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ORIGINAL SCIENTIFIC PAPER

## Restricted Ambitions: Analyzing Barriers to Women's Advancement in Serbia's Public Sector



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### ABSTRACT

*This paper explores the “sticky floor” phenomenon that hinders women's career progression in the public sector in Serbia. This little-researched concept impedes the career path of women, especially in the early stages of their careers.*

*The paper applied a theoretical review and quantitative analysis based on a survey of 100 employees in the public sector in Serbia, with the aim of investigating specific challenges such as a lack of support in career development, the elimination of social stereotypes, and better business-private life coordination. The research used a validated instrument from previous studies to develop the questionnaire, whereas the chi-square test of independence and cross-tabulation analysis were used for data analysis. Women reported a higher incidence of challenges related to lack of mentorship, difficulties in balancing work and family responsibilities, societal stereotypes, and gender-based discrimination. The goal of the research is to identify factors that hinder women's advancement and better understand the paths to success. Also, it has been investigated how possible it is to overcome all the obstacles mentioned.*

*The study proposes relevant recommendations and new policies, including various education programs on workplace bias awareness development, better*

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*support programs, and more flexible working conditions in order to break down the barriers of the "sticky floor" and promote a more inclusive environment for the advancement of women in the public sector in Serbia. This research will allow us to understand better the challenges in women's career development as well as to encourage a more supportive work environment.*

**KEYWORDS:** *sticky floor, women, advancement, public sector, gender equality, barriers, professional development*

## **Introduction**

A problem visible in the process of advancement in the public sector in Serbia is reflected in the barriers preventing the career development of women. This problem is particularly pronounced at lower positions and in the sectors of an organization where hierarchy is more present. According to the available Gender Equality Index for the Republic of Serbia from 2021 (Babović & Petrović, 2021), it is evident that the percentage of women in managerial positions is around 28%, whereas only 18% of women occupy leadership positions in the public sector. The report highlights the “sticky floor” phenomenon as a major factor limiting their progression, especially in the public sector in Serbia.

The “sticky floor” deals with various barriers that hinder women's advancement from entry-level to higher positions in organizations. In relation to this phenomenon, the “glass ceiling” concept has also been identified as the one that determines and explains the barrier to higher management positions that women in organizations encounter (Cotter et al., 2001; Smith, 2015). Those barriers are perceived in various systemic, structural, cultural and institutional circumstances. While both concepts address gender inequality, the sticky floor captures the more pervasive, early-career constraints such as lack of mentoring, biased evaluations, and limited advancement (Smith, 2015; Tošković, 2013). Though often invisible, these barriers have a significant impact in the early stages of women's careers.

The differences are particularly noticeable in public institutions where politicization of public administration and traditional norms limit women's mobility and advancement (Acker, 2006; Ridgeway, 2011).

Studies show that women are greatly limited due to weak institutional support and traditional norms. The situation is no different in Serbia, where the “sticky floor” phenomenon additionally stands out (Rahman et al.,

2024). Studies also indicate that despite technological progress bringing prosperity and progress in various areas of life, it has not helped women in overcoming different systemic and structural barriers to the same extent as it has for men (Salamzadeh et al., 2024).

The position of women, with the emphasis on managerial and entrepreneurial roles, has drastically worsened over the past few years, and especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. The crisis highlighted the great vulnerability of women by increasing caregiving expectations, while institutional empathy and support were lacking (Agu et al., 2024; Salamzadeh et al., 2024). Efforts recognized and made visible through digitization have not empowered women, nor have they served as a support in their empowerment efforts. Women often remain at a disadvantage and do not have access to training programs, mentoring, and other development opportunities (Machado et al., 2025; Banyan Global, 2020).

Acker's theory of "inequality regimes" explains how gendered power dynamics are embedded in bureaucratic norms, with informal bias particularly evident at higher levels (Acker, 2006). Ridgeway (2011) emphasizes that leadership remains linked to masculine traits, disadvantaging women who do not conform.

In Serbia, the "sticky floor" phenomenon is shaped by a combination of historical, political, and cultural events and differences. The legacy of socialist gender equality, encouraging women to be a part of the labor force and at the same time strengthening the traditional role of women at home directly causes the existence of a "double burden" for women (Blagojević, 2009). Such a legacy has caused a situation where women today hold significantly lower-paid positions or administrative positions that are of no influence in decision-making processes within organizations.

