

# **EXPERIENCES OF SINGLE MOTHERS IN THE LABOUR MARKET; COMPARATIVE STUDY IN ALBANIA AND BOSNIA HERZEGOVINA**

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## **Abstract**

The level of unemployment in the whole region of the Western Balkans is very high considering the average unemployment rate in the European Union. The majority of all citizens, men and women alike, encounter difficulties in the labor market. Single mothers are no exception. The purpose of the study was to investigate the main determine factors that obstacle women – single mothers in particular entering in the labour market. The methodology was a qualitative one, through conducting focus groups with single mothers and in depth interviews with key informants. The results of the study show that single mothers face several difficulties to enter in the labor market that relate mainly to the lack of child care services, adequate employment and welfare policies, effective support services, etc.

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**Keywords:** Single mothers, family, unemployment, labour market

## **Introduction**

The major economic and social changes in Western Balkans, where Albania and BiH take part, in the last twenty years have brought about significant changes in the position of women inside the family and society. One of the most significant and visible changes is the participation of women in the labour market, which has strengthened its role in the economic and social development of the family and society.

In Albania in the early 90s with the changes in the economic and political systems and the associated widespread closures of factories, women were initially more affected than men by unemployment and often "very willingly" returned to their traditional role in the family. This trend was favoured also by the lack of supporting social system services that had previously existed before the '90s which had been accessible to everyone free of charge. Various research studies indicate that women in Albania, in terms

of lack of facilities for childcare and the increasing backlog of unpaid work responsibilities and family, feel disadvantaged in the labour market participation. While other factors such as age, education, and health, play an equally important role in FLFP level (Danaj., *et. al*, 2008, p. 39).

Fewer women participate in the labour force; 60.8% of women compared to 76.4% for men (2011 Labour Force Survey). The 2011 population census shows much lower levels of economic activity with 37.1% of women and 62.4% of men in the labour force. However, different methodologies used in the census compared to labour force surveys meant that some types of work were undercounted. Women tend to be concentrated in certain types of work. Men are more likely to be employers or self-employed and women are more likely to be employees or perform unpaid work in a family business. Women with no children have higher economic activity rates. As the number of children increases, economic activity generally drops, especially for women with four or more children. Highly male-dominated occupations are craft and related trade workers, plant and machine operators and assemblers, and the armed forces while employed women are mainly concentrated in the services sector (as opposed to agriculture and industry) where they hold a 42% share of these jobs. According to the 2011 Census the reasons given for not being in employment or unemployed differ widely between women and men. Most women (49%) outside the labour force are occupied as housekeepers, confirming the role of the woman as full-time caregiver remains relevant for many families. The most common reason given by men for not participating in the labour force was being a student (32% of inactive men), followed closely by believing there is no work available (28%).

Referring to the same INSTAT data there are more than 60,000 single parent families in Albania, representing around 8 per cent of all families in Albania. Single parents may be separated from their spouse at the time of the census, either temporarily (e.g. migration for economic purposes), or permanently. This would include parents who are still married, separated, divorced or widowed. According to same statistical data up to 7 percent of households in Albania are single mothers households.

Studies and empirical data on the economic position of women in BiH are scarce (Bašić and Mikovic, 2012), with single mothers being particularly understudied in BiH, Montenegro and Serbia (Blagojević, 2012). Up to 15 percent of all households in BiH are single parents households, among which the percentage of single mothers' households ranges from 70-85 (Blagojević, 2012:220). Statistical data on single parents are "rare or based on surveys which have methodological limitations" because parents are not officially recognized as a separate category (Blagojević, 2012:227). Institutions dealing with social issues, such as centers for social work,

typically collect insufficient information which is part of the reason why the category of “single parent” does not exist in the official documents. Furthermore, very few studies deal with the issue of single mothers in the labour market exclusively, while some cover it only as a part of other socially excluded categories such as the unemployed, disabled people, refugees and displaced persons, young people, etc.

The findings from our qualitative study, presented in the following sections, contribute to the existing body of literature by providing additional insights into the perceptions of single mothers about Albania and BiH labour market.

## **Methodology**

The study was conducted following the same qualitative methodology in Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). The specific methods to fulfill the purpose of the study were respectively three focus groups with single mothers and 5 interviews with key informants. In-depth interviews were carried out with experts in the field of women’s rights, GO representatives in field of social welfare and policy-makers directly involved in issues related to single mothers’ status. To obtain data from diverse groups of participants in terms of regional and individual characteristics, participants have been selected with respect to age, educational and working varieties in distribution. Each focus group was conducted in urban and sub-urban area in order to ensure both urban and rural representation. All focus group and expert interviews were recorded and transcribed.

