ACTIVISMS ON THE MARGINS: CAPACITY ASSESSMENT IN TEN SELECTED WOMEN’S ORGANISATIONS

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WOMEN’S AGENDA FOR POSITIVE CHANGES!
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1. Introduction

Various studies indicate that women have accomplished their engagement in the public sphere predominantly via the civil society and the prosaically named ‘third sector’. According to some data, women’s representation in the civil society is in reverse proportion to their representation in the domain of formal politics. This is sometimes interpreted in the context of ethics of care, which interprets engagement in the public domain as an extension of housework, but also the fact that civil society offers more freedom and autonomy than formal politics. In the context of feminism in both theory and practice, the latter is often emphasised and encouraged. Despite this, this aspect should not be idealised, particularly if we consider that the civil society is a provider of services not provided by a dysfunctional state. This is particularly symptomatic when it comes to specific categories of women often labelled as double marginalised, which include women in rural communities, women survivors of violence, Roma women, women with disabilities and mothers of children with special needs, and returnee women.

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1 The term third sector was mainly used in the U.S. in the 1970s, but was later abandoned. Due to lagging behind these developments in the socialist period, in these parts the term remained in use throughout the 1990s. The ‘non-profit nature’ of the third sector is questionable from the perspective of social capital and due to the fact that its activities are productive for the individual, group and the wider community. Smith, Stebbins, Grotz (eds). The Palgrave Handbook of Volunteering, Civic Participation, and Nonprofit Associations. Volume I. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 10

2 Popov Momčinović, Z. Ženski pokret u Bosni i Hercegovini. Artikulacija jedne kontrakulture. Sarajevski otvoreni centar, Centar za empirijska istraživanja religije u Bosni i Hercegovini, Fondacija Cure Sarajevo, 2013, p. 117 (in this book the author provides specific indicators from the relevant research in this field).
work is often framed as humanitarian work, i.e. as ethics of care rather than ‘true’ women’s and ultimately feminist activism, although it often requires two or three times more effort.

What is particularly troubling is the fact that although the civil society is a domain of ‘freedom’ that provides more room for articulation and various conventional and unconventional forms of engagement, it is not free from certain (in)formal hierarchies that favour ‘strong’ organisations at the expense of ‘weaker’ ones, those lacking capacity, etc. This further marginalises these groups even in the domain of the civil society, and this is the research problem, i.e. the specific challenge. For these reasons, the research objective here is not just cognition but also activism. Findings were used not just to collect the necessary data but also to formulate recommendations how to strengthen these groups by learning more about the problems in their field of activity, local context, etc. within the methodological framework of research in action.

Some of the specific problems concerned the terminology, because the civil society is often seen as something in opposition to the state although it actually supports and improves democratic processes through cooperation, which does not reduce the importance of a critical stance towards institutions. When it comes to these special categories of women, a critical perspective is certainly needed. However, this does not imply fault-finding but rather constructive criticism focused on synergies and joint action and compliance with legal obligations in the sphere of gender equality, as well as development and implementation of adequate strategies and Gender Action Plans which should adequately protect these groups of women.

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Other problems concern the lack of data for these specific groups, although some improvements have been noted in the research in this field. In that regard, Foundation CURE initiated several studies and published several important publications about these groups, such as the published studies *Women Who Inspire..., Study of potentials and living conditions of women in small local communities in BiH, My Voice Echoes..., Women in BiH Institutions Puppets of Legal Quotas*. Despite this, some data are still missing, particularly detailed, specific data on women’s organisations acting in this domain and the local specifics or more specifically local gender policies. Namely, in a study conducted by Foundation CURE with the objective to research the implementation of the Law on Gender Equality in all cities and municipalities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, only 35 of them responded to the questionnaire.\(^4\) Although the data are incomplete, this study and others indicate that the lower levels of government, where the everyday drama of human existence takes place “has the highest incidence of human rights violations and discrimination” and that legal mechanisms “are not actually used in practice”.\(^5\) This situation further complicates an already unfavourable framework for women’s organisations and groups focusing, inter alia, on the above categories.