Another factor significantly influencing the unfavorable position of women is the politicization of public administration, which obstructs the possibility of women's advancement and mobility (Petrušić, 2018).

Comparative studies conducted in post-socialist countries such as Hungary, Poland, and Bulgaria indicate similar patterns of gender stagnation despite major legal reforms being carried out. Authors such as Fodor (2002) and Glass and Fodor (2007) claim that while the social regimes promoted women's employment, they failed to free themselves from the rigid patriarchal norms within the organizations, thus leading to the current situation that there is an informal resistance to female leadership and that gender stereotypes are deeply rooted in public institutions. These studies

only reinforce the necessity for dealing with the “sticky floor” phenomenon in Serbia through both local and transnational lenses.

The “sticky floor” phenomenon has also been analyzed in terms of feminist organizational theory. It indicates that the phenomenon is rather present in different patterns of behavior and discrimination, thus directly affecting the levers of power when it comes to gender equality and creating an informal organizational environment not supportive of women (Acker, 2006; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Dokmanović, 2024).

Obstacles that prevent women from advancing in their careers can be classified as cultural norms, institutional discrimination and various social stereotypes. Women face all the obstacles mentioned daily in their working environment (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998). Apart from the obvious problems that they have in balancing business and private life, they also face cultural problems, lack and unavailability of mentors and organizational culture development (Sharma, 2022; Eagly & Carli, 2007).

In Serbia, other obstacles prevent women from advancing within organizations, i.e., barriers related to education and access to advancement opportunities based on gender differences. Men in the public sector usually hold leadership positions and have a significant role in the decision-making process, whereas women are often given administrative roles (Ćopić, 2016). Another aggravating aspect is that women cannot obtain the qualifications necessary for advancement through institutional support and appropriate resources, which is recognized as a deficiency of the current educational system (Banyan Global, 2020).

One of the key issues identified is the lack of promotion opportunities for women as well as limited or inadequate access to appropriate management training, thus further limiting women from participating in professional development programs (Ćopić, 2016; Banyan Global, 2020). According to research conducted by Lazarević-Moravčević et al. (2023), women who attended specialized or MBA programs had greater opportunities to move to management positions in the public and private sectors. Nevertheless, disparities in access to these programs exist, and problems related to gender stereotypes greatly affect and discourage women from applying to various development programs (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998).

This paper aims to investigate how systemic barriers—such as social stereotypes, lack of work-life balance, limited mentoring, and unsupportive workplace climates—contribute to the “sticky floor” effect in Serbia’s

public sector. Adopting a feminist perspective, it explores gender inequality as a structural issue requiring deep institutional change. The survey of 100 public sector employees in Vojvodina, across managerial and non-managerial roles, is used to examine perceptions of career barriers by women and men. The findings offer practical implications for institutional reform and gender-sensitive policy development, including the introduction of structured mentoring programs, enhanced access to professional development, the reduction of gender stereotypes, and greater representation of women in decision-making roles.

### **Multifaceted “Sticky Floor” and Its Impact**

The “sticky floor” phenomenon encompasses persistent early-career obstacles that keep women in low hierarchical positions despite adequate education and strong performance (Smith, 2015). Different factors, such as cultural norms and social contexts that function within an organization, significantly contribute to this phenomenon. Cultural norms portray women primarily as caregivers, limiting their career ambitions (Cotter et al., 2001). Inadequate mentoring reduces women’s confidence and professional support (Cross et al., 2019). Rigid organizational practices and poor work-life balance further restrict advancement (Acker, 2006). Social stereotypes portraying women as less capable for leadership exacerbate these issues (Davies et al., 2004). Collectively, these studies illustrate how complex and multifaceted the “sticky floor” phenomenon is and the impact it has on women's career paths.

When perceived from the aspect of education, the “sticky floor” phenomenon is particularly noticeable, especially in relation to the public sector. Namely, though women make up most graduates from various universities in Serbia, their advantage is rarely proportionally represented in their professional advancement. According to the research of the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory (2019), barriers that are recognized as educational stereotypes and appear as early as primary and secondary school direct girls towards traditionally feminized fields such as education, health, and administration, which generally provide fewer opportunities for leadership positions (Institut za filozofiju i društvenu teoriju, 2019). Such gender stereotypes are only further reinforced and continue at the higher education level.

