



Funded by
the European Union



UNIVERSITY OF BELGRADE
Faculty of Economics
and Business

Empowering women in rural Serbia: The Octopus project

Dr Sonja Avlijaš

University of Belgrade – Faculty of Economics

Insights from the Horizon Europe WeLaR project

About project Octopus [Hobotnica]

- **Hobotnica** is a gender-responsive service launched by a regional female association ZUKO (Kolubara region) and national gender experts, with donor support.
- Developed during COVID-19 to address the escalating **crisis of unpaid female care work** in rural Serbia.
- Targeted women in **small towns and villages**, overburdened by caregiving and household duties.
- During the pandemic, activities conducted with **strict health precautions** (e.g. online sessions, masks, safety guidelines).
- Offered **8 interconnected sub-services**—the “arms of the octopus” — to reduce unpaid work.

About project Octopus [Hobotnica]

“We always tell our families and our kids, I don’t have 10 hands, I’m not an octopus”.



Love Yourself - Physical & mental health support from GPs and psychotherapists.

Support Knowledge – Homework and study help for beneficiaries’ children

Empower Yourself – Free legal assistance in key life areas.

Get Trained - Digital tablets & basic IT training for women without access to tech.

Unite - Support to form women's associations in rural areas.

Get Transported - Organised transport to improve mobility and access

Socialise - Activities to reduce isolation and promote social ties

Take a Break - Planned group day-trip to offer respite (not yet implemented)

Innovative aspects

- **Modular, flexible support** (health, education, legal aid, digital literacy, transport, social inclusion)
- Designed to be **cost-effective and scalable**: Services can “expand” or “contract” as needed (tailored to small, rural municipalities).
- Emphasises the **dynamism and diversity of local needs** vs. standardised social policy services
- **Cross-sectoral integration**: Breaks sectoral silos by responding to interconnected needs of service users.
- **Intersectional approach**: Targeting rural women, predominantly economically and socially marginalised.

Feedback loop between users and gender experts

- Initial **needs assessment** conducted with women aged 22–81
- But design also drew from **expert knowledge** on gender inequalities.
- E.g. Psychological support emerged as one of the most used services, despite low initial demand—showing **value of expert-guided innovation**.
- This **continuous feedback loop** enabled the service to adapt to evolving needs and external conditions—though long-term flexibility was constrained by limited resources.

Financing context

- **Local-level innovation** piloted in rural Serbia (Mionica 2021, Lajkovac 2022), implemented by women's association ZUKO.
- Developed with support from **UN Women, GiZ**, and national gender-responsive budgeting experts.
- **Second pilot** involved national NGO **Gender Knowledge Hub** and shifted to **direct GiZ support**
- It aimed to **scale coverage and duration**, and to enable **formal service evaluation** so that it can be legally adopted by municipal authorities.
- While pilots opened space for **national and local policy dialogue** on long-term **managerial, financial, and institutional sustainability**, no service adoption by local authorities yet.
- Lack of a **multi-annual budgeting framework** and **legislative support for non-state providers** hinder continuity.

Future outlook

- The project inspired Mionica municipality to launch a **citizen consultation** for new local services —extending the project's user-driven ethos.
- Hobotnica acted as an “**ideas lab**”, boosting the visibility, capacity, and influence of the regional association ŽUKO.
- Catalysed **national public discourse** on unpaid female labour and rural gender inequalities, contributing to **broader policy learning**.
- **Scaling and adaptation:** Stakeholders exploring ways to replicate or adapt Hobotnica's modular approach in other Serbian municipalities with localised funding.
- ŽUKO remains committed to Hobotnica's mission but is now focusing on institutional partnerships, advocacy work, and expanding services rooted in its core design principles.



**What can we learn about
social innovation from
Hobotnica?**

Hobotnica and globalisation

- Regional inequalities in Serbia, worsened by globalisation and austerity, left rural areas underfunded and administratively overstretched; “one size fits all” policies failing to meet local needs.
- Hobotnica **filled welfare gaps** with psychosocial, legal, and organisational support to women marginalised in agricultural aid schemes which are skewed toward larger enterprises.
- Emphasised **wellbeing over income generation**—revealing tensions between care-based and economic empowerment models.
- Globalisation dynamics enabled **idea diffusion and collaboration among activists**, pointing to the potential of building social innovation ecosystems—if sustainable support structures are put in place.

Digitalisation, demographic decline and climate change

- **Digital inclusion:** Tablets and training empowered rural women to access legal info, connect socially, and engage local governance — fostering connectivity and confidence.
- **Tangible benefits:** Receiving a device improved household support for the woman's participation in the project and allowed women to meet immediate needs. Material support can build trust and uptake.
- **Economic aspirations:** Some women developed interest in further learning and entrepreneurship, sparking new ambitions despite short-term pressures.
- **Demographic resilience:** By offering psychosocial support and socialisation, Hobotnica helped make rural life more viable — especially for women often excluded from land and public services.
- **Climate adaptation potential:** Could be expanded to build rural women's knowledge of sustainable farming and climate resilience.

Labour market impacts, incl. the hidden cost of social innovation

- Some women used legal aid, information, and digital tools to boost income-generating activities or start small businesses (e.g. hairdressing, agriculture).
- **Ripple effects for next generation:** Exposure to skills like English language and diverse life paths inspired children to consider new futures beyond migration or subsistence farming.
- **Precarity for implementers:** ŽUKO staff and collaborators faced job insecurity, burnout, and uncompensated labour due to inadequate project funding and Serbia's inflexible welfare system.
- Delivering modular services in a rigid welfare and labour framework can thus generate **hidden costs**, risking exploitation of those tasked with delivering inclusive innovation.
- **From project to policy:** Social innovation requires not just passion but supportive institutions—multi-year funding, flexible labour protections (e.g. flexicurity), and governance models suited to investment-oriented welfare delivery.

Welfare state constraints and the need to evolve monitoring frameworks

- Hobotnica exposed the Serbian welfare state's inability to support modular, user-driven services—highlighting **a lack of governance structures for non-state actors** and inadequate institutional frameworks for social investment.
- **Hidden policy needs:** Modular, cross-sectoral service design surfaced unmet needs—e.g. rural mobility, mental health, and gendered access to public spaces—that traditional welfare approaches ignore.
- **Tension between innovation and metrics:** Traditional monitoring methods fail to capture Hobotnica's spillover effects—such as learning, policy inspiration, and shifts in local governance practices.
- **Role of policy catalysts:** Though not sustained, Hobotnica served as a demonstrational model—raising awareness, informing other initiatives, and influencing local and national debates on unpaid labour and gendered inequality.

Key insights

- **Modular innovation in an inflexible system:** A user-responsive, cross-sectoral service model—unusual in Serbia’s cash-focused, sectoral welfare landscape—was introduced, highlighting potential for implementing social investment in underserved rural areas.
- **Ripple effects & evolving needs:** The service sparked demand for education, entrepreneurship, and community action—demonstrating how social reproduction support can empower broader life choices.
- **Hidden costs for implementers:** Non-state actors delivering flexible services in a rigid institutional and LM context faced burnout, insecurity, and undercompensation—revealing the need to assess SI impact on both users and providers.
- **Limits of traditional metrics:** Standard monitoring often misses spillover effects and policy learning; social innovation requires evaluation frameworks that recognise experimentation, empowerment, and ecosystem-building.



Funded by
the European Union



UNIVERSITY OF BELGRADE
Faculty of Economics
and Business

Thank you for the attention!

sonja.avlijas@ekof.bg.ac.rs

www.projectwelar.eu