



PROGRAM REPORT

MSD for Mothers in Europe

Improving maternal health across Europe

Equity and access as MSD's driving forces

MSD for Mothers is MSD's global initiative to help create a world where no woman has to die while giving life. Applying MSD's business and scientific resources, MSD for Mothers works with grantees and collaborators to improve the health and wellbeing of women during pregnancy, childbirth and the months after. MSD for Mothers is an initiative of Merck & Co., Inc., Rahway, NJ, USA. For more information, visit www.MSDforMothers.com.

For more than a decade, MSD for Mothers has been an essential component of our company's efforts to extend access to solutions that address unmet medical needs and advance health equity. We invest in solutions that have the potential to transform health care for women across the globe by increasing access to safe, high quality, equitable, respectful care around pregnancy and childbirth as part of our company's contribution towards Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3.1: significantly reduce maternal mortality.

Overall, the maternal health gains in Europe are encouraging. According to the World Health Organization, the maternal mortality rate declined by more than 50% between 2000 and 2020.¹ However, in 2020 an estimated 1,000 European women still died due to complications related to pregnancy or childbirth.²

European women who are poor, have less access to education, migrants, refugees and those from racial and ethnic minority groups fare disproportionately worse during pregnancy, childbirth and the months after.³ The COVID-19 pandemic – and the strain it placed on health systems – further exacerbated health inequities and we continue to see the impact today.⁴

At MSD, we believe that all women everywhere should have access to quality maternal health and family planning services, regardless of their socio-economic status, ethnicity or nationality. Maternity care across Europe should be tailored to meet the needs of women, especially those from underserved and marginalized communities. This is the way forward to help close disparities in care and save more women's lives.

We also believe that a critical pathway for access to health for all is to strengthen health systems, ensuring a strong and well-trained workforce and reliable access to high-quality care. We are proud to collaborate with non-governmental organizations, health care professionals, businesses and local and national governments to understand and meet the maternal health needs of women across Europe and beyond.

This report describes how we work with diverse organizations to bolster standards for quality maternity care, increase access to this care, build the knowledge and capabilities of health providers, disseminate life-saving information about pregnancy, and more. We are grateful to the team behind MSD for Mothers and all employees contributing to this company-wide initiative as well as to our grantees and collaborators whose impactful work are reflected in these pages. We thank them for their outstanding efforts to help create a world where no woman has to die while giving life.



Louise Houson
SVP, President
Core Europe and Canada,
MSD



Cyril Schiever
SVP, President
Mid-Europe,
MSD

MSD for Mothers: Committed to saving lives

MSD for Mothers is MSD's \$650 million (USD) global initiative to help create a world where no woman has to die while giving life.

In support of the United Nations' SDGs, and our company's goal to reach more than 50 million people by 2025 with our social investments, we strive to improve maternal health by increasing access to safe, high-quality, equitable and respectful care during pregnancy and childbirth.

To date, [MSD for Mothers](#) has helped improve access to quality maternal health care for over 30 million women in more than 70 sites around the world, contributing to the global effort to save women's lives, strengthen health systems and meet the SDG targets by 2030.

In Europe, MSD for Mothers has supported maternity health projects across 14 countries, playing a crucial role in advancing maternal health outcomes across the continent. Our commitment extends to fostering collaborations and initiatives that address the unique health care challenges faced by women in Europe, with a goal of ensuring that every woman has access to the high-quality care she deserves during pregnancy, childbirth and the critical postpartum period.

Our approach

Recognizing the multifaceted challenge of maternal mortality, we take a holistic approach to addressing the many factors that have an impact on maternal health, especially in underserved communities.

Applying MSD's business and scientific resources, MSD for Mothers works with grantees and collaborators to improve the health and wellbeing of women during pregnancy, childbirth and the months after. We are committed to working with organizations that have a deep understanding of the populations they aim to serve and are skilled at integrating women's voices and experiences into the services they provide.

The programs we support in Europe are **improving access to maternal health care and promoting sexual and reproductive health**, with a focus on building capacity, awareness and education. We have also supported regional efforts to raise awareness of maternal health challenges and encourage European policy makers to prioritize equitable access to quality maternal health care.

