

Women Across Ethnic Divide Angered by Lowly Status

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Both Serb and Albanian woman are starting to resist the idea that they're destined to be homemakers.

Ryve Azizi, an ethnic Albanian dentist in Presevo, says women living in this rural area on Serbia's southern border are still very much second-class citizens.

The perception that they are disadvantaged is one of the few that link Albanians and Serbs in an otherwise divided society. "Women here usually have no choices," said Azizi.

Born in Peja, or Pec, in Kosovo, she was one of the first women to graduate in dentistry in the University of Pristina. But when she and her husband applied for jobs at the Presevo health centre, it was her husband who got the post.

Health centre officials told her they did not want a woman in the job, in case she got pregnant and disappeared on maternity leave.

Azizi would not accept no, so after talking to her husband and the health centre management, she persuaded them to let her take the position her husband was offered.

"Women work now in many different fields, especially in education and health," she said, "but not enough - and their voice is often not heard. They are very rarely involved in decision-making, either at work or at home."

Though better off than their Albanian counterparts in terms of jobs, Serbian women in the Presevo valley also feel disadvantaged.

"Young women in villages don't see any future for themselves because of the backward mentality of our society," said Suzana Stojkovic, the Serbian manager of the DIV tobacco factory in Presevo and a political activist in the Democratic Alternative Party. "Marriage is the only way out."

But if both Serb and Albanian women in south Serbia have historically viewed marriage as their only option in life, there are signs this is beginning to change.

Some are becoming more assertive, Stojkovic believes, and are demanding the right to join "men-only" professions.

Take Ferdane Mehmeti who raised eyebrows when she became a driving instructor. "I was the first woman in this profession in the area," she says proudly, "but I was welcomed, especially by women."

Mehmeti first thought of becoming a driving instructor while working at a local shoe factory.

Most workers there were women who had a hard time reaching the factory on the edge of town. She

learned how to drive and, while giving lifts to friends, realised more women needed driving licenses so they could drive themselves to work.

Havce Hasani, a history professor, is another local high achiever who refused to be put off by the fact that few Albanian women from Presevo had progressed to higher education.

“As only few women attended university, I was seen with a critical eye by people around me,” Hasani recalled. “But I worked hard and proved that women can graduate just like them.”

Hasani was also the first Albanian woman to take an active part in local politics, after joining the Party for Democratic Action.

“I always thought a country cannot develop if its women are not free, independent and emancipated,” Hasani added. “But for this to happen, men also need to be emancipated and help women engage more fully in every field of society.”

Although women in Presevo are more assertive than a few years ago, and both women and men seem to have realised women can and should do more in society, the region’s severe economic problems block more substantial progress.

Local women often cannot afford the higher education that was once free for all. During the communist era, students of both sexes could afford to go to college under government scholarships. Now they are difficult to get.

Another obstacle is the chronic lack of local jobs awaiting those women who make the effort to graduate.

Aferdita Ismaili, a mother of two, says women in Presevo still usually end up taking care of the house and the children.

She would like to leave the home, if only there were jobs to get. Paid work would help her family finances and at the same time give her more independence, she said.

“There are not many economic fields that women who have graduated from high schools can get into,” Ismaili added.

When it comes to differences between Serbian and Albanian women, the former are undoubtedly more outgoing. There are still more psychological barriers facing the latter when it comes to fighting for their rights.

That, at any rate, is how it looks to Miona Markovic, from Presevo. “Serbian women are in a slightly better position, even though Serb men here are real Balkan types,” she said.

“At least we can go out with our friends. Albanian girls are in much worse position - they can only go out when they are engaged, with their fiancés.”

In both communities, the battle for equality has a long way to go.

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The package of articles is intended to shed light on the specific problems of this much neglected region.

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