2. Research methodology

Keeping this complexity in mind, this research relied on a *qualitative method* to delve deeper into the methods, problems, challenges of women’s organisations and groups, both formal and informal, in these categories, i.e. those that include these categories of women as members


\(^5\) Edita Miftari, *Ravnopravnost spolova u općinama/opštinama i gradovima u Bosni i Hercegovini*, Fondacija CURE, Sarajevo, 2015, p. 18
and/or beneficiaries. This approach is not intended as a substitute for the quantitative approach. However, considering that the available data are disorganised, particularly in the local context, which can be seen as evidence of non-implementation or partial implementation of the Law on Gender Equality, deeper insights provided by the qualitative method have partially bridged this gap. The qualitative method as such is not sufficient, so for the purposes of verification of collected data we consulted the available official documents and data from the relevant institutions and published research in this field. We also used the content analysis technique for available documents and the methodological approach in this segment was both quantitative and qualitative. Thus, as pointed out in relevant methodological texts, qualitative methods should not be defined as that which quantitative methods are not. Also, qualitative methods are particularly recommended for the so-called feminist research, i.e. research based in the feminist theory as it theoretical and heuristic framework, considering that they avoid the pitfalls of dichotomy between the allegedly neutral subject and the passive ‘object’ of the research.

We used the research technique of **in-depth, semi-structured interviews** lasting one hour on average. The semi-structured form is reflected in the fact that interviews were based on predefined questions, but the interlocutors were free to expand, supplement and even re-formulate them. A potential disadvantage is that we interviewed the presidents of associations and only occasionally some association members. The advantage of this approach is that leaders are often better informed about the research problem than other members. Although it would have been desirable to organise focus groups with members of

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individual associations/groups, this posed a problem because some associations have many members and beneficiaries and in some cases it is difficult to discern members from service users; and there was also the planned duration of the research and the phenomenon of invisible mechanisms of inter-group control that may occur in this type of group interviews. As already stated, we used the available documents and other studies to ensure a kind of ‘verification’ in our interpretation of data, because a frequent criticism of qualitative methods and in-depth interviews is that they may slide into constructivism.8 These problems have been minimised through precise specification of general questions as the focus of the interview and reference to other available data and studies.

Groups of women targeted in this research project exist throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina. They all face certain specific but common problems. One of the specifics is the activity of the given women’s organisation, formal or informal group that targets one of these categories of women. In some communities, some organisations and groups have managed to profile their activities, but this does not mean they are not facing different challenges. They were selected to participate in the research sample on account of their potentials and past results, despite the numerous obstacles they still encounter due to intergroup dynamics and the environment in which they operate. These are women’s organisation from small local communities (Viktorija from Pale, Zvjezdangrad from Vareš, Žena za ženu from Konjic, Udruženje građanki (žena) Grahovo from Bosansko Grahovo), from rural areas (UŽ JADAR from Konjević Polje, UŽ Pašinke from Hajderovići), organisations of Roma women (Romkinja from Bijeljina, Romani Čej from Prnjavor), informal women’s

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groups (Posebne mame from Sarajevo, lobby group in the association Horizonti from Tuzla).

The analysis that follows will describe their common problems and will also highlight some **specifics of their local context** in terms of specific indicators (municipal development index, under-representation of women in politics and lack of statistical data, gender responsive budgeting, lack of infrastructure, education, socio-cultural barriers and multiple marginalisation, domestic violence) and present the **selected findings concerning the work of women’s associations**. The chapter with the selected findings concerning the work of women’s associations represents the central chapter of this analysis. In this section we have profiled the analysed associations and groups and, on the basis of research of the work of these 10 organisations, inductively arrived at insights about the motives of each women’s association, its membership structure, its human, spatial and technical capacities, visibility of the organisation’s work, cooperation with other organisations and local authorities, distribution of duties and administration and management. The analysis resulted in specific recommendations provided in the final section.