This study refers to the legal definition of a single mother as a mother who raises children separate from their father, and either widowed, divorced, never married, separated or in the process of divorce.

The purpose of the study was to determine how women – single mothers in particular - perceive their employment prospects, to identify the key obstacles they confront when attempting to enter the labour market, how the existing legal and institutional mechanisms add to or alleviate their entering in the labour market. A brief overview of the findings is presented below.

## **I.**

As we have mentioned previously, the problems that women confront when attempting to enter the labour market are similar throughout the region. Despite some improvements over the recent years, women in all societies involved in this comparative study are still very vulnerable. Many families, in particular in sub-urban and rural areas, continue to be traditional and persist in maintaining the stereotypical gender roles where men are the main ‘bread winners’, while women have to do the housework and care for their

children and the elderly. As a result, many women are expected to self-sacrifice for family obligations, and often remain excluded from the labour market. Also, according to the traditional perceptions of society certain jobs or professions are more suited for men, such as managerial positions or jobs that require physical strength.

Many participants in the study report that women cannot compete with similar men who advance much faster in their careers. Women tend to be chiefly employed in sectors such as healthcare, education and service industry. They are also often employed either as manual or seasonal workers. The majority of women from rural areas are involved in unpaid agriculture work on family farms with little odds of finding other paid jobs in the future.

The findings show that single motherhood are followed by similar problems in the both countries. Single mothers feel that their first and most important role is that of a mother, while other social roles are of secondary importance. Having this in mind, the crucial factor that determines whether a single mother will enter the labour market is the quality of childcare that have access to. Single mothers who cannot afford proper childcare or have no family network to rely on, usually stay out of the labour market. For example, some of the interviewed mothers got jobs only because they managed to persuade employers that someone else would care for their children. Many participants have reported that the existing childcare and elderly care social services are inadequate and inaccessible. Hence, they have to stay at home to care for children and elderly. Unless they receive financial assistance from their family, the majority of unemployed single mothers find organized childcare too expensive and choose to care for their children by themselves. Even when employed, women cannot work flexible hours unless they have resolved childcare issue. Consequently, single mothers remain outside the labour market and often feel they cannot connect with the society around them.

An important economic obstacle related to single mothers' labour participation is *maternity leave*. Many employers, mainly in the private sector, are very reluctant to employ pregnant women or women planning pregnancy. Pregnant women are less likely to be employed and they are at a greater risk of being laid off after reporting pregnancy to their employers. Although all countries have adopted laws that guarantee maternity leave, many employers easily circumvent the existing legal mechanisms under the excuse of austerity measures, lay-off women immediately or after the legal deadline lapses. This is particularly obvious in informal sector where women receive no social benefits and have no place to report employers for similar misconducts. Reports from both countries involved in this study indicate that employers rarely, if ever, get charged for conducting such discriminatory practices. Single mothers find it rather difficult to re-enter the labour market

after giving birth, both because they become less competitive but also because of low labour demand. A number of women who re-enter the labour market often get lower paid jobs and lower hierarchical positions within their companies. Some of women who fail to return to their previous jobs either stay unemployed or find jobs in the grey economy.

All the single mothers participating in the focus group discussions express the same opinion of facing additional difficulties raising alone their children because of the irregular working hours, inflexible and nearly impossible working schedules, taking the children to the kindergarten/school, especially at an early age.

*Unemployment* is one of the biggest problems for single mothers. In some cases single mothers' unemployment is due to unresolved childcare issue and other reasons such as age, poor education and lack of professional experience. Having a formal job, as opposed to working in the grey economy, is very important to the majority of surveyed single mothers. Formal jobs provide health insurance, social care and more secure income. Among the formal jobs, most participants prefer jobs in institutions or state-owned companies that offer more flexibility to employees, guaranteed insurance and vacations. On the other hand, private sector offers a broader scope of available jobs.

Single mothers in Albania stated that their income is limited and insufficient to meet the basic needs of their families. Their main source of income is from their relatives, especially parents, brothers or other migrant family members or from the immigration of their spouses. Others say they live only on economic aid and their husband's pension; however, these revenues are insufficient to cover the needs of the entire family. Other sources of income include support from NGOs and charity that provide basic food and clothing. Out of the total of 30 single mothers that participated in three different focus groups in Albania, only one was satisfied with her life, and this because she was running her own business.

