



Reproductive rights and the economic position of women In Bulgaria, Macedonia, Poland, Serbia and Montenegro and Slovenia

LIMITED REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS LEAD TO DISADVANTAGED ECONOMIC POSITION OF WOMEN

Limited reproductive rights and limited access of women to reproductive health services have an evident negative impact on the economic position of women, and their employment opportunities in particular. When women cannot decide freely if, when and how many children they have, their economic choices as well as their employment opportunities are very restricted. Additionally, the restriction has the greatest impact on women who are already economically disadvantaged.

The situation is probably most drastic in Poland where women's reproductive rights are very significantly undermined. Access to legal abortion is limited to cases when there is a serious threat to life or health of the women, when there is an evidence of the damage of the fetus, or where pregnancy is a result of criminal act (rape or incest). In practice however, even the women who fulfill above conditions often cannot gain access to legal abortion, because some doctors refuse to perform abortion on the grounds of conscience. Additionally, contraception is too expensive for large proportion of women. Finally, sexual education in most schools is either not available at all or reflect conservative catholic values, discriminatory to women.

The lack of reproductive rights (right to legal and safe abortion) impacts poor women in particular, as they do not have financial resources to neither raise the children nor to buy contraceptives. Illegal abortion is accessible in so called "abortion underground" (advertisements of doctors performing illegal abortion can be found in any larger newspaper) but costs more than an average wage and much more than minimal wage earned by many women. In case of some poor (employed women) the cost of illegal abortion equals to two or three month wages. The example of Poland illustrates very clearly that restricting women's reproductive rights not only has adverse effect on their economic situation through limiting their employment opportunities but also through forcing them to pay for expensive reproductive services, both those legal and illegal.

LIMITED REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS LEAD TO DISCRIMINATION OF WOMEN ON THE LABOUR MARKET

There is a clear link between the reproductive rights of women and their situation on the labour market. In Poland employers often treat women as 'risky' workers who cannot control their fertility due to limited access of great majority of women to sex education, contraception and abortion. As a result the employers tend to either offer women lower wages or less secure employment contracts than they would offer to male workers. In Macedonia for example, there are still social prejudices and stereotypes about the appropriate woman's role in the society and family. There have been cases of employers requesting young female employees to remain single for period of three years in order to be available for work at any time. In Bulgaria mothers with small children appears in all researches as one of most disadvantaged and at risk of unemployment. The women from this group become easily discouraged workers. In Poland due to restricted access to abortion and denial of family planning women have even smaller choices than in other countries of the region.

LINK BETWEEN WOMEN'S ECONOMIC POSITION AND THEIR RIGHT TO HAVE CHILDREN

Since 1995 all of the countries covered in this information sheet have experienced serious drop in fertility rate. Women's right to freely choose not to have children should always be respected, and the so-called 'demographic crisis' should never be used as a justification for restricting women's reproductive rights and to force them to have children they otherwise would not have. At the same time, however, women who want to have children should not be denied this right. Unfortunately in many countries of CEE/CIS region the disadvantaged economic position of women and particularly discrimination experienced by mothers (and not fathers) on the labour market leads to many women having to choose either to have children or to have a job. Bulgaria for example has the lowest fertility rate in Europe (1,1). This situation has undoubtedly its roots in the overall impoverishment of the population. Further, the on-going health reform excluded reproductive health from the social security payments and therefore women with lower income cannot afford basic reproductive health services (regular check-ups, family planning services, basic contraception, sterility medication etc), which deprive many of them of the opportunity to have children. In Serbia the combination of economic and political instability is influencing women's (parents) childbearing decisions. This is particularly true in the decisions regarding having a second child. In Poland women concerned about their economic prospects, as well as aware of the discrimination on the labour market delay having children, which often results in many women who would like to have children to miss their fertility age.

In Slovenia there does not seem to be a direct link between reproductive rights and economic situation of women. The reproductive rights of women in Slovenia have not changed (at least not directly) over the course of 10 years. The main achievements in providing comprehensive reproductive health care were observed in relation to family planning and extending the use of modern contraceptive methods.

RECOMMENDATIONS**To National Governments:**

In order to ensure equal economic opportunities of women and men, promptly develop legislative guarantees of all reproductive rights of women.

To include into the national economic policies solutions supporting equal opportunities in the labour market of all parents, regardless of gender, including creation of quality, accessible childcare system.

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