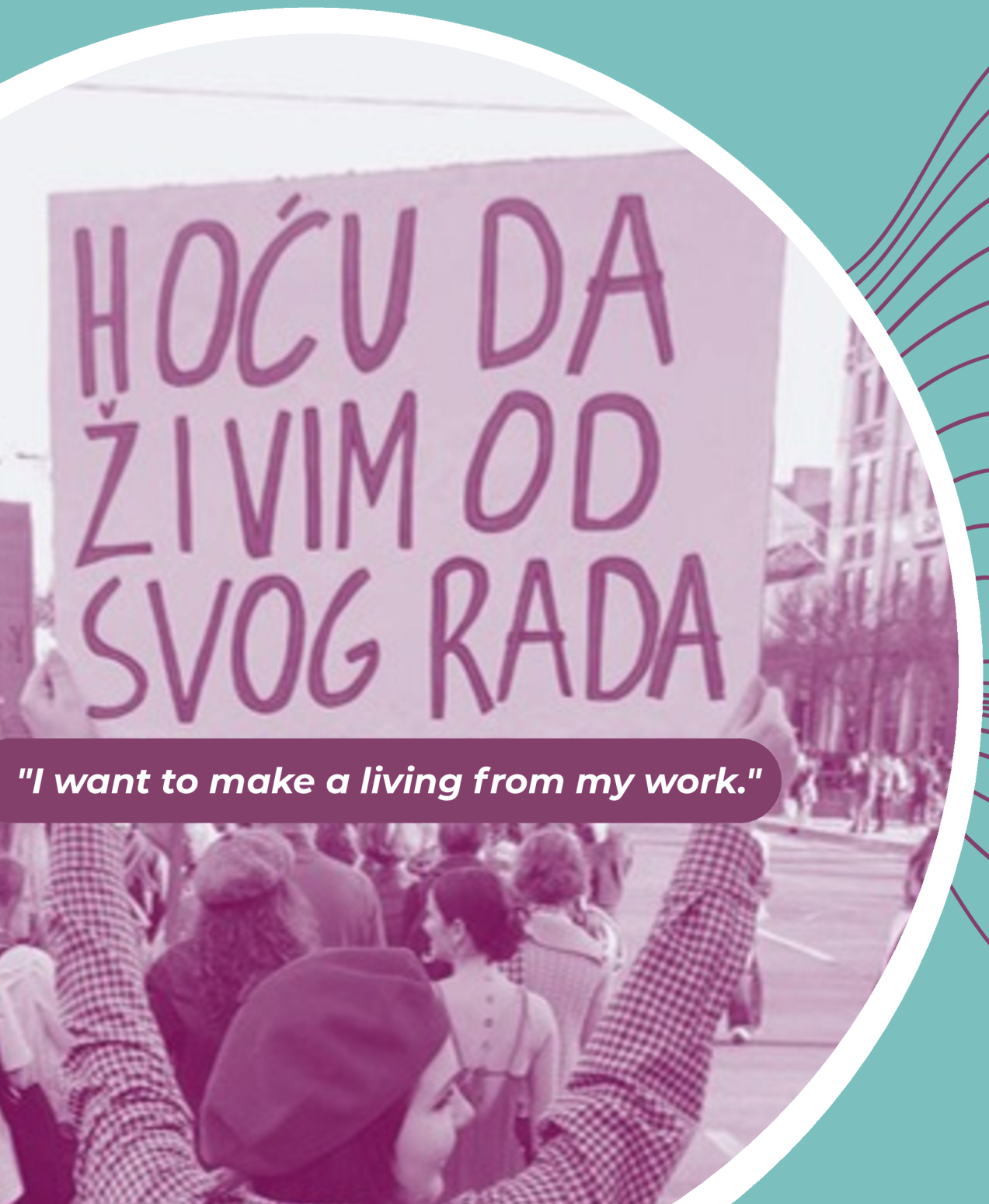
ANALYSIS OF LABOR RIGHTS IN HUMAN RIGHTS-ORIENTED CSOs IN SERBIA



"I want to make a living from my work."

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We extend our sincere gratitude to everyone who participated in providing responses.

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1.INTRODUCTION

This publication presents an analysis of research conducted between October 2024 and April 2025. The analysis aims to provide insight into labor rights and working conditions within civil society organizations (CSOs) engaged in human rights work in Serbia. Although the number of participants cannot be considered representative of the entire sector, the research results point to patterns and challenges that many recognize as part of their everyday work experience.

Civil society organizations (especially those focused on human rights) are often perceived primarily as spaces of activism, volunteering, and advocacy for the common good. This perception tends to overlook the fact that they are also workplaces, formal or informal, for a significant number of people, particularly women.

For this reason, the goal of the research was to shed light on the conditions under which these individuals work, how they perceive their labor rights, and the obstacles they face in exercising them.

The data and insights gathered through this process are not exhaustive, nor was it possible to encompass all forms of activist labor. However, they serve as a starting point for raising important questions and empowering those who dedicate their work to protecting and promoting the rights of others - to reflect on their own working conditions and needs, as well as on mechanisms for improving them within organizations.

This analysis also serves as an advocacy tool directed toward donors and the broader public.

2.CONTEXT

Workers in Serbia face numerous challenges when it comes to exercising their labor rights. According to Eurostat data[1], compared to other European countries, employees in Serbia work the second-highest number of hours per week, up to 6.4 hours more than the EU average. Based on empirical experience from years of fieldwork and research conducted by other organizations[2], it is clear that although the legal framework formally recognizes labor rights, as well as international labor conventions, many provisions remain inconsistent or are not implemented effectively in practice, creating the impression that labor rights exist only on paper.

Precarious and non-standard forms of employment are common[3]
Accurately estimating the number of people working outside formal employment contracts in Serbia is difficult due to the lack of official data that would capture all forms of engagement. Data from the Labour Force Survey by the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia[4] provides insight into the total number of employed and unemployed persons, but does not distinguish between different types of contracts. The focus is on legal employment status (whether someone is employed, seeking work, or economically inactive), not on the form of the contractual relationship. Additionally, statistics on concluded contracts may indicate the prevalence of certain forms of work, but do not offer a complete picture. It is necessary to distinguish between work without an employment contract and additional engagements that are legally permitted under the Labor Law, which further complicates understanding the real scope of insecure work. Engagements under contracts that are not employment contracts (e.g., service contracts, Work for Hire Agreements, contracts for temporary and occasional work, etc.) generally do not guarantee basic labor rights. While some forms of engagement, such as temporary and occasional work, are legally entitled to certain minimum rights (e.g., proportional minimum wage), empirical evidence shows that these rights are often rendered meaningless, leaving workers without adequate income or protection. These workers do not have guaranteed rights to paid sick leave, paid annual leave, maternity leave, union membership and organizing, the right to strike, or other rights guaranteed to employees under the Labor Law.

1 https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.ptitle=Actual_and_usual_hours_of_work

2 https://sdgs4all.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Ispunjenost-standarda-Medunarodne-organizacije-rada-kao-preduslov-odrzivog-razvoja-u-Srbiji.pdf

3 https://zajednicko.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/publikacija_Radnici-drugog-reda-nestandardni-rad-u-Srbiji.pdf

4 https://www.stat.gov.rs/sr-latn/oblasti/trziste-rada/anketa-o-radnoj-snazi/

The economic situation further illustrates the severity of the problem: the legally defined minimum net wage in 2024 is 47,696 RSD (approximately 407 EUR), while the estimated living wage[5] - the amount needed to ensure basic conditions for a dignified life for workers and their families - is 144,457 RSD (approximately 1,232 EUR). This disparity reflects deep economic insecurity for a large number of people, including those who are not formally recognized as employed but who work on a daily basis.

In this context, labor rights in civil society organizations, particularly those engaged in human rights work, are rarely addressed and are not the subject of research. Activist work is often perceived as a calling or personal mission, a “labor of the soul”, rather than as work that requires labor rights, security, and dignified conditions. Activists working in the field of human rights are frequently subjected to stigmatization and denial of their labor, portrayed as idle, foreign-funded, enemies of the state, or parasites feeding off international donations.

All of this points to the fact that this research was conducted within a landscape of data scarcity. Due to the lack of previous relevant data and analyses, it was not possible to establish comparative frameworks, which further demonstrates the invisibility of this topic - both in the public sphere and within the sector itself. The absence of systematized knowledge hinders not only the understanding of the position of activists, but also the development of policies that could improve their working conditions.

The significance of this research lies in the opportunity it provides to examine our own working conditions, to name them, and to compare them to the broader social context. It reminds us that, despite the particularities of the work we do, we are workers too. This research is a first step toward shared understanding and empowerment within the sector.

5 https://cleanclothes.org/file-repository/efw-update-2022.pdf/view ; https://platazazivot.rs/#deklaracija

3.METHODOLOGY

To collect data, a mixed-method approach was applied, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods. The primary research instrument was a structured questionnaire completed by activists in an online format. In addition, individual interviews were conducted to enable deeper analysis and understanding of the context and meaning behind the questionnaire responses.

The questionnaire consisted of a total of 47 questions, organized into seven thematic sections:
– Basic Information (6 questions)
– Current Employment Status (15 questions)
– Income (3 questions)
– Volunteering (5 questions)
– Work Environment and Occupational Safety (10 questions)
– Discrimination and Workplace Harassment (5 questions)
– Unions and Solidarity Support (5 questions)

The questions were both closed and open-ended. Some included self-assessment elements through which respondents expressed their personal views and feelings regarding their work position, security, rights, and overall job satisfaction. This self-assessment component was key to understanding the subjective perceptions and emotions that accompany everyday work.

A total of 191 completed questionnaires and interviews were processed for this analysis, collected from individuals across 21 districts in Serbia. A number of questionnaire responses were excluded from the analysis, primarily because they referred to work in organizations outside the territory of Serbia.

The quantitative part of the analysis included statistical processing to identify the frequency of specific phenomena, correlations, and patterns. The qualitative analysis focused on interpreting open-ended responses and narratives gathered through in-depth interviews.

The in-depth interviews covered the same thematic areas as the questionnaire but allowed for greater flexibility in responses, additional clarifications, and personal reflection. Their purpose was to enable a deeper analysis of more complex aspects of work conditions, which often remain invisible through standardized research tools.

By combining quantitative data from the questionnaires with qualitative narratives from the in-depth interviews, this research provided a more layered and comprehensive understanding of labor rights and working conditions in civil society organizations engaged in human rights work in Serbia.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 BASIC INFORMATION

The basic information section includes responses related to place of residence, workplace location, age, years of activism, and the type of organization (formal or informal) in which respondents are engaged.

According to place of residence, respondents came from 21 districts across Serbia. The largest number of participants were from the City of Belgrade District (57.5%), while the remaining 42.5% came from all other districts combined.
The distribution by district includes: South Bačka, Nišavski, South Banat, Zlatiborski, North Bačka, Jablanički, Šumadijski, Central Banat, Moravički, Kolubarski, Zaječarski, North Banat, Rasinski, Mačvanski, Braničevski, Sremski, West Bačka, Podunavski, Raški i Toplički.

