

Why Are Low-Skilled Women From Minority Groups Economically Inactive In Macedonia?

By Diego F. Angel-Urdinola

Macedonia's low rate of employment sets it apart from its South Eastern European neighbors; a new study by the World Bank's Europe and Central Asia Region, with funding from *Gender Equality as Smart Economics*, estimates that only some 60 percent of the working-age population is economically active, with women's level even lower. The study finds that many economically inactive women belong to the minority Albanian, Turkish and Roma Muslim communities.

Sixteen women and seven men from Macedonia's major ethnic groups; Macedonian, Albanian, Turkish, Serb and Roma; participated in the study, which is called "*Analyzing the reasons for economic inactivity among women in Macedonia.*" While men and women from different ethnicities cited nepotism and lack of personal connections as a main obstacle, the results show stark differences between women from different ethnic groups. With only 11 percent estimated to be economically active, women of Albanian origin were 35 percent less likely to be employed than women of Macedonian origin.

This has no recent historical precedent in Macedonia: before the layoffs that followed the transition in 1990, female labor force participation was much higher than today. Most Macedonian women in the study say they want to work but that it is difficult for them to find paid employment. One Macedonian woman, aged 50, said "We are the generation that has suffered most from the transition. At this age no one wants to employ you."

Meanwhile, Albanian, Turkish and some Roma women say that traditional norms confine them to household work, and burden them with tasks that limit the possibility of seeking employment. Many of them say they never received a secondary education because their communities do not consider it necessary. Low market wages for unskilled workers and difficult working conditions are additional deterrents. "Even if the



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Traditional values in Macedonia deter many women from working outside the home.

husband earns only 200 denars per day, the wife should stay at home, prepare the meal, clean, to be around for the kids," explained one Albanian woman.

The study recommends increasing women's and men's educational opportunities while supporting the implementation of existing laws. The government's new policy of making secondary education compulsory, effective from September 2008, may both help improve educational levels and increase economic activity. The study also recommends that the Macedonian Employment Agency team up with universities to provide specific qualification programs for the unemployed, with a focus on professions in high demand. In addition, accreditation systems could be put in place for individuals who have skills related to crafts, enabling women who cannot work outside the home to earn an income. Finally, the study proposes helping women enter the labor force by encouraging more flexible forms of employment in the formal job sector like part-time jobs. This could attract women into the formal sector while having the added benefit of boosting the respect for labor rights.

The study suggests, however, that the factors preventing women from minority groups to participate fully in the economy are deep-rooted, and

Integrating Women into Labor Markets, a Priority for the Gender Action Plan

Women's participation rates in the labor market lag behind men's in virtually all countries. The objective of the labor market projects funded under the Gender Action Plan (GAP), *Gender Equality as Smart Economics*, is to identify the constraints to women's labor force participation and access to quality employment in order to design better policies and programs to stimulate women's employment.

To do this, the GAP set out to improve statistics on women's labor force participation in both the formal and informal sectors, expand the knowledge base of gender issues in labor markets through studies and initiate impact evaluations. It also strives to increase awareness by policy makers of the importance of women's economic empowerment for household, community, and country outcomes.

In the area of statistics, the GAP has partnered with the UN for Marrakesh Action Plan for Statistics (MAPS) to improve the availability and quality of sex-disaggregated employment data. In terms of analytical work, the GAP funds research projects and Economic and Sector Work to better understand female employment in the formal and informal sectors, the determinants of male/female wage and productivity gaps, and the structure of labor markets.

There is also an imperfect understanding of the relative impact of initiatives to enhance female participation in the labor market and the quality of women's work because impact evaluations are rare. For this reason, the GAP allocates a substantial amount of its budget to fund impact evaluations.

the initiatives above may have limited effect in these communities. The study suggests that representatives from NGOs working on women's issues could be effective in changing the traditional outlook on female education and employment at the individual and family level. Women appear to trust these organizations and rely on them when it comes to seeking training.

This study will be delivered to the Macedonian government in October 2008 as part of the Macedonia Labor Market Assessment, and will be a resource for the implementation of future labor market reforms. ☺

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