interventions needed to support inactive individuals in rebuilding labour-market readiness. These include the following.

1. Strengthening psychological resilience.

Barriers to labour-market participation extend beyond formal skills, increasingly reflecting low confidence, discouragement, or limited perceived employability. Recognising these psychological constraints is crucial for designing activation measures that tackle the underlying drivers of inactivity.

Delivering specialised socio-psychological support to people moving from inactivity into the labour market could be strengthened through cooperation with external providers. An approach similar to Estonia's—where socio-psychological assistance is outsourced to certified

organisations selected through public procurement—could be adopted. After an initial assessment of employment barriers, career counsellors would be able to refer clients who need psychological support to these external specialists. The counselling itself could concentrate on employability-related objectives, such as building resilience, developing strategies for overcoming obstacles to employment, and preparing individuals for active job searching.

## 2. Rebuilding soft skills.

Longer spells outside employment—particularly among women returning after childcare breaks or individuals managing health-related difficulties—often erode interpersonal, organisational, and workplace-adaptation skills. Targeted soft-skill development is therefore essential for supporting sustained reintegration.

The activity could take the form of group-based soft-skills workshops for people experiencing long-term unemployment or inactivity. Offering these sessions to newly registered clients of the public employment services would help them build essential workplace abilities—such as effective communication, collaboration with others, and managing their own tasks—that are often weakened during extended periods outside the labour market.

## 3. Group-specific services addressing health-related challenges.

Inactive individuals with chronic illnesses or disabilities require tailored support structures rather than standardised interventions. The OECD stresses the need for accessible services coordinated across institutions to respond effectively to health-related barriers.

Each individual person should be diagnosed. Rather than concentrating exclusively on medical diagnoses or eligibility for benefits, work capability assessments need to be done to identify what tasks a person is able to perform and under which conditions. Assessments grounded in the *International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF)* make it possible to determine the type and level of support required for a successful return to employment, while also giving persons insight into their own functional abilities. Also, health-related guidance for employers is needed. It can be delivered through multiple formats, including online seminars for HR teams, managers, and employees, as well as on-site workshops, training sessions, and individual consultations. Many advisors should be practitioners to draw on their own lived experience with similar conditions and work with external experts whenever additional specialist input is required. Their advisory work spans explaining the nature of specific health issues, dispelling misconceptions and anxieties, demonstrating how everyday job tasks can be performed, and assessing workplace accessibility from the viewpoint of an employee managing a health condition.

## 4. Mentoring schemes and short-term work opportunities.

Mentoring networks and short work placements within community organisations can help individuals gradually rebuild work routines and regain confidence. These short-term opportunities, embedded in trusted environments, are particularly valuable for people who have been distant from the labour market for extended periods.

Advisors working in the public employment services could gather examples of effective cooperation with employers—for instance, mentoring schemes offered by companies or

positions created specifically for clients facing disadvantage. These cases could then be reviewed and highlighted by the Ministry as models of good practice. Employers that demonstrate strong CSR (*corporate social responsibility*) commitments could also be awarded diversity certificates recognising their efforts to build inclusive workplaces, following the example of the regional employment service Actiris in the Brussels.

#### 5. Strengthening institutional cooperation.

A central recommendation of the OECD is the development of strong collaborative mechanisms between Public Employment Services, social welfare centres, and social-economy entities. Examples include social and work cooperatives, non-governmental organisations, occupational therapy workshops, and social integration centres and clubs. Such cooperation can significantly enhance outreach, reduce fragmentation, and ensure continuity of support across institutional boundaries.

A reform initiative in France focused on improving collaboration between social welfare agencies and employment services. The effort centred on three key components. First, it introduced shared information systems to allow both sectors to access and update client data. Second, it established joint advisory and follow-up procedures for activating social benefit recipients and jobseekers facing complex social difficulties, delivered by paired teams of social workers and career counsellors. Third, it created a specialised support mechanism within the Public Employment Services for registered jobseekers whose social circumstances hinder their ability to engage in job-search activities.

#### 6. “Open and friendly office” initiatives.

This approach focuses on lowering emotional and administrative barriers to contacting PES staff. The OECD emphasises that inactive individuals—especially women in rural areas—may feel more comfortable engaging with familiar, trusted intermediaries, such as rural housewives’ clubs, which can act as outreach channels to individuals otherwise disconnected from public services. Such initiatives may come with the need to be open for all persons, also unregistered (potentially inactive) and, under certain conditions, without the need for making an appointment.

#### 7. Developing a database and cooperation with social economy enterprises.

A social economy enterprise is a business blending commercial activity with a primary social mission, reinvesting most profits to benefit people or the planet rather than shareholders, and often featuring democratic governance. These entities, including cooperatives, associations, foundations, and specific social enterprises, focus on societal goals like inclusive employment or community support, operating within the broader social economy sector.

### **7.2.5.2. Role models and returner programmes**

The OECD identifies returner programmes as an important tool for reintegration, particularly for women who exited employment due to caregiving responsibilities. Group-based initiatives can help rebuild a sense of belonging, reduce isolation, and normalise the process of re-entering employment after a long break.

Role Models and Returner Programmes play a vital role in helping experienced professionals—particularly women—re-enter the workforce after extended career breaks. These initiatives provide clear, supportive pathways that combine mentoring, coaching, and structured placements to rebuild confidence, refresh competencies, and reduce bias. At the same time, employers gain access to a motivated and diverse pool of talent at a moment of widespread skills shortages. Organisations such as STEM Returners and Career Returners illustrate how these programmes benefit both participants and companies.

Core Elements of Returner Programmes are designed mainly for experienced professionals, frequently women, who have been out of the labour market for several years. They are typically structured as short-term placements or internships that provide a gradual, supported transition back into work. They include support mechanisms such as coaching, mentoring—often from senior staff—training opportunities, and peer networks. They enable participants to rebuild their professional identity, refresh their skills, regain confidence, and navigate hiring biases. There are also clear advantages for employers, such as open access to overlooked talent, help close skills gaps (notably in STEM and tech), strengthen workforce diversity across multiple dimensions, and enhance retention. Examples of these programmes are initiatives such as STEM Returners, Career Returners, and government-backed schemes supply both resources and structured opportunities.

Returner Programmes provide the framework for re-entry, while those who complete them successfully become the next generation of role models. Their visibility encourages more candidates to participate and motivates additional employers to adopt such schemes, creating a reinforcing cycle that supports workforce reintegration and broadens diversity.

A key component of these programmes is the use of role models with women who have successfully returned to work after periods of inactivity. Their experiences can:

- Strengthen confidence among programme participants. Individuals who have successfully returned to work serve as powerful examples, showing that resuming a professional career after a long pause—often due to caregiving—is achievable.
- Challenge entrenched age and gender stereotypes. Visible success stories help normalise career breaks and counteract negative assumptions about returners.
- Foster peer motivation and shared learning dynamics.
- Real-world cases demonstrate to hiring managers and leaders the value and capability that returners bring to organisations.

By creating supportive group environments and showcasing relatable success stories, returner programmes can help participants envision realistic employment trajectories and reduce fears associated with labour-market re-entry.

### **7.2.5.3. Employer awareness and combating age discrimination**

The OECD also highlights the need for stronger employer engagement to address the persistent undervaluation of workers aged 50+ on the Polish labour market. Employers and public employment services can form highly effective partnerships to support the labour-market activation of older women, especially in contexts where demographic change and skills shortages make their inclusion both a social and economic priority. Good cooperation begins with employers sharing information about their skill needs and recruitment challenges so that employment services can tailor outreach, profiling, and training to the realities of local labour markets.

