

Girls Face Pressure to Stop "Wasting Time" in School

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The advent of political freedom in Kosovo has not freed women from the widespread notion that serious education is men's business.

In the family home in Peja, western Kosovo, 23-year-old Afërdita Gruda and her older sister Merita spend most of their day at home, doing the odd bit of housework, watching television and flipping through *Kosovarja*, a popular gossipy magazine.

Neither has much chance now of a career, after quitting school on reaching the end of the elementary level. Both abandoned study under family pressure. "My grandmother insisted we leave," Afërdita said. "She said there was nothing for us to learn there."

The sisters' "choice" - such as it was - is all too typical in a society still governed by most Albanian's conservative moral code, which tells women their role in life is to perform household chores and not "waste" time on education.

The result is that after decades of campaigns to improve schooling for both sexes in Kosovo, there is still no equality between the education of men and women.

According to Hazbije Krasniqi, of the Womens' Democratic Forum, an NGO covering women's rights based in Peja, western Kosovo, illiteracy among women remained high well into the 1990s in remote rural areas such as Zahaq, a village 7 kilometres east of Peja.

"We found that almost 90 per cent of the women, young as well as old, had not spent one day in school in their lives," Krasniqi said.

Under the Serbian regime, Albanians were too preoccupied with surviving Milosevic's repression to give much attention to the matter. But after the political earthquake of 1999, the Womens' Democratic Forum started a rural projects in areas like Zahaq, including courses in reading and writing.

Five years on, however, there remains a mountain to climb. Statistics show women are far less privileged than men when it comes to education and according to the Statistical Office of Kosovo, SOK, only about half Albanian girls aged 15-18 attend school at all.

That alarming figure dovetails with joint findings produced by the Institute for Development Research, Riinvest, a not-for-profit research body based in the capital, Prishtina, and the World Bank.

Published on March 31, 2004, this research said only half Kosovo's women aged 25 to 64 had received even a basic primary education.

By way of contrast, the percentage of girls pursuing higher education in advanced European societies, such as Sweden and Finland, exceeds 90 per cent.

Hava Balaj, head of the adult learning section in the Ministry of Education and Technology, says female illiteracy in Kosovo has actually worsened since the 1990s.

“The number of illiterate women and girls increased during the 1990s and continued to do so [even] after the end of the NATO bombings,” he said.

The causes of this phenomenon are many, ranging from poverty and conservative attitudes to such banal factors as lack of transport.

A study in 2001, conducted by Kosovo’s education ministry and the UN Development Fund for Women, UNIFEM, said many of the factors that contribute to a high “drop-out” level in school-age girls in other countries are present in Kosovo.

“The reluctance of parents to send girls to distant schools, a lack of women teachers and lack of financial resources”, were among the leading causes that the report listed.

Hava Balaj, from the ministry of education, says that in rural communities, when families choose between educating a daughter and a son, the son always comes first.

“They believe that investing in a son is good value, since he is more likely to support the whole family with his education when he grows up,” Balaj said.

Balaj added that girls dropped out of higher education in large numbers in the 1990s after the Serbian authorities effectively expelled Albanian students from formal schooling from 1991 onwards. Poverty was another factor.

Although Albanians set up their own parallel structures to counter state discrimination, their improvised high schools were mostly located in private houses, relatively far from transport links. This was more inconvenient for women students than for men.

Since the advent of the UN-led administration in July 1999, new factors have come to the surface, such as the lack of public transport from villages to schools. This also affects women more than men. “Women need public transport because they cannot walk long distances for safety reasons,” said Balaj.

There is also a persistent shortage of staff. Marta Prenkpalaj, head of Motrat Qiriazhi, a local NGO combating illiteracy in the Prizren region of south-west Kosovo, says the shortage of teachers in rural areas means teachers either have to come in from urban areas, or schools have to close.

Prenkpalaj is highly critical of the closure of village schools. “It is easier for ten teachers to travel to rural parts than for 300 students to travel a long way to high schools in town centres,” he said.

But the problem of women’s education in Kosovo is not all to do with money. Kosovar society is conservative and girls face pressure to marry early, ruling out any chance of higher education. Motrat Qiriazhi says the average marrying age for girls in villages around Prizren is around 18 or 20.

Those who go on to higher education, and pass this all-important threshold face the prospect of remaining

single for ever.

“Most women in the older generation who finished higher education never married,” said Sanije Vocaj, of Motrat Qiriaz, in Mitrovica. Unsurprisingly, many girls feel discouraged by this and leave school early.

In Afërdita’s family in Peja, three of her five brothers have gone on to high school, while she and her sister dropped out.

She hopes that some or all of her brothers will go to university. “I tell them everyday that they should study hard because school is important,” Aferdita added, wistfully.

“When you are educated you can get a good job, have your own money and be independent.”

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