



Equality on our doorstep

Gender equality at the local level

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Despite the fact that the legal framework in the field of promoting and protecting women’s human rights has been in effect for several years in Bosnia and Herzegovina, discrimination against women in different spheres is still widespread, particularly at the local level, where it should be easy for an individual to exercise his/her rights. There have been efforts to improve the situation through existing mechanisms; however, the top-down approach has not deliver the expected results.

Gender equality refers to equality between women and men with respect to their treatment, opportunities, and economic and social achievements. Equality between women and men refers to the absence of discrimination and the promotion of equal treatment for men and women in and beyond the workplace (Eurofound).

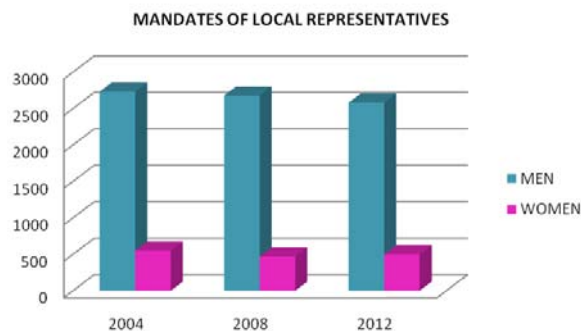
The implementation of the Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) Gender Equality Law (GEL) at the local level is the responsibility of Gender Equality Commissions (GECs) established within the municipal councils/municipal assemblies (MCs/MAs). However, GECs are not very active in this respect. There are few examples of good practices and these almost always lead back to donor assistance. This research consulted international organizations working in this field, relevant CSOs, municipal representatives, entity gender centers as well as significant literature detailing the conditions in BiH and the in the European Union (EU).

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Have local communities already done everything possible within their capacity? Would it be possible to change practices with the given legislative framework? Could BiH apply some existing models in educating the members of Gender Equality Commissions? Do gender centers have enough capacity to educate and facilitate the work of the GECs?

NO MONEY - NO RESULTS

Data on women’s turnout at elections at the municipal level do not exist, however, the available data on the numbers of women elected as representatives at the local level are far below European standards. In 2008, four women were elected mayor, out of 140 (2.85%). In 2012, five women were elected mayor out of 144 (3.47%)



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Looking for the beacon municipal GECs that have been successful in their work and have ac-

complished visible results, the research found that the examples good practices have had some external support. Whether a non-governmental organization (NGO) project, a gender center project or directly financed by a donor (all leading back to foreign donor money), the municipalities that could be considered good examples showed little or no commitment (particularly financial commitment) to the issue.

In Bratunac, for instance, Forum Zena invested great effort in obtaining a Protocol on Gender Equality in the Bratunac municipality. However, the example of the Visegrad municipality shows that when the money stops, the activities stop and there is no ownership or sustainability. In Visegrad, the civil society organization (CSO), Most, was providing technical support to the municipal assembly GEC. After Most shifted the focus of its work, the commission was no longer active.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?

Local representative authorities are not sufficiently familiar with the work of all national, entity and local institutional mechanisms comprising the state apparatus for gender equality (Petric, Idzakovic, Vidovic, Petric, Radovanovic, & Sehic, October 2010). Most local authorities have set up Gender Equality Commissions (GECs), but have not taken any actions to support them in performing their activities or shown any interest in improving the gender equality situation and the quality of life for all citizens. Thus, it is not surprising that the GEC members at the local level have no knowledge of the mission and mandate of the entity and state institutional mechanisms. According to OSCE research, most of the Gender Equality Commissions do not have their own budgets for the implementation of activities. Without adequate resources to carry out their tasks, the commissions risk becoming purely cosmetic bodies producing no real impact in their municipalities. Few commissions require funding for their activities reflecting the lack of commitment and awareness of the importance of these

issues among many members of commissions. Since these Gender Equality Commissions are the first instance where a citizen can address the issue of gender equality at the local level, it is necessary to strengthen the capacities of these commissions and enable them to perform activities within their scope of work. Research showed that the biggest problem in practice is the lack of knowledge and continuity in the membership of the GECs. Every four years the GEC has to work with new members. Members of the council/assembly who have already had some education and who in some way have developed awareness of the importance of the gender equality issue are no longer members of the GEC. In fact, as with all other municipal committees, their appointment is mainly political and very few are paying attention to the real competencies and preferences of persons appointed to the GECs.

WHAT TO DO?

There are three possible options in this regard: retain the **Status Quo**, use **External Assistance as a Generator of Change**, and appoint a **Gender Equality Officer within the Municipal Administration** since the law allows for the establishment of institutional mechanisms for its implementation.

Obviously, maintaining the status quo will bring no improvement in order to achieve EU accession where the requirement is a 40% quota. The second option achieved some results, however, its limitation is that, in practice, the work of the GEC is not sustainable and ceases to be active when international organizations or civil society organizations end their project or change the focus of their work.

Therefore, the obvious choice would be to appoint a **Gender Equality Officer within the Municipal Administration** to deal with gender equality issues, irrespective of an MA/MC GEC. This would address the main concerns regarding gender centers' capacities to train all the GEC members, councilors and administrators and the continuity of their work and

¹ The same way the implementation of the BiH Law on Free Access to Information obliged public institutions, including municipalities, to appoint an Information Officer tasked to respond to inquiries of citizens, there could be a provision in the GEL requiring institutions to appoint a person tasked to implement the GEL and the GAP (perhaps the same person). This person should also be responsible to train councilors/delegates at the beginning of each mandate and be a permanent member of the GEC outside the council.



its sustainability.¹ This would not only ensure knowledge transfer, consistency, and sustainability, but would also make a platform for political cooperation between the MA/MC parties involved and the administrative representative.

HOW TO DO IT?

- Amend the GEL so that it requires the appointment of a person responsible for its implementation – Gender Equality Officer (Sluzbenik/Sluzbenica).
- Have the BiH Gender Equality Agency (GEA) issue a recommendation/decision that all institutions should appoint a gender equality focal point.
- Include the topics of gender (gender equality, gender-based discrimination, gender-based budgeting) in the existing entity curriculums for the training of municipal officials and elected officials.
- Ensure that the GEC members are elected based on competences and experience in the field of human rights and gender equality and ensure continuity of the GEC membership through a Gender Equality Officer.
- Develop and ensure financial support for activities of municipal Gender Action Plans or the plans and programs of the GECs.

WHY DO IT?

The European standards and quota requirements are not the reasons to change and improve gender equality at the local level. The only reason is to improve the status of women in our communities, to give equal opportunities to all women and men and take into consideration the specific needs of women and men in every community.

Appointing an officer would mean having one person who is knowledgeable and motivated to initiate activities, preserve continuance of the

work, sensitize the community, educate and train other officials, NGOs, etc., respond to the inquiries regarding gender equality issues and provide sustainability of the GECs' work. Investing in only one person saves money and makes room to use resources on activities instead of training and education every four years. It would also mean representation of the administration in the MA/MC and thus better cooperation and communication about the needs of the municipality.

Appointing the Gender Equality Officer:

- Easy (just add the gender related tasks to an appropriate position).
- Saves time (no need to train every four years).
- Saves money (no need to waste resources on capacity building, sharing of experiences, etc.).
- Promotes cooperation between the municipal administration and the MA/MC.

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