A particularly effective practice is co-designing training and re-skilling programmes. Employment services can deliver foundational or digital skills training, while employers contribute job-specific modules, workplace visits, or short practical placements. This approach not only updates skills but also builds confidence—an area where older women often need additional support, as shown in guidance for employers working with women 45+. Employers who open their workplaces for “taster days” (open days at work enabling short familiarization with a workplace) or job-shadowing (job candidate does not perform any tasks, but observes the employee's performance and duties, asks, and discusses work) give candidates a realistic sense of the job and reduce anxiety about returning to work after long breaks. There is also the need to educate entrepreneurs of inclusive work conditions. This may come from good practices of international employers.

Good-practice examples from selected employers can demonstrate the positive contributions older workers bring, including:

- extensive experience and reliability,
- a strong work ethic and organisational loyalty,
- mentoring capacities valuable for younger staff.

However, employer bias and age stereotypes remain widespread. Combating age discrimination requires coordinated actions, such as:

- information and awareness-raising campaigns,
- employer training to recognise the value of age-diverse workforces,
- incentives encouraging employers to engage in inclusive recruitment.

Building age-inclusive workplaces is identified as a prerequisite for sustainable activation of older individuals, particularly in a demographic context of rapid population ageing and shrinking labour supply.

Taken together, the OECD's recommendations emphasise that effective activation must address psychological, social, institutional, and employer-side barriers simultaneously. Activation of inactive individuals—women, older workers, people with disabilities—requires not only labour-market instruments but also redesigned cooperation frameworks, inclusive employer practices, and community-based entry points that build trust and motivation. These insights

provide a comprehensive blueprint for strengthening activation strategies in the face of Poland’s deepening labour shortages and demographic challenges.

### 7.2.6. Concluding comments

The activation of older individuals remains a persistent and multidimensional challenge, shaped by factors that extend far beyond labour-market instruments alone. Different groups experience distinct barriers arising from their employment histories, the specific causes of unemployment or economic inactivity, and the social and institutional constraints they encounter. Evidence reviewed in this report demonstrates that older women, in particular, face a combination of care-related responsibilities, earlier labour-market exit, lower lifetime earnings and limited opportunities for re-employment, all of which contribute to heightened vulnerability in later life.

Research and practice consistently show that effective activation requires individualised and flexible approaches tailored to the complex circumstances of inactive persons. Whether focused on health, skills, caring duties, motivation, or psychological resilience, successful interventions often reach beyond labour-market policy *sensu stricto*, necessitating cooperation with social services, community actors, and institutions capable of addressing underlying barriers. This implies that there is no universal remedy for the employment challenges faced by older women or other disadvantaged groups. Instead, a comprehensive strategy that enhances overall social engagement can contribute to greater labour-market participation, generating benefits not only for the individuals themselves but also for the wider society confronted with demographic ageing and labour shortages.

### 7.2.7. Proposal for the integration of good practice support measures into local labour markets – experiences from Poland

Table 8 summarises the experiences of Poland and selected countries with ALMPs for older women and their potential applicability in North Macedonia.

Table 8. Summary of ALMPs for older women – experiences of Poland and selected countries

Measure	Target group	Country	Effectiveness	Applicability to North Macedonia
Wage subsidies	Older workers 50+ (in Poland also men 60+)	Austria, Belgium, Germany, Finland, France; Poland	Mixed: positive in Austria, Belgium, partly Germany; limited/adverse in Finland, France; low effectiveness in Poland.	Potentially applicable with careful targeting, retention incentives, and complementary measures.
Instrument-based support for persons in special labour-market situations (Poland 2025 Act)	Individuals eligible for special support, including older persons	Poland	No effectiveness results; reform shifts from categorical labels to instrument-based eligibility.	Applicable: flexible targeting model adaptable to Western Balkan systems.

Activation concept: engaging unemployed women 50+ in caregiving roles	Women 50+ (unemployed, often informal caregivers)	Poland	Research shows limited labour-supply potential; highlights need to address root causes of inactivity.	Applicable where informal caregiving is widespread; requires addressing barriers to participation.
Subsidised employment in care services (e.g., Active Parent)	Parents of young children; potential employment for women 50+ as child caregivers	Poland	No direct effectiveness results for older women; creates subsidized care-sector jobs.	Applicable if childcare shortages exist; can create employment niches for older women.
Psychological and motivational interventions (motivational interviewing, resilience-building)	Older unemployed individuals; inactive persons	Poland	RCTs show statistically significant improvements in motivation.	Highly applicable: low-cost, scalable, addresses motivational barriers.
Specialized socio-psychological support (outsourced model)	Inactive individuals with psychological barriers; women returning after childbirth; older individuals	Estonia (model); Poland (recommendation)	No quantified results; OECD stresses psychological barriers and recommends Estonia-style outsourcing.	High: administratively feasible and relevant to similar barriers.
Soft-skills rebuilding workshops	Long-term inactive individuals; women returning after childcare; people with health-related gaps	Poland (recommendation)	No effectiveness data; OECD emphasizes erosion of soft skills and need for group workshops.	High: low-cost and scalable.
Work-capability assessments based on ICF + employer guidance	People with disabilities or chronic illnesses	Poland (recommendation)	No effectiveness results; OECD stresses functional assessments and tailored employer guidance.	High: ICF framework transferable; employer guidance feasible.
Mentoring schemes and short-term work placements	Long-term inactive individuals; those distant from labour market	Poland (recommendation); Brussels (Actiris example)	No quantified results; OECD highlights gradual re-entry value and CSR-based recognition.	Medium-high: feasible; depends on employer engagement.

Strengthened institutional cooperation (PES–social welfare–social economy)	Individuals with complex social barriers; inactive benefit recipients	France (example); Poland (recommendation)	No numerical outcomes; French reform introduced shared systems, joint advisory teams, specialized PES support.	Medium–high: requires coordination; feasible with administrative investment.
“Open and friendly office” outreach model	Inactive individuals, especially rural women; unregistered persons	Poland (recommendation)	No effectiveness data; OECD notes emotional/administrative barriers and value of trusted intermediaries.	High: community-based outreach aligns well with rural structures.
Database and cooperation with social-economy enterprises	Inactive individuals needing supported employment pathways	Poland (recommendation)	No effectiveness results; OECD stresses role of social-economy entities in inclusive employment.	Medium–high: depends on maturity of social-economy sector.
Returner Programmes (structured re-entry pathways)	Experienced professionals—mainly women—returning after long caregiving breaks	International examples	No quantitative results; text highlights confidence-building, skill refresh, reduced bias, employer benefits.	High: strong relevance due to similar female inactivity patterns.
Role-model-based support within returner programmes	Women returning after inactivity	International examples	No numerical evidence; emphasizes confidence, stereotype reduction, peer motivation.	High: low-cost, culturally adaptable.
Employer awareness initiatives to combat age discrimination	Older workers (50+), especially older women	Poland	No quantified outcomes; text stresses undervaluation of 50+ workers and need for awareness campaigns and training.	High: age bias is widespread; awareness measures transferable.
Co-designed training and re-skilling with employers	Older women; returners; individuals needing updated skills	Poland	No effectiveness data; benefits include updated skills, confidence, realistic job previews.	High: strong potential where employers face skills shortages.
Employer good-practice promotion (experience, reliability, mentoring capacity of older workers)	Older workers (50+)	Poland	No quantitative results; highlights positive contributions of older workers.	Medium–high: depends on employer openness.
Incentives for inclusive recruitment	Employers; older	Poland	No effectiveness data; incentives identified as	Medium–high: adaptable to local labour

	workers; women 45+		part of combating age discrimination.	market institutions.
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Source: The authors.