Access to development training programs is limited due to family obligations and a lack of institutional support, which reduces women's mobility and growth opportunities (Banyan Global, 2020). Gender stereotypes in educational materials further undermine girls' confidence and aspirations (Petrušić, 2018).

In addition to all visible and alarming problems within organizations, a significant problem lies in the poor and very slow institutional response to these challenges. Institutions should actively promote the best solutions and practices to fight biases and change harmful practices. Therefore, it is crucial to define solutions that would be visible and of a longer-term character, which are supported by appropriate material resources and assistance from educational institutions, thus strengthening the women's careers in the future. In this context, it is important to empower women in the earlier stages of education, so that these issues are identified in the earlier stages and, as such, prevented from becoming a bad example and practice. Such initiatives also contribute to solving the shortcomings in organizations related to the generation gap and challenges in the areas of equality, equity and gender equality. Otherwise, the "sticky floor" phenomenon will continue to be an issue for generations to come.

### **Women in the Public Sector: Achievements and Challenges**

Research on the role of women in the public sector indicates both significant achievements and numerous challenges. Despite more women becoming involved in the public sector, thus creating new perspectives and more inclusive policymaking (UNDP, 2021), gender inequality still persists. According to the data available for gender equality for 2021 in the Republic of Serbia, women do not occupy leadership positions in a satisfactory percentage (Babović & Petrović, 2021). Also, there are various systemic, structural and cultural norms that make it difficult for women to advance in the public sector. Some of the barriers are recognized to be bad employment practices, lack of training and mentoring opportunities, as well as stereotypes that women are incapable of taking leadership positions and are not ready to take on leadership roles. The European Institute for Gender Equality emphasizes that these problems are often exacerbated by old and conservative modes of operation, which are deeply rooted in tradition (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2020).

In Serbia, many women still occupy lower-paid positions, thus making it difficult for them to take part in decision-making processes. Therefore, in addition to changing the law, it is necessary to create such an organizational climate and culture to provide adequate support for women so that they can advance and assume leadership positions.

## **Global Trends and the Serbian Context**

Studies show that there are certain systemic and structural barriers that make it difficult for women to obtain leadership positions in the public sector worldwide (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998; Dennissen et al., 2018). Slaughter (2015) further discusses the concept of “double duty” applied to women, particularly to those holding leadership positions. This means that women have to fulfill traditional gender roles, and at the same time, constantly prove their abilities so as to fight the stereotypes and practices that hinder their careers.

In the Republic of Serbia, the gender equality index for 2021 shows a score of 58 out of a possible 100 points, reflecting widespread stereotypes that are deeply rooted within organizations (Babović & Petrović, 2021). This indicates that the imbalance affects approximately every other woman. In addition, the second segment of the report deals with the sphere of power, especially in political, economic, and social decision-making processes. This index increased by 18.5 points compared to the results from 2014. These positive changes are mainly the result of the appropriate application of legal norms aimed at increasing the representation of women in various institutions. There is a noticeable increase in the participation of women in the legislative bodies of the Republic of Serbia, such as the National Assembly and the Government of the Republic of Serbia. The participation of women has increased to approximately 40% (Babović & Petrović, 2021). Despite the improved formal scores, the index suggests that gender gaps still exist when it comes to economic power. Women are still underrepresented in leadership positions, even in the private sector in Serbia, and they still face wage inequality. Furthermore, the time domain, which measures the balance between the paid and unpaid work, shows stagnation due to outdated data from 2015. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated these inequalities, especially for women, in terms of limited access to employment.

The Human Rights Education in Serbia (2021) report indicates that education about human rights, including gender equality, is not systematically implemented in schools. The normative framework supports equality and non-discrimination, but many obstacles exist in practice, including inadequate curriculum implementation, lack of trained teachers, and no visible results in the educational process itself (Koturović et al., 2021).

The results show that Serbia is making progress in formal gender representation, yet cultural norms and institutional barriers and practices hinder women's advancement. A common and more comprehensive approach is needed to bridge the gap between policy and practice and for the public sector in Serbia to truly support gender equality. The approach should include better regulatory norms, raise awareness at all levels and introduce key changes in the education system.