### 3. Some specifics of the local context

#### 3.1. Municipal development index

The composition of the sample shows that the research covered eight citizens’ associations and two informal groups from ten municipalities with a varying level of development. Namely, the document “Municipal socio-economic indicators in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2017” presents the main socio-economic development indicators
for municipalities in the FBiH and ranks local communities by the
development level. Assessment of the aggregate development index
for each municipality in the FBiH included the following indicators:
employment rate, unemployment rate, number of primary/secondary
school students per 1000 inhabitants, difference in the number of
inhabitants against 1991 census data, and municipal tax income per capita.\textsuperscript{9}
In the same document, municipalities with development index below
50\% of the average for the FBiH are treated as severely underdeveloped,
while municipalities with the development index between 50\% and
75\% of the FBiH average are treated as underdeveloped.\textsuperscript{10} With regard
to the local communities where the analysed organisations from the
Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina primarily operate, it is important
to highlight some municipal development indicators. With respect to the
development index, the Municipality of Vareš (44.9) and the Municipality
of Bosansko Grahovo (18.7) are considered severely underdeveloped;
the Municipality of Zavidovići (59.3) is considered underdeveloped,
while the index for the Municipality of Konjic was 79.3 and for the
Municipality of Tuzla 118.7. In the Decision on the level of development
of local self-government units for 2018, published in the Official Gazette
in October of 2017, municipalities Pale, Prnjavor and Bijeljina were
designated as developed and Bratunac (which includes Konjević Polje) as
underdeveloped. Therefore, the research, as already stated, covered eight
citizens’ associations and two informal groups from ten municipalities
at different levels of development. We have conducted 11 interviews in
total to gain deeper understanding of the local socio-cultural contexts in
which these organisations operate. It is important to note that the level of
development of the relevant local community, although it may provide a

\textsuperscript{9} \textit{Socioekonomski pokazatelji po općinama u Federaciji Bosne i Hercegovine 2017}, Federalni
3.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., p. 3
more favourable framework for women’s association and engagement, this relationship is not linear, particularly with regard to specific marginalised groups such as parents of children with disabilities. This group faces similar challenges throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina (e.g. problems with categorisation of children’s disability, non-enforcement of inclusion, etc.), but it should be noted that the capital city of BiH offers at least some services such as daily centres and, due to a higher number of children with disabilities (in the quantitative sense, not in the sense of the ratio of such children against the number of children with typical development in the local community), has achieved some progress in terms of social awareness and public support, even if not sufficiently formal.

3.2. Under-representation of women in politics and scarcity of statistical data

The desk research confirmed that women are under-represented in politics in all local communities where these organisations operate, and that reforms of legislation and institutional mechanisms at the local level are seen as formal obligations rather than real and positive social change. As one interviewed activist stated: “The committee did not build up its authority because there are several such committees in the city council and the gender equality committee has the lowest rank. It’s like you have to form them and there they are, and nobody cares about them...” We also confirmed that official statistics are not gender-sensitive and that some statistical data are disaggregated by gender on an ad hoc basis rather than systematically. Responsible institutions at this level of government often state that they lack mechanisms to manage gender-sensitive statistics.11

11 Hrnjić Kuduzović, Zarfa. Rodna ravnopravnost u regijama Tuzla i Livno: Riječi na papiru. In: Ždralović, Amila; Popov Momčinović, Zlatiborka i Hrnjić – Kuduzović, Zarfa. Žene u bh. institucijama:
This is particularly apparent in the local development strategies. In most analysed communities, general information includes the number of men and women and, in some but not all cases, education levels by gender and unemployment rates for women and men. The planned and implemented activities foreseen in the local development strategies are not gender-sensitive, with some exceptions mainly in entrepreneurship segments where women are frequently classified under traditional women’s occupations. Local documents were also written in an overly formal language and this, coupled with the previously noted lack of data, prevents deeper understanding of local gender dynamics. Still, some conclusions could be made based on other indicators and the information received from in-depth interviews with interlocutors who are in contact with women in their local communities.

3.3. Gender (un)responsive budgeting

Research findings also indicate the absence of gender responsive budgeting. This term usually refers to procedures and actions related to planning, development and implementation of budgets that account for specific influences on women and girls. Mere indications of gender responsive budgeting were found in some of the analysed local communities, in allocations for women’s organisations, or even less frequently in allocations for dedicated women’s entrepreneurship projects. Allocations to women’s organisations are often not critically analysed and the data should be interpreted in a broader context, as detailed further in this paper. Here we can provide an illustration, in the example of one interlocutor who was pleased with her local authorities, while also mentioning the fact that municipal football clubs receive more than 50,000 BAM. She also said: “And when I submit ours, I’m missing 250 BAM, they tell me: ‘Ah, women, they have money.’”

Marionete zakonske kvote, Fondacija CURE, Sarajevo, 2018, p. 99
explains that they finally received the money because some people in the Municipal Council stepped in, recognising the importance of this women’s association’s activities for the community, however her perception of the local authorities remains positive and she believes that “they do as much as they can.” To other questions concerning gender responsive budgeting, she replied: “They organise public consultations about the budget; they invite all citizens but we didn’t go, and maybe we should have.” On the other hand, an interlocutor from another organisation said: “We did not receive a single convertible mark from the municipal budget; it’s like: we’ll give you everything, everything goes, but when it comes to specific requests, when it comes to money - well, then there’s none.” Concerning the problems related to the availability and (in)consistency of financing for women’s organisations, activists from the UG Horizonti lobby group emphasised the following: “This is one of the issues that should be raised by the women’s lobby group, financing of women’s associations by the state and the city etc., these are the open issues that need to be addressed and raised soon to prevent closures.”