Our impact by the numbers

Our work has supported impressive strides in improving maternal health worldwide



30.1 million

women

reached with improved access to quality maternal health care



895,000

providers

better equipped to offer quality care



+240

programs



+180

grantees and collaborators



+70

countries/sites



Maternal health in Europe

Equitable access to high-quality maternal health care remains a fundamental right for all women in Europe.

Thanks to ongoing efforts, the region experienced a **50% decline** in maternal mortality rates (MMR) between 2000 and 2020. Eastern Europe was recognized as one of two regions in the world, next to Southern Asia, that achieved the greatest overall reduction in MMR with a 70% decline during the same period.⁵

Despite this progress, even in Europe, where health care systems are comparatively more efficient and accessible than in many other regions globally, there remain concerning statistics and discrepancies regarding maternal health.⁶ In 2018, researchers found that **1 in 10 women in the European Union have no access to maternal health services in the first months of pregnancy.**⁷ In 2020, nearly 1,000 died from complications of pregnancy and childbirth and two-thirds of newborn deaths could have been prevented with appropriate care.^{8,9}

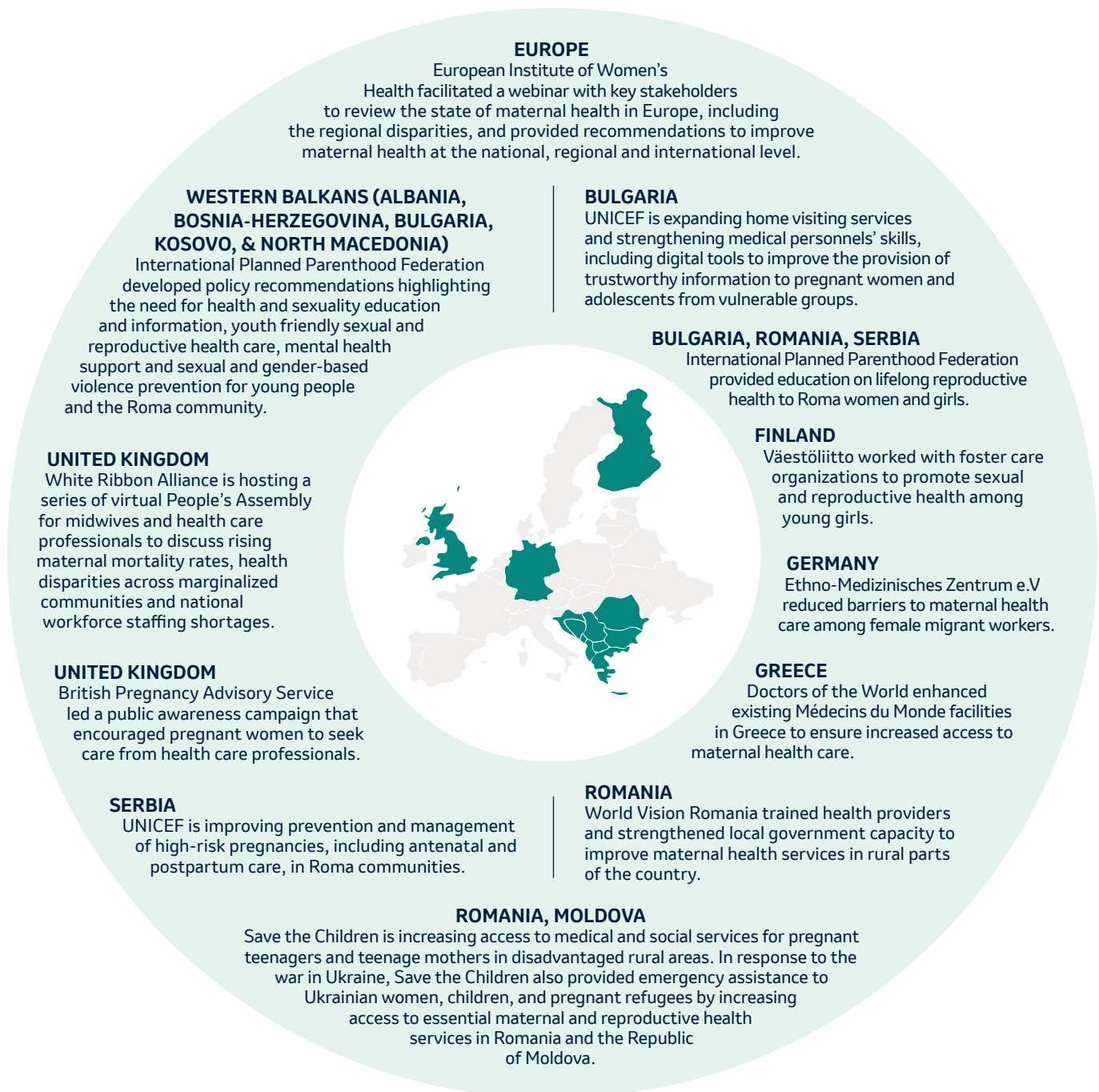
Many women across Europe are unable to access timely and quality health care, putting them in a particularly vulnerable situation. Lack of information and gaps in the knowledge base of maternal health care have led to these women slipping through health system safety nets, especially during pre- or post-natal periods.¹⁰