## **Research Methodology**

This study addresses the limited opportunities for advancement of women employed in the public sector in Serbia. Therefore, the aim of the paper is to highlight the disparities in career advancement opportunities between men and women, and to examine the challenges faced by women in the public sector.

The research for this study was conducted during September and October 2024. Quantitative research used a questionnaire developed based on previous empirical studies on barriers to women's career advancement (Lyness & Thompson, 2000; Banyan Global, 2020). The questionnaire contained demographic and closed-ended questions aimed at examining the perception of barriers in the areas of mentoring support, work-life balance, gender discrimination and organizational culture. The research was conducted on a sample of 100 employees in managerial and non-managerial positions in various public sector institutions located in major urban administrative centers of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina. Respondents were selected using the random sampling method, and the data were collected electronically (via an online questionnaire), with the anonymity of the participants having been ensured. The questionnaire was previously tested through a pilot study (n=10) to check the clarity of the question formulations.



The sample structure by gender, age, experience and level of education is shown in Table 1. The sample consists of 32 male respondents (32%) and 68 female respondents (68%). In the age category, the most respondents fall under the category between 41 and 50 years of age (34%), followed by 51 to 60 years (25%), 31 to 40 (20%), 18 to 30 years (17%) and 61 to 70 (4%). When it comes to experience, the largest number of respondents have between 10 and 20 years of experience (37%), 28% have between 20 and 30 years of experience, 23% have up to 10 years of experience, while 12% of respondents have over 30 years of experience. In the category of education, most respondents are in the category of high school (59%), followed by college (32%) and 9% with a master's degree.

*Table 1: Distribution of respondents by gender, age, experience and level of education*

|                   | N  | %  |
|-------------------|----|----|
| <b>Gender</b>     |    |    |
| Male              | 32 | 32 |
| Female            | 68 | 68 |
| <b>Age</b>        |    |    |
| 18-30 years       | 17 | 17 |
| 31-40 years       | 20 | 20 |
| 41-50 years       | 34 | 34 |
| 51-60 years       | 25 | 25 |
| 61-70 years       | 4  | 4  |
| <b>Experience</b> |    |    |
| Up to 10 years    | 23 | 23 |
| 10-20 years       | 37 | 37 |
| 20-30 years       | 28 | 28 |
| Over 30 years     | 12 | 12 |
| <b>Education</b>  |    |    |
| High school       | 59 | 59 |
| College           | 32 | 32 |
| Master            | 9  | 9  |

*Source: Author's calculation*

Based on the analyzed theoretical background and set research objectives, the following hypotheses were set:

- H0:** It is expected that a significantly higher number of women than men will report facing challenges in career advancement in the public sector.
- H1:** The lack of mentorship as a career advancement challenge differs between men and women.
- H2:** Balancing work and family responsibilities affects career advancement differently for men and women.
- H3:** Societal stereotypes about the role of women, as a challenge to career advancement, differ between men and women.
- H4:** Gender-based discrimination, as a challenge to career advancement, differs between men and women.

Hypothesis testing was made possible by the application of Pearson's chi-square test, while the method of cross-tabulation was used to determine the frequency or proportion of cases in each of the categories. The statistical software used for data processing and testing of proposed hypotheses is IBM SPSS version 22. For a result to be significant, the significance level should be 0.05 or less (Pallant, 2020). Therefore, the level of statistical significance was set at  $p < 0.05$ .

## **Research Results**

To examine whether there is a significant relationship between challenges related to career advancement in the public sector and gender, we used the Pearson chi-square test (Table 2). The chi-squared test of independence showed a significant relationship between challenges related to career advancement in the public sector and gender  $\chi^2 (df = 1, n = 100) = 24,698; p = 0,000$ .

*Table 2: Relationship between challenges related to career advancement and gender (Pearson Chi-Square test)*

|                                  |                              | <b>Value</b> | <b>df</b> | <b>Significance</b> |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------|-----------|---------------------|
| Challenges to career advancement | Pearson Chi-Square           | 24,698       | 1         | 0,000               |
|                                  | Likelihood Ration            | 23,775       | 1         |                     |
|                                  | Linear-by-Linear Association | 24,451       | 1         |                     |
|                                  | N of Valid Cases             | 100          |           |                     |

*Source: Author's calculation*

The results show (Table 3) that the number of women (87%) who stated they face career advancement challenges in the public sector is significantly higher than the number of men (38.7%) who face similar challenges. On the other hand, the number of men (61.3%) who did not perceive any challenges in their career advancement in the public sector is notably higher compared to the number of women (13%).

