

The importance of women's economic empowerment – a report from Slovenia

Within the European Union, but also on the international level we may take pride in the many conventions, declarations and charters that subscribe to the goals of equality, development and peace for both men and especially for women. Yet, the history of equal treatment of men and women is a short one. It was only after 1975 that EU law introduced parity between both sexes as a European civil right. With the signing of the constitutional treaty of the EU, the charter of fundamental rights, it has however been fully incorporated and, in this sense, the path been set towards women becoming more economically independent. The issue of developing women's entrepreneurship and accompanying support activity is quite as important as the issue of entrepreneurship itself, involving all significant goals associated with fulfilling the Lisbon strategy priorities.

Gender pay gaps, decreasing employment rates within the female labour force, feminisation of specific professions, unemployability of women of a mature age (despite these women being experienced and knowledgeable workers, who may well have the ambition and life experience needed to become successful) – all these are important issues, which have big impact not only on the economic development, but also on the social development and on the quality of life of people, families, children and individuals.

The question is no longer one of why we need women entrepreneurship, but rather of how to develop it. It is we women ourselves who can do most towards achieving sustained economic development and economic independence for women – for example that unemployed women do not become complacent with their destiny; that self-employed women point out the weak points of the system that prevent the smallest and weakest trades from growing and developing; that successful women managers in large corporations do not forget about those women who did not receive equal treatment and have equal opportunities in their own lives; and most of all, that we put our heads together from time to time, find common projects which allow us to learn from each other, look up to each other and thus perpetuate the partnership between the private and public spheres, where the private initiative, knowledge and skills of the individuals of both sexes have their place and value – in entrepreneurship as well! In Slovenia, the first to point out the importance of equal opportunities for women in entrepreneurship were members of the association GIZ PODJETNOST (1991) and jointly later the Institute for the Development of Family and Women's Entrepreneurship M.E.T.A. (2001). Not remaining content with mere discussion of this issue, they wanted to become involved in the measures to be taken. They were successful in many activities and are proud to show the fruits of their labour to others.

The Professional Establishment of Women Program

In 1999, the Slovenian government adopted the "employment action program for the years 2000–2001", which is based on the employment policies of EU member states. The program, Professional Establishment of Women, was also implemented in the years 2003 and 2004. The key administrative role in implementing its goals was played by the Small Business Development Center. The Meta Institute is in charge of the promotional activities within the network. The women's entrepreneurship promotion network involves women



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promoters from various regions of Slovenia, women mentors, associations of women entrepreneurs and selected experts from various organizations. The program is devoted to creating a stimulative environment geared towards the professional establishment of women based on their specific needs and opportunities for the improvement of their economic status, as well as to ensuring their equal status in society as a whole. The Professional Establishment of Women Program is a relatively extensive national program intended mainly for the female population. Its name dates back to the year 1999, given by our women's program initiative group, because we wanted to avoid the definition of "women's entrepreneurship". The reason is that the terms entrepreneurship, entrepreneur, enterprise, still, after all these years of independence, have a negative connotation, a fact corroborated by analysts through their studies (Rebernik, GEM 2002, 2003, Pšeničny and Glas, Podjetniški observatorij (Entrepreneurial Observatory).

As a term, "Professional Establishment of Women" communicates to the public that it is:

- *about women in general*
- *about professions involving women*
- *about establishment, i.e. the establishment of women in a given profession, establishment of equal opportunities in all fields, but most importantly on the labour market*
- *and about establishment of women in the economic sense.*
- *It is therefore also about drawing attention to discrimination and the prevention of discrimination which, in this case, is mainly faced by women: women in the labour market, women in business, women in the education process...*

Despite the fact that it is sometimes referred to as women's entrepreneurship, the general perception and notion of this activity is related to sole proprietorship (so-called s.p.), and this is the reason that the majority of the population ask themselves why indeed should entrepreneurship, and women's entrepreneurship at that, receive such special social treatment? The Professional Establishment of Women program is a comprehensive social program and its actions are primarily social actions, not simply actions which would promote economic growth alone. We are also involved in looking at part time employment and at those women, who find themselves in the pitfall of unemployment

The other goals of the program Professional Establishment of Women include:

- *Opening up new employment opportunities for women and initiating alternative employment and self-employment options*
- *Systematic support and help for various groups of women towards more rapid professional inclusion*
- *Encouraging professional qualification and additional education to assist in planning a professional career*
- *Empowering the politics of equality between genders, comparable with the programs of other EU member countries*

Target groups are:

- Unemployed women, who call in to the counselling hotline or have seen information at the national employment agencies or in other public places
- Women freelancers (journalists etc.)
- Women start-ups, who are not yet involved in sections, associations or other clubs
- Employed women, unsatisfied with their profession or current employment

We would especially like to highlight the great success accomplished through the toll-free counselling hotline, the increasing number of visits to the independent web portal www.podjetnost.org with all its subheadings, where individuals can seek advice, guidance and answers to questions frequently received by the hotline counselling service. The ever-growing number of questions addressed to the toll-free counselling hotline confirms the experience that people prefer to seek initial advice from an anonymous phone service, where the counsellors can point them in the appropriate direction depending on the issue involved, or invite the caller to a private meeting and counselling session. If the structure of calls is examined with regard to the caller's status, we see that:

- the largest share is of women who are currently employed but either looking for a certain change, or expect that they will have to take matters into their own hands (impending termination of employment, company bankruptcy, etc.) (33 %)
- immediately followed by unemployed women – both women with unemployment status and those without it – seeking employment in one way or another, and looking for advice on how to go about it. These are mostly persons who have lost hope that there are any other ways for them to reach economic independence. (26 %)
- as many as 21 % of callers are looking for general information, frequently calling in some one else's name – this percentage includes the majority of male callers who wish to confirm information that they have received elsewhere and of whose validity they are uncertain.
- Generally, women entrepreneurs and craftswomen with experience in the market tend not to use the counselling hotline service, but they do consult it when they wish to make contacts or participate in a particular activity offered by the Meta Institute (international activities, exhibitions and trade fairs, joint presentations) (14 %).
- A smaller percentage (7 %) of young women, mostly university students, seek advice from the hotline although there is an increasing trend in terms of the absolute number of calls from women (particularly final year university students) who are more actively considering their future after graduation.

This is a growing network which is being joined by women and their family members, it is expanding fast and the seminars, workshops and forums have increasing numbers of participants of both sexes. Currently, many women are familiar with the Professional Establishment of Women Program objectives and regularly attend events in their local neighbourhoods, as they are interested in having a local place to turn to for advice or assistance, or a place where they could meet more frequently. At motivational workshops for unemployed women in the less developed regions of Slovenia, the counsellors identified the issue of individual women's lack of motivation, due on the one hand to long-term unemployment, and on the other to local society's unwillingness to sufficiently support the creation of "self-help" groups which could later develop into forms of cooperatives.

The women entrepreneurs stressed the need to organize various forms of family services. Women who decide to go into entrepreneurship, in spite of everything, are still left with the actual burden of caring for schoolchildren and elderly family members. Time pressure and the great burdens and responsibilities can bear down on the individual so strongly as to wear down their initial enthusiasm for entrepreneurship, their will and their energy. This is why, in order to promote the economic establishment of women and women's entrepreneurship, it is necessary to create women's centres, or family centres, which offer activities for children and offer the option of organizing care for the elderly. This need will become increasingly more obvious, as we witness demographic changes which are afflicting the whole Europe, we are becoming an aging society. The Meta Information Centre attracts a large number of information seekers to its Professional Establishment of Women Program, at the same time including the Slovenian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Slovenian Association of Entrepreneurs, the Chamber of Craft of Slovenia, Section of Women Entrepreneurs, Section of Women Managers, and selected municipalities around Slovenia.

Conclusion

The question "Why develop women's entrepreneurship?", and even what it is, is no longer a valid question in the developed countries of Europe. Nowadays, program developers are asking questions of how to encourage women's entrepreneurship and through what means? In its growth strategy, the Lisbon Declaration pursues a vision of the European economy becoming the most competitive and dynamic in the global economy, based on knowledge, and this brings with it the need for the creation of a supportive environment in which innovative companies, small and medium-sized enterprises in particular, can emerge and prosper. In order to achieve that, we must develop entrepreneurship in all sectors of business. This is not only crucial for the economy, but is also essential for society as a whole, and for promoting the idea of entrepreneurship as a virtue on the part of an individual who seeks to be involved in the company's development and in shaping the living and working conditions there.

This is one of the reasons why we must provide information and counselling for women and offer them the support they need to pursue their goals concerning economic status, vocational orientation, social status and balance in their personal lives. Because this is what it is all about: the power to choose, and the opportunity to devote yourself to your children, your family, and your career, instead of giving one up for the other.

Sources:

The Government Office for equal opportunities, Equal Opportunities Legislation Project documentation of ZAVOD META, from 2000/2004

Smo Slovenke na trgu delovne sile enakopravne, analysis of SBDC, 2002

Actions and Measures Promoting Female Entrepreneurship, ECEDG, 2003