Disparities in access to maternal health services are also common within countries across the region and disproportionately affect historically excluded populations. Women from underserved groups, including ethnic communities, refugees and migrants, disproportionately face higher rates of maternal mortality.¹¹ Migrant and refugee women are particularly at risk of facing heightened marginalization and social exclusion, especially when seeking even the most basic maternal health care services.¹² In western and southern Europe, only a quarter of migrants know their rights to access care and only half know how to navigate the health system.¹³



MSD for Mothers' impact in Europe

In collaboration with local MSD offices throughout Europe, MSD for Mothers is supporting organizations that improve women's access to high-quality maternal health care and raise awareness of safe childbirth practices. We have supported **14 programs that have reached nearly 1.3 million women across Europe**. In keeping with our focus on maternal health equity, many of these organizations center their work around women from underserved communities, including migrant workers, refugees and women living in rural areas.



We have also collaborated with European-based organizations to support eight programs that have reached more than **120,000 women in several African countries** with very high rates of maternal mortality.

BELGIUM. Medics Without Vacation supported medical missions to train local health workers on maternal health in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

DENMARK. Maternity Foundation implemented its Safe Delivery App, an innovative mobile health tool to enhance antenatal care and emergency obstetric care, in Ethiopia.

IRELAND. Concern Worldwide reduced maternal mortality and morbidity in Malawi through a package of community and facility-based interventions.

ITALY. Comunità di S.Egidio ACAP Onlus integrated HIV/AIDS care with antenatal services in health facilities in Mozambique.

ITALY. Doctors with Africa Cuamm conducted community outreach in Ethiopia to increase demand for facility-based maternal health care.

SPAIN. Organización Navarra Para Ayuda Entre Los Pueblos improved access to antenatal care in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and strengthened health workers' ability to manage pregnancy complications.

SWEDEN. World Lung Foundation developed a digital learning platform to support the delivery of emergency obstetric care in remote health facilities in Tanzania.

SWITZERLAND. Swiss Tropical Public Health Institute improved access to care and treatment for pregnant women in Tanzania who have HIV.





Project spotlights

Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Kosovo, & North Macedonia)

Increasing access to sexual, reproductive and maternal health to young people and marginalized groups

The COVID-19 pandemic's disruption of sexual and reproductive health care services across Europe disproportionately affected women living in remote areas and in marginalized groups, including the Roma community.¹⁴

The *Youth Voices, Youth Choices* project — implemented by the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) European Network its member associations and partner organization — supported young people's sexual, reproductive and maternal health needs during the COVID-19 pandemic by making sure that information and services were accessible and youth friendly, with special attention to those living in rural settings in the Western Balkan region. The project built on research findings on how the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions severely hampered access to services and information for hard-to-reach groups of young people. The project empowered young people to advocate with policymakers for better information and to increase access to sexual and reproductive services in rural and Roma communities.