## 8. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 8.1. Interpretation of findings

Statistical evidence from the Labour Force Survey and administrative data of the Employment Service Agency indicates that, despite overall improvements in employment indicators, women aged 50+ remain a structurally vulnerable group on the Macedonian labour market. Between 2017 and 2024, unemployment and inactivity rates among women aged 50–64 declined, and employment increased significantly, reducing the unemployment rate from 15.4% to 6.3%. However, registered unemployment data reveal persistent structural disadvantages: women aged 50+ account for 37.4% of all registered unemployed women, and more than 80% of them are long-term unemployed. The majority have very low educational attainment (nearly 80% have not completed compulsory education), which is severely limiting their employability. In the Skopje region, the situation is similarly unfavourable, with a high concentration of long-term unemployment and low education levels among older women. These findings suggest that, despite positive aggregate trends, older women face cumulative barriers related to education, prolonged labour-market detachment and structural mismatches, requiring targeted and age-sensitive policy interventions.

Focusing on the Skopje region in North Macedonia, this study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the structural and individual determinants of long-term unemployment among women aged 50 and over, taking into account the institutional, economic and social context of the Macedonian labour market. Statistical evidence from the Employment Service Agency and the Labour Force Survey confirms that women aged 50+ represent a substantial share of registered unemployed women, with a particularly high incidence of long-term unemployment and low educational attainment. Although overall unemployment rates have declined in recent years, older women remain disproportionately exposed to prolonged labour-market detachment, especially those with primary or incomplete secondary education.

The research goes beyond quantitative indicators by examining explanatory factors that cannot be fully captured through administrative data alone. Survey findings and focus group discussions with unemployed women and key stakeholders reveal a multidimensional pattern of disadvantage. Reduced employability is closely linked to outdated qualifications, limited digital skills, weak knowledge of foreign languages and educational profiles that no longer correspond to current labour-market demand. Prolonged employment interruptions, often due to caregiving responsibilities for grandchildren or elderly family members, further limit mobility and availability for work. Health-related constraints, combined with declining self-confidence and repeated job-search rejection, contribute to demotivation and withdrawal from active job seeking.

Precarious and informal employment remains common among older women, particularly in sectors such as cleaning, hospitality, retail, and domestic services, where formal contracts and

social protection are often lacking. While self-employment is promoted through national strategies, many women report insufficient information, administrative burdens and low confidence in starting a business. At the same time, employers rarely perceive older women as a resource for addressing labour shortages, and age-related stereotypes persist in hiring practices.

Although active labour market measures exist, participation of women aged 50+ is largely limited to counselling and mediation services, while access to more substantial financial incentives or employment subsidies remains limited. The absence of specialised, age- and gender-sensitive employment services further indicates that women aged 50+ are not systematically prioritized within the broader category of hard-to-employ persons. Overall, the findings point to the need for targeted, integrated and inter-sectoral measures that explicitly address the structural and personal barriers faced by older unemployed women in North Macedonia.

The subsequent analysis is guided by a comprehensive and inter-sectoral framework that seeks to capture the multifaceted nature of long-term unemployment among women aged 50+. It examines their labour-market status, participation in active labour market programmes (ALMPs) and structural characteristics, while additionally considering educational attainment, place of residence (urban–rural differences) and specific age subgroups within the 50+ category. This approach allows for a differentiated understanding of how various socioeconomic factors interact shaping employability and labour-market outcomes.

Particular attention is devoted to employability constraints arising from outdated or mismatched skills, especially gaps in digital competences, limited knowledge of foreign languages, prolonged employment interruptions and low or inappropriate educational profiles. The analysis also explores the prevalence of precarious and informal employment, reduced self-confidence and administrative obstacles that discourage women from considering self-employment as an alternative pathway to labour-market integration.

Furthermore, the study assesses the impact of family and caregiving responsibilities, including care for grandchildren or elderly relatives, which restrict mobility, working hours, and job-search intensity. Health-related limitations are examined as additional barriers that reduce physical capacity for work and increase psychological strain, thereby affecting reintegration prospects.

The analysis also considers motivational aspects, including how prolonged unemployment and repeated rejection in job applications may weaken active job-search efforts. Structural factors such as age stereotypes, discriminatory hiring practices, and employers' concerns regarding productivity, health-related absences or proximity to retirement are evaluated as key determinants of limited employment opportunities for older women.

Finally, the study reviews the extent to which existing employment services adequately address the specific needs of women aged 50+, questioning whether they are effectively prioritized within the broader category of hard-to-employ individuals and whether sufficiently tailored, age- and gender-sensitive measures are in place.

## 8.2. Implications for policy and practice with key recommendations

### 8.2.1. Measures to support the employability of women aged 50+

#### *Key implications*

The findings from the research in Skopje shows that long-term unemployment among women aged 50+ in North Macedonia is driven by overlapping structural, institutional and personal barriers. The group is characterised by prolonged labour-market detachment (often beyond 4–5 years), low or outdated qualifications, limited digital and language skills and a high prevalence of care responsibilities and health constraints. Women’s employability is further weakened by age and gender stereotypes, low self-confidence and discouragement caused by repeated rejection and perceptions of nepotism/clientelism in hiring. Although ALMPs and social protection benefits exist, their impact is constrained by weak outreach (especially to rural and minority women), insufficient targeting, limited access to training and wage subsidies, and low utilisation of Employment Service Agency services. Informal and precarious work remains a common coping strategy, while self-employment is seen as attractive but hindered by lack of resources, knowledge, mentoring and administrative complexity. Overall, findings imply that effective support must be integrated: combining skills upgrading with motivational and psychosocial support, stronger inter-institutional coordination, better communication, and demand-side measures that encourage employers to hire and retain older women under decent working conditions. Based on the abovementioned several key implications rise from the research.

Long-term unemployment is structural rather than temporary. Both focus groups emphasized that once unemployment exceeds four to five years, women effectively become detached from the labour market, regardless of formal registration status. This is strongly supported by survey data showing that 52.6% of respondents have been unemployed for more than four years, while a significant share has actively searched for work for up to 10–20 years. Furthermore, 65.1% of those who used Employment Service Agency services remained unemployed afterwards, indicating limited reintegration effectiveness.

Skills mismatch and digital exclusion are main employability barriers. Stakeholders and unemployed women repeatedly pointed to outdated qualifications, low digital literacy and limited foreign language skills. Survey results confirm that 74% of women did not participate in any training in the past two years, mainly due to lack of information (62%) and financial constraints. At the same time, almost 39% expressed interest in digital skills training and a similar share in foreign language courses, demonstrating unmet demand.

Care responsibilities and health constraints significantly limit labour-market participation. In both focus groups, caregiving for grandchildren, elderly parents and spouses was described as a dominant barrier. Survey data support this: 65% of respondents care for household members and 37.3% identify family obligations as a key job-search obstacle. Health problems were cited by 44% as a reason for unemployment and by 28.9% as a job-search challenge.

Age and gender discrimination reduce employment prospects and motivation. Participants in both focus groups highlighted stereotypes regarding productivity and training investment.

Survey findings show that 36.1% believe their age prevents hiring, while 22.9% experience frequent rejection. Additionally, 37% perceive personal connections as decisive in employment, reflecting distrust and perceived clientelism.

Institutional support exists but lacks targeting, outreach and effectiveness. Stakeholders acknowledged that ALMPs are inclusive, but not tailored to women 50+. Survey data show that 73% did not use ESA services in the past year, and among users, only 12% secured employment. Both focus groups stressed weak communication, insufficient personalization and the need for community-based outreach.

