

WOMEN'S ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE AS A FACTOR OF SOCIAL EQUALITY

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Abstract: *Women's economic independence plays a crucial role in promoting social equality, empowering marginalized groups, and dismantling patriarchal power structures. This paper analyzes the role of women's economic independence in fostering social equality, with a particular focus on the factors shaping it, the challenges women face, and the possibilities for overcoming them. Through an empirical analysis of data from the Republic of Srpska and examples of good practice drawn from international sources, the study examines the impact of educational policies, labor market conditions, and institutional barriers on gender equality. Special attention is given to identifying mechanisms that contribute to increasing women's economic autonomy, including support for women's entrepreneurship, education, and changes in social norms. The paper provides a critical review of existing inequalities and proposes recommendations for improving systems that support women's economic empowerment as a key instrument of social transformation and the strengthening of gender equality. The findings indicate that achieving full economic independence for women is essential for building a more stable and just society.*

Keywords: *economic independence, social equality, labor market, education, social policy*

JEL classification: *I29*

INTRODUCTION

The issue of women's economic independence has gained increasing importance in contemporary societies striving for social justice, inclusion, and gender equality. Although certain advances have been made over recent decades in women's rights, access to education, employment, and public life, full economic equality for women remains an unattained goal, particularly in transition countries, including the Republic of Srpska. The research problem lies in the discrepancy between formally recognized rights and the actual economic position of women. The gender pay gap, horizontal and vertical segregation in the labor market, insufficient institutional support for reconcil-

ing professional and family responsibilities, and the marginalization of women's labor represent manifestations of broader economic inequality. The subject of this paper is the analysis of factors influencing women's economic independence and its significance for achieving social equality. The aim of the study is to provide a multidisciplinary examination of women's economic independence as a key factor of social equality in the context of transition challenges, institutional frameworks, and cultural patterns in the Republic of Srpska. Based on this objective, the following research hypothesis was formulated: *Women's economic independence represents a key factor in achieving social equality, and its level depends on educational opportunities, institutional support, and socio-cultural norms shaping the labor market.* The motivation for conducting this research stems from the need for stronger empirical and theoretical foundations for policies addressing gender equality. The paper is structured into six sections. Following the introduction, the second section presents a review of relevant literature and theoretical approaches to gender equality and women's economic independence. The third section describes the research methodology. The fourth section presents and analyzes empirical data from the Republic of Srpska. The fifth section discusses the research results and provides a critical interpretation within a broader social context. The final section offers conclusions and policy recommendations aimed at enhancing women's economic empowerment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theories of social stratification provide a fundamental framework for understanding the social position of women, their economic (in)dependence, and broader patterns of social inequality. Social stratification refers to systematic and persistent inequalities between different social groups in terms of access to resources, power, and privileges. Such inequalities are not accidental but rather the result of historical, economic, political, and cultural processes.

Conflict theories of social stratification, associated primarily with Karl Marx and Max Weber, offer a critical framework for understanding social inequality, including the gender dimension of economic dependence. These theories emphasize that social hierarchies are the result of historically established relations of power and exploitation. Marx argued that class differences are rooted in control over the means of production. The bourgeoisie, which owns capital and the means of production, exploits the labor of the proletariat, who possess only their labor power. According to Marx, stratification is the consequence of this fundamental exploitation and class conflict. Max Weber expanded Marx's analysis by introducing additional dimensions of stratification—status and power. He argued that social inequalities do not arise solely from ownership of economic resources but also from prestige (status groups) and the capacity to exercise authority (power). Weber's approach enables a deeper understanding of how gender norms and social values shape women's positions even within the same economic class. For example, women who formally belong to higher economic strata may simultaneously be subordinated within familial, cultural, and political structures. Within this theoretical framework, women's economic dependence is not the result of individual choice or lack of qualifications but rather of systemic marginalization within capitalist systems and patriarchal social patterns.