In three years, nearly 350 young people took up an active role in the project (including through trainings, research, campaigning and advocacy, direct engagements with youth). Building on research findings, IPPF and key project stakeholders developed regional policy recommendations which were presented in the European Parliament.



Copyright: IPPF European Network



“Youth Voices Youth Choices’ unique approach combining active participation and empowerment of young people, especially those most vulnerable and working with multi-stakeholder partnerships, on multiple fronts targeting policymakers, service providers, community and young people contributed to young people’s increased access to sexual and reproductive health services. The transformation of young participants into advocates for sexual and reproductive health, ensures a sustainable and youth-led movement for positive change.”

– Lena Luyckfassee, Director – Member Associations Support & Development, IPPF European Network



Romania

Supporting adolescent pregnancy and providing emergency assistance to refugees

Adolescent pregnancy remains a significant public health concern in Romania. Adolescent mothers (ages 10-19)¹⁵ account for an estimated 10% of all births in the country, roughly 18,000 births annually.¹⁶ In disadvantaged rural areas, approximately 40% of pregnant teenagers do not receive recommended prenatal care due to access and financial challenges.¹⁷

Save the Children is developing and implementing an integrated model of maternal health care and family planning services, supporting pregnant teenagers and young mothers living in rural communities in 16 counties of Romania.¹⁸ The two-year program aims to increase knowledge and awareness of reproductive health, enhance accessibility to prenatal care, improve availability and quality of social support services and strengthen the capacity of health care providers.

Since the initial grant, our support for Save the Children continued, adapting to the landscape of public health challenges in Romania. Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, about 140,000 Ukrainian refugees have entered Romania. In response, Save the Children Romania has extended its reach to provide emergency assistance to these mothers and children and facilitating access to maternal health care services for these women. Leveraging the existing infrastructure, Save the Children is ensuring that the refugees are able to receive the care and support they urgently need. The medical mobile units have now expanded access to more vulnerable communities, aiming to directly reach 10,000 people annually.

Since 2017, over 100,000 women, girls, mothers and children in Romania and the Republic of Moldova, as well as Ukrainian refugees, have been directly assisted through MSD for Mothers funded programs to access essential maternal and reproductive health services.



“The MSD for Mothers grant helped us in bringing quality services as close as possible to pregnant teenagers, teenage mothers and their children and offer them access to integrated services (medical, social, educational), adapted to their needs. Moreover, Save the Children is one of the organizations in Romania that mobilized since the arrival of the first Ukrainian refugees in the country and with the support of MSD for Mothers we managed to immediately help mothers and children in need both in Romania and in the Republic of Moldova.”

– Gabriela Alexandrescu, Executive President,
Save the Children Romania

Greece

Providing quality, affordable care for refugee women

During Greece's 2009 economic crisis, the country faced a prolonged recession and rising poverty rates, amplifying issues of widespread unemployment and unmet medical needs.¹⁹ These challenges were exacerbated by a surge in refugee and immigrant populations that strained the health care system and affected access to maternal health care services throughout the country.²⁰

Through the Mother & Child Project, Doctors of the World's Greek delegation deployed mobile health units so that many more women – both refugees and those living in remote regions – are able to receive the maternal health services they need. The organization is strengthening the capacity of health care professionals to better serve these women and ensuring that antenatal and postnatal care is available to women who do not have health insurance. In three years, the project delivered primary health care services to nearly 43,000 women and trained more than 1,900 health providers.



Copyright: Doctors of the World - Greece



“The Mother and Child project had a substantial social impact. With the support of MSD for Mothers, thousands of pregnant and postpartum women who faced multiple health risks due to problematic access to public health services received dignified health care when they needed most. The Doctors of the World Greece activities that were funded by the MSD program were truly a lifesaver for these very vulnerable women and their children.”