Motivation remains high, but job quality is decisive. Despite barriers, 78.9% prefer a salary to social assistance. Financial stability (75.9%), pension security (53%) and decent working conditions (49.4%) are strong motivators. Focus group discussions confirm that women are willing to accept jobs below expectations if conditions are fair, flexible and respectful.

Together, these findings indicate that women aged 50+ are not disengaged from work by choice. Instead, long-term unemployment results from cumulative structural, institutional and social barriers that require integrated, age-sensitive and targeted policy responses.

### ***Key and actionable recommendations***

#### *Recommendations for the Governments and relevant ministries:*

- Introduce a dedicated policy package for women 50+ within employment and gender-equality frameworks, with clear eligibility, targets and monitoring (employment outcomes, training completion, retention).
- Expand publicly funded, short, practical training programmes tailored to women 50+ (digital literacy, basic office software, online communication, customer service, caregiving certificates, language basics), delivered locally (on municipal level) and with flexible schedules.
- Support formalization pathways for common female 50+ activities (caregiving, cleaning, cooking, crafts, home-based food production) through simplified regulation, micro-licensing and reduced administrative burdens.
- Strengthen care infrastructure (affordable eldercare/day-care services, community care) to reduce unpaid care burdens that prevent job search and job retention.
- Scale age- and gender-sensitive wage subsidies and/or tax incentives for employers who hire long-term unemployed women 50+, with minimum contract duration and decent work requirements (formal contract, social contributions).
- Design “returnship” programmes (paid work placements combined with training) for women 50+ to rebuild work habits, reduce employers’ perceived risk and support gradual reintegration.
- Embed anti-discrimination enforcement and awareness in labour policies, including campaigns on age inclusion and guidance for employers on adapting workplaces for older workers and those with health limitations.

- Provide integrated financial and non-financial support for self-employment, combining grants/loans with mentoring, business planning, marketing support and simplified administrative procedures.

*Recommendations for public employment institutions, NGOs and employers:*

- Create specialized case-management for women 50+ (dedicated counsellors or focal points), combining employability assessment, confidence-building and realistic pathways to jobs.
- The Employment Service Agency should introduce a structured preparatory phase before enrolling unemployed women 50+ into Active Labour Market Programmes. This phase should include an individual assessment of skills, motivation and readiness, as well as comprehensive guidance on available measures, including their objectives, eligibility criteria, obligations, duration, expected outcomes and potential benefits, to ensure informed participation and improve programme effectiveness.
- The Employment Service Agency should strengthen its cooperation with the Chamber of Commerce and Employers' Organization, given its significant influence on employers and its capacity to shape inclusive employment practices. Such collaboration can support the development and promotion of targeted employment policies for women aged 50 and over.
- Improve communication and outreach, via regular SMS/email alerts on vacancies and training opportunities and expand face-to-face community outreach (small group meetings, rural visits, mobile teams).
- Link training to real vacancies through employer partnerships and “train-and-hire” schemes, ensuring that training is practical and leads to placement rather than remaining generic.
- Offer interview preparation and job-search coaching adapted to older women (confidence, digital job search, CV support) and include motivational sessions as continuous support, not one-off events.
- Expand guidance on self-employment with hands-on administrative support (registration, taxes, compliance) and referrals to mentoring networks and local business support centres.
- Act as trusted intermediaries for reaching inactive and hard-to-reach women (especially rural, Albanian and Roma women), providing mentoring, peer support groups and accompaniment to services.
- Deliver community-based empowerment programmes that combine digital basics, soft skills, psychological support and information on available ALMPs.
- Support recognition of informal skills through micro-credentialing and certification routes (caregiving, cooking, cleaning, crafts) and help women access markets (fairs, e-commerce intermediaries, cooperatives).
- Adopt age-inclusive hiring practices (removing age filters, structured interviews, skills-based recruitment) and offer short on-the-job training with clear job design.
- Use wage subsidies and training support more actively for women 50+ and cooperate with ESA on targeted placements and returnship schemes.

- Introduce flexible work options where feasible (part-time, shift adjustments, job-sharing, home-based tasks) to accommodate health and care responsibilities, with safeguards against exploitation.
- Create mentoring arrangements pairing older women with younger staff to support digital adaptation and knowledge sharing, improving retention and workplace integration.

*Recommendations for unemployed women aged 50+:*

- Invest in targeted skills upgrading, particularly digital and language skills. Given that digital illiteracy and outdated competencies were repeatedly identified as key barriers, and that nearly 74% of surveyed women had not participated in training in the past two years, active engagement in short, practical training programmes, especially in basic computer skills, online communication, and foreign languages, can significantly improve employability. Even modest improvements in digital literacy can expand access to vacancies, remote work options and administrative positions.
- Actively to use institutional and NGO support services. Although many women reported limited contact with the Employment Service Agency, available services such as career counselling, CV preparation, motivational training and on-the-job training can provide structured support. Women are encouraged to request individualized employment plans, ask for regular updates on training and vacancy announcements, and participate in community-based outreach activities organized by NGOs or municipalities.
- Recognize and valorize informal skills. Many women possess valuable competencies acquired through caregiving, household management, sewing, cooking, retail or agricultural activities. These skills can be transformed into income-generating activities through certification, micro-credentialing, cooperatives or supported self-employment. Viewing informal experience as an asset rather than as “non-work” can strengthen self-confidence and open alternative employment pathways.
- Strengthen self-confidence and peer support. Loss of self-confidence, stress and discouragement emerged as major psychological barriers. Participation in peer groups, mentoring programmes or motivational workshops can help rebuild confidence, reduce isolation and maintain job-search persistence. Networking within local communities may also increase access to information and opportunities.
- Consider flexible and gradual entry into employment. Where health or caregiving responsibilities limit full-time work, part-time employment, flexible schedules, seasonal work or gradual re-entry through on-the-job training may represent realistic intermediate steps toward stable employment.
- Explore self-employment cautiously but proactively. Although lack of resources and confidence were identified as barriers, self-employment can provide flexibility and autonomy. Women considering this option should seek mentoring, training and financial guidance before making decisions, and explore joint or family-based initiatives where risks can be shared.

## **8.2.2 Enhance motivation and self-confidence to improve the employability of women aged 50+**

### *Key implications*

Motivation and the desire to regain self-confidence are clearly present among women aged 50+, yet they are progressively weakened by structural barriers and repeated unsuccessful reintegration attempts. Both focus groups consistently confirmed that women in this age group remain willing to work and actively seek employment opportunities. This finding is strongly supported by the questionnaire data: 78.9% of respondents would prefer a salary over social assistance, while financial stability (75.9%), pension security (53%) and decent working conditions (49.4%) were identified as primary motivators for labour market participation. At the same time, the structural reality of prolonged unemployment significantly undermines this motivation. More than half of the surveyed women (52.6%) have been unemployed for over four years, and among those who used Employment Service Agency services, 65.1% remained unemployed, indicating limited reintegration success. Such repeated exposure to unsuccessful job search outcomes contributes to psychological erosion. Survey findings confirm that 27% report loss of self-confidence, 22.9% experience stress and anxiety, and 19.3% feel socially isolated. These results suggest that the issue is not a lack of willingness or aspiration. Rather, motivation is gradually weakened by structural exclusion, limited effectiveness of reintegration mechanisms and persistent labour market barriers. Without improved employment outcomes and more supportive institutional frameworks, even strong initial motivation risks being transformed into discouragement and withdrawal.