3.4. Lack of infrastructure

In-depth interviews provided a better understanding of the problems posed by the lack of infrastructure (lighting, absence of roads and difficult access to nearby villages, bus lines, etc.) and some reflections on the lives of women and children in the local community. These problems are particularly important in, for example, the local community of Konjević polje, in Bosansko Grahovo, but also in rural areas of the Municipalities Vareš and Konjic. Undeveloped infrastructure results in difficult access to primary and other healthcare, education, but also impacts some everyday tasks. Women often complain that they cannot go to specialist medical appointments due to the lack of regular bus lines. For women in
this situation the alternative would be to use taxi services, but this is too costly for many women. Therefore any initiatives focused on addressing these issues would be of major importance. For example, as we learned through in-depth interviews, the primary healthcare clinic in Bosansko Grahovo has been closed (only the outpatient department is open, and the general practitioner comes for two hours three times per week; there are no emergency services after hours; nurses work only until 14 h) and there are no specialist medical services. To consult a specialist, the women must go to Livno which is 75 km away and there are no regular bus lines. Infrastructure problems therefore impact their ability to exercise various rights and the ability to form associations. As one interlocutor from a rural area noted: “When we try to get together the problem is that our villages are scattered and lack infrastructural connections.”

The lack of infrastructure often makes education essentially inaccessible to young women from rural areas. Completion of secondary education under these circumstances sometimes depends on the good will of extended family that resides in a nearby town with a secondary school. For example, the desk study and in-depth interviews identified this problem in Glavatičevo, some 30 km from Konjic. University education, not just in Glavatičevo but in some other communities, is basically beyond the girls’ reach. Girls who get an opportunity to go to a larger city to study, not just from Glavatičevo but also from some other communities, do not return to their local community upon completion of studies because their communities do not offer them any perspective for the future. The same problems can be noted in most other local communities that were analysed. The situation in Bosansko Grahovo is highly specific because secondary schools have not been reconstructed and children attend schools elsewhere, mostly in Drvar as the closest town some 35 km away. According to our findings, some students (especially girls) do
not complete their secondary education. One organisation operating in a rural area highlighted the fact that education is problematic for girls coming from large families. In such circumstances the family usually sacrifices to educate the male child.

All these circumstances greatly affect the aspirations of young women and their future lives, even if modest school transport is provided. For example, one association has organised workshops for female high-school students where they discussed what would be best for them and what would keep them in their local community and in BiH in general. When asked about the problems young girls face, the interlocutor responded: “They don’t have friends; they have no one to talk to. Especially village girls. They come to school, there’s just a single bus - it brings them, it takes them away. I remember the words of one girl who said that her life is no different than the life of her mother. [...] There was one girl who said that she is the only one in the village, the only girl, and that this was very hard for her, that she feels bad. [...] The old ones are dying, and the young ones are leaving.”

The only consistency we noted in most interviews was the parallel feelings of pride and disappointment in their community. During interviews they sometimes proudly listed all the advantages of clean air, described the history of their town, talked about all the things their town used to have... And, on the other hand, there is a feeling of disappointment that none of it was rebuilt. One interlocutor said: “Nothing has moved. Our villages are empty. And our souls become empty.”

3.5. Education

In addition to poor access to secondary and university education, we should certainly note that many girls drop out of primary education.
According to 2013 Census data, of the total population older than ten years of age 2.82% was illiterate. Of the total 89,794 illiterate persons, 77,557 (86.37%) were women. In other words, 4.76% of women were illiterate. In her analysis of the problem of illiteracy in BiH, Professor Adila Pašalić Kreso indicated that aggregate illiteracy rates “show relatively minor discrepancies at the level of the state and between entities, but that variations between cantons and municipalities are much greater.”

For example, the illiteracy rate amongst women was 8.68% in the Municipality of Bratunac, 7.28% in Prnjavor, 7.37% in Bosansko Grahovo, 6.58% in Konjic, 4.32% in Bijeljina, 4.12% in Vareš, 3.72% in Tuzla, and 2.58% in the Municipality of Pale (RS).