Regarding workplace location, just over half **(51.4%) of respondents work in the City of Belgrade District.** Across all of Serbia, 12.2% work nationwide (i.e., with activities not tied to a single district), and 9.4% work in the South Bačka District. In all other districts, workplace representation was below 3% per district.

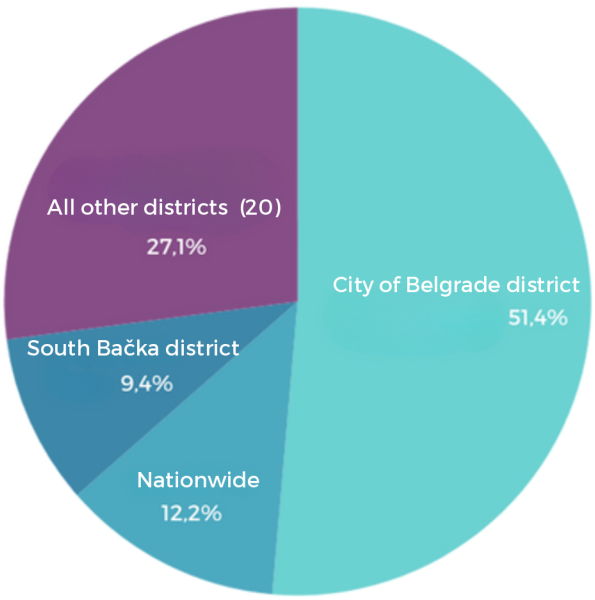


Chart 1: Workplace Location

When it comes to age distribution, the youngest and oldest respondents are the least represented, confirming some of our previous findings[6]. Only 1.1% of participants are over the age of 65, while 7.2% fall within the 55 to 65 age group. Those between 18 and 24 years old make up 9.9%, **meaning that the youngest and oldest respondents combined account for less than one-fifth of all activists included in the analysis.**

The largest share of participants belongs to the 25 to 34 age group, comprising 37.6% of the sample. In other words, the majority of surveyed activists are in the most productive phase of their working lives.

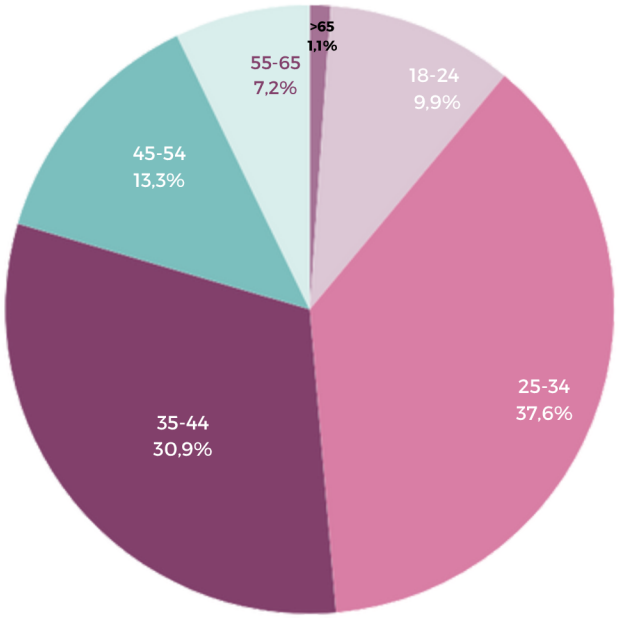


Chart 2: Age Structure

The data show that, for the majority of respondents, activism and work are often inseparable.

According to self-assessment, **70.2% of participants consider themselves both workers and activists,** 17.1% identify solely as workers, and 12.7% solely as activists, indicating the overlapping nature of these two roles.

Only 2.8% of respondents have been involved in activism for less than a year, while 11 out of 100 participants have more than 20 years of activist experience. The rest are fairly evenly distributed across categories by length of activist engagement, with each accounting for 27–30% of respondents.
These findings suggest that activism is not merely a temporary or occasional activity, but rather a long-term aspect of the working lives of most participants.

6 Serbian case study: status of women in activism

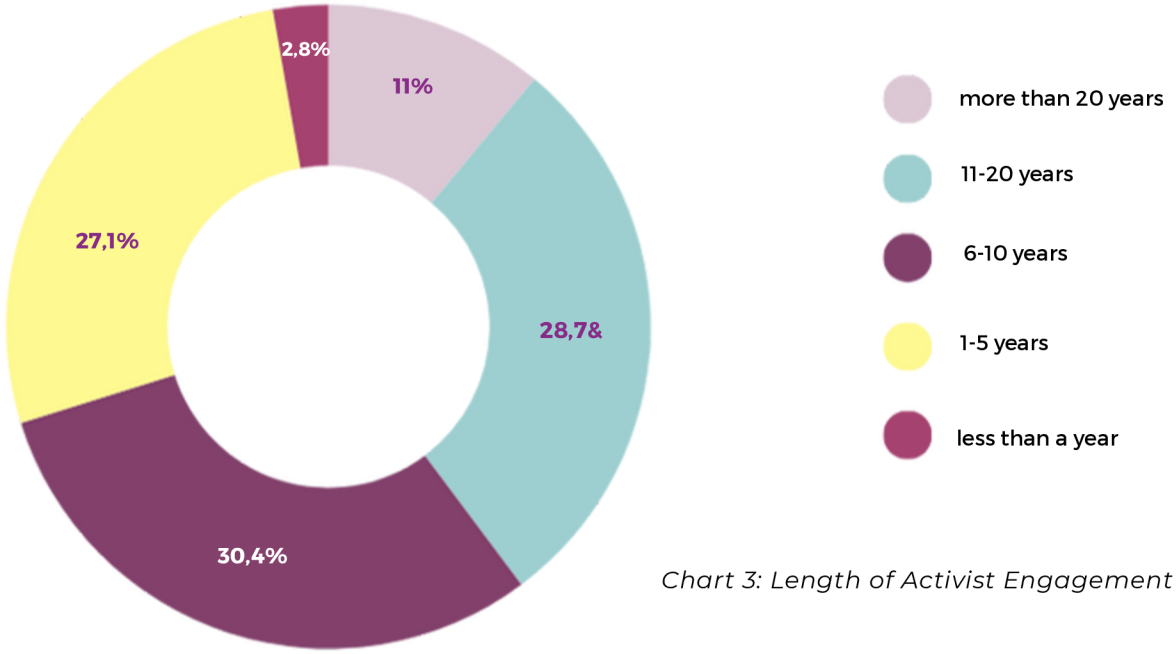


Chart 3: Length of Activist Engagement

Work within formal organizations is predominant (91.1%), taking place in structured collectives. However, it is important to note that the questionnaire focused on work within human rights organizations and did not include independent activism. Therefore, the research and analysis do not encompass all forms of activist labor.

Regarding the size of the organizations in which respondents are active, the **most represented are collectives with 5 to 10 members** (35.9%). On the other hand, only 9.4% of respondents work in organizations with more than 50 members. Additionally, 5% of respondents were unsure about the number of members in their organization.

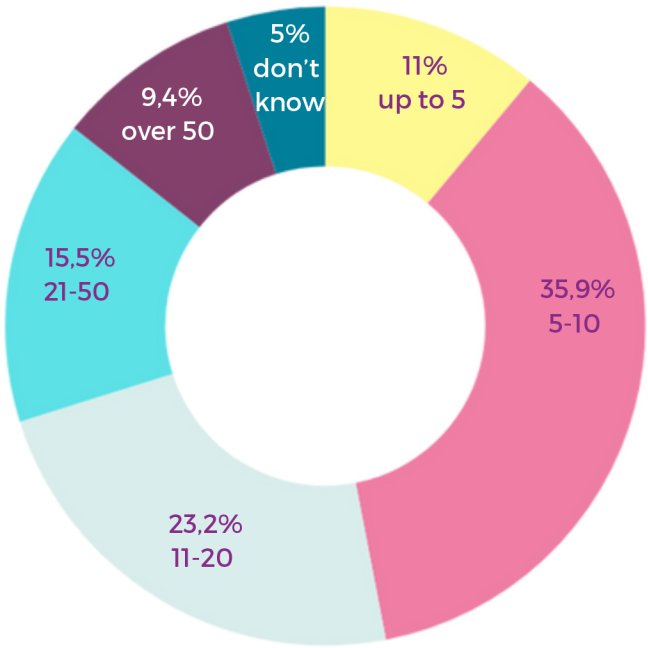


Chart 4: Organization Size by Number of Members

According to the number of employees, the majority (43.1%) of respondents come from organizations with up to 5 employees. In total, two-thirds of respondents are from organizations employing up to 10 people. A smaller portion (5.5%) of participants did not know how many employees their organization has.

Although most organizations in the sample have a small number of formally employed staff, this does not necessarily reflect the total number of individuals involved in the work of these organizations through other forms of engagement. This trend is also noticeable in responses to other questions. Nonetheless, it may indicate the general state of labor rights within these organizations.

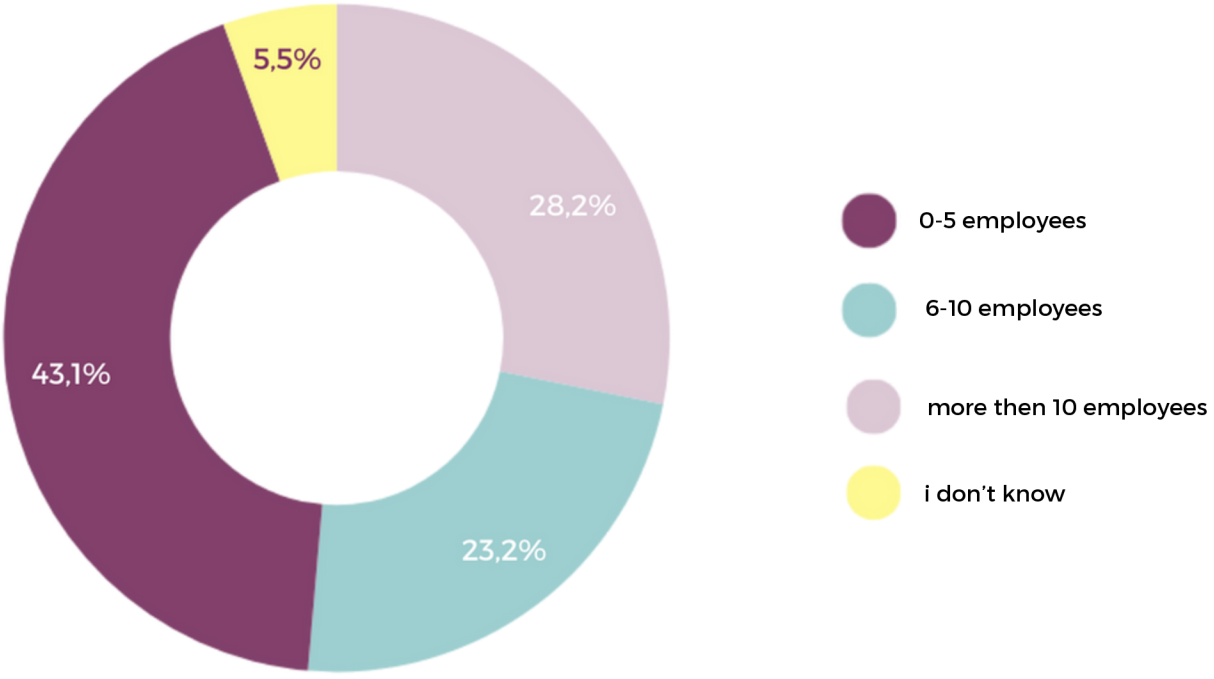


Chart 5: Number of Employees in the Organization (Based on Employment Contract)

4.2 CURRENT EMPLOYMENT STATUS

The “Current Employment Status” section includes responses related to participants’ current engagement in the organization they work for. This category covers information on the length of engagement, basis of employment (employment contract, freelance or volunteer work), working hours, access to basic labor rights, occurrence of overtime and weekend work, availability during leave, and performance of tasks outside the agreed scope of work.

