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ATTITUDES, PRIORITIES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR MANAGERIAL DEVELOPMENT OF FEMALE FOREST PROFESSIONALS AND FEMALE FOREST OWNERS IN BULGARIA

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Abstract: The current strategic goals and proposed initiatives regarding the labor force challenges in the forestry sector in Bulgaria are covering the overall development of human capacity without separately focusing on female managerial opportunities and participation in the sector. Researches in the field are indicative of the low level of employment of women with a tendency for becoming even lower during the upcoming years. However, women are an important factor in the labor market of the current modern society. The main goal of the paper is to study the attractiveness of forestry in Bulgaria by outlining the attitudes, priorities, and opportunities of women (1) to develop in their careers at the public and private forestry sectors and (2) to manage their forests as an alternative form for entrepreneurial development and increasing the competitiveness of the sector. Primary data is presented from the Fem4Forest project with information from in-depth interviews among the target groups, a round table with stakeholders and decision-makers, and results from online questionnaires.

Keywords: Female forest professionals, female forest owners, questionnaire, round table, in-deep interviews

1. INTRODUCTION

The main challenge for the development of the forestry sector in Bulgaria is the loss of competitiveness, leading to some negative consequences such as slowing down the economic growth and inefficient use of timber in the country (Chobanova, 2016, p.61). According to the strategic goals and priorities of the European Union (EU), the achievement of inclusive economic growth should be based on increasing the level of employment of women, as well as by raising the qualification of the workforce in the EU Member States. Greater gender equality can improve competitiveness and economic productivity, which is a prerequisite for achieving greater economic growth (Cuberes and Teignier, 2011; Revenga and Shetty, 2012, p. 40-43). Active participation of female in the labor market is seen as a factor counteracting the negative consequences of the declining working-age population (Labour force participation of women, 2015, p.3). In 2019, less than 1/5 of those employed in the "forestry and forest-based industry" in Bulgaria are women. Female participation in the forest labor market can be influenced by financial, social, and legislative factors (Georgieva and Chobanova, 2017; Georgieva, 2017), and to whether women are employed in the public or private forest sector, or own and manage

a forest (Georgieva et al., 2021). However, there is a small number of female employees in the forest sector in the EU Member States in the Danube region. The measures currently taken to motivate their participation don't yield significant results because they are mainly focused on training, which, however, does not reflect the real reasons for the lack of interest of women to be employed in the sector (Georgieva, 2021). Compared to the forest industry, forestry is not attractive to female and this must be taken into account when determining the impact of employment on labor productivity and the competitiveness of the sector. The **main goal** of the paper is to study the attractiveness of forestry as an opportunity for career development for women. An additional goal is to outline the attitudes, priorities, and opportunities of women to manage their forests, as an alternative form of entrepreneurial development and to increase the competitiveness of the sector. **The object of the study** is women employed in the public and private forest sector, as well as those who own a forest in Bulgaria. **The adopted research methods** are logical, deductive, and comparative methods. Data from in-depth interviews among the target groups, a round table with stakeholders and decision-makers, and results from online questionnaires are presented. They are compared to data from 10 countries (Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Germany (Bavaria), Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Ukraine) in the Danube region as primary results of the Fem4Forest project.

2. ONLINE SURVEY RESULTS

To determine the needs of women in forestry in Bulgaria, an online survey was conducted using The Lime Survey tool. The survey was carried out during 22 March – 15 April 2021 based on snowball sampling. The target groups are female forest professionals and female forest owners. The questionnaire has 5 main sections, 3 of which contain the same type of questions for the two target groups. The other two sections contain specific questions for outlining the respondents' views regarding 1. Forest management and ownership and 2. The professional perspectives for the career development of forestry workers. A limitation of the study is the small sample size of n=45, which is reason to argue that the study is not representative. However, it creates further insights into the situation and position of women in forestry. From a socio-demographic point of view around 82% of the respondents live in cities while 18% - in villages. Around 42% are in the age group between 42 and 56 years old, while 34% are over 56 years of age. 20% indicate that they own a forest, while the rest are employed in forestry. The majority (44.44%) of the respondents state that women's participation in forestry is not satisfactory. For almost 58%, forestry (and even the forest sector as a whole) is male-dominated, and for 64% of respondents, forest management is often left to male, regardless of who is the owner. All women respondents who own a forest agree that it is not their main source of income, as they have acquired it as an inheritance from their relatives. However, they have a contract with a forest entity for timber harvesting, which they plan to continue as a way of managing their forests. Only 1/3 of the female plan some nature preservation activities. In terms