Functionalist theorists such as Talcott Parsons and Kingsley Davis interpret

stratification as an inevitable mechanism that ensures the efficient functioning of society. According to the classical formulation by Davis and Moore, societies must ensure that the most important positions are filled by the most capable individuals, who are adequately rewarded, thereby legitimizing stratification. However, feminist scholars criticize this perspective for ignoring unequal starting positions and structural barriers that constrain women. (Milovanović, Novaković, & Koryagina, 2025). Contemporary conflict analyses, including feminist theories, emphasize that reproductive labor, child-care, and emotional labor form the foundation of the economic system, yet these forms of work are systematically undervalued and neglected. As a result, women's access to economic resources and status positions is limited, and their full civic and political participation is undermined, deepening economic dependence and social inequality. Feminist theories of social stratification reject the neutrality of class-based analyses and highlight gender as a central category of social inequality. Scholars such as Ann Oakley and Sylvia Walby argue that women's subordination is not based solely on economic position but also on normative and institutionalized gender roles. Oakley maintains that gender is a social construct rather than a biological destiny (Oakley, 1972), while Walby conceptualizes patriarchy as a systemic structure operating alongside capitalism (Walby, 2009). Tanja Renner introduces a more complex approach, emphasizing that gender inequalities cannot be analyzed separately from class and ethnic hierarchies (Renner, 2002).

Pierre Bourdieu develops a theoretical framework that transcends the simple dichotomy of class and income by offering a multidimensional approach to social stratification through the concept of capital. In addition to economic capital (material goods and financial resources), Bourdieu introduces cultural, social, and symbolic capital as key dimensions shaping individuals' and groups' positions within the social hierarchy. Each of these dimensions functions as a source of power and differentiation, and their distribution and accumulation influence opportunities for social mobility. Cultural capital, manifested through education, linguistic competencies, cultural practices, and symbolic knowledge, plays a crucial role in the reproduction of social inequalities. In this context, women—particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds—often lack equal access to this form of capital and its institutional validation. Social capital, referring to networks of support, acquaintances, professional connections, and social ties, is also unevenly distributed. Women are frequently excluded from influential social networks, especially in decision-making and political spheres, which further limits their access to resources and opportunities for advancement. Symbolic capital—recognition, prestige, and social legitimacy—is linked to societal perceptions of the value of specific roles, identities, and behaviors. Since women's characteristics and contributions are often symbolically devalued or marginalized, women are disadvantaged within processes of symbolic exchange that determine social status (Bourdieu, 1984).

Feminist political economy and institutional theory offer additional insights into the dynamics of power, labor, and gender relations. Feminist economists such as Diane Elson (Elson, Gender justice, human rights and neo-liberal economic policies, 2002), Nancy Folbre, and Lourdes Benería (Benería, 2003) emphasize that mainstream economics neglects gender differences and unpaid labor. They criticize standard household models that assume equal distribution of resources within families while ignoring

internal hierarchies. Ferber and Nelson highlight the importance of analyzing unpaid labor, the gendered division of labor, and unequal power relations within economic institutions (Ferber, 2003).

According to Amartya Sen's capability approach, genuine individual freedom depends on actual access to resources rather than merely formal rights (Sen, 1999). Women's economic independence enables them to choose education, professions, and lifestyles, as well as to participate equally in democratic society. Nancy Fraser proposes a dual strategy of social justice: redistribution of economic resources and recognition of identities (Fraser, 2013). This approach is particularly relevant for post-transitional societies such as the Republic of Srpska, where economic insecurity and traditional gender norms operate simultaneously (Sasic, 2015).

According to a UN Women report (Women, 2023), increased female participation in the economy contributes to overall GDP growth, poverty reduction, and greater community resilience. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2023) estimates that reducing the gender employment gap by 25% would increase global GDP by more than 5%. In the context of the Balkans and Bosnia and Herzegovina, women exhibit lower employment rates, are less likely to hold leadership positions, and are more often engaged in precarious forms of work (Rudić, 2021). Women's participation in political decision-making structures remains extremely low, and longitudinal trends do not indicate consistent progress, as noted by (Babović, 2010) in her analysis of Serbia. (Blagojević, 2009) emphasizes that the resources available to women are often culturally undervalued and socially invisible, leading to symbolic inferiority. Knowledge, skills, and experiences acquired through everyday work—particularly unpaid and emotional labor—are not recognized as legitimate forms of capital. Consequently, although women contribute significantly to social reproduction, they remain excluded from spheres of recognition and reward.