Regarding length of employment in their current organization, most activists (49.2%) have been working there for less than 5 years, while only 3.9% have been with the same organization for more than 20 years. This suggests a high level of turnover.

In response to the question, “Is your work in the organization your primary job?” 83.4% of participants answered affirmatively, indicating that for most, engagement in organizations is not only a professional but also a vital economic choice.
This finding further emphasizes the importance of respecting labor rights and the need to create conditions that reflect the real needs of those building their careers in the civil sector.

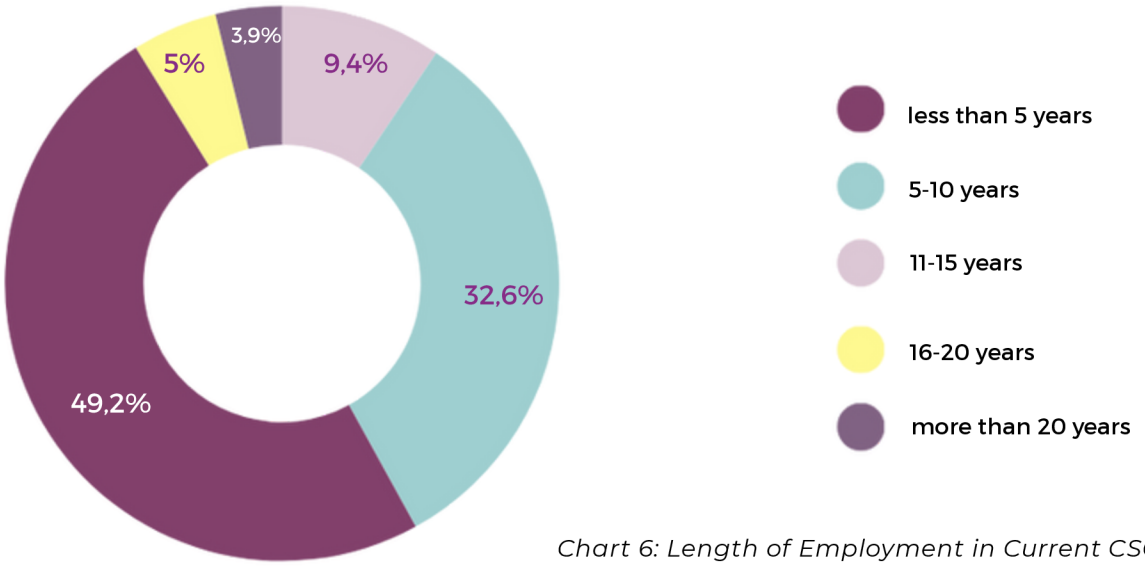


Chart 6: Length of Employment in Current CSO

When it comes to the type of engagement, more precisely, the types of contracts under which they work, respondents answered as follows: 68% of respondents are engaged based on an employment contract, 7.2% work under a service contract, while 6.1% perform work based on a Work for Hire Agreement. 8.8% of respondents are engaged as volunteers, and 3.3% work through student-youth cooperatives.

Additionally, some respondents are engaged through other types of contracts, including contracts on business-technical cooperation, contracts on temporary and occasional work, and contracts made through employment agencies. Also, 2.21% of respondents work without any formal contract - that is, "off the books."

A comparative analysis of the answers leads to the conclusion that 15.4% of people for whom work in the organization is their primary job do not have guaranteed basic labor rights under the Labor Law, due to not having an employment contract.

Since it was important for us to find out whether activists have certain labor rights regardless of the type of contract under which they work in organizations, the content of the question referred to the following rights: paid annual leave, paid travel expenses, paid sick leave, paid days off, and unpaid days off.

None of the above is available to 14.4% of respondents —that is, 1 in 7 people.

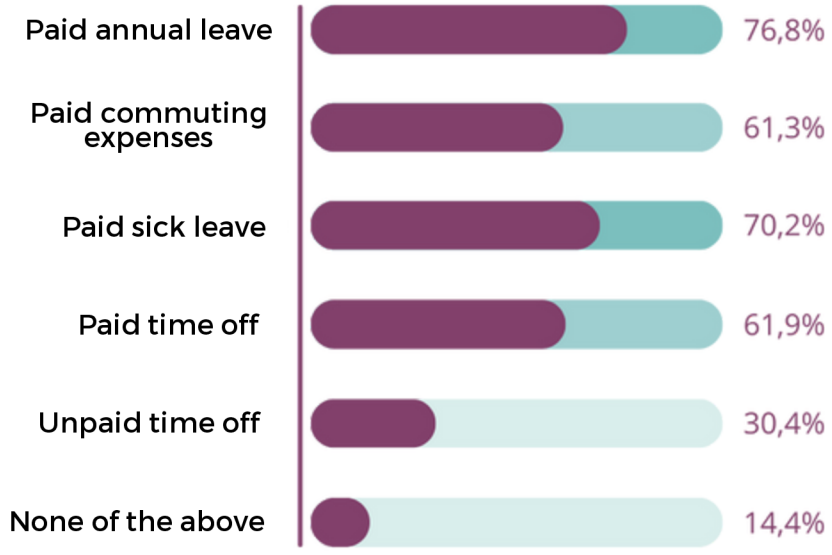


Chart 7: Affirmative Responses Regarding Access to Certain Labor Rights, Regardless of Contract Type

"I have, I have. It's just that in our NGO, it doesn't really look like that."

"I didn't work for one day, I wasn't feeling well. And the comment I got was, like, take some medicine and come in."

Among those employed under an employment contract, a significant majority (88.8%) work full-time.
Part-time work exceeding 50% of full-time hours is reported by 9.6% of respondents, while only 1.6% work less than half-time.

"Our contracts are regulated for 8 hours a day, or 7 - it doesn't matter - but really, I mean, I don't know when was the last time one of us actually worked only that much."

"Not just full-time, but double full-time. Overflowing, sister, it's boiling over."

When asked whether they typically work more than eight hours per day, 39.8% of respondents answered no, while the rest reported that they occasionally or frequently exceed standard working hours.
Although extended working hours are not a daily practice for all, the fact that nearly one-fifth of respondents say they often work beyond the prescribed time points to risks related to working conditions, workload, and work–life balance.

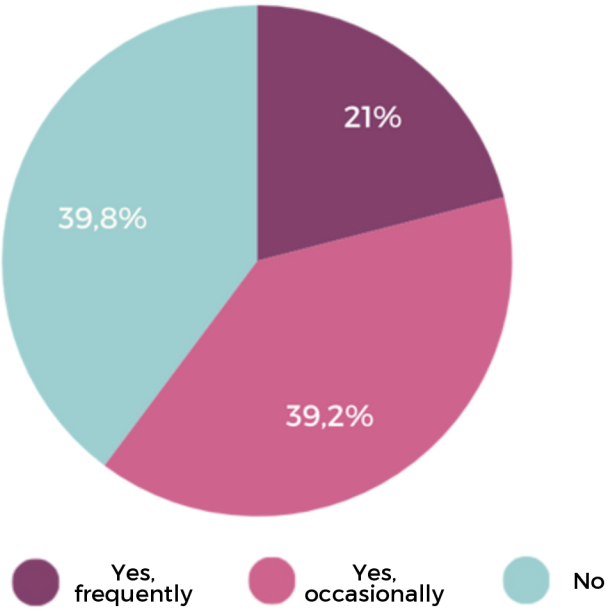


Chart 8: Frequency of Overtime Work (More than 8 Hours a Day)

Slightly more than half (51.4%) of respondents have no regulation at all regarding overtime work.

"Donors don't account for overtime hours."

"[...] I worked overtime every single day. Nothing would ever get done otherwise - I had to work even more from home. And no one says anything; it's just expected."

"I have them, but they're not regulated. I can even lend overtime hours to others. If someone needs them... These are bad practices that have now become completely normalized in civil society."

"It happens that I work six or seven days in a row, or I have a conference until 10 PM, but I feel anxious about asking whether I can work from home the next day or take the day off."

When it comes to weekend work, for most respondents, it is a regular part of their engagement. Notably, **10.5% of respondents work every weekend.**

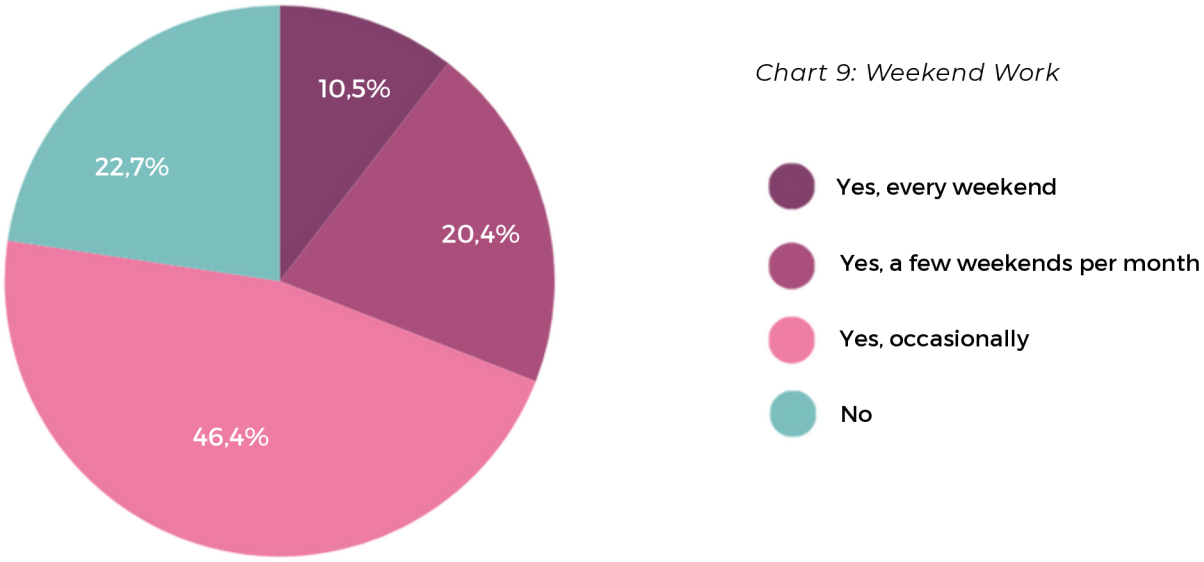


Chart 9: Weekend Work

"[...] The work environment was very toxic, and overtime and weekend work were glorified. [...]"