*Table 3: Challenges to career advancement in the public sector by gender*

|                                  |       |                 | <b>Gender</b> |               | <b>Total</b> |
|----------------------------------|-------|-----------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|
|                                  |       |                 | <b>Male</b>   | <b>Female</b> |              |
| Challenges to career advancement | Yes   | Count           | 12            | 60            | 72           |
|                                  |       | Structure (%)   | 16,7%         | 83,3%         | 100,0%       |
|                                  |       | % within Gender | 38,7%         | 87,0%         | 72,0%        |
|                                  | No    | Count           | 19            | 9             | 28           |
|                                  |       | Structure (%)   | 67,9%         | 32,1%         | 100,0%       |
|                                  |       | % within Gender | 61,3%         | 13,0%         | 28,0%        |
|                                  | Total | Count           | 31            | 69            | 100          |
|                                  |       | Structure (%)   | 31,0%         | 69,0%         | 100,0%       |
|                                  |       | % within Gender | 100,0%        | 100,0%        | 100,0%       |

*Source: Author's calculation*

After proving that career advancement in the public sector is different for men and women, an attempt was made to determine the individual challenges that women face to a greater extent than men. A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between gender

and individual challenges in career advancement. The results of the chi-squared test of independence (Table 4) show a significant relationship between lack of mentorship and gender  $\chi^2$  ( $df = 1$ ,  $n = 100$ ) = 23,391;  $p = 0,000$ .

*Table 4: Relationship between individual challenges related to career advancement (Lack of mentorship) and gender (Pearson Chi-Square test)*

|                    |                              | Value  | df | Significance |
|--------------------|------------------------------|--------|----|--------------|
| Lack of mentorship | Pearson Chi-Square           | 23,391 | 1  | 0,000        |
|                    | Likelihood Ration            | 23,613 | 1  |              |
|                    | Linear-by-Linear Association | 23,157 | 1  |              |
|                    | N of Valid Cases             | 100    |    |              |

*Source: Author's calculation*

A lack of mentorship as a challenge to career advancement in the public sector is reported by a significantly higher percentage of women (76.8%) compared to men (25.8%).

*Table 5: Individual challenges for career advancement (Lack of mentorship) in the public sector by gender*

|                    |     |                 | Gender |        | Total  |
|--------------------|-----|-----------------|--------|--------|--------|
|                    |     |                 | Male   | Female |        |
| Lack of mentorship |     | Count           | 8      | 53     | 61     |
|                    | Yes | Structure (%)   | 13,1%  | 86,9%  | 100,0% |
|                    |     | % within Gender | 25,8%  | 76,8%  | 61,0%  |
|                    |     | Count           | 23     | 16     | 39     |
|                    | No  | Structure (%)   | 59,0%  | 41,0%  | 100,0% |
|                    |     | % within Gender | 74,2%  | 23,2%  | 39,0%  |

*Source: Author's calculation*

When it comes to balancing work and family responsibilities, the chi-squared test of independence shows (Table 6) a significant relationship

between balancing work and family responsibilities and gender  $\chi^2$  ( $df = 1$ ,  $n = 100$ ) = 8,486;  $p = 0,004$ .

*Table 6: Relationship between individual challenges related to career advancement (Balancing work and family responsibilities) and gender (Pearson Chi-Square test)*

|  |                              | Value | df | Significance |
|--|------------------------------|-------|----|--------------|
| Balancing work and family responsibilities | Pearson Chi-Square           | 8,486 | 1  | 0,004        |
|  | Likelihood Ration            | 8,500 | 1  |              |
|  | Linear-by-Linear Association | 8,401 | 1  |              |
|  | N of Valid Cases             | 100   |    |              |

Source: Author's calculation

Female respondents were more likely to report balancing work and family responsibilities (66.7%) compared to men (35.5%).