Ageism and perceived unfair recruitment practices significantly weaken women's self-belief and reduce persistence in job search. Psychological barriers do not operate independently; rather, they are closely intertwined with entrenched age and gender stereotypes that shape both employer behaviour and women's self-perception. Evidence from both focus groups indicates that women frequently internalize negative labour market signals, describing themselves as being viewed as "too old," "less adaptable," or a "lost investment" due to their shorter remaining working life. Such perceptions are reinforced by survey findings: 36.1% of respondents believe their age is a direct obstacle to being hired, while 22.9% report experiencing repeated rejection when applying for jobs. In addition, 37% consider personal connections or political affiliation decisive for obtaining employment, which further strengthens feelings of exclusion, injustice and institutional distrust. These findings demonstrate that perceived discrimination and opaque recruitment practices not only reduce objective employment chances, but also erode confidence, discourage active job search and contribute to psychological withdrawal from the labour market.

Skills gaps among women aged 50+ appear to generate insecurity rather than unwillingness to engage in employment or learning. Both, the focus group discussions and the survey results indicate that women are aware of changing labour market demands, particularly the importance of digital competencies and foreign language skills. However, despite this awareness, 74% of respondents did not participate in any training during the past two years, primarily due to a lack of information about available programmes (62%) and financial constraints. Importantly, the data also show that interest in skills development remains strong. Nearly 39% expressed a clear

preference for digital skills and foreign-language training, demonstrating readiness to upgrade their competencies if appropriate opportunities are accessible. This suggests that low participation in training is not rooted in resistance to learning or passivity, but rather in structural barriers, limited outreach and reduced self-confidence following prolonged unemployment. Therefore, the issue is less about motivation to improve and more about creating accessible, affordable and confidence-building pathways to lifelong learning.

Care responsibilities and health limitations significantly shape women's perceived employability and labour market behaviour. The survey findings indicate that 65% of respondents provide care for household members, while 37.3% explicitly identify caregiving responsibilities as a major obstacle in their job-search process. In addition, 44% cited health problems as a key reason for unemployment, confirming that physical limitations and chronic conditions directly influence labour market participation. The focus group discussions further revealed that women are not only constrained by these objective factors, but also by their perceptions of how employers interpret them. Many expressed concern that employers view older women as less productive, more frequently absent due to illness or burdened by family obligations. This perceived stigma reinforces self-doubt and discourages active job search. The broader implication is that, in the absence of flexible and adaptive employment arrangements, such as part-time work, adjusted workloads or flexible hours, women tend to internalize structural constraints as personal inadequacy. Instead of recognizing caregiving and health limitations as social and policy issues requiring accommodation, they often interpret them as individual shortcomings, which further weakens self-confidence and labour market engagement.

Institutional communication gaps appear to reinforce passivity and weaken active labour market engagement among women aged 50+. Survey results show that 73% of respondents did not use Employment Service Agency (ESA) services in the past year, despite being registered as unemployed. Focus group discussions further revealed that many women obtain information about job vacancies, training programmes or support measures through informal networks, friends, acquaintances or NGOs, rather than through systematic and direct communication from official institutions. This pattern suggests that existing outreach mechanisms are insufficiently proactive, personalized or accessible for this age group. Limited communication, combined with previous unsuccessful experiences, contributes to disengagement and a gradual erosion of trust in public employment institutions. As a result, women may withdraw from active job search or rely solely on informal channels, which further reduces their chances of structured reintegration. The implication is clear, weak institutional outreach does not merely limit information flow, it also contributes to reduced participation, diminished confidence in public support systems and the reinforcement of long-term labour market exclusion.

### ***Key and actionable recommendations***

#### *Recommendations for the Governments and relevant ministries:*

- Integrate psychological activation into labour market policy. Active labour market measures should systematically include confidence-building, mentoring and mental health components alongside skills training.

- Develop age-sensitive employment incentives. Introduce targeted wage subsidies or tax incentives specifically for hiring long-term unemployed women 50+, reducing employer bias and increasing reintegration success.
- Expand flexible employment frameworks. Promote part-time, job-sharing and phased retirement models through legislative adjustments and employer incentives.
- Support recognition of prior learning and informal skills. Establish simplified certification systems for caregiving, domestic services and craft-based skills to convert informal competencies into formal labour market value.
- Fund community-based activation programs. Allocate dedicated resources for outreach programs delivered at the municipal level, particularly in rural areas.

*Recommendations for public employment institutions, NGOs and employers:*

- Introduce individualized motivational counselling programs. Employment Service Agency, should move beyond standardized counselling and introduce structured, individualized motivational programmes tailored specifically to women aged 50+.
- Establish regular SMS/email notification systems for vacancies and training. Automated SMS and email alerts about job vacancies, training programmes, wage subsidies and self-employment grants would reduce information gaps and encourage active engagement.
- Implement small-group activation workshops tailored to women 50+ at local level. These sessions should be delivered regularly in cooperation with municipalities and NGOs.
- Monitor employment outcomes specifically for this age group. Tracking reintegration rates, training participation and job retention for women 50+ would allow evidence-based adjustments to policies and improve accountability of active labour market measures.
- Provide peer-support groups to reduce isolation. These groups create safe spaces for sharing experiences, rebuilding confidence and strengthening social capital. NGOs can play a crucial role in establishing peer-support circles.
- Offer mentoring schemes pairing employed women with long-term unemployed peers. Such peer role models can provide practical guidance, emotional encouragement and real-life examples of successful reintegration, directly addressing self-doubt and perceived “lost investment” narratives.
- Deliver practical, short, hands-on trainings in community settings. Training should focus on practical competencies: email use, CV submission, online job applications, Microsoft Office basics and remote-work tools.
- Provide gradual re-entry programs. Employers should introduce supported probation periods or subsidized internships combined with training, allowing women to rebuild work habits and confidence.
- Value reliability, life experience and soft skills in recruitment. Job advertisements and HR evaluation criteria should reflect these strengths rather than focusing exclusively on technical skills.

- Ensure respectful and non-discriminatory hiring practices. Transparent selection criteria, structured interviews and anti-discrimination policies should be strengthened. Workplace culture should promote respect, flexibility and dignity for older workers.

*Recommendations for unemployed women aged 50+:*

- Actively engage in short, practical training that produce immediate, visible results. Small, achievable learning steps help rebuild a sense of competence and reduce fear of new technologies.
- Participate in peer or mentoring networks to reduce feelings of isolation and discouragement. Sharing experiences with other women facing similar challenges helps normalize setbacks, exchange practical advice and strengthen motivation. Seeing examples of successful reintegration can increase belief in one's own potential.
- Recognize and value personal strengths. Life experience, reliability, responsibility, caregiving abilities, communication skills and resilience are real labour-market assets. Confidence grows when experience is reframed as value rather than limitation.
- Consider gradual labour market entry. Part-time roles, temporary assignments, volunteering, internships or on-the-job training can serve as transitional steps. These opportunities help rebuild work routines, social interaction and professional confidence without overwhelming pressure.
- Explore supported self-employment cautiously and strategically. Before starting, it is important to seek mentoring, business-planning advice and financial guidance to reduce risks and increase sustainability.
- Maintain active institutional contact. Regular communication with employment services increases visibility and access to opportunities. Request updated vacancy lists, inquire about training programmes and ask for individualized employment plans.

This project represents a pilot intervention focused on long-term unemployed women aged 50+ in the labour markets of the Belgrade and Skopje regions. Accordingly, several of the broader recommendations outlined in this study could first be introduced as pilot measures, allowing policymakers to assess how key stakeholders and the women themselves respond to these initiatives before wider implementation.

### **8.3. Future research**

In light of the insights generated through the analyses conducted within the project, it is possible to outline promising directions for future research that would build directly on the evidence gathered to date. Recent analyses, together with comparative data and evidence collected from studies undertaken in other countries, including Slovakia and Poland, highlight the significant role of soft skills and psychological factors as key determinants of labour market participation. This is particularly true for vulnerable groups, including the older women examined within the project, for whom such non-cognitive constraints often constitute critical barriers to labour market engagement. Against this background, incorporating experimental research into future study designs appears both justified and highly valuable, as it offers a more nuanced understanding of how these factors influence labour market behaviour.

