
Working against the grain: Voices of women from rural areas in Bulgaria

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Women from rural and agricultural areas in Bulgaria are generally in a disadvantaged position. They are faced with big challenges. This paper seeks to revisit some of these issues by listening to the voices of a number of women from rural areas in Bulgaria, in order to make an assessment of the current position of women in the rural labour market and society. The analysis will be based on the data collected from a number of local informants from diverse age-groups and regions of Bulgaria. Possible solutions for the continued emancipation of women and the society in rural areas are considered.

The European Dimension

The rural areas of the EU are particularly affected by population ageing, low population density and, in some countries like Bulgaria, depopulation. Demographic change, emigration and a general decrease in the proportion of women in the population of many rural areas make it more difficult to ensure an adequate local provision of goods and essential everyday services, basic medical treatment and care, pre-school education, schooling and vocational and academic education and further training or adequate cultural and leisure activities. About 42% of the 26.7 million people working regularly in agriculture in the European Union are women and at least one holding in five (around 29%) is managed by a woman. The significant contribution made by women to local and community development is inadequately reflected in their participation in the relevant decision-making processes (European Parliament, 2011).

The Situation in Bulgaria

The role of agriculture in the Bulgarian economy is important. There are approximately 2.9 million people living in rural areas in Bulgaria and approximately half are women. The share of agricultural labour force amounts to 20% and

agricultural production accounts for 16% of the total production. The main employment opportunities for women in rural areas are in agriculture and they work full-time, part-time and seasonally in cooperatives and private farms. Privatisation has posed a lot of problems to small farms.

According to Fidanska (2009) the major problems faced by rural women in Bulgaria include unemployment; declining or low incomes; economic problems generated by social changes; the heavy workload both in the framework of paid employment and at home; lack of free time and inequality in free time when compared to men; low levels of education; and depopulation in rural areas, especially the migration of young rural women.

Abadjieva (2008) claimed that the reform process in Bulgaria following the transition to democracy seriously affected rural areas. The main problems concern the rural population on the one hand, and the rural economy on the other. These issues include a low birth rate, negative natural increase, higher mortality rate, low educational status, higher unemployment rate and long-term unemployment, deteriorating infrastructure, depopulation, especially due to the emigration of young people caused by lack of employment. The high long-term unemployment rate is explained by the lack of employment opportunities in rural areas and the deteriorating quality of the labour force. Entrepreneurs encounter difficulties in finding qualified labour force. The negative impact of urbanisation is multifaceted. In a number of areas, the demographic, economic and social consequences are quite evident. More significant in the border regions (especially the north-west and south-east borders), the depopulation process in villages has led to serious consequences for Bulgaria's economic development. The process of depopulation persists because of the deteriorated social and economic conditions.

Rural poverty is generally associated with inequality and poor access to resources, services and markets. In 2017 the unemployment rate in rural areas was 8.8% compared to 4.7% in urban areas (National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria, Statistic Book for 2007). Employment services for rural people are lacking. This puts additional burdens on rural women. Households headed by women are usually very poor.

The interviews

The main aim of the study is to give a voice to women in rural areas in Bulgaria. It was therefore decided to collect ethnographical data through semi-structured interviews with seven women from different rural areas in Bulgaria.

In order to have as wide a representation as possible, the study adopted a purposeful sampling procedure whereby these seven women were selected to represent different age groups, occupations and geographical locations. They were from different regions of Bulgaria - 3 from the North and 4 from the South. The youngest woman interviewed is a 20-year-old university student from a village. The oldest is an 80-year old woman from a small town in a rural community.

Table 1 The profile of the participants

The women who were interviewed have the following profile:

	Occupation	Age in years	Location
1	University student	20	Northern village
2	Mayor	35	Southern village
3	Worker in a small Cultural Centre	38	Southern small town
4	Farmer/Physical Education teacher	40	Northern village
5	Medical doctor	50	Southern village
6	Retired teacher	65	Southern village
7	Retired journalist and poet	80	Northern small town

The ages of the women ranged from 20 to 80 years as shown in Table 1 above. All of them form part of the active civil society in the rural areas and they are in a position to describe accurately the current situation of women in small rural settlements in Bulgaria. Two of the women have graduated from high school, one is currently a student, and four of the women have a university degree: three of them have a master's degree and one has a medical doctorate. All of them consider education as very important. Five of them are married. In the course of the interviews, three of the women reported that their monthly earnings are below the country's minimum wage.

The women were asked about: the difficulties and opportunities they encountered as women living in a rural area; what they would like to change in the development of rural areas to provide women with better career opportunities; and their involvement in regional, national and European initiatives. The women were also asked whether they would advise their children to continue living and working in their home village or town.

Difficulties encountered

With regards to difficulties faced by women living in the rural areas, all of them pointed out that in the villages there are usually no well-paid and permanent job opportunities available. Four of the women observed that when compared to cities, villages have very poor public transport systems. Three women also referred to the lack of a pharmacy and permanent medical services in villages. Four of them indicated that in rural areas, opportunities offering a good quality education for their children are very limited. Two of them said that there are no schools in their villages, so their children have to travel to the city.