Women's economic independence has become a central topic of contemporary theoretical and empirical research, as it is regarded as one of the key indicators of social development and gender equality. A common denominator in contemporary studies is the need for an interdisciplinary approach that integrates economic, sociological, cultural, and legal perspectives on gender inequality, particularly in the context of women's economic empowerment and the achievement of social equality.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods research approach integrating quantitative and qualitative methods in order to provide a comprehensive and multidimensional analysis of the economic position of women in the Republic of Srpska. Such an approach enables the simultaneous examination of structural patterns and individual experiences, as well as a deeper understanding of the factors shaping women's economic independence in the contemporary social context.

The primary objective of the research was to examine the relationship between women's economic independence and the level of social equality, as well as to analyze the interconnections between education, employment, and women's participation in decision-making processes. Particular attention was paid to identifying the barriers and constraints women face in realizing their economic rights and potential. A descriptive-analytical research design was applied, allowing both the description of the

existing situation and the analysis of causal relationships among key variables. The quantitative component of the study focused on the analysis of existing statistical data obtained from secondary sources, while the qualitative component involved primary data collection through semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Secondary data used in the quantitative analysis were collected from several relevant sources, including the Institute of Statistics of the Republic of Srpska (publications from 2018–2024), (Srpske, 2024) the Agency for Gender Equality of Bosnia and Herzegovina, UN Women, the International Labour Organization (ILO), the World Bank, and other international and domestic institutions. The indicators analyzed included employment rates, the number of enrolled and graduated students in higher education institutions in the Republic of Srpska, gender wage gaps, women's representation in managerial positions, the prevalence of informal employment, and women's participation in entrepreneurship.

Quantitative data were processed using the statistical software package SPSS (version 26). The analysis included descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, mean values, and standard deviation) as well as cross-tabulation analysis to identify associations between education level, employment status, and participation in decision-making. The qualitative component of the research consisted of 20 semi-structured interviews with women employed in the public and private sectors, five interviews with representatives of organizations working in the field of women's rights and gender equality, and three focus groups with six participants each, conducted in both rural and urban settings, thereby capturing diverse social perspectives. The sample was formed using purposive sampling to ensure diversity according to the following criteria: gender (women), age (25–65), level of education, professional status, and place of residence (urban/rural). All interviews and focus group discussions were audio-recorded with participants' consent and analyzed using thematic analysis following the methodological steps proposed by (Braun, 2006). The identified thematic categories included barriers to employment and career advancement, challenges in balancing professional and family responsibilities, perceptions of institutional support, motivation and obstacles related to entrepreneurship, and subjective perceptions of economic independence. Primary data were collected between March and April 2025. A total of 300 questionnaires were distributed via online platforms, of which 113 were validly completed. Additional open-ended questions were included to obtain qualitative explanations of quantitative responses. The analysis of available statistical data indicates a significant discrepancy between women's educational achievements and their professional positions.

EMPIRICAL DATA

The empirical data collected during the research provide a foundation for understanding the current economic position of women in the Republic of Srpska, as well as for identifying the factors shaping their economic independence. The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods enabled a multidimensional examination of the complex social reality in which women operate, as well as an analysis of the interdependence between education, employment, income, and institutional support.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Selected Variables (N = 113)

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Percentage (%)
Age (years)	39.7	9.8	25	65	—
Education level: Secondary school or lower	—	—	—	—	23.0
College/University degree	—	—	—	—	52.2
Master's/specialist or higher degree	—	—	—	—	24.8
Employed (yes)	—	—	—	—	68.1
Employment sector: Public	—	—	—	—	40.7
Private sector	—	—	—	—	59.3
Average monthly salary (BAM)	850	320	400	1,800	—
Informal employment (yes)	—	—	—	—	27.4

Source: Author's calculations using SPSS 26. Percentages are calculated based on the total number of respondents (N = 113).