The quantitative and qualitative research conducted within the project provides a solid foundation for designing an intervention targeting the specific aspects identified during the study. For vulnerable groups especially, the development and rigorous testing of such interventions could yield meaningful insights into the most effective ways to support their integration into the labour market. Experimental approaches based on Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs) represent the gold standard in empirical research, enabling robust causal inference. Implementing an RCT-based design would therefore substantially strengthen the evidence base and help identify mechanisms that genuinely improve outcomes for individuals most at risk of labour market exclusion.

In addition, future research will focus on identifying similarities in the obstacles faced by women aged 50+ in effectively participating in the labour markets of the capital cities of Serbia and North Macedonia. Furthermore, the divide between rural and urban origins will be explored. Information from focus groups will be analysed using Large Language Models with the GPT4All tool to provide further insights into the issue of low participation of the target group in the labour market and to identify the main factors, as described by the perceptions of various stakeholders and the target group. To ensure robust results, LLaMA and other models will also be used.

Further steps will be taken not only to advance the current research studies in terms of policy implications for both Serbia and North Macedonia, but also to increase the scientific visibility of the project and its research findings. In this regard, the research team will continue to collaborate on scientific projects, including the development of publications for peer-reviewed journals and responding to project calls that extend beyond the framework of national and regional cooperation achieved by this project. This project served as a platform to strengthen mutual collaboration between the partner institutions. So far, this has led to a bilateral proposal by IER SAS and IEN in the Know-how Exchange Programme 2025 under the CEI Fund at the EBRD, which was successful and will be implemented between February 2026 and January 2028.

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## **10. APPENDIX**

### **10.1. Focus groups guidelines**

#### **10.1.1. Focus group discussion – relevant stakeholders**

##### **Session 1: General Labour Market Conditions for Women Aged 50+**

**Objective:** Establish a shared understanding of the employment situation for women aged 50+ in Belgrade/Skopje.

##### **Guiding Questions:**

1. How would you describe the overall labour market trends for women aged 50+ in Belgrade/Skopje?
2. How has the economic situation (including crises like COVID-19) impacted this group?
3. Are there specific sectors where women aged 50+ are more or less likely to be employed?
4. What are the main reasons for the poorer labour market outcomes of women aged 50+ from either the demand or the supply side?
5. Is unwillingness to work one of the main reasons for their status in the labour market?
6. How can the difference between long-term unemployment and inactivity be perceived, if at all?

##### **Session 2: Challenges and Disadvantages Faced by Women Aged 50+**

**Objective:** Identify structural, social, and individual barriers to employment.

##### **Guiding Questions:**

1. What are the main challenges women aged 50+ face in accessing job?
  - To what extent do gender and age bias impact hiring decisions?
  - How do factors like education, digital and other skills, and work experience influence their employability?
  - What role do psychological and health factors, like potential lack of self-confidence or health restrictions, play in the job seeking process?
  - Do employers have other concerns in hiring women aged 50+ (e.g. health conditions that influence productivity or cause often sick leave)?
2. What are the biggest difficulties in gaining and retaining jobs and career progression for this group?
  - How does caregiving responsibility (e.g., for grandchildren or elderly parents) affect employment?

- How participating in trainings for improving digital and other skills affect retaining jobs or career progression?
- Are there specific industries or job types that are more age-inclusive and giving possibilities for career advancement?
- What factors can help these women to adapt to challenging working conditions and to overcome the age barriers?

### **Session 3: Existing Policies and Support Measures**

**Objective:** Review policies, programs, and interventions supporting women aged 50+ in the labour market.

#### **Guiding Questions:**

1. What are the main benefits to which unemployed women aged 50+ who are registered with the employment office are entitled?
2. What policies or programs are currently in place to support women aged 50+ in employment?
  - How effective are these measures? Are there any notable successes?
  - How can training programs for upskilling or reskilling be made more accessible to older women?
  - Are there any specific initiatives (e.g., subsidies for employers) that have worked well?
  - What is the most efficient way for cooperation between social services and public employment agencies?
  - What bottlenecks or limitations exist in current support systems?
3. Could careers advice and counseling for women aged 50+ still be effective? Are there any known incentives that can be shared as examples of good practice? Is mentorship playing role in improving women employment outcomes?
4. What mechanism could be used to outreach unemployed women aged 50+ not registered with the Public Employment Service

### **Session 4: Solutions and Innovative Approaches**

**Objective:** Explore new and innovative strategies to improve the employment situation of women aged 50+.

#### **Guiding Questions:**

1. What additional measures or policies could help improve the labour market position of women aged 50+?
  - How can the Public Employment Service better support this group?
  - What role can employers play in fostering age-friendly workplaces?
  - Are there any activities carried out by NGO or other stakeholders in Belgrade/Skopje trying to improve the situation of the target group?
  - How cooperation between social and labour market agencies can be improved to create innovative approaches that will encourage women aged 50+ to actively search for job?
2. What innovative approaches (e.g., digital upskilling, flexible work models, incentives, including tax stimulations, for hiring older women) could be explored?

3. What changes in government programs and policies can make a significant impact in improving the employment situation of women aged 50+? What Ministry for Labour can additionally do to improve employment prospects of these women?
4. Can the inactive women aged 50+ who have never worked for pay (e.g. housewives) be integrated into the paid labour market?
5. And finally, from a longer time perspective, what will you include in the employment strategy if finance is not the problem? What is the first thing you will do in the employment strategy or the employment plan? What are your priority measures regarding the problem unemployed women aged 50+ encounter on the labour market in Belgrade/Skopje?

### **10.1.2. Focus group discussion – unemployed women 50+**

#### **Session 1: Work and employment history**

Have you ever worked for an employer or in your own company? Do you think that unemployed women over 50 who already have work experience find it easier to find a job again? In your opinion, what are the main reasons why someone remains long-term unemployed and what are the reasons why someone of this age gives up their job?

Have you ever had the opportunity to work without a signed contract? What do you think of this way of working and what kind of work is most often offered to women, especially older women?

#### **Session 2: Barriers to employment**

What are the main difficulties that unemployed women over 50 face when they decide to look for work? Do you think that age, being a woman, lack of relevant work experience, career breaks, lack of professional contacts and lack of qualifications are the main reasons why most women over 50 are unemployed? Is there anything else that you think contributes to the long-term unemployment of women your age?

What could motivate unemployed women aged 50 and over to be more active in seeking employment? And what are the main demotivating reasons for taking a more active part in the job search?

#### **Session 3: Skills, training and education**

What are the requirements of today's labour market in terms of needed knowledge and skills (e.g. digital skills, foreign languages, licences and certificates) and to what extent can unemployed women aged 50 and over meet these requirements?

What should be changed or improved in terms of support and availability of training so that unemployed women over 50 can improve their knowledge and skills and thus their chances of finding a job?

Would reskilling and upskilling reduce the unemployment of women of this age and why?

#### **Session 4: Personal and family circumstances**

To what extent do personal and family reasons, such as caring for a spouse, elderly parents, looking after grandchildren and health problems, influence job search and job retention among women of your age?

What suggestions do you have for women with these kinds of problems to become more actively involved in paid work in the labour market?

What do you think, should long-term unemployed women accept jobs that are offered to them and that are below their expectations (in terms of salary, training, working conditions and type of work) in order to get out of unemployment?