Another view appears in the head of single-mothers living in the village, when the only possibility of being employed is in agriculture, specifically in the maintenance of their land. According to the National Report for Women Position and Gender Equality in Albania, women in rural areas disproportionately face poverty, a lack of social services and double engagement in agriculture and nonpaid work. They represent 50 percent of labour force in agriculture but most of them do not pay social insurance, being at risk of exclusion from the pension scheme, health and social benefits also. Only 6 percent of women result to be owners or managers (MOLSAEO 2011, p. 84). Women in focus groups report that in the cases when the family owns more land than they can work by themselves, usually they prefer to hire women rather than man. The government does not offer

any concessions to single mothers regarding health insurance, nor has any special program for this category. Women in the focus groups complain about the medications that are subject to the reimbursement of health insurance for the poor quality or because some time they have expired dates. Women ask the reimbursement for expensive medicines and better quality too. Children up to 14 years old do obtain free textbooks, but together this support is still not enough to meet the complex needs of these families and children for a decent standard of living.

*Child employment*, mostly in seasonal work has been another source of income for their families. Among the women included in the study there are those who work in the private sector, but they also claim that their salary is small and not enough to survive. While for the heads of the rural households the only source of income is selling their own agriculture products, which may only be sufficient for covering their minimum living expenses. Women in focus groups mentioned the difficulties that they face to cover their family expenditures and monthly obligations, and paying bills of electricity, water, telephone or local taxes. A good part of them try to be regular in their payments, but on the other hand this brings them to reduce other household expenses and consequently not to accomplish the minimum requirements of their children.

*Divorced women* are a specific group with specific problems, which recently have increased the number of female heads of households. Referring to the data revealed by the MOLSAEO, there is an increase single mother as a result of the increasing number of divorces and immigration. The number of single mothers treated in Economic Aid scheme in 2010 was 8,785 families while in 2012 it has risen significantly to 12,375 (Open Data / MOLSAEO, 2013).

Having in mind the previous conclusions, it comes as no surprise that there is a widespread belief that the state should provide further institutional assistance to single mothers to enter the labour market. One of the biggest problems reported in both countries is related to post-divorce difficulties and securing alimony. In most cases, women become victims of their divorces because the courts tend to be very biased in favour of their ex-husbands. Divorced women rarely benefit from the rights that entitle them to a share of common property or receiving alimony. If single mothers win the court rulings, they rarely receive alimonies from their ex-husbands who manage to transfer their property to third persons or report to be poor. Many single mothers have reported the cases of women who receive only a fraction of a total alimony sum in irregular intervals.

In Albania there are lots of ex-husbands, which through corruptive practices, avoid their legal and economic responsibilities toward their family and children, leaving them without a house and/or income. There are

reported also cases of judges who get bribed by ex-husbands to prolong the duration of court cases or rule against former-wives contrary to the existing legal framework that protects mothers in such cases. Raising children without this kind of support becomes very difficult if not impossible. These families are more likely to fall in the category of poor families, given also the lack of supporting programs and policies for children.

In the absence of state support, women employ various *strategies to get jobs*. Single mothers are aware that what one knows matters less than who one knows. They believe that personal connections with powerful individuals are in many cases the single most important factor that determines whether one gets a job or not, in particular in the public sector. A number of times, the participants have reported cases of client-patron relationships between influential individuals or groups such as political parties. Whilst comparing the data we have identified almost identical statements from Albania and Bosnia about political party membership and activism as vehicles for getting jobs. Some participants mention the cases of “purchasing” jobs in the public sector, although this kind of practice is very difficult to prove. Those who have no contacts with powerful individuals or cannot afford to bribe officials sometimes deliberately stay in the grey economy so as to ensure social and health insurance through the state-owned employment agencies.

Regarding the role of state-owned employment agencies, officially, their mission in both countries included in this report is to match employers and unemployed. Unfortunately, they fail to do this on a regular basis. The participants report that the state-owned employment agencies primarily deal with registering unemployed people for the purpose of securing basic social and health benefits. Unsurprisingly, there is a widespread lack of trust in such agencies throughout the region. Another related problem is very limited access to information about the labour market demand. Once again, the survey participants have reported similar experiences of relying on personal networks of friends and relatives in finding timely and accurate information about available jobs. The lesser number of participants have reported using other sources of information including the internet or daily papers. Some participants from Bosnia said that publicly available vacancies for the jobs in the public sector are only a “fasade” that is required by employment laws.