In terms of formal education of persons older than 15 years of age, the percentage of women without any education or with partially completed primary education was 33.17% in the Municipality of Vareš, 32.52% in Bosansko Grahovo, 30.61% in Prnjavor, 27.44% in Konjic, 24.91% in Bratunac, 21.55% in Bijeljina and 13.87% in Pale (RS). As we learned in the course of this research, women that have not completed primary and secondary education for whatever reason are also faced with the high price of taking primary and high school equivalency exams. Their opportunities in the labour market are substantially limited by their level of education, so it is not accidental that the feminist movement quickly recognised that education and economic independence are important prerequisites for women’s affirmation in the society. Therefore, any initiatives focused on strengthening entrepreneurship skills in women with the objective to empower women to use their skills on the labour market, as well as activities aimed at providing scholarships for children.

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from the local community, should be treated as highly important. Women’s associations do not have the financial resources to provide these scholarships themselves, but activities such as e.g. selling calendars in cooperation with other associations would somewhat contribute to improved quality of life for women and their local communities. Although all these activities are very important, they still represent mere ‘damage control’ on account of the fact that the state has failed to provide access to education, and the facts of life in some local communities prove that education in BiH remains stratified.

3.6. Socio-cultural barriers and multiple marginalisation

Socio-cultural barriers are particularly troublesome in smaller communities and often have a demotivating effect on women activists who are trying to motivate other women in their surroundings to continue to work and act. Patriarchal stereotypes are aptly reproduced, so in two different interviews interlocutors from two different communities emphasised that women in their local community are passive, however their explanations pointed to a common denominator: for many women their marriage and daily routine represent the only safety and security in their lives. Patriarchal discourse imposes clearly defined roles: men must strive to provide at least the existential minimum for their families, while women must take care of housework. For the comfort of this ‘safe’ zone, women will sometimes choose a family life characterised by domestic violence. This model is then adopted by younger women who often, as one interlocutor explained, adopt the attitude of “Let me finish high school so I can get married. And when I get married someone will take care of me. [...] Still, there are girls who went on to university... And then it’s different.”
Divorced women, single mothers, women survivors of violence, elderly women, women who lost their jobs without the right to retirement pensions or social income, women who are ill and do not have health insurance, women with disabilities, Roma women - these are just some of the particularly vulnerable and multiply discriminated women, who were also recognised as such by the women’s organisations included in the research sample. The president of one association serving a fairly heterogeneous group of women noted as a special problem the fact that schools in her local community are not even accessible for persons with disabilities. Some marginalised groups - especially Roma women and mothers of children with disabilities, often point out the importance of a broader discriminatory environment and the social climate - from the right to employment, even in poorly paid jobs when it comes to Roma women (e.g. cleaning jobs which do not require qualifications), to the right to choose one’s values and lifestyle (e.g. in the case of mothers of children with disabilities, the right of the woman to practice her profession, use cosmetics, go to fitness classes, etc.).

General theoretical observations indicate that women’s groups demonstrate more care for other marginalised groups. This research has confirmed those findings. Namely, women’s associations recognise different marginalised groups in their activities. It is interesting to include an example of the association Romani Ćej – Romska djevojka from Prnjavor. The association was founded primarily for the Roma women and intended to operate in Prnjavor. Today this association also works in other municipalities, such as Vukosavlje, with the intent to improve the quality of life of the Roma population. In Prnjavor, the association works with other beneficiaries as well, not just with the Roma population. As we learned through in-depth interviews, when the association offered free legal aid they started to receive inquiries from many beneficiaries, both
men and women, concerning many different matters, and similar examples can be found in the association Romkinja. This is just one example of a women’s association taking on the role of a service provider for all men and women in their local community. In the context of ‘stronger’ organisations, such as the one with the lobby group that was included in the research sample, former beneficiaries tend to come back asking for services (e.g. psychological assistance) although the organisation now focuses on numerous other activities. Still, due to their dedication and many years of experience in working with this category, members of the organisation still provide this service on a voluntary basis.