of effective and efficient forest management, 22% of the forest owners would resort to training and specialized literature, while 33% rely on male relatives to make decisions about their forest. It is noteworthy that no woman who owns a forest uses social media, NGOs, and industry organizations to help them in making managerial decisions. 33% point out that there is gender discrimination against women who own forests. Female professionals are motivated to work in the forest sector. They find their work meaningful and enjoy being in the forest. In this respect, for 22% of the women working in forestry who filled in the questionnaires, the main motive for choosing such a career development is the fact that the work is interesting and diverse, while for 14% - because they like to be in the forest. For 11% this is a stable job, and 8% see working in the forest administration as a meaningful position. The lowest percentage of respondents believe that the combination of professional and personal commitments (6%), as well as the fact that they feel happy at work (3%), motivate them to work in forestry. Only 6% of the surveyed women state that in their work there is specialized training, sexually targeted to female. For 31%, women and men are not treated equally in their work environment. In a comparative aspect with the results, from the other countries - object of analysis in the project (n=835, without the results from Bulgaria), no significant differences are reported. However, it seems that almost every fifth female forest owner in the whole project survey lives from her forest in terms of harvesting. It represents more than 50% of their income. Such a trend has not been reported in Bulgaria. It is also noteworthy that the age of the respondents from Bulgaria is higher than in the other Danube countries. The Bulgarian respondents do not turn to non-governmental organizations, the state, or experts when making decisions for effective forest management while the data for the other surveyed countries show that female forest owners (46,5%) seek support from people to help them with manual labor and government funding. Information, know-how (training, literature) (49,2%), forest contractors (30,8%), and experts (25,4%) are needed as well when managing a forest. The above can't be considered as a prerequisite to claim that professional development in forestry is unattractive to young women in Bulgaria, but is indicative of their perspective of female in forestry.

3. RESULTS OF IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS WITH WOMEN FROM FORESTRY IN BULGARIA

The in-depth interviews were conducted during the period 30.04.-30.06.2021, aiming to gain in-depth insights about female forest ownership and career paths of women in the forest sector. Twelve women were interviewed, 6 of which are forest owners and the rest are forest professionals. All interviewees who own a forest have acquired it as an inheritance from their relatives, and the size of their forests is between 10 and 20 ha. None of them uses their forest for tourism, picking herbs and fruits, research, or training. A significant limitation of the study is that among the interviewed forest owners, no one works in the sector. For this reason, no comparative analysis can be made regarding the management of forests between women with and without forestry education and experience. The interviewees rarely visit their forests, mainly

because they live in another place, as well as due to their age (between 60 and 80 years). Half of the interviewees have signed a contract with a private entity for timber harvesting, while the rest have left the forest unattended. They, as well as their relatives, are not interested in turning their forest management into a family business. Although the majority share their concern that private companies may deceive and fraud them, they see no other alternative of what to do with their forests. The interviewees did not show interest in participating in specialized training, nor did they turn to experts, non-governmental organizations, and state institutions for advice. They admit willingness to trust neighbors and family members when making decisions for managing the forests. Priority, they rely on the state for nature preservation purposes. In addition, „managing a forest requires teamwork so it is not a job for one woman alone“. Another issue regarding the private forests is that there are many heirs, so people (not only women) sometimes prefer not to waste time on filling papers, arguing with relatives, dealing with private firms, controlling the process of cutting the trees, etc. All female forest professionals who participated in the interviewees agreed that there is a lack of interest by young girls to be engaged in forestry, even though there are many vacant job positions. They attribute this fact to the desire of girls for a high salary, which they cannot receive in forestry. Additionally, fieldwork requires women to travel frequently or to live near the forest. However, women chose forestry as a career precisely because of their desire to be in nature and in the woods. Still, the majority of women choose to work in the state forest administration. The main reasons stated by the interviewees are: (1) the administrative work in state forest institutions seems to be more secure, (2) it is easier for women to combine professional and social commitments, especially if they have to take care of a child or a sick relative, (3) some of the forestry duties on the field are more suitable for male. For example for the management of forest roads and control of timber transportation by a forester, internet access is required, which can't be found everywhere in the forest. The forester needs to look for a spot with internet access, which sometimes takes time. This can lead to tensions with the truck drivers and even clashes. In these situations, male foresters instill more respect. In addition, sometimes foresters are being attacked. Even though it is not common, it can negatively affect the motivation of women to work in the field. Despite this, the interviewees state that they are "always ready to replace high heeled shoes with rubber boots". However, there is currently a negative public attitude towards foresters. „Unfortunately, society sees foresters as people who only cut trees, without understanding that trees are cut when needed (for example when sick or old). There is a regulated cut off the trees but because of misunderstanding, people get the impression that foresters are doing something bad to the nature and in this respect, foresters are seen as violating the law“. This additionally has a negative effect on the choice of women to become foresters. Interviewees do not consider the renewal of machinery and other assets (like the use of drones or tablets) as something that will stimulate the participation of women in the sector. Also, they do not believe that digitalization will significantly change the type of the forester's working tasks. The forest professionals do not consider that there is gender discrimination in terms of the remuneration they receive at work, because it is linked to the position they hold, not to their gender. However, the forest sector is

predominantly male-dominated, and more time is needed for female to prove themselves. This leads men to be often hired as decision-makers in the higher levels of management. „It is so because people think that in terms of forestry men are more reliable and have a stronger will“. Still, many women are more active, disciplined, and better professionals than men. Another problem is that „because of fewer people working in the sector employees are required to do multitasks which is stressful“. This can make a woman give up and look for another job. “To be a female forester it requires women deeply to love their job.”