– Dr Chara Tziouvara, Pediatrician and President of Board of Directors, Doctors of the World Greece

Denmark's work in Ethiopia & beyond

Equipping health providers with digital tools to deliver safe maternity care

The majority of maternal deaths can be averted when women give birth with health care providers who are equipped to manage potential obstetric emergencies.²¹ However, in many low-resource areas, providers lack the necessary knowledge and skills to deliver the high-quality maternal health services essential to safeguard maternal and newborn health.²²

Maternity Foundation, in collaboration with the University of Copenhagen and the University of Southern Denmark, developed the Safe Delivery App, a digital health tool, to enhance antenatal care and emergency obstetric care in Ethiopia. The app offers maternity care providers instant access to evidence-based clinical guidelines for basic emergency obstetric and neonatal care, supports pre-service and in-service trainings and can be a vital reference tool during difficult deliveries. Through a two-year project, the Safe Delivery App has strengthened the capabilities of more than 1,300 providers to recognize and manage childbirth complications, improving the quality of care for over 11,000 women. The Safe Delivery App has since been adapted for maternity care providers in more than 70 countries, with language, animations and clinical practices that are appropriate for each context. MSD for Mothers continues to support Maternity Foundation today as it expands its work across India.



Copyright: Maternity Foundation



“I use the Safe Delivery App every day. I use it on the job, and when I am not busy I check up on clinical procedures and actions. Our work is risky. The Safe Delivery App makes it easier for us to manage birth complications. I think all midwives should use it.”

– Nicola Zewge, Midwife in Nguenyiel Refugee Camp, Ethiopia

Bulgaria

Improving maternal and child health through home visiting services and digital tools

Bulgaria has one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy in Europe, with particularly high rates among young women who are poor, have limited education, live in rural areas, or are from the Roma community.^{23,24} The Sliven region, where the largest Roma population lives, is one of the regions with the highest proportion of people at risk of poverty, total fertility rate and infant mortality rate.^{25,26} Adolescent births are particularly common among the Roma population and in 2022, 649 children were born to mothers under 20 years of age, representing almost one third of the total number of live births in the Sliven region.²⁷ The largest Roma neighborhood has limited access to essential services including health care.²⁸

UNICEF Bulgaria is working to improve the provision of trustworthy information to pregnant women and adolescents from vulnerable groups by expanding home visiting services and enhancing the interpersonal and communication skills of medical personnel, including through innovative digital tools. For example, the Bebbio mobile application will include modules on maternal health, healthy pregnancy and disease prevention. Bebbio will be offered to pregnant teenagers during home visits, promoted in maternity wards and made available in communities to reach adolescent girls and young women.

NEW PROJECT



Copyright: UNICEF Bulgaria/2023/Maria Milkova



“The Center for Maternal and Child Health project is an innovative care model for pregnant women, also providing support to families in raising newborns and children up to age of 3 years. For the implementation of the project, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between UNICEF, the Bulgarian Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the Ministry of Health and others, involving the participation of multiple stakeholders.”

- Director, Child and Youth Health Department, The Bulgarian National Center of Public Health and Analysis (NCPHA)

Serbia

Improving maternity care through standards, capacity building and health literacy

Maternal mortality remains high in Serbia, with 11.2 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2022.²⁹ Regional disparities in access to health care disproportionately affect rural and Roma communities in Serbia. In 2019, only 83% of Roma women in Serbia reported having access to basic services, such as antenatal care, compared to 97% of the general population.³⁰

UNICEF Serbia is working to improve the quality of care for pregnant women, mothers and newborns in the general population, with a special focus on mothers coming from rural and Roma communities. The organization is supporting the update of guidelines on standards of care and enhancing capabilities of health care providers by developing innovative methods for providers on the updated guidelines. UNICEF Serbia will support health institutions in Central Serbia and Belgrade with the necessary resources to present and manage high-risk pregnancies, including through a digital tool to support medical teams. The project also aims to increase health literacy among women, enabling them to make informed decisions about their health care and prioritize their health during pregnancy and the postnatal period.