Descriptive statistics indicate that the average age of respondents is 39.7 years, suggesting that most participants are in a phase of active economic and family engagement. More than two-thirds of women (68.1%) are employed, with employment in the private sector predominating (59.3%), which is often characterized by lower job security, higher risk of exploitation, and weaker institutional protection. The average monthly salary amounts to BAM 850, which is below the level required for financial autonomy, particularly in the context of family and housing obligations. A particularly concerning finding is that 27.4% of respondents are engaged in informal employment, meaning they work without formal contracts and access to social rights, further exacerbating their economic vulnerability.

Table 2. Correlation Matrix of Selected Variables (N = 113)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Age	—				
2. Education level	0.12	—			
3. Salary level (BAM)	0.08	0.45**	—		
4. Employment sector (1 = private)	-0.05	-0.10	0.30**	—	
5. Managerial position involvement	0.15	0.38**	0.52**	0.25*	—

Source: Author's calculations using SPSS 26.

***Notes:** *p < .05; *p < .01. Variable 4 coded as binary (private/public sector). Variable 5 coded as binary (managerial position yes/no).

The correlation analysis (Table 2.) reveals significant relationships between education level, salary level, and involvement in managerial positions. Women with higher levels of education are more likely to achieve higher incomes ($r = 0.45$, $p < .01$) and to occupy managerial positions ($r = 0.38$, $p < .01$). However, although education significantly contributes to economic independence, it does not constitute a sufficient guarantee of equal opportunities.

Table 3. Independent Samples t-Test by Education Level (N = 113)

Variable	Secondary school or lower (N = 26)	Higher education (N = 87)	t-value	df	p-value
Average salary (BAM)	650	920	-5.23	111	< .001
Managerial positions (%)	15.4%	38.0%	-3.12	111	.002

Source: Author's calculations using SPSS 26.

The t-test results (Table 3.) confirm statistically significant differences in income and hierarchical positioning between women with higher education and those with secondary education. Despite substantial educational attainment—over 77% of respondents possess higher or university-level education—their representation in managerial positions remains low. This finding indicates the presence of the so-called *glass ceiling*, an invisible barrier that prevents women from advancing in their careers regardless of competence and experience.

The qualitative segment of the study provided additional insight into women's experiences and perceptions of the challenges associated with achieving economic independence. The analysis of 20 in-depth interviews, five interviews with representatives of women's rights organizations, and three focus groups involving a total of 18 participants from urban and rural areas revealed a range of obstacles that cannot be fully captured by quantitative methods.

According to the results of the thematic analysis (Table 4.), the most frequently mentioned themes are clearly identified. These findings complement the statistical data and offer a deeper understanding of the causal relationships between women's individual strategies and the structural barriers that hinder the realization of full economic autonomy. The data point to the multilayered nature of the economic challenges faced by women in the Republic of Srpska.

Table 4. Thematic Categories and Frequency of References

Thematic category	Number of references	Example quotations
Barriers to employment	27	"Gender stereotypes hinder women's access to managerial positions."
Work-family balance	23	"Employers do not understand the needs of mothers."
Perception of institutional support	15	"Programs exist, but they are not accessible to everyone."
Motivation for entrepreneurship	18	"Entrepreneurship is often the only path to independence."
Importance of education	20	"Education is the key to better pay and career advancement."

Source: Author's calculations using SPSS 26.

From a sociological perspective, education is not merely an instrument for acquiring knowledge and skills, but also a mechanism through which attitudes, values, and aspirations are shaped. Providing equal educational opportunities for women contributes to dismantling stereotypes and opens space for the transformation of gender roles within the family, the community, and the workplace.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study confirm the initial hypothesis that women's economic independence is a key factor in the construction of social equality, while also demonstrating that its realization in the Republic of Srpska is constrained by numerous structural, institutional, and cultural barriers. Quantitative findings clearly indicate the existence of significant gender disparities in economic position. Women remain underrepresented in the formal labor market, are less likely to occupy high-ranking positions, are more frequently engaged in the informal economy, and continue to face a pronounced gender wage gap. Such conditions reflect insufficient structural inclusion of women in economic processes, which directly affects their capacity to act as autonomous agents in society.