### **Session 5: Support from institutions and employers**

What kind of support should unemployed women aged 50 and over receive from employment services and other government institutions? To what extent can long-term unemployed older women rely on the services of private employment agencies?

What role should employers play in creating employment opportunities for women your age?

Who else do you see as important factors in overcoming the problem of long-term unemployment among older women?

Name and rank the institutions and actors relevant to solving the problem of long-term unemployment among older women.

### **Session 6: Motivational factors**

What are the key motivating factors for long-term unemployed women to continue to look for, find and keep a job? What motivates them in their decision to look for a job (self-confidence, living conditions, expectations of future work, support from their immediate environment)?

### **Session 7: Support through employment policy measures**

What support measures for long-term unemployed women aged 50 and over are you aware of?

How do you rate the importance of the following support measures for the employment of long-term unemployed women?

- information and placement services for the employment of unemployed persons from the register
- training programmes for active job search, self-efficacy training and similar activation measures
- training courses for reskilling or upskilling
- subsidies for employment with the employer
- subsidies for self-employment
- other support measures that you have heard about from others, that you have heard about in the media or that you have learnt about along the way

What would be your message to the relevant state institutions when it comes to possible solutions for the problems of women your age on the labour market in Belgrade/Skopje?

## 10.2. Survey questionnaires

### Questionnaire for Unemployed Women over 50 years

The survey is part of the project "Identifying the causes of long-term unemployment among older women in Serbia and North Macedonia" financed from the funds of a Visegrad+ Grant. The project aims to improve the labour market status of long-term unemployed women. The survey purpose is to understand the reasons for lack of job of women, and factors that might contribute to improving their situation in the labour market to suggest policy actions.

The survey will serve only statistical purposes, and no personal information will be revealed. The results will be presented in an aggregate, not individual way.

The survey will take approximately 30 minutes.

#### Section 1: Personal Information

1. Age in years: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Highest level of education completed:
  - a) Without education and uncompleted primary education
  - b) Primary school
  - c) Secondary vocational school
  - d) Higher vocational education
  - e) Bachelor degree
  - f) Master degree
  - g) Doctoral degree
3. State the type of education you have completed (type of secondary or higher education, for example: secondary economic, hospitality, agricultural, etc., or Faculty of Economics, Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, Faculty of Education, etc.).
  - \_\_\_\_\_
4. What area do you live in?
  - a) Urban
  - b) Rural
5. Marital status:
  - a) Single
  - b) Married / Cohabiting
  - c) Divorced/separated
  - d) Widowed
6. What is the number of your household members?
  - \_\_\_\_\_
7. Do you have dependents? (children, elderly, or others under your care)
  - a) Yes
    - i. children
    - ii. elderly
    - iii. spouse

b) No

8. What is your household income?

- a) I don't know
- b) Up to 8.000 denars
- c) 8.001-20.000 denars
- d) 20.001-50.000 denars
- e) 50.001-80.000 denars
- f) 80.001-110.000 denars
- g) More than 110.000 denars

## Section 2: Employment History

9. Have you been employed before?

- a) Yes, on the position of \_\_\_\_\_
- b) No

10. How long have you been unemployed?

- Up to 5 months
- 6 months – 11 months
- 1 – 3 years
- 4 and more years

11. How long have you been looking for a job? Please specify number of years or months.

\_\_\_\_\_ month or \_\_\_\_\_ years

12. What is the main reason for not working? (Please select one of the answers for each line, Yes, No, or Don't know.)

	Yes	No	Don't know
a) Job loss due to company downsizing			
b) Health issues			
c) Family responsibilities			
d) Job quitting due to unsatisfactory job conditions (underemployment, low wages, harmful environment etc.)			
e) Age discrimination			
f) Gender discrimination			
g) Lack of relevant skills			
h) Necessity of costly commuting to work or relocation			
i) Lack of relevant work experience			
j) Influence of cultural and religious factors			
k) Other, please specify _____			

## Section 3: Job Search and Challenges

13. What kind of challenges do you face while actively looking for a job? (Please select one of the answers for each line, Yes, No, or Don't know.)

	Yes	No	Don't know
a) Health issues prevent me from working			
b) I have caregiving responsibilities (e.g., for children, elderly, or family members)			
c) I believe my age makes it impossible to get hired			
d) I feel that I am discriminated against because I am a woman			
e) I lack the necessary skills or qualifications			
f) I am discouraged by repeated job rejections			
g) I cannot find suitable work opportunities in my area			
h) I have difficulty using digital technologies			
i) I am financially stable and do not need to work			
j) I am working but without work contract (not paying obligatory pension and health contributions)			
k) Other, please specify _____			

14. How would you evaluate your skills considering the job you are looking for?

- a) My skills are satisfactory
- b) I need further improvement of my skills
- c) I need new skills
- d) I do not know

15. Have you attended any job training for improving knowledge and skills in the last two years?

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) I am interested, but don't know where to start

16. If the answer on the question 16 is a), then who was provider of the job training for improving knowledge and skills? (Please select one of the answers for each line, Yes or No.)

	Yes	No
a) National employment service		
b) Local self-government (city/municipality)		
c) Employers		
d) Program sponsored by donor organizations/project		
e) Other, please specify _____		

17. Are you satisfied with the job training for improving knowledge and skills you have attended?

- a) Yes
- b) No

18. If your answer on the question 15 is b) what is the main reason for this?

- a) I was unaware of those possibilities
- b) I was invited but was unable to attend
- c) I was not interested in this training

d) Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

19. What type of training do you need to improve your core (basic) skills? (Please select one of the answers for each line, Yes or No.)

	Yes	No
a) Foreign language		
b) Numerical skills		
c) Writing and reading skills		
d) Digital skills		
e) Other, please specify _____		

20. What type of training do you need to improve your job-related skills? (Please select one of the answers for each line, Yes or No.)

	Yes	No
a) Communication and work adaptability		
b) Customer service orientation		
c) Work with computers		
d) Preparation and serving food		
e) Providing assistance and care for those in need		
f) Using hand tools for textile and other materials		
g) Cultivating plants and crops		
h) Other, please specify _____		

#### Section 4: Financial and Emotional Impact

21. How has unemployment affected your financial situation?

- a) Severe financial hardship
- b) Somewhat difficult but manageable
- c) No major financial impact

22. Have you received any unemployment benefits or financial support in the last two years?

- a) Yes, unemployment benefits
- b) Yes, social assistance
- c) Yes, support from family/friends
- d) No, I have no financial support

23. How has unemployment affected your emotional well-being?

- a) Increased stress/anxiety
- b) Feeling socially isolated
- c) Loss of confidence
- d) No significant emotional impact

#### Section 5: Support and Future plans

24. What type of support would help you return to work? (Please select one of the answers for each line, Yes, No, or Don't know.)

	Yes	No	Don't know

a) Skills training or reskilling programs			
b) Support for starting a business			
c) Career counselling and job placement assistance			
d) Flexible job opportunities			
e) Having a connection to get job			
f) Financial assistance			
g) Psychological support			
h) Other, please specify _____			

25. What type of job would you be most interested in?

- a) Full-time job in company
- b) Part-time job in company
- c) Start my own business
- d) Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

26. Would you be open to remote work?

- a) Yes
- b) No

27. If the answer on the question 26 is a), what would be the main reasons for choosing remote work? (Please select one of the answers for each line, Yes, No, or Don't know.)

	Yes	No	Don't know
a) Flexible working hours			
b) Possibility to balance between job and household chores			
c) Long distance between your home and job			
d) Possibility to renew the employment contract when convenient			
e) Other, please specify _____			

## Section 6: Assistance for the Unemployed and ALMP

28. Are you beneficiary of Centre for Social Work

- a) Yes
- b) No

29. If the answer on the question 28 is a), please specify the type of assistance you are receiving? (Please select one of the answers for each line, Yes or No.)