NEW PROJECT



Copyright: UNICEF Serbia/Zoran Jovanovic Maccak



“The uniqueness of the program is reflected in several ways. Pregnant women will be better equipped to identify pregnancy risks in a timely way and receive the required support to overcome potential harms. The health system will be strengthened to effectively respond to the needs of women during pregnancy and prepare them for safe delivery. Moreover, health professionals will be sensitized to the specific needs of vulnerable groups of women, particularly those from rural areas and Roma settlements”

- Deyana Kostadinova, Serbia Representative, UNICEF



1. WHO Europe. (2021). [Maternal mortality.](#)
2. WHO Europe. (2021). [Maternal mortality.](#)
3. WHO Europe. (2021). [Maternal mortality.](#)
4. Bobrovnikova, E. (2023) [Economic and social inequalities in Europe in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.](#)
5. WHO Europe. (2021). [Maternal mortality.](#)
6. Women Political Leaders Global Forum. (2018). [Improving Maternal Healthcare for Vulnerable Women in EU28: What Can You Do?](#)
7. Women Political Leaders Global Forum. (2018). [Improving Maternal Healthcare for Vulnerable Women in EU28: What Can You Do?](#)
8. WHO Europe. (2021). [Maternal mortality.](#)
9. European Institute of Women's Health. (2023). [Maternal Health in the European Union.](#)
10. Women Political Leaders Global Forum. (2018). [Improving Maternal Healthcare for Vulnerable Women in EU28: What Can You Do?](#)
11. Eslier M, Azria E, Chatzistergiou K, Stewart Z, Dechartres A, Deneux-Tharoux C. (2023). [Association between migration and severe maternal outcomes in high-income countries: Systematic review and meta-analysis.](#)
12. Women Political Leaders Global Forum. (2018). [Improving Maternal Healthcare for Vulnerable Women in EU28: What Can You Do?](#)
13. European Institute of Women's Health. (2023). [Maternal Health in the European Union.](#)
14. UN Women. (2020). [Putting Women at the Forefront of the COVID-19 Response in Europe and Central Asia.](#)
15. World Health Organization. (2023). [Adolescent pregnancy.](#)
16. UNICEF. (2021). [Policy Brief Prevention of teenage pregnancy and its consequences.](#)
17. Save the Children. (2022). [Analysis on the situation of mothers and pregnant teenagers from disadvantaged rural areas.](#)
18. UNCESCO. (2023). [Romania's education responses to the influx of Ukrainian refugees.](#)
19. Stylianidis S, Souliotis K. (2019). [The impact of the long-lasting socioeconomic crisis in Greece.](#)
20. Joseph L, Ismail SA, Gunst M, Jarman K, Prior D, Harris M, Abbara A. (2020). [A Qualitative Research Study Which Explores Humanitarian Stakeholders' Views on Healthcare Access for Refugees in Greece.](#)
21. World Health Organization. (2023). [Maternal mortality.](#)
22. World Health Organization. (2023). [Maternal mortality.](#)
23. UNICEF. (2017). [Situation analysis of children and women in Bulgaria.](#)
24. UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office and UNICEF Bulgaria. (2022). [Un/Equal Childhood: Deep Dive in Child Poverty and Social Exclusion in Bulgaria.](#)
25. National Statistical Institute. (2023). [Indicators of poverty and social inclusion by region.](#)
26. National Statistical Institute. (2023). [Mortality rates by place of residence, statistical regions, districts and sex.](#)
27. National Statistical Institute. (2022). [Indicators for live births by districts, municipalities and mother's age in 2022.](#)
28. UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office and UNICEF Bulgaria. (2022). [Un/Equal Childhood: Deep Dive in Child Poverty and Social Exclusion in Bulgaria](#)
29. IPHS. (2022). [Health Statistical Yearbook of Republic of Serbia.](#)
30. UNICEF. (2019). [Serbia and Serbia Roma Settlements Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys.](#)

These programs are funded by MSD for Mothers, MSD's global initiative to help create a world where no woman has to die while giving life. MSD for Mothers is an initiative of Merck & Co., Inc., Rahway, NJ, USA.