"[...] When my colleague says 'we worked the entire weekend', she doesn't say it to complain. She just states it, like, yeah, we worked all weekend. Often even with a kind of upbeat tone, like, 'ahaha I've got 20 hours of overtime, what a month.' That's unpaid, no one acknowledges it. [...]"

Regarding days off after working on a weekend, the results show that respondents are evenly split: 31.5% do not have the right to a day off, and 31.5% have the right to a day off only if it doesn't disrupt the organization's work. In addition, 5% of respondents provided extended written responses, supplementing the quantitative data with personal experiences.

“I can, except in cases when something really urgent comes up, like donor deadlines or something - in that case, no.”

“Well, I had experiences, in a previous organization I worked for (not this one) where, for example, if there were working Saturdays and Sundays and I asked for a day off, the response was: ‘Are you asking us for a favor?’ I was shocked.”

“I don’t have that right. No. And I’ll tell you why. Everyone involved in organizing and coordinating projects, or authorized signatories at the bank, knows that after a seminar or event (which usually happens on Saturdays, in our case), when you return, you have to sort out all the paperwork, travel orders. And on Monday you have to deliver everything to the accountant, or make all the payments. So no, I don’t get days off after weekends.”

“Well, it’s regulated in a way that we can take days off. I mean, how can I put it, we can. I now have a pile of accumulated not hours, but days, but when exactly can I take them if there are always deadlines? I mean, they exist on paper, and no one is being strict about it, but each of us has a personal sense of responsibility toward everything that needs to be done, so we don’t take those days off. And when it gets really urgent, then you don’t take a day, you might take an hour to go to the doctor.”

“[...] I think that’s really important, because we in the NGO sector, working under these conditions (service contracts), we don’t count hours at all. And that’s very important. We should count hours. My colleague and I realized that sometimes, on a daily basis, or every other or third day, we spend hours on the phone. [...] If you asked me what I did yesterday, I’d say: ‘Well, nothing really’.”

When it comes to **availability during annual leave or days off, 16.6%** of respondents stated they **are obliged to respond** to emails or calls, while an **additional 52.5% do so in urgent cases.** Some respondents provided extended written responses or spoke about this in interviews:

"I'm not obliged, but I want to."

"[...] When it comes to my colleagues, I have space for everything. My team is great, and in that sense, yes. But if I take sick leave or go on vacation, then they carry my workload which we can barely manage even as is. So basically, whichever one of us goes on holiday takes her laptop, just in case, you know."

"To be honest, for a long time I volunteered myself for this, and it was a process. But when I started setting boundaries, it caused problems both with colleagues and with beneficiaries." - (referring to the act of refusing to remain available)

When it comes to availability during sick leave, 16% of respondents stated they are obliged to respond to calls or emails, while 47% said this applies only in urgent circumstances. The most common open-text responses, provided by 4.42% of activists in the questionnaire, included: "It's my choice to respond."
"Yes, it happened because of donor deadlines."

"I've worked while sick countless times, not because anyone forced me, but because it had to be done. I have to say that. If a project deadline is tomorrow and you get sick today, and I don't submit it, then no one will. That's the issue. There just aren't enough resources to have someone cover for you."

Although only a smaller number of respondents are formally required to be available during vacations or sick leave, a large proportion respond in urgent situations, pointing to an unwritten culture of constant availability.

The open-text responses further reveal a reality in which the boundaries between work and private life are often blurred. A sense of personal responsibility, pressure from the collective, or expectations from beneficiaries often lead to taking on work even during leave or sick days. This practice, although sometimes framed as a personal choice, highlights a **systemic issue: the failure to recognize the right to rest and recovery** as an essential component of labor rights.

To the question of whether they have had to perform tasks that are not part of their agreed duties, the largest share of respondents answered that they occasionally (43.1 %) or often (42.5 %) take on such tasks, while only 12.7 % said this never happens.

"On paper there is a job systematization, but everyone does everything and then no one is responsible for anything. [...] There is that kind of structural chaos which is a huge burden."

"[...] I was expected to work and be present all the time as if I were employed full-time (I had a 20-hour-per-week contract). [...]"

"Always. And, I mean, I can't say every day, but almost every day. Since fluctuation in the NGO sector is enormous, with people constantly churning, being replaced, and so on, we are forever in a situation where we take over the work of colleagues who leave overnight and patch those holes until a new person arrives. [...]"

"We do have duties written in the contract, but of course it doesn't work like that, because donor demands keep growing and there are few of us... They will never give you a salary for another person, so we all do everything. Literally, we all do everything. And I had to learn 300 things that maybe don't even interest me."

Qualitative answers such as "there is no agreement on duties, we do whatever needs to be done," "in small organizations we all do everything," or "I can't specify what exactly is part of my duties" show that, in many organizations, the job is often broader than clearly defined frameworks. This situation points to difficulties in setting boundaries and personal responsibility, as well as to problems in task distribution due to a lack of specialized staff, which forces those engaged to assume multiple roles. This overload makes work dynamics less efficient and more exhausting, indicating that organizations essentially need more employees.

“Absolutely. Do I need to explain why? Some things aren’t organizational questions at all but general civil-sector and socio-political issues. [...] We received information that the action plan for social policies for the next few years is being revised. I don’t remember exactly what it’s called, and no one invited us to join the working group or get involved in any way. Yet I have a moral obligation, because everything we do falls within social policy, to track what they have planned for the coming years and see if someone has posted a budget somewhere; then, based on that, decide whether to send comments and whether those comments might endanger us, and find the right scope to summarize what’s essential so I can send it if someone might include it. No one told me that’s my job, but it’s there and it matters. At the same time, three organizations can, day after day, invite us to various events where our presence means mutual support, which snatches four hours of my working time like nothing. If for three days in a row I add another four hours, I have to go home and make up those four hours, not because anyone told me to, but because things simply can’t get done otherwise. And on top of that, some donor pops up and says, ‘You know, we’re doing this and that; it wouldn’t be bad if you got involved,’ and that turns into a whole new pile of work hours."

“The reason I left was the breach of agreements on the projects I was contractually obliged to implement and the additional, previously undefined demands to handle other projects. That required weekend work, evening work, and being permanently available, exploiting the fact that I don’t have children, so they could ping me on Saturdays and Sundays and send me on trips because colleagues with bigger families can’t. At that point I realized I had no life and that, for the money from one project I had signed for, I was actually working on six, literally six projects, and that’s why I left. [...] Then I understood the same would happen to me in a third organization until we change something systematically in civil-society organizations. The whole story feels hypocritical - we go around lecturing others on what should be done and how, yet we can’t apply it within our own organizations.”

4.3 INCOME

The questions and responses in this section focused on salary ranges, sources of income, and whether respondents' earnings meet their basic living needs.

Based on self-assessment, more than two-thirds **(71.3%)** of respondents believe that for a full-time workload, they **do not earn enough to meet their own needs or those of their families.**

"No, not even close. I mean, now I'm managing somehow. It's an interesting story. We had lower salaries and advocated to the donor for an increase, explaining that we quite literally couldn't survive on the existing pay. And then they gave it to us. [...] Also, if you take into account all the different tasks we do, if each of those were paid properly, just increasing the salary by 30% would already be something. As it is now - zero points."

"A project coordinator gets, I might be wrong, but between 10,000 and 15,000 dinars per month. What can we do with that? What does the donor expect from themselves for 15,000 dinars? What do they expect of themselves, and then accordingly, let them tell us what they expect from us. I think that's an insult. I don't know what's worse - them offering it or us accepting it."

"I work through Work for Hire Agreements, on a project basis. [...] The money sometimes comes in, maybe even more than a regular salary. [...] And when I calculate it monthly, it often comes out close to minimum wage."

More than 55% of respondents say that their income from the organization is their only source of income, while nearly 31% perform additional freelance work. These numbers point to a significant need for supplementary income, suggesting that **many activists must work multiple jobs to make ends meet.**

"I personally lived and worked for ten years through project funding. I had no other income, I just worked like that. And in the end, I had to get a regular job. I couldn't survive anymore on these small donations."

"Basically, all this time, up until a few months ago, I did whatever I could. I mean, whatever came up, from participating in focus groups for 1,000 dinars (8.5 EUR), to monitor elections, if someone called me..."

"No, not at all. That's why I have my own private agency and work as a consultant for other organizations. Especially in the past few years. I can safely say that my salary from seven years ago is the same as it is today - not a single euro more."

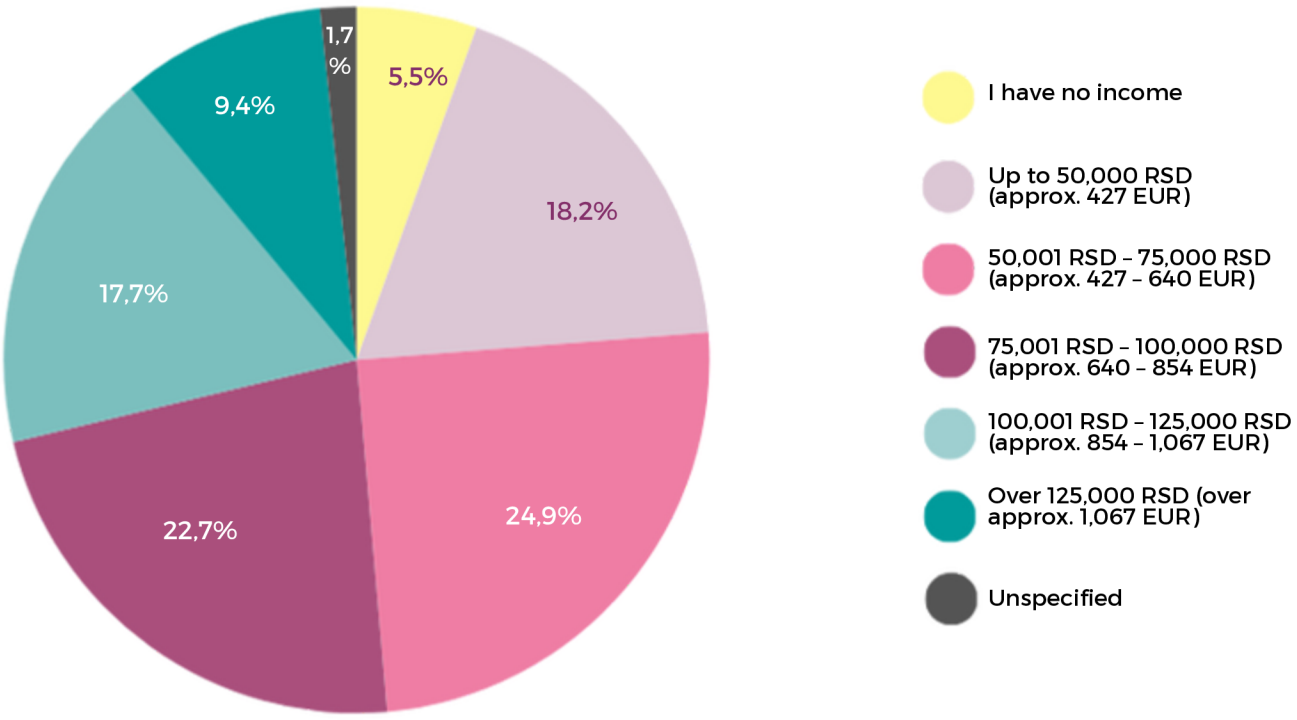
In terms of income range:

- 5.5% of respondents earn no income at all
- 18.2% earn less than 50,000 RSD (427EUR)
- The largest share (24.9%) earns between 50,001 (427EUR) and 75,000 RSD (640EUR)
- Only about 9.4% earn over 125,000 RSD, which is approximately the threshold for a living wage

Altogether, **48.6%** of respondents **earn up to 75,000 RSD (640EUR)**, which suggests that the median net income in this sample is below or close to the national median net salary in Serbia for December 2024[7], which was 79,624 RSD (680EUR). This indicates that in terms of income, activists are **not significantly different from the general population.**

7 https://www.cekos.rs/medijalna-zarada-u-2024-godini

Chart 10: Income Range



"For us, it's somehow shameful to talk about salary. And even when someone asks about it, we answer shyly: 'Well, what's your budget? I'll fit into it.' I think that's all wrong. And now these young people have gone to the other extreme - they mentally quit their jobs on the very first day."

"Number one, we are absolutely underpaid. Number two, donors humiliate us to such a degree that soon there won't be professionals in this sector anymore, just people who, as a friend of mine puts it, have some kind of personal fixation with human rights. And they'll be doing this in their free time, and it'll all spiral out of control. We won't have that professional corrective force in society anymore - a high-quality, professional one."

4.4 VOLUNTEERING

In this category, the questions and answers referred to the existence of a volunteering contract and volunteer compensation, as well as the time frame of work and the type of tasks performed by the respondents.

When it comes to volunteering, most activists who volunteer do not have a volunteering contract—as many as 81.8%. Just over half (54.5%) do not receive a volunteer compensation.

45.4% work more than 10 hours per week regularly, while 22.7% work more than 10 hours per week occasionally.

36 out of 100 volunteers do not have the option to choose the tasks they work on.

Regarding the delegation of tasks that no one else wants to do, the majority (72.7%) are not in that situation, but there is still a notable number.

"I have nothing, of course, because I'm a volunteer." - *refers to lack of contract or volunteer compensation*

"In previous organizations (organization name), no. But now, currently in (organization name), yes. I have a volunteering contract and receive a compensation."

The number of working hours and the tasks performed by volunteer activists indicate that this category of work also requires greater attention.

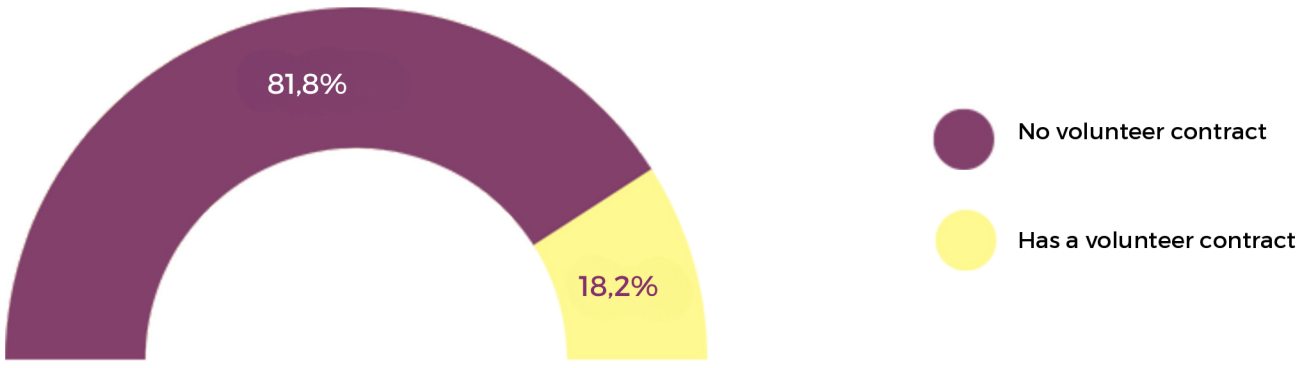


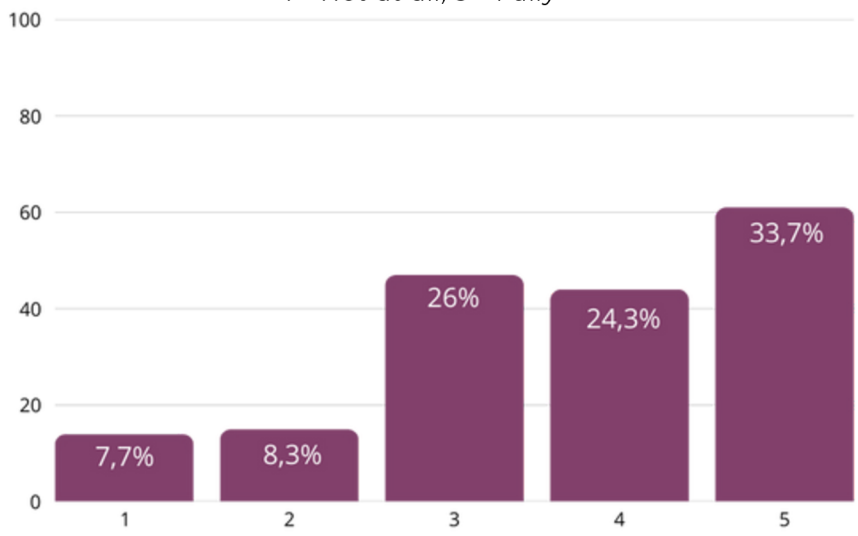
Chart 11: Volunteering Contract

4.5 WORK ENVIRONMENT AND WORKPLACE SAFETY

This section of the research focuses on working conditions and the organizational environment, with an emphasis on opportunities for professional development, influence on organizational work, freedom of expression, stress levels, and financial security.

When asked whether they have the opportunity to pursue professional development within their organization—on a scale from 1 to 5—the largest group (33.7%) believes they fully have that opportunity, while the smallest group (7.7%) feels they do not have it at all.

Chart 12: Opportunity for Professional Development
1 – Not at all, 5 – Fully



Interview responses, as well as written responses from the questionnaire, provide additional insight.

"Yes, I do. On a voluntary basis. So, if one of our members wants to learn something - someone helps us, they explain something and that's it. Basically, the organization itself arranges some trainings, and then we learn."

"[...] there was none of that at all. And even when they trained me, they did it in a really... well, they weren't enthusiastic about it. It was a burden for them to spend an hour explaining how their program works, the one I had to use."

"I can attend all the stuff that's free. That's really not a problem, it's actually great. But if I say, 'I'd like to do this', and I'd like them to pay for it, well, that I definitely can't do. [...] In my opinion, even going to professional development, especially when it comes to seminars, is an issue if you don't have a salary. It's easy for you to go to a seminar if you have a salary, but me going to a seminar for two days means I won't be able to, say, write project proposals. So not only am I losing out on potential income, but also, at my age, you weigh it against your private life. [...] I don't know, even your kid says, 'Don't go, mom, don't go', and then you end up looking like some bad woman - you're going off somewhere, leaving your kids, your husband. Especially when it starts to pile up, and sometimes it really does. [...] It's also a huge problem when you have obligations you need to delegate to someone else. [...] Because I have to bother my mom. [...] Every time I go somewhere, she watches my kids and skips work, and she doesn't get paid her own wage."

"Right now we have a lot of money for professional development, and we're really supportive of each other when it comes to learning new things. But last year I said no one should push me into any more trainings. The only place they can push me into is a spa or a rehabilitation center."

The possibility to advance within the organization was rated by respondents as follows:
The highest number of respondents gave a mid-range score on a scale from 1 to 5—that is, 28.2%.

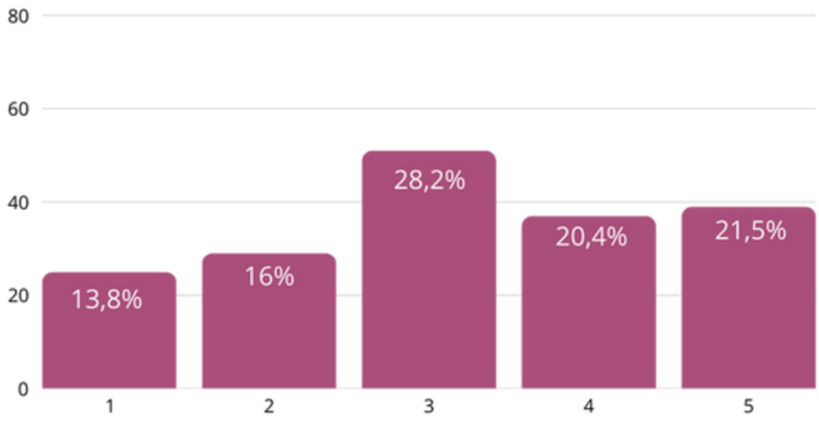
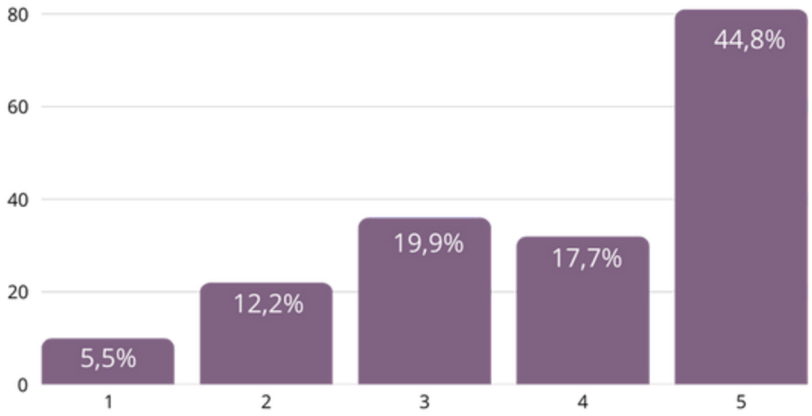


Chart 13: Possibility for Advancement; 1 – Not at all, 5 – Fully

When asked whether they feel they can influence the organization's work—for example, by suggesting new topics or different ways of working—the largest share of respondents, 44.8%, said they completely feel they can.