	Yes	No
a) Guaranteed minimum assistance		
b) Disability allowance		
c) Allowance for assistance and care by another person		
d) Wage compensation for reduced working hours		
e) Housing allowance		
f) Permanent allowance		
g) One-time financial assistance		
h) Other, please specify _____		

30. If you have a chance to choose, what would you appreciate more

- a) Regular social assistance
- b) Chance to earn own salary
- c) Something else, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

31. Have you used National Employment Service (NES)/ Employment Service Agency services recently?

- a) Yes
- b) No

32. What type of NES/Employment Service Agency support have you used? (Please select one of the answers for each line, Yes or No.)

	Yes	No
a) Job-search assistance (profiling and preparation of the Individual Employment Plan – IEP, employment counselling, preparation of a CV and motivation letter, information on labour-market conditions and demand)		
b) Information on active employment programmes and measures, and assistance and support for participation in these programmes/measures		
c) Motivational training		
d) Vocational guidance and career counselling		
e) Employment mediation (upon employer request)		
f) Support for self-employment		
g) Support for job creation (wage subsidies, employment and growth of legal entities, employment of persons with disabilities)		
h) On-the-job training upon employer request		
i) Training for occupations in demand on the labour market		
j) Public works		
k) Municipal community work		
l) Activation of unemployed persons at risk of social exclusion		
m) Other, please specify _____		

33. How would you rate usefulness of those services? (Please select one of the answers for each line, Very satisfied, Satisfied or Not satisfied.)

	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Not satisfied
a) Job-search assistance (profiling and preparation of the Individual Employment Plan – IEP, employment counselling, preparation of a CV and motivation letter, information on labour-market conditions and demand)			
b) Information on active employment programmes and measures, and assistance and support for participation in these programmes/measures			
c) Motivational training			
d) Vocational guidance and career counselling			
e) Employment mediation (upon employer request)			
f) Support for self-employment			
g) Support for job creation (wage subsidies, employment and growth of legal entities, employment of persons with disabilities)			

h) On-the-job training upon employer request			
i) Training for occupations in demand on the labour market			
j) Public works			
k) Municipal community work			
l) Activation of unemployed persons at risk of social exclusion			
m) Other, please specify			

34. Have you found a job after receiving support from NES/Employment Service Agency?

- a) Yes
- b) No

35. If the answer on question 34 is a), how long have you been employed?

- a) Less than 1 year
- b) Only during the duration of the program
- c) I was employed longer, but stopped working due to personal reasons
- d) Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

36. Have you been thinking about your own business incentives?

- a) Yes
- b) No

37. If the answer on question 36 is a), what prevents you from starting a business? (Please select one of the answers for each line, Yes, No, or Don't know.)

	Yes	No	Don't know
a) Lack of resources			
b) Lack of knowledge			
c) Lack of self-confidence			
d) I do not have a support from the family			
e) I already had my own business in the past			
f) Other, please specify _____			

38. What would you appreciate the most if you get a chance to work? (Please select one of the answers for each line, Yes, No, or Don't know.)

	Yes	No	Don't know
a) Stability of employment/salary			
b) Working conditions			
c) Working environment			
d) Possibility for enhancing skills			
e) Possibility to enhance career opportunities			
f) Possibility to gain experience			
g) Increase chances of getting own pension			
h) Other, please specify _____			

## Section 7: Performance on job interview

39. How would you rate your last job interview performance?

- a) Very satisfied
- b) Satisfied
- c) Not satisfied
- d) Never attended a job interview

40. If the answer to question 39 is c), based on your experience, what would you change in a job interview with an employer? (Please select one of the answers for each line, Yes, No, or Don't know.)

	Yes	No	Don't know
a) I would change nothing			
b) I need more self-confidence, and now I know how to do that			
c) I need more self-confidence, but I do not know how to make a good impression			
d) I need additional training because I lack knowledge and skills required by the employers			
e) Other, please specify _____			

41. What do you think is crucial for getting a job? (Please select one of the answers for each line, Yes, No, or Don't know.)

	Yes	No	Don't know
a) Good education and practical knowledge			
b) Work experience			
c) Being in a productive, mobile age			
d) Access to needed tools, like a car or specific work equipment			
e) Good personal connections			
f) Other, please specify _____			

42. Any additional comments or suggestions?

## 10.3. Tables

**Table A10.3.1. Key survey indicators for Serbia and North Macedonia**

Indicator	Serbia	North Macedonia
Average age, in years	56.4	55
Education, %		
Primary and less	8.3	10.8
Secondary	56.8	65.1
Tertiary	34.9	24.1
Type of settlement		
Urban	76.2	74.0
Other	23.8	26.0
Have caregiving responsibilities, %	44.3	65.0

Have previous work experience, %	88.6	71.6
Long-term unemployed, %	71.9	68.0
Job search challenges, %		
Age discrimination	71.0	36.1
Caregiving responsibilities	46.2	37.3
Disappointment due to job rejections	40.0	22.9
Health issues	33.2	28.9
Difficulties in using digital technologies/	25.3	22.9
Self-assessment of skills, %		
Satisfied	62.1	37.0
Need further improvement	11.2	20.0
Need new skills	8.3	15.0
Self-assessment of basic skills training, %		
Digital skills	65.3	39.0
Foreign languages	56.1	39.0
Self-assessment of job-related skills training, %		
Computer skills	61.6	37.3
Communication and work adaptability	31.8	32.5
Support to return to work, %		
Personal connections	68.1	19.3
Flexible job opportunities	54.2	36.1
Skills training programs	51.2	32.5
Financial assistance	46.7	24.1
Type of support from the national employment service, %		
Receiving information about services for unemployed	79.3	
Receiving information about ALMP		22.9
Employment mediation	69.8	13.3
Job fairs	63.3	
Professional orientation and career counselling	55.7	13.3
Assistance in job searching	52.5	24.1
Training for labour market	15.6	
Training for known employer	8.7	
Motivational training		32.5
Interested in self-employment, %	27.3	34.0
Reasons for not starting a business, %		
Lack of resources	82.0	36.1
Low self-confidence	46.2	12.0
Lack of knowledge	32.4	13.3
Importance of factors if given the chance to work, %		
Stability of work and salary	95.2	75.9
Higher chance for pension	85.0	53.0
Satisfaction with presentation at the last interview, %		
Satisfied	63.5	66.2
Not satisfied	21.4	8.8
Never attended an interview	15.1	25.0
Number of respondents	169	83

Source: The authors.

#### 10.4. List of stakeholders consulted

The list of stakeholders included in the project is as follows:

- Employment Service Agency of North Macedonia
- Ministry of Economy and Labour
- Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth
- Ministry of Education
- State Statistical Office of North Macedonia
- Chamber of Commerce of North Macedonia
- Organization of Employers of North Macedonia
- Public Institution – Adult Education Centre
- Open Civic University for Lifelong Learning “Kocho Racin” – Skopje
- NGO National Women’s Network for Women
- NGO Association of Business Women
- Federation of Trade Unions of North Macedonia
- Representatives from companies
- Representatives of international organizations in North Macedonia
- Representatives of academia and research organizations
- Representatives of media

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- Local partners and focus groups participants

The Institute of Economics – Skopje, North Macedonia, recognizes the importance of engaging key stakeholders throughout the project implementation period. The stakeholders identified within the project actively participated in the first focus group, organized to identify the principal barriers faced by women aged 50 and over in their job-search process. Representatives of these institutions also attended the roundtable discussion on the preliminary findings, as well as the workshop dedicated to knowledge exchange.

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