*Table 7: Individual challenges for career advancement (Balancing work and family responsibilities) in the public sector by gender*

|  |                   | Gender |        | Total  |
|--|-------------------|--------|--------|--------|
|  |                   | Male   | Female |        |
| Balancing work and family responsibilities | Count             | 11     | 46     | 57     |
|  | Yes Structure (%) | 19,3%  | 80,7%  | 100,0% |
|  | % within Gender   | 35,5%  | 66,7%  | 57,0%  |
|  | Count             | 20     | 23     | 43     |
|  | No Structure (%)  | 46,5%  | 53,5%  | 100,0% |
|  | % within Gender   | 64,5%  | 33,3%  | 43,0%  |

Source: Author's calculation

The chi-squared test of independence shows (Table 8) a significant relationship between societal stereotypes about the role of women and gender  $\chi^2$  ( $df = 1$ ,  $n = 100$ ) = 7,677;  $p = 0,006$ .

*Table 8: Relationship between individual challenges related to career advancement (Societal stereotypes about the role of women) and gender (Pearson Chi-Square test)*

|  |                              | Value | df | Significance |
|--|------------------------------|-------|----|--------------|
| Societal stereotypes about the role of women | Pearson Chi-Square           | 7,677 | 1  | 0,006        |
|  | Likelihood Ratio             | 7,569 | 1  |              |
|  | Linear-by-Linear Association | 7,600 | 1  |              |
|  | N of Valid Cases             | 100   |    |              |

*Source: Author's calculation*

Societal stereotypes about the role of women are identified as a challenge to career advancement in the public sector by a significant higher percentage of women (71.0%) compared to men (41.9%).

*Table 9: Individual challenges for career advancement (Societal stereotypes about the role of women) in the public sector by gender*

|  |     |                 | Gender |        | Total  |
|--|-----|-----------------|--------|--------|--------|
|  |     |                 | Male   | Female |        |
| Societal stereotypes about the role of women | Yes | Count           | 13     | 49     | 62     |
|  |     | Structure (%)   | 21,0%  | 79,0%  | 100,0% |
|  |     | % within Gender | 41,9%  | 71,0%  | 62,0%  |
|  | No  | Count           | 18     | 20     | 38     |
|  |     | Structure (%)   | 47,4%  | 52,6%  | 100,0% |
|  |     | % within Gender | 58,1%  | 29,0%  | 38,0%  |

*Source: Author's calculation*

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between gender and gender-based discrimination as a challenge to career advancement in the public sector and the results of the chi-squared test of independence show (Table 10) a significant relationship between these two variables  $\chi^2$  ( $df = 1$ ,  $n = 100$ ) = 21,861;  $p = 0,000$ .

*Table 10: Relationship between individual challenges related to career advancement (Gender-based discrimination) and gender (Pearson Chi-Square test)*

|                             |                              | Value  | df | Significance |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------|--------|----|--------------|
| Gender-based discrimination | Pearson Chi-Square           | 21,861 | 1  | 0,000        |
|                             | Likelihood Ration            | 23,359 | 1  |              |
|                             | Linear-by-Linear Association | 21,643 | 1  |              |
|                             | N of Valid Cases             |        |    |              |

*Source: Author's calculation*

A significantly higher number of women (66.7%) than men (16.1%) report experiencing gender-based discrimination as a challenge to career advancement in the public sector.

*Table 11: Individual challenges for career advancement (Gender-based discrimination) in the public sector by gender*

|                             |     |                 | Gender |        | Total  |
|-----------------------------|-----|-----------------|--------|--------|--------|
|                             |     |                 | Male   | Female |        |
| Gender-based discrimination | Yes | Count           | 5      | 46     | 51     |
|                             |     | Structure (%)   | 9,8%   | 90,2%  | 100,0% |
|                             |     | % within Gender | 16,1%  | 66,7%  | 51,0%  |
|                             | No  | Count           | 26     | 23     | 49     |
|                             |     | Structure (%)   | 53,1%  | 46,9%  | 100,0% |
|                             |     | % within Gender | 83,9%  | 33,3%  | 49,0%  |

*Source: Author's calculation*

Results show that there is a significant relationship between gender and these enumerated career advancement challenges in the public sector. The number of women facing these enumerated career advancement challenges in the public sector is significantly higher compared to the number of men facing these career advancement challenges in the public sector.

## Discussion

The quantitative approach used in this study provides insights into the interconnected factors behind the “sticky floor” in Serbia’s public sector,

aligning with theoretical frameworks on organizational regimes of inequality and reproduction of gender norms (Acker, 2006; Ridgeway, 2011). The research results validate earlier findings of gender disparities in public administration across multiple national settings (Segovia-Pérez et al., 2021; Subramaniam et al., 2014).