Education represents one of the key mechanisms of social mobility and individual emancipation, and in the context of gender equality, it has the potential to serve as the most important instrument for achieving women's economic independence. Traditional social structures, which have largely favored patriarchal patterns of behavior and gender roles, have systematically limited women's access to education - particularly in higher and technical fields - thereby directly suppressing their competitiveness in the labor market and their opportunities for economic empowerment. Qualitative findings indicate that women who had access to additional education (especially in information technology, foreign languages, and management) were more likely to achieve economic advancement. However, women from rural and socioeconomically underdeveloped areas often lack access to such resources, resulting in social polarization within the female population itself.

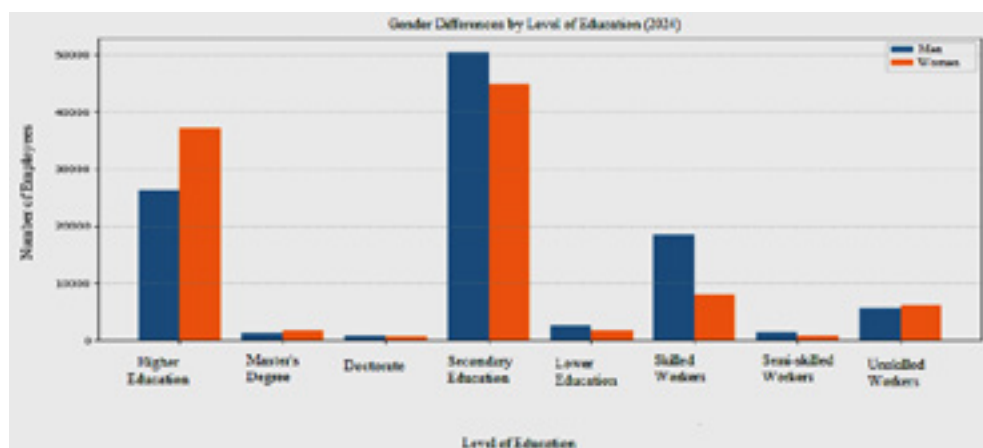


Figure 1. Gender differences in the structure of employment by level of education (2024)

Source: Author's research

An analysis of the structure of employment in business entities in 2024, disaggregated by gender and level of education (Figure 1.), reveals the persistent existence of gender-conditioned patterns within the labor market. A total of 246,213 employed persons were recorded, of whom 128,905 were men (52.4%) and 117,308 were women (47.6%). Women dominate the category of higher education attainment, with 37,246 women (59%) compared to 26,254 men (41%). This distribution indicates a strong

presence of women in fields requiring higher education, consistent with global trends of feminization in certain professional sectors, particularly services, public administration, healthcare, and education. In the category of master's degree holders, women also predominate (1,840 women compared to 1,242 men), while at the highest educational level—doctoral degrees—men continue to prevail (863 men compared to 680 women).

These data testify to a gradual reduction of the gender gap in academic and scientific personnel, but also to the continued presence of structural inequality at the top of the educational hierarchy. At the level of secondary education, men are slightly more represented (53%) than women (47%), reflecting traditional gender divisions in occupational choice: men are more frequently employed in technical, manufacturing, and industrial sectors, while women are more concentrated in administrative and service occupations. At the level of lower education, gender differences are more pronounced, with 2,709 men (60.9%) compared to 1,739 women (39.1%). This distribution points to long-term educational and professional dispositions shaped through socialization and expectations regarding “male” and “female” occupations.

The categories of skilled and semi-skilled workers further reinforce gender dichotomies: men are overwhelmingly dominant, with 18,556 skilled workers (compared to 7,956 women) and 1,455 semi-skilled workers (compared to 844 women). This reflects greater male participation in crafts, physically demanding jobs, and technical production. Conversely, women constitute the majority among unskilled workers—6,186 women compared to 5,555 men. Although numerically smaller, this group is analytically significant as it points to gender segregation at the bottom of the labor market, where women more frequently perform low-paid, insecure, and flexible jobs with limited opportunities for professional mobility. Data for 2024 confirms the existence of gender stratification within the educational and professional structure of employment. Although women increasingly dominate higher education segments, their presence in low-paid and unstable positions remains substantial. This polarization of the female labor force underscores the need for systemic interventions and gender-sensitive policies in education, labor markets, and career advancement to reduce structural barriers and ensure full gender equality.