On the other hand, in the opinion of the policy-makers in Albania, chances to improve the situation of women's participation in the labor market are numerous, starting with the modernization of employment services and network building on the computerization of employment services. Online system was set and aims specifically labor market transparency and expanding the range of employment services, increasing the speed and quality of their services. In this way it becomes possible for all categories of

the unemployed to use this planning system for job search and CV presented, and each of them can find a better option through this new service and quickly to be aware in time with the most appropriate offers for work and to take advantage of them. This system makes it possible to achieve the ultimate goal of policies aiming the increase of employment for all categories and individuals.

While civil society representative gives a critical assessment of the various options to improve the situation of women's participation in the labor market and the concrete measures that need to be taken.

Some single mothers are clearly informed about these policies. Little and limited information is gained by women who live in remote areas and villages. They have repeatedly contacted the Local Employment Offices, but almost never received replies from them.

Single mothers in villages do not benefit from social assistance programs (NE) or from employment because they obtain land, the production of which is sufficient for most basic and immediate needs. Benefits for head of households, although minimal give to them the chance to stay home and take care of their children rather than be employed in unskilled jobs where wages are very low anyway. Costs of services for children do not justify such low-wage employment they can get, which again entails their choice not to work.

*Restrictive social norms* are a heavy burden to many single mothers around the region, particularly in the sub-urban and rural areas. The present study confirms Blagojević's assertion that many women are subjected to various forms of “stigmatisation, limitations of their social space and communication, social rejection and strong patriarchal control“ (2012:224). In Bosnia, some single mothers contested they encounter sexual references at job interviews only because male employers perceive single mothers as a “window of opportunity” for sexual services. In traditionalistic Balkans' settings, women in general, and particularly single mothers, are not allowed to enjoy some of the benefits from the existing social services including their right to be included in the labour market. Expectedly, many single women feel as social outcasts.

A note of caution is in place here. Although the majority of surveyed women have reported traumatic experiences while attempting to enter, or stay in, the labour market, some women also reported positive experiences. Such women usually exert higher levels of self-confidence as a result of their previous professional experiences; they have had supportive family environments before and have on average higher level of education than the rest of the participants. Thanks to such preconditions, these single mothers have developed various necessary skills, knowledge and social contacts that allow them to remain competitive in the labour market.

## **Conclusion**

The reader should be aware that the level of unemployment in the whole region of the Western Balkans is very high considering the average unemployment rate in the European Union. The majority of all citizens, men and women alike, encounter difficulties in the labour market. Single mothers are no exception.

The single mothers with whom we talked may be split into two groups. First, mothers who exert high levels of self-confidence and second, mothers who feel rejected from society as a whole. The first group usually consists of either highly-educated women or women who recently lost their relatively well-off partners or got divorced. Those women appear to be focused and goal-oriented, and report a wide network of contacts. Single mothers from the latter group often come from low-income families, report traumatic experiences with their former husbands in relation to divorce and/or alimony, and live around the poverty threshold.

Our study confirms that unresolved child care provision holds back a considerable number of single mothers from job seeking. It is a vicious circle: unless there is access to day childcare a single mother cannot find a job, without a job she earns little or no income, and without income she cannot afford childcare. In the case of single mothers who can afford to pay, finding childcare is frequently still difficult because of insufficient number of childcare centers.

A number of single mothers report traumatic experiences with their former husbands in terms of securing alimony. Many participants assert that the court rulings in their favor had no practical effect, since they were not allowed to exercise their right to alimony.

Access to information about vacancy announcements is limited in Albania and BiH. In cases where single mothers apply for jobs, many claim to be exposed to discriminatory practices based on gender, age or their status as single mothers. Various ‘criteria’ for employment including reliance upon political power and influence, or one’s physical appeal and sexual favors that some employers expect in return for jobs. Also, women often get fired once employers learn they have become pregnant or employers present them with contracts that require them not to become or remain pregnant if they are to stay employed.

Our study contributes to our better understanding of the reasons behind the low participation of single mothers in the labour market in Albania and BiH. It shows that these societies reinforces social constructs of women as “producers” of children, and wives who are subordinate to husband’s authority. So as to become active participants in the labour market, single mothers need ‘breathing space’ that can be provided by the

state. The state has to ensure that the existing laws that safeguard women's rights and prevent discrimination are effectively implemented.

Considering the general outlook in our countries, one cannot expect these groups to have a privileged status. This, however, cannot and must not be an excuse for poor institutional treatment of women, above all single mothers. Many of the problems presented above have to do with ineffectiveness of institutions to implement their own rules, and long-standing division of traditional roles in society that either men or women have to play.

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