Chart 14: Influence on Organizational Topics and Work Methods; 1 – Not at all, 5 – Fully

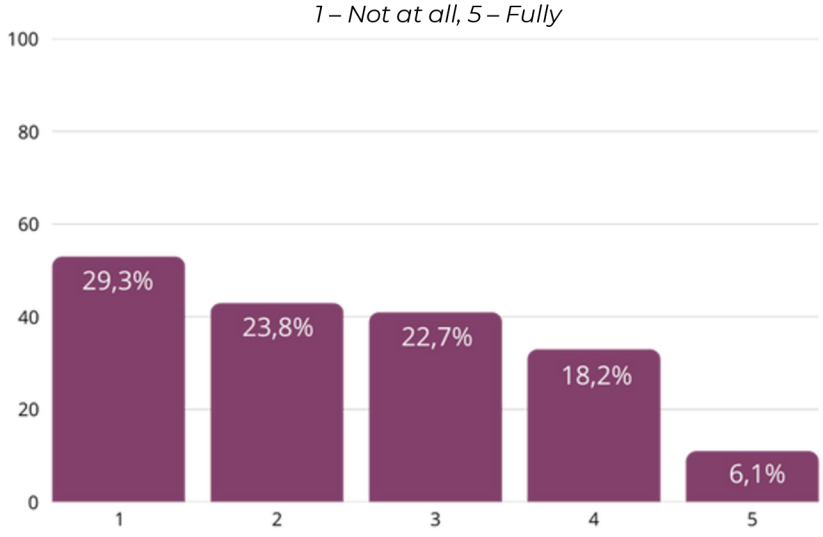


"I make a lot of suggestions, but few of them are adopted. For some things we even develop a strategy for how to package them, and what time of day to bring them up."

When it comes to freedom of opinion and speech, that is, **the ability to express one's views** without being belittled by others, just over half—**53.6%—feel they can fully do so without fear.**
One in four respondents experiences belittlement when expressing their views and opinions.
This is an extremely concerning finding, especially considering that these are organizations dedicated to the defense of human rights.

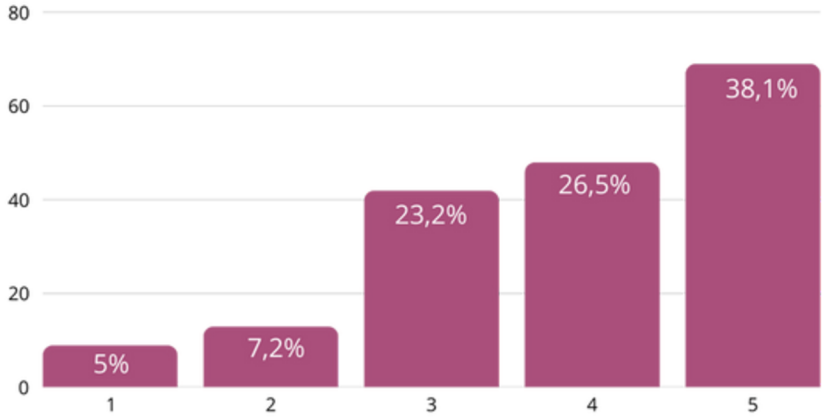
When it comes to financial security, based on self-assessment, 29.3% of respondents—nearly **one in three—feel they have no financial security at all,** while only 6.1% believe they are fully financially secure.

Chart 15: Financial Security; 1 – Not at all, 5 – Fully



"And the most insecure too, because at the end of the day, you live from project to project, as do 90% of organizations. So maybe you've got a year, two, max three, and after that, who knows."

Chart 16: Do You Experience Burnout at Work?
1 – Not at all, 5 – Fully



The majority of respondents experience burnout syndrome, and the highest score on a scale from 1 to 5 was selected by 38.1% of them.

Since burnout syndrome includes not only fatigue, but also feelings of exhaustion, reduced efficiency, and loss of enthusiasm. This issue requires serious attention through the development of mechanisms to mitigate negative effects and the implementation of preventive strategies.

"Of course, especially in the fall. That's when my five minutes come. Because another problem is that we all write project proposals at the same time, and we all implement them at the same time. [...] And that's when we reach burnout, because you're doing your own work, attending others', writing reports, and so on."

"[...] I'm currently in the worst burnout I've experienced in 20 years. Because I keep insisting, not just me, all of us, that we shouldn't work 12-hour days, even though we've often gone over that - to 14, 16 hours a day. When we're in the field, it's 18–20 hours. And at this age, the body can't take it. And it's not just about the body, it's about how we've neglected our personal lives. That leads to a general dissatisfaction, which reflects on everything. And that's not good for anyone. So no organization can survive long under those conditions. We've had all sorts of burnout prevention programs. I mean, what burnout prevention program if you're trying to secure enough to live on and pay everyone's salary?"

"Well, yes, but everyone has that. [...] I think what we do isn't an easy job at all, on the contrary, but it's our choice."

"I never admitted it to myself. But yes, if I asked the people around me, they'd probably say: 'Yes, you're in burnout'. And I realize that, based on some of my reactions (for example in my private, everyday life) that I no longer have the same patience I used to. I have trouble falling asleep at night, because I replay all the things I didn't manage to do. And I'm constantly haunted by unfinished tasks. [...] At one point in my life, I even started having nightmares. That was terrifying. And I would say it was the result of overly intense work with final beneficiaries where I was living through their life stories and situations. [...] That's why I think we urgently need psychological support, and we mostly don't have access to it."

"Absolutely, long ago. But no one in my group talks about it, because it's considered nonsense. [...] I'm against the culture of sacrifice, it's horribly patriarchal. [...] I don't want to die for the cause I'm fighting for, I want to live for it. But I'm expected to burn myself out. I refuse to break the limits of my body and my capabilities."

Just over half **(51.4%)** of respondents **have work equipment** (laptop, mobile phone, etc.) **provided by the organization,** 28.7% have equipment partially provided, while one in five respondents has no work equipment at all.

3 out of 5 respondents (59.7%) have the option to choose their place of work (work from home, remote work, etc.). In cases of severe weather conditions, 24.9% - or one in four - have this option, while 15.5% have no choice of workplace at all.

Regarding self-assessed working conditions, the majority of respondents believe that the space they work in has adequate lighting, enough room, is accessible, has proper ventilation (heating and cooling), comfortable chairs, and is sufficiently technically equipped.

When it comes to self-assessment of workplace comfort, 65.7% of participants responded affirmatively. However, open-text responses provide the following picture:

"All nice on the outside, but a mess on the inside."

"Depends on the day, depends on who's present in the organization."

"It's pleasant within the limits of what's considered normal in the civil sector."

"The worst part is when we pretend to be horizontal, but we're really not."

"Not really. It feels much more like a corporate environment. Only form matters, not the substance of the work."

"Mostly yes, with the unavoidable toxicity and gossiping in the corners."

"No, there's constant tension and anxiety. The biggest factor is uncertainty about finances, long-term engagement, tasks that change daily."

"For now, I mostly enjoy working in this environment. Some unpleasant things aren't caused by the immediate surroundings, but rather by how work is done in partner organizations we collaborate with."

"Yes. Despite differing opinions and personalities, the most important thing is that we listen to one another and don't implement things that even one team member finds unacceptable."

4.6 WORKPLACE HARASSMENT AND DISCRIMINATION

The questions and answers in this section addressed the recognition, frequency, and protection from mobbing and discrimination. There was also space for sharing personal experiences through extended written responses and interviews.

When it comes to harassment in activist work within organizations, just over half of respondents **(53%)** said they have **never experienced such treatment**, while 12.2% reported being subjected to long-term harassment.
Based on self-assessment, 1 in 10 respondents said they did not know whether they had been in such situations.

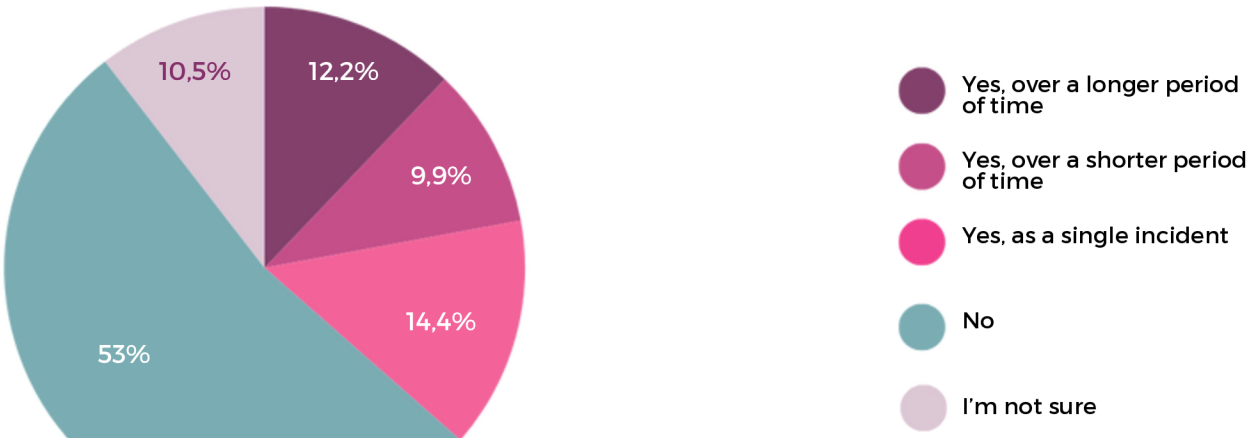


Chart 17: Have you experienced any form of workplace harassment in an NGO/CSO where you previously or currently work?

One in five respondents provided a longer narrative response, and below are quotes that illustrate the forms of workplace harassment within civil society organizations engaged in human rights work.

"Micromanagement, passive aggression, public shaming, change in supervisor's behavior after they (the supervisor) received criticism, which turned into harassment (retaliation)."

"In the past month, I've been experiencing mobbing from my supervisor, including: isolation, being denied access to information needed to do my job, denial of advancement opportunities, being assigned tasks below my intellectual capacity, being belittled, and cutting off communication."

"Psychological abuse, humiliation, constant anxiety about whether I'll have a job and salary each month, manipulation of completed activities (deleting my work), constant degradation."

"I was insulted and humiliated, and when I asked for a conversation about it, I was told that I needed to apologize, because the colleague who insulted me was older and important to the organization."

"[...] for expressing my opinion, or rather for asking basic questions about how the organization functions and demanding better conditions, I later became a target of retaliation and suffered aggression from supervisors multiple times. For a while, I would often arrive at, and leave the office in tears. I was on anti-anxiety medication."