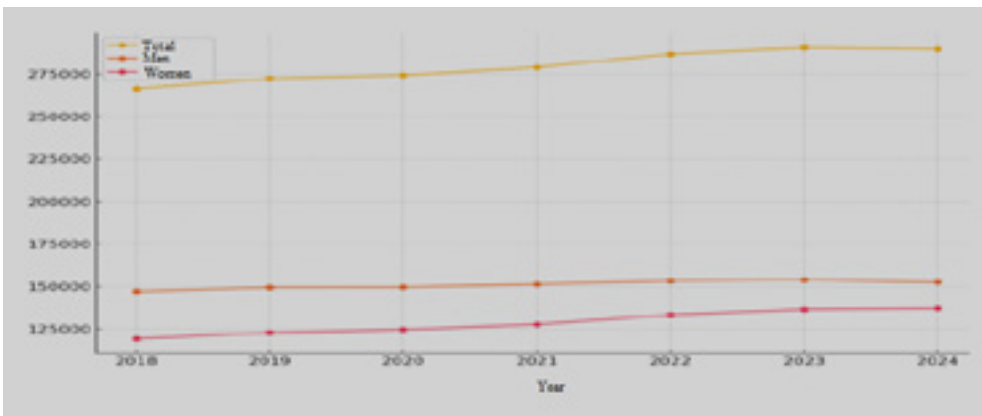


Figure 2. Employment Growth in the Republic of Srpska (2018-2024)

Source: Author's research

Based on official statistical data, the period from 2018 to 2024 (Figure 2.) shows an overall increase in employment in the Republic of Srpska. The total number of employed persons rose from 266,309 to 289,722, representing an increase of 8.8%. However, a gender-disaggregated structural analysis reveals significant sociological implications. While men remain the majority of the employed population, their number increased only modestly—from 147,106 in 2018 to 152,513 in 2024 - representing a relative growth of just 3.7%. A slight decline was even observed in 2024 compared to 2023, which may indicate shifts in labor market structure or increased flexibility in female labor participation.

Female employment recorded a substantially more pronounced increase—from 119,203 in 2018 to 137,209 in 2024—representing a growth of 15.1%. Women’s share of total employment increased from 44.7% to 47.4%, significantly narrowing the gender employment gap. These trends point to a gradual transformation of gender roles in the sphere of economic activity.

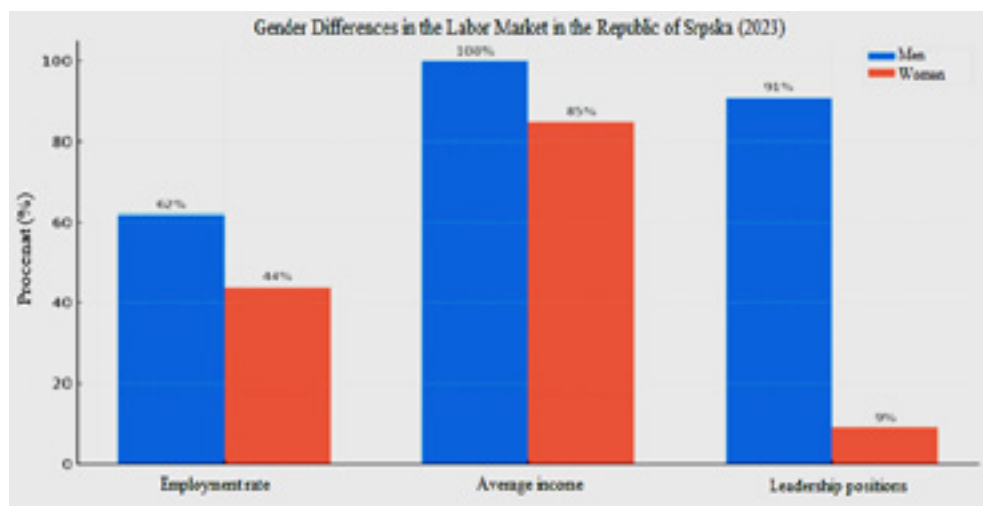


Figure 3. Gender Differences in the Labor Market in the Republic of Srpska (2023)

