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## NEWS RELEASE

### Equal Opportunities for Men and Women Important for Growth in Emerging Europe and Central Asia

**Istanbul, December 6, 2011** – Achieving gender equality can help support economic development and prosperity in the countries of Emerging Europe and Central Asia, says a new World Bank report, *“Opportunities for Men and Women: Emerging Europe and Central Asia”*, released today in Istanbul. Governments can address gender gaps by facilitating women’s entry into the labor market, adopting educational reforms, and addressing health disparities.

The new report reviews the performance of men and women during the last decade in three spheres: human capital, labor markets, and entrepreneurship, and examines a range of issues pertaining to men’s and women’s economic opportunities.

*“During much of the last century, Emerging Europe and Central Asian countries surpassed those in other regions in establishing the equal treatment of women and men,”* said **Sarosh Sattar, World Bank Senior Economist and the main author of the report.** *“In the past, the governments in the region allocated substantial resources toward health and education of both men and women, provided child care services, and adopted gender-blind labor legislation. But, as our new report shows, the region’s advantage in gender equality has eroded, and the region now looks more similar to the rest of the world. This has happened because the rest of the world is catching up, critical services such as child care have been significantly cut back, and some new gender disparities have emerged in the region.”*

The report finds three areas of gender inequality in the Emerging Europe and Central Asia region:

*First*, there are gender gaps in health and tertiary education in the economies of the region. In health, men are dying too young in some countries, such as Kazakhstan, Russia, and Ukraine. In other countries, such as in the South Caucasus, there are unusually low numbers of girls being born. Up to 16 percent more boys than girls are born in the South Caucasus, an imbalance second only to China and India. In education, relative parity exists among men and women at the primary and secondary level, but gender gaps emerge at the tertiary level with not enough men attending universities. There are also large gender gaps in basic school enrollment rates for minority groups such as Roma children.

*Second*, the structural changes in the economies of the region have opened up economic and employment opportunities for women and reduced some avenues of prosperity for men. The growth of the services sector and the shrinkage of the manufacturing sector have created job opportunities for women while reducing some high paying jobs for men. Despite this, women’s earnings are on average about 20 percent less than those of men, though the gender gap in wages varies significantly across countries in the region.

*Third*, the dramatic demographic changes in the region have different implications for men and women. The region’s population is aging and fewer children are being born, which will result in a shrinking labor force and increasing vulnerability to old age poverty. Between 2009 and 2025, the share of the population above 60 will rise sharply, from 15 to 25 percent of the population, and women will constitute 57 percent of this age group. The challenge is to increase labor participation rates for both men and women, at the same time as protecting women’s ability to have children and provide them with good quality care.

*“While aiming to achieve equal opportunity among men and women, we must not forget that men and women differ,”* said **Sarosh Sattar.** *“Women differ from men in terms of their roles in the private sphere, their greater vulnerability to physical insecurity, longer life spans, and their fertility, among other factors - and these different*

*realities need to be taken into account. We also believe that more effective use of women's human capital and removal of the impediments that women face in contributing to the economy will help countries in their economic growth."*

To address the existing gender disparities and achieve equal economic opportunities for men and women in the region, the report makes the following policy recommendations:

- Women's greater labor force participation is important, especially in the context of growing demographic challenges. Measures are needed to facilitate women's entry into the labor force, such as better child care, more sensible maternity leave policies, and closing the gender gap in retirement age.
- Improving the quality of education and reducing gender imbalances at the secondary and tertiary levels are essential to increase productivity and close existing wage gaps.
- Addressing the pockets of health disparities that remain in individual countries of the region is important. Comprehensive national agendas and delivery of specific programs are needed to reduce maternal mortality rates, increase male life expectancy, and address the imbalance in the sex ratio.

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For more information on "Opportunities for Men and Women: Emerging Europe and Central Asia" report, please visit: <http://go.worldbank.org/YQJACAW5H0>

For more information on the World Bank's work in Emerging Europe and Central Asia, please visit: [www.worldbank.org/eca](http://www.worldbank.org/eca)

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