"My theory is that the NGO sector uses such subtle mechanisms of mobbing that they are hard to recognize at first, so it goes on much longer. When a worker leaves, it's said: 'She couldn't handle the pressure'. Power is absolutely concentrated in the hands of a few people."

"Manipulation, inappropriate comments suggesting I have mental health issues, judgment about my choices regarding how I deal with mental health challenges."

“At my previous workplace, we helped my female mentor with some of her private matters, and it went without saying. As was tolerating toxic patterns of communication. [...] The only comfort is that this sector is changing, and Gen Z truly doesn’t stay silent.”

“No one says, ‘I’m punishing you’, because no one really has grounds to. Everything we do is supposedly for the collective good, but sometimes relationships get incredibly tense, simply because we’re all so exhausted.”

“In (organization name), there was a lot of yelling and even chair-throwing. There weren’t insults, at least not directed at me, not that I remember anything specific... but there was a lot of yelling. I can’t even remember what it was about anymore.”

“That constant tension and passive aggression really upsets me. I feel it all the time.”

“I’ve experienced psychological violence many times. Yelling, insults, verbal abuse. My supervisor told me I’m pathetic, that I’m worthless.”

“Typical sexist belittling by a male colleague, belittling of some workers by a higher-up, remarks about money (how everyone earns what they’re worth) while most people are earning below minimum wage.”

“Micromanagement by people who landed in managerial positions through favoritism or without merit is the reason NGOs have a bad reputation. [...] NGOs deceiving themselves into thinking they are moral beacons only furthers their detachment from the people they exist to serve.”

Discrimination within CSOs was not experienced by slightly more than half of the respondents, 53%, while 20.4% of activists reported that they do not know whether they have experienced discrimination.

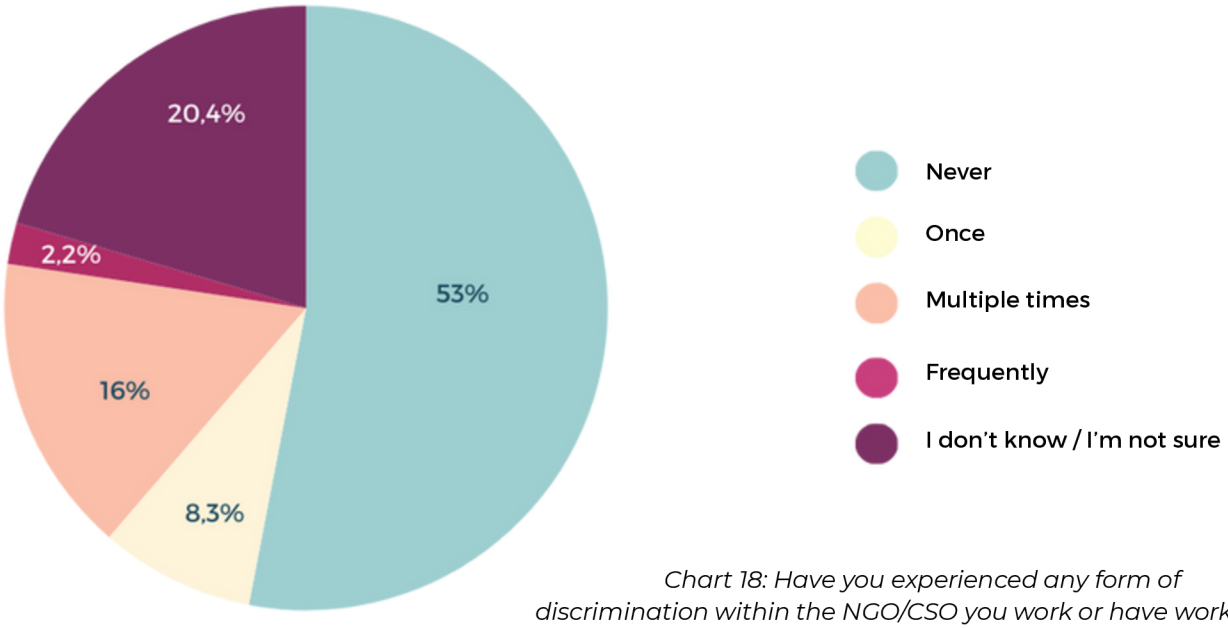


Chart 18: Have you experienced any form of discrimination within the NGO/CSO you work or have worked in?

A more detailed written response was provided by 14.4%, and the most common answers are presented below.

"The basis of it was ageism. Several of us who studied and worked were discriminated against and excluded by the older management."

"Not personally, but regarding members of minorities and persons with disabilities, there were often offensive comments, or skipping them for employment, by the leadership in several of the largest organizations."

"Because I'm young and come from the middle class, a family where my parents worked in state institutions."

"Constant emphasis on my age, how I am too young to be involved in this work, and how my age 'doesn't give me the right' to work with beneficiaries."

„“I experienced discrimination because of my sexuality as a lesbian [...].”

“Regardless of my knowledge, they always chose men and trusted them more than me.”

“It’s too personal to share.”

Just over one in three individuals (35.9%) do not know whom to turn to in situations of workplace abuse or discrimination, which is an extremely discouraging finding.

A comparative analysis of the data shows that more than half – specifically, 55.4% – of respondents who have experienced some form of workplace abuse at least once do not know whom to contact in such cases. Similarly, 38.5% of those who have experienced some form of workplace discrimination also report not knowing where to seek help.

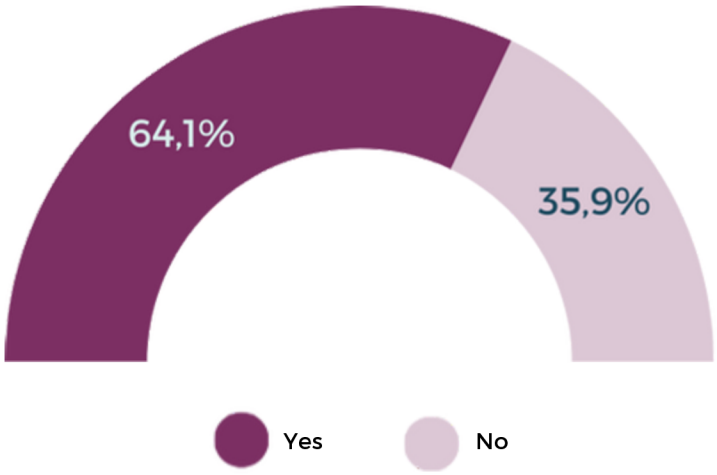


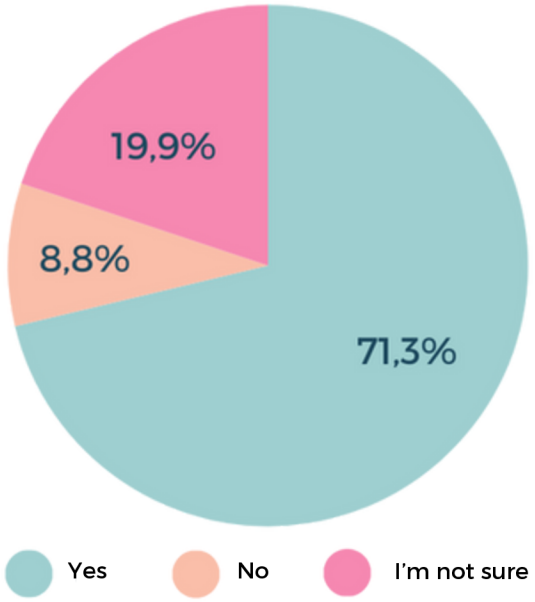
Chart 19: Do you know whom to contact in cases of work harrasement or discrimination?

4.7 TRADE UNION AND SOLIDARITY SUPPORT

This section of the research examined the attitudes of activists regarding the possibilities for collective organizing and mutual support through the establishment of a trade union and a solidarity support fund.

When asked whether forming a trade union in CSOs is necessary, 71.3% of respondents answered affirmatively, while only one in eleven people believe that forming a union within CSOs is not necessary.
All respondents who stated that they support the formation of a union in CSOs also said they would become members of such a union, while one fifth of all respondents were unsure.

Chart 20: Do you think it is necessary to form a trade union within NGOs/CSOs?



"Yes, absolutely. I would participate actively, as a volunteer, every day. As long as the people involved are carefully chosen."

"Whichever organization initiates this topic, I would contribute. If I've tried so many things in life just to move forward even a little in terms of human rights, then why wouldn't I try to contribute here too, voluntarily. But it has to be a real union, the way it's supposed to be."

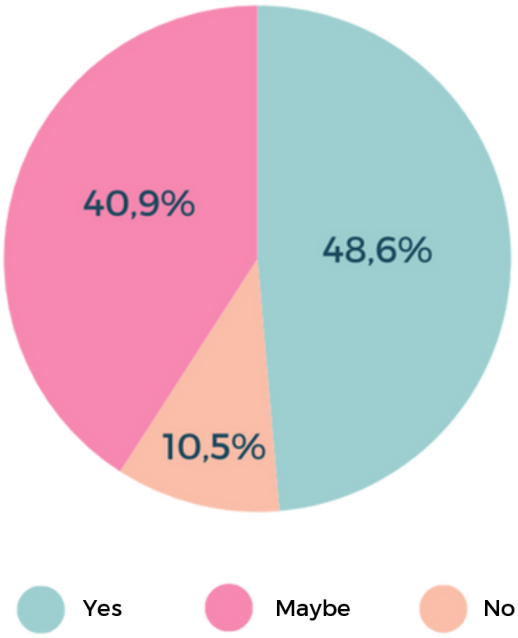
"I'd say yes, because wherever there is space for the rule of law, I think it should be used. People generally give themselves too much freedom when they hold authority."

"I've been going, and I am going to all these events, like you. They mention our unpaid labor everywhere, and they also mention how we don't have the means to unionize. [...] What we get through projects is mostly for conducting activities, not for salaries. [...] You can't work for a monthly salary of 20,000 RSD and expect a successful project. That's why it's very important to form a union, because then we could present all this in collective gatherings, assemblies, whatever they're called, plenums. Right now, we're all scrambling for a bigger piece of the pie and we're happy when we get it, but we're not aware that the moment it ends, we're back at square one, just like before the project. [...] Also, no one negotiates with us, we have no power. We talk to donors only as contractors, not as employees doing work for them. Donors need to be aware that we are part of their work. So I don't have much to add, other than to say that it's really important, however possible, to create a front, to have employment contracts or whatever they're called, or at least some kind of union organization, or at least a platform we can all refer to when we have problems."

"There is no union organizing in this sector, so we don't know anything about it. Now, hypothetically, I'd join a union, and I'm thinking about what it could be, what unions are like now, what they strive for. I see that these things are a long way off and depend on a few people trying to reform the relationships and structures to reach the goal. I think it's a grueling task to get there. On the other hand, considering the real state of things, finances and jobs... [...] We could self-organize, build principles for self-organization, but we're so diverse and simultaneously overworked. And now we need to find a way to make sure union members get paid. If the funding we live on (donor money) gets pulled, and no organization is self-sustainable, how do we pay people running the union? It's a kind of perpetuum mobile that's complex. I'm absolutely for it, I just don't know how long it will take or how it would look."