Source: Author’s research

Women with higher education levels have better employment prospects; however, on average, they still earn 12–15% less than men with the same education and qualifications. (Figure3.). Additionally, only 9% of managerial positions in public enterprises and public administration are occupied by women, indicating an unequal distribution of power and influence. Despite the fact that women have constituted the majority of highly educated individuals for years, their representation in leadership structures remains minimal. This imbalance reflects deeply entrenched social barriers. The first barrier is the so-called *glass ceiling*, which prevents women’s advancement due to informal decision-making networks and the preferential selection of male candidates. The second barrier is related to gender roles, whereby women are still predominantly perceived as primary caregivers and managers of household responsibilities, limiting their professional engagement. The third barrier is the lack of institutional support, including flexible working arrangements, childcare services, and an equitable

distribution of parental responsibilities, all of which further complicate women's position in the labor market. The fourth factor consists of persistent gender stereotypes portraying women as emotional, indecisive, and insufficiently assertive for leadership roles. (Bank, 2023) These findings confirm that women's economic independence is not merely a matter of employment, but also of job quality, fair remuneration, and equal opportunities for career advancement. At the same time, women's underrepresentation in leadership positions reflects deeper patterns of social power and influence that continue to favor men.

In comparison with international frameworks, Eurostat data indicate that women in the European Union account for approximately 60% of university graduates but remain underrepresented in STEM fields. In Nordic countries, where education and equal opportunity policies are strategically developed, the highest rates of women's economic activity and the smallest gender pay gaps are recorded. These examples demonstrate that institutional support, affirmative measures, and systematic education are key factors in overcoming deeply rooted gender inequalities. The results of focus groups and interviews further confirm the persistence of a patriarchal culture in which women are expected to primarily fulfill family and domestic roles. Many participants reported experiencing a "double burden"—professional work combined with household responsibilities—which significantly limits their opportunities for career development. Although laws formally guarantee gender equality, informal discrimination continues to dominate in practice, particularly with regard to career advancement and working conditions after maternity leave. An analysis of existing mechanisms supporting women's entrepreneurship and employment indicates that these mechanisms are insufficiently developed and poorly accessible. Women are often inadequately informed about subsidy programs, while procedures are complex and inadequately promoted. Individual success stories are largely the result of personal initiative and local support networks rather than systemic policy measures.

Nevertheless, the study also identifies a strong transformative potential of women's economic independence. Women who have secured stable incomes, started their own businesses, or obtained employment in highly qualified sectors exhibit higher levels of self-confidence, social engagement, and readiness to initiate change within their communities. Their economic autonomy positively affects the quality of life of their children, families, and the broader social environment. These findings confirm that women's economic empowerment has a multilayered impact: it is not merely an individual act of emancipation, but a crucial mechanism for dismantling unequal social structures and building a more just system in which women are equal agents of development.

CONCLUSION

The initial hypothesis of this study posited that women's economic independence represents one of the key factors in achieving social equality. Based on the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, this hypothesis has been confirmed. Empirical findings unequivocally indicate that women who possess stable sources of income, formal employment, higher levels of education, and a certain degree of institutional support demonstrate greater autonomy in decision-making and more active participation in social processes. Despite positive trends reflected in increased interest in education

and entrepreneurship, the results reveal persistent and systematic gender inequalities in the economic status of women in the Republic of Srpska. The theoretical contribution of this study lies in the identification and analysis of the multilayered factors that determine women's economic independence. Its practical relevance is reflected in its potential to inform policymakers and contribute to the development of gender-sensitive public measures aimed at overcoming economic inequalities. Research limitations, particularly those related to sample size and limited access to certain data, point to the need for further studies employing more diverse methodologies and broader empirical coverage. Finally, women's economic independence cannot be viewed in isolation, but rather as the result of the interaction between individual capacities and structural conditions. Comprehensive policies integrating education, labor markets, social protection, and gender equality are necessary to create a social environment that fosters a fair distribution of power, resources, and opportunities.

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