4. ROUND TABLE RESULTS

The round table was held online at the end of March 2021 and the total time duration of it was 2 hours. It was attended by 13 women from the target groups - local public authority, NGOs, higher education and research institutions, SME. A questionnaire was prepared for two main sessions. The first one aimed at identifying if the profession is prestigious, what is the situation of the women working in forestry, and what are their specific needs and interests? The second session aimed at collecting data for gender equality, motivation of women to study forestry, and needed skills and training for women based on their needs. During the round table, all participants express the common vision that forestry is prestigious work and they would recommend this career choice to all their female relatives. They said that all women working in the field love their jobs and work with passion. Still, representatives from the government and an NGO of women in forestry, express the view that Bulgarian forestry is too “conservative” and “closed”. They find it as a way to “preserve” the sector due to harmful media influences referring to cutting trees, corruption, and frauds in forestry. The participants shared many good examples and stories of promoting forestry in the society, which however is not shown by the media, and even some of them are secrets. „There is a need for forestry to be more related to the social life of people from their early stages of life until their death”. Some of the participants shared their fear that the forester as a profession is going to disappear and the current COVID-19 situation is not helping, because the forestry tasks can't be done at the home office. When it comes to maternity leave even though in Bulgaria it's 2 years, the participants don't see it as an obstacle. A forester expresses the view that the main problem is not the fieldwork but the fact that the jobs in the sector are not secure and if a woman loses her job it is very hard for her to find another one. This is one of the reasons women to look for an administrative job even if it is low-paid. The participants think that during the COVID-19 situation the administrative jobs in the sector will be even more attractive for women rather than jobs in the field. A representative from a government institution stated that in such institutions the assets are old and with no possibility to be changed soon. However, she thinks that technological renewal will not attract more women to forestry. The participants agreed that forests in Bulgaria are fragmented which in a way is an issue as well. There are not many private forests. Private forests are primarily hereditary. If there is a woman owner of the forest then she is more likely to rent it out than to manage it. „Currently, young people are more attracted to easy jobs, which

do not require a long period of absence“. However, “forester is not a male or female profession but it is a universal one, which requires love and passion. Still, women are more innovative and open-minded than men”.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The results from the online questionnaire, interview findings, and the feedback collected from the stakeholders and decision-makers during the roundtable, provide an overview of the situation and position of women in forestry in Bulgaria. In this respect, female forest ownership could be seen as a family tradition, given the fact that all interviewed women inherited their forests. This as well is a common conclusion to the survey results from the other Danube countries covered by the project. In Bulgaria main purpose for which the forests are used by the female owners is timber harvesting for sale. Nature conservation purposes and recreation however are not a major priority for the interviewee when it comes to taking actual actions for achieving it. On the contrary, closeness to nature and achieving resilient forests are major motivations in forest management as it is concluded from all the project survey results from the other countries. In Bulgaria, however, female forest owners rarely spend time in their forests and they rely on private companies to take care for the woods. The overall project results show that women are aware of the many things that need to be done to actively manage forests and feel comfortable doing so, but face physical limitations. Even though female forest owners in Bulgaria do not feel secure signing contracts with private forest entities, when making decisions they ask advices from relatives and neighbors, but not from government institutions, NGO's and forestry experts. Unfortunately, Bulgarian data show that the interviewees do not have the needed knowledge to manage their forests and they are not willing to participate in any courses to gain it. It is so because of their age and the fact that they and their families do not see the benefits of forest management. In terms of female forest professionals, the Bulgarian results confirm the overall project data that women are intrinsically motivated to work in the forestry sector - but not because it offers attractive and well-paid careers. The main motives are their love for forestry and the fact that they find their job interesting and meaningful. However, the majority prefer and work at the government administration. This data confirms the information from the other countries under the project scope. Maternity leaves and social life responsibilities are not seen as a barrier to the Bulgarian female forest professionals, however, they state that it is a male-dominated sector and women must work harder to be recognized as experts. They think that there is gender equality in terms of payment because it is related to the job position. However, when it comes to high-level positions men are primarily hired. The collected and analyzed data confirms that female professionals are highly engaged, well educated, committed, organized, and meticulous when working in and for forests/forestry. Demotivating for the female is the negative social and media view of foresters. Because of that, the beauty

of forestry is not sufficiently represented among the public and stakeholders, and the majority of women struggle with roles and stereotypes.

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