The lack of cultural events and entertainment were mentioned by five women. Three women pointed out that the main problems include low-paid jobs, unemployment, depopulation and increased migration to the cities. For the youngest participant, the major problem is the very limited opportunities for her professional development and career progression. One participant who owns a farm referred to the difficult access to European programmes for rural projects as a major problem. She said that being a woman-farmer and living in a village "is a great challenge and a struggle for survival".

One of the women who is a retired teacher mentions the absence of a bookstore among the difficulties of village life. In order to procure books and textbooks they have to travel to neighbouring cities. Another concern is that there is no museum to preserve the rich past of the village and the unique local traditions and customs.

"I love my village and I am trying to work for it to survive and to revive. Here are my roots, my identity, my world..."

(Retired teacher from a Southern village)

Opportunities

When asked about the opportunities for women living in a village or a small town, all the seven respondents replied that these are very limited. Four of the women responded that the clean air and the good food produced in the home gardens are some of the advantages. Two women pointed out the less stressful life, when compared to cities, and also the opportunities for some tourist activities.

Changes for better opportunities

The question about things to change in rural areas to provide women with better career opportunities was the most popular. Each woman put forward some suggestions aimed at improving the situation in villages and small towns.

Two of the women referred to the need for new regional programmes for small settlements. Five women responded that more European projects involving women from the rural areas are needed. The mayor of a southern village proposed the creation of a new European programme to finance activities which strengthen the social and economic fabric of rural communities. She pointed out that currently, according to the criteria of the European programme for rural development, cities that are municipal centres receive most of the funding, and there is hardly anything left for villages. Four women put forward the need to attract new investments in villages and the creation of new job opportunities. The young university student advocated modernisation through increased digitalisation of the villages.

"We live at a time of modernisation. I would like digitalisation to also reach my village."

(University Student from a northern village)

Other recommendations were related to the restoration of schools in all villages and lower tax incentives for companies that open branches in rural areas. Three women emphasised the need to revive traditions and promote rural and alternative tourism such as those pertaining to cultural and historical heritage, ethnography and traditional music, crafts and cuisine. One woman proposed the national authority and European programme financing of local initiatives and regional festivals that depict the authentic spirit of each village to attract more tourists. Five women asked for more investment in rural road infrastructure. One woman appealed for the reduction of bureaucracy in the process of applying for European projects. Another participant proposed the setting up of a special fund to provide financial credits for initiatives by young people in the villages and the small towns.

"I would like to recommend the people who lead Bulgaria and Europe to support the revival of the villages because I believe they have a big potential for development."

(Medical doctor from a Southern village)

Participation in regional, national and European initiatives

Six of the women had participated in some regional initiatives and training programmes. One woman had not participated in any way. Two had participated in training programmes specifically intended for women from the rural areas. One woman is involved in a cultural exchange programme involving several European countries.

Advice to their offspring

The last question of the interview was about whether they would recommend their children and relatives to continue living and working in their village. Four women would recommend this only if the infrastructure was improved and there were increased opportunities for employment in their villages in the near future. One woman would like her children to have a better life in the city. Another woman felt that life in a village is extremely difficult and she wants her children to be successful in a big city or in another country. The youngest woman said that she has plans to move to a bigger city and to live and work there.

Conclusions

Rural women from different age groups have the same understanding of the required changes in rural development policies. This study confirms the results of previous studies stipulating that women feel they occupy a generally disadvantaged position in agriculture and in rural areas in Bulgaria. Despite the significant progress that Bulgaria is making in the development of rural areas, and especially in involving women as an active force in the labour market, a number of critical issues still persist. The women identified low labour costs, the lack of permanent jobs, depopulation, underdeveloped infrastructure and the limited opportunities for health care and a good quality education in villages as major problems. The difficult access to European programmes for projects in villages is another persisting problem. There is still a lack of cultural and entertainment activities such as theatre performances and concerts. The women interview put forward proposals such as investment and new employment opportunities to improve the position of women in rural areas. They also referred to the need for a specific European programme to finance exclusively developmental activities in the villages.

The younger women paid more attention to the limited education and career opportunities. The older women tended to focus more on the need for better infrastructure, the preservation of rural traditions and the revival and promotion of local initiatives. These women are aware of the limited opportunities available in villages and would therefore like their children to have better life and career prospects in the cities.

They believe that rural development policies at national and European levels are not sufficiently effective. For them, access to financial resources remains very limited. They see huge potential in the development of alternative activities in villages, including rural tourism and the revival of traditional festivals and initiatives.

Women aspire for better and stronger rural communities as they recognise that the condition of women can only improve through better conditions for their whole society. They aspire for sustainable development with tangible results.

Europe is moving at several speeds. Rural areas are still lagging behind cities in terms of earnings, career opportunities and infrastructure. At the same time, they have huge development potential as an alternative to living under stress, and suffering pollution and traffic in the city. Active women in villages can be the engine for the revival of the rural areas.

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