The findings align with international research showing that women face multiple career obstacles, including limited mentorship, work-life imbalance, and persistent stereotypes, even when holding positions equal to men, with restricted access to networks and informal support (Lyness & Thompson, 2000). This is also evident in Serbia's public sector, where women encounter similar informal barriers.

International studies further confirm the universality of this issue. In the analysis of the Spanish labor market (Carrasquer Oto & Martínez-Portillo, 2023) systemic horizontal segregation and barriers at lower-level positions were identified, thus shedding light on the structural and institutional dimensions of the "sticky floor" phenomenon and revealing strong parallels with the situation in Serbia's public sector. The research (Ahmad & Naseer, 2015) shows that formal gender equality policies do not automatically eliminate deep-rooted discriminatory practices, which means that policy implementation alone is not enough to overcome embedded workplace inequalities. Another research (Ciminelli et al., 2021) on OECD countries found that "sticky floor" effects within workplace practices significantly contribute to the gender wage gap, particularly by limiting women's advancement from lower-tier positions.

The formal mechanisms and legal frameworks for gender equality in Serbia have not removed significant professional development barriers for women, which stem from institutional and cultural patterns, a gender-segregated labor market, and inconsistent anti-discrimination policy implementation (Dragičević & Mihić, 2020). Our findings show that insufficient mentoring, persistent stereotypes, and discriminatory practices sustain the "sticky floor" effect even in organizations that formally endorse equality principles, indicating that nominal equality is ineffective without active measures to address often invisible obstacles. The Coordination Body for Gender Equality (2021) further notes that these barriers are frequently informal and culturally embedded, and legal frameworks alone are insufficient to remove them.

Pirju et al. (2024) found persistent gaps in income, education, and life expectancy in former European communist states, highlighting the need for



structural policies where formal mechanisms fail, and confirming the relevance of our findings to similar transitional contexts.

The socialist legacy of Serbia maintains a “double burden” on women by encouraging their workforce participation while maintaining conventional household responsibilities. When combined with public sector politicization and clientelism, these factors further hinder the effective implementation of gender-sensitive policies (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024).

Based on the research findings, practical recommendations can be identified: establishing mentoring programs for women, training managers to recognize unconscious biases, and introducing flexible work arrangements without negative consequences. The interventions need to become a part of a gender equality strategy, which includes gender-sensitive performance indicators for tracking progress (UN Women, 2020; European Institute for Gender Equality, 2021). This research provides empirical evidence on the “sticky floor” in Serbia’s public sector, expanding knowledge of workplace inequality in transitional societies and validating the adaptation of international theoretical frameworks to the country’s institutional and cultural context (Dragičević & Mihić, 2020).

## **Conclusion**

This study contributes to the understanding of the “sticky floor” phenomenon in Serbia’s public sector by demonstrating how the established institutional practices and social norms restrict women’s career advancement even though the government endorses gender equality principles. Relying on the theoretical frameworks of the “sticky floor” and “glass ceiling” phenomena and empirical data obtained through a survey, the study identified major barriers, including insufficient mentoring and role models, inflexible work schedules, gender-based stereotypes, and discriminatory practices in recruitment, task allocation, and promotion. By applying international concepts to Serbia’s post-socialist institutional framework, the research reveals how the official legal framework interacts with informal mechanisms that exclude certain groups, offering a more comprehensive analysis of the institutional dynamics of gender inequality in post-socialist societies.

Based on the findings, four specific institutional actions are recommended: (1) developing formal mentoring programs for women in the public sector, (2) introducing flexible work arrangements, such as remote

work and flexible working hours, (3) launching programs to address gender stereotypes and unconscious biases and (4) maintaining rigorous anti-discrimination policies for equal gender opportunities.

Although the study has certain limitations such as a small sample size, a limited geographical scope, and self-reported data, it provides valuable insights into “sticky floor” mechanisms in public administration through its analysis of the situation in Serbia. Future research needs to implement longitudinal study designs to monitor women's career development over time.

The intersectional analyses need to be carried out to study how gender discrimination affects different groups who face marginalization based on ethnicity, social class, disability and sexual orientation. The assessment of gender equality promotion policies requires both comparative studies between different sectors and countries and rigorous evaluations of existing institutional interventions.

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