When asked whether they support the establishment of a Solidarity Fund for activists (intended for emergency financial support), 94.5% of respondents answered affirmatively. Among them, 48.6% stated they would definitely contribute monthly to the fund, while 40.9% answered "maybe."
In textual responses and interviews, the most common reasons for hesitation, or for answering "maybe", were the inability to allocate funds due to insufficient or irregular income, and a lack of trust in the future management of such a fund.

Chart 21: Would you be willing to set aside a monthly amount of money for the purpose of Solidarity Fund?



"It is necessary to first introduce mechanisms to prevent abuse. Otherwise, the unions will be filled with the favored ones, and the funds will, through various malpractices, be redirected to corrupt leaderships."

"I would, absolutely. Because, beyond solidarity aid, some additional actions need to be initiated, because most women don't have them... The state doesn't allocate funds for social protection in a way that, in 20 years when we are old, there will be some system that will take care of us. The issue of a roof over one's head is serious. Most activists live in rented apartments and don't own their homes. And then, some will face that in 5 years, some in 10-15 years - it doesn't matter, but it's high time to think about some space and mutual support, which relates to aging. But equally to illness, because women are burned out, because they've given more than they could, and they have no mechanism to be taken care of. And that is our responsibility more than the state's, because the state... but we need to think about it."

"I think that is a very important thing in today's world, because we are all more or less atomized and, well, we don't exist. How should I say this - solidarity, in any form, and aid in any form, that connects people, gives them a broader front to solve some problems. Because we don't know each other's problems. Like this, through that solidarity fund, we would probably know more about one another, and thus have more opportunities. Not only to help, but to connect and become one family, which I think is very important for any future activity."

"Yes, I would. I'd rather allocate my own money to that fund than pay health insurance to this state, where we cannot get any health assistance in a health center or hospital. [...] Or, for example, now with what happened to some colleagues and these projects that are slowly shutting down, cutting budgets. Even in situations when someone needs help bridging the gap after leaving the sector. Because I am sure that in the coming years, there won't be enough space for all of us to stay in this sector. And maybe we won't even be here."

"Yes, but it really needs to be well-regulated, I would of course set aside money. My answer is yes, I would, and yes, I think it is necessary. However, I'm afraid, given what NGOs look like now, I'm afraid there will be a lot of abuse."

"Our organization actually has a solidarity fund, only it's on an informal level. [...] So, I agree that there should be one."

4.8 COMMENTS

In the final part of the results, the comments from the questionnaire and interviews are presented, together with brief reflections on additional related topics that the participants mentioned, which important for understanding everyday work in organizations.

"Can't wait to see the survey results."

"This is interesting, like psychotherapy."

"You gave me the chance, I've opened up my soul now."

"Thank you for dealing with this important issue and for supporting activists!"

"We need support, someone to whom we can tell what we've been going through and what's been happening to us for a long time. We need help that will give us advice on how to get through this process."

"Work in an NGO can't be viewed strictly through the prism of labor rights (as if we worked in some company). Of course there mustn't be mobbing, discrimination, harassment, violence, hate speech, and the like, but without our enthusiasm and devoting time to issues that demand change, there is no progress."

"I think it would be interesting (although the questionnaire is already long, and good! bravo for that) to look at transparency - how did we end up working in exactly these organizations? How often were there job calls? How clear were the job descriptions and expectations? And how often were there 'friendly agreements' in which the lines are blurry and 'we owe favors,' which then makes it harder to leave bad relationships and bad workplaces, and also feeds the image that civil society is a closed circle of nepotism...

"I think the word 'solidarity' is so over-used that it's been emptied of content; it rings hollow. I want to believe in it, but we live in patriarchy and there is no life outside patriarchy. Women, who mostly lead NGOs, haven't learned to exercise power differently; they do it the same way men do. It's traditional power - not power with, but power over."

"No one ever told us, though there should be trans-generational or any other transfer of knowledge, that when an organization grows it means the capacities of the people employed in that organization also have to grow so they can handle the workload necessary to justify paying five or more salaries. Not minimum wages, but salaries. That means that if resources are drained for five years to reach those salaries, the next five years are twice as draining, because much more has to be done to justify projects that justify the salaries."

"I've been to so many seminars in the last month and a half. And the line inside the NGO world is so clear: you have NGOs that work in the field, do the real things, and earn zero points. And you have NGOs that actually 'skim the cream' from all those field results and make money from the results someone else did. And that's what's terrible to me. It's the same with donors. Donors always face toward the big organizations, which then give us re-granting. Yet at the end of the day, who makes the activists who are in Belgrade? We who are in local communities. So that's all I wanted to say, it was important for me to underline: much more money needs to go to local, smaller organizations."

"We had illusions about what feminism offers, in the sense of what the real relationships are among groups, individuals, what the movement is. And that distorted our picture of where our place is. In other words, we've come into a situation where none of us can say we have adequate family or any social relationships in the communities where we were born and live, because we've been torn from those communities on account of principles, values, insistence on everything and anything. So what should be our obligation toward those younger women, girls, whatever they are, is to set things as they are. To state in advance that if you choose that path there are some, let's not call them risks, call them whatever, circumstances you should potentially be ready for, because they carry a price. And that means an exclusivity: you work on something you consider universal values, and you see that nobody around sees things that way, and acting like we're constant fools can't help but leave consequences, on the one hand. On the other, there is no real solidarity in the movement. Actually, there is generally none."

5.CONCLUSION

The analysis has confirmed a long-present, but rarely articulated reality: work in civil-society organizations, even when motivated by solidarity and belief in social change, often proves to be a source of exhaustion, insecurity, and violations of labor rights. Although these organizations strive for social justice and human rights, they are not immune to broader social challenges such as job insecurity, institutional weaknesses, and insufficient care for the people who form the sector's foundation.

The analysis shows that activists for years have accepted working conditions that would be unacceptable elsewhere - out of a sense of belonging, political responsibility, or fear of disrupting collective relations. In such circumstances, personal boundaries are easily erased, overtime becomes taken for granted, and unspoken availability becomes the rule. Volunteering and engagement often lack clear frameworks, and internal power dynamics can remain unaddressed due to a lack of protection mechanisms and fear.

Activists in this sector face an overload that is often invisible, balancing work and private life, emotional stress, unpaid labor, and a lack of basic rights. This leaves consequences for mental health, leading to chronic fatigue, anxiety, and burnout. It is particularly worrying that many have no employment contracts or formal protection, while the income they earn rarely meets basic living needs.

Insights into the work environment and interpersonal relations further highlight the need for internal discussion about both values and structure, not only about what we fight for, but how we do it. Generational and hierarchical relations, differences in access to resources between Belgrade and other areas (especially smaller communities), and the absence of internal protection and support mechanisms all shape the work experience and influence the sense of security and belonging in organizations.

Alongside burnout and wages that allow living rather than mere survival, mobbing and discrimination emerged as particularly important issues. The most common forms include belittling, exclusion, and abuse of power; most alarming is that many do not know whom to address in such situations. This clearly shows that the civil sector cannot rely on its moral position without genuine responsibility toward those who constitute it from within.

Precisely because this space has the potential to be different, not subject to standard corporate and capitalist norms, it is important to confront our own contradictions. Only from that place is it possible to build collective practices that are sustainable, just, and consistent with the values that brought us here in the first place.

This analysis does not offer ready-made solutions, but it opens space for acknowledgment, dialogue, and empowerment. It shows that the problems are not individual, but structural. And once we know that, it becomes clear that transformation does not depend on “capacity building” of individuals, but on a collective decision for civil society to become a place of dignity for those who work within it.

The responsibility of donors for the current situation cannot be ignored. Funding models that rely on short-term projects, high administrative demands, and minimal budget lines for human resources directly shape working conditions in organizations. When support is focused on results and “visible impact” while ignoring the needs of the people who carry out the work, donor approaches not only fail to strengthen the sector, they make it more vulnerable, unsustainable, and therefore less resilient to crises.

6. RECOMMEN-DATIONS

FOR ORGANIZATIONS

Work is work—even when it's activism.
It is essential to recognize that work in CSOs, regardless of their value framework and mission, requires the same standards of protection as any other form of labor. Respect for rights, clear contracts, rest periods, boundaries, and dignified conditions are not optional extras - they are the foundation of every responsible engagement.

Establish structures that protect, not just inspire.
Organizations should develop and/or honor internal policies that regulate job descriptions, division of responsibilities, communication, and accountability. Transparent procedures and protection mechanisms against abuse, discrimination, and overload must exist and be accessible to everyone in the collective.

A culture of care, not only resilience.
An organizational culture in which care for people is as important as care for goals must be built. This entails preventive mechanisms for burnout, time for recovery, and a collective understanding of boundaries and the right to rest.

Accessibility, solidarity, and inter-generational connection.
The inclusion of different generations, geographic areas, and experiences must be an active policy - not a matter of chance. Listening, sharing power, and building mutual trust through daily practices are essential.

Protection must not depend on good will.
Space must be opened, within organizations and across the sector, for joint work on establishing safe procedures, mutual trust, and support for those who endure abuse, regardless of their position in the hierarchy. Formal mechanisms for reporting mobbing and discrimination must be respected, clearly defined, and accompanied by safe procedures and trusted persons. CSOs must not be places where the very patterns of power and violence they oppose are reproduced. In parallel, informal networks of solidarity should be actively developed and nurtured.

Consistency between values and practice.
If we stand for human rights, equality, freedom, and dignity, we must first practice them within our own organizations. Critical reflection on our own practices must become, and remain, part of regular work and a culture of learning.

FOR DONORS

Financing that includes people - not just results.
Donor funding should explicitly recognize labor, care, and institutional development costs as legitimate and priority expenses. Salaries, social contributions, leave, mental health care, and supportive work structures must be properly budgeted.

Support stability, not exhaustion.
Funding based on short-term projects, with minimal flexible long-term support and ever-increasing administrative demands, depletes human resources. Greater investment in long-term capacity development and continuity is required.

Shared responsibility for values.
Donors bear part of the responsibility for the conditions in which their work is carried out. In addition to evaluating results, they should encourage evaluation of organizational practice - including decision-making processes, working conditions, and participation.

Support transformation, not reproduction of problems.
Ignoring internal dynamics allows the same injustices CSOs aim to change to persist within them. Donors should be allies in transforming the sector itself, not only its goals.

Invest in common resources and support mechanisms - as partners.
The civil sector needs shared resources that exceed the capacities of individual organizations - solidarity funds, educational materials, independent counseling and support mechanisms, and regional networks for mutual exchange. Donors can partner in developing these resources, but it is important that the initiative comes from within the sector itself, based on real needs, and that ownership remains with those who constitute it.

So that every woman can go to and from work with her head held high and peace of mind.

Radna prava žena