3.7. Domestic violence

It must be noted that domestic violence remains a problem in all local communities where the research subjects operate. Many women’s associations focus specifically on addressing this problem. The intensity of this type of work varies between associations but it is interesting to note that even just talking about this problem represents the first step towards a solution. However, other institutions must be included to fully address this problem. Insufficient capacities of those institutions and the general attitude were noted as particular concerns. Some activists noted some progress in terms of cooperation with the police, considering that the police operates under strict protocols and with a stable hierarchy (but remarked on problems when reporting domestic violence suffered by Roma women). When it comes to institutions in general, centres for social work were mostly assessed as ineffective, even in cases where some level of cooperation was involved, and since this was confirmed in other studies this aspect requires further improvement. We should add that Bosansko Grahovo is a municipality without a centre for social

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15 Tamara Žarković, Žene koje inspirišu... Istraživanje o mogućnostima i uslovima života žena u malim lokalnim zajednicama u BiH, Fondacija CURE, Sarajevo, 2017, p. 19
work, and that statistical data indicates a growing incidence of domestic violence every year.

4. Selected findings concerning the work of women’s associations

4.1. Association profiles

The average profile of organisations comprising the research sample is that they are relatively new organisations, although there are some differences in terms of the year of registration and reasons for establishment. Some have been active for more than 15 years, while some were registered two years ago. Their activities are quite versatile and include organisation of street actions, public debates and workshops, organisation of bazaars, etc. The following overview is primarily based on in-depth interviews and covers the basic profile of the organisation, number of years active, number and structure of members and the primary focus of each organisation’s activities.

N.V.O. Udruženje građanki (žena) Grahovo was registered in 2000 but started to operate one year earlier, in a severely underdeveloped municipality. According to our research, the association Grahovo continually grew its membership and in 2008 had more than 500 members. Considering that they could not coordinate activities for so many members, the General Assembly of the association decided to reclassify their membership into supporters, permanent members and beneficiaries. Membership numbers grew and fell, and last year the association had 245 members. The association employs five persons and, as we learned through in-depth interviews, it engages short-term experts for specific tasks (e.g. legal expert, psychologist, social worker, as required). We
should keep in mind that this association has been active for 20 years in a severely underdeveloped municipality. What is of particular note is that their activities include infrastructure development. For example, ten years ago the association refurbished and equipped the gynaecology room and engages a gynaecologist as frequently as the association’s funding allows (at least once per year, depending on the available funds); the association also provides free gynaecological check-ups, ultrasound examinations and Papanicolaou tests; the association also operates a children’s centre for children 6-16 years of age. Since the municipality does not have a nursery, mothers/guardians bring their children to the Gnijezdo Children’s Centre where the association works with approx. 40 children from families with multiple difficulties. We were also informed that, as part of programmes for economic empowerment of women in rural areas, the association receives requests for assistance from women who want to start their own business, find a market, advertise their products, etc. These are just some of the problems in this municipality and some of the activities of this association, illustrating that this women’s organisation provides services which the citizens should normally receive from the state.

**UŽ JADAR Konjević Polje** was registered in 2003. The association focuses on several areas such as reconciliation, economic empowerment of women in rural areas - specifically Konjević Polje and surrounding local communities (villages), joint activities for children and youth aimed at countering the ongoing push for ethnic division ‘from above’ which promotes segregation of children and youth. The association has provided psychological support services in the past and, considering that many women from this area are single mothers, provision of these services should continue, particularly in the context of trauma from the last war, hard labour in agriculture and the absence of organised
childcare services (nursery, day centre) which put these women under constant stress. Unfavourable local conditions (infrastructure problems, irregular bus lines) make many services inaccessible to women, so the association bridged this gap through other activities (e.g. training for hairdressers and opening a salon). The association has 84 members who sometimes manage to meet two times a week for certain activities (IT course, hairdressing, sewing courses) and visit fairs together to promote their products.

**Udruženje Romska djevojka – Romani Ćej** from Prnjavor was founded in 2010. The association employs three to four persons and engages project experts as needed. There are 32-35 Roma families in the Municipality of Prnjavor, but they also work with other beneficiaries, both men and women, and in other areas (primarily in the severely underdeveloped municipality of Vukosavlje with 65 Roma families). Their original purpose was to work with Roma women in Prnjavor, but their beneficiary base, range of activities and geographical coverage expanded mainly through free legal aid projects. Although Roma women and men are generally in a disadvantaged position in BiH, the findings of this research indicate that the situation in Prnjavor is still somewhat better than in some other local communities (such as the Municipality of Vukosavlje). Their activities were mainly focused on violence against women and organisation of preventive medical check-ups for men and women, and the importance of this organisation was recognised in the Gender Equality Action Plan for the Municipality of Prnjavor 2018-2020.\(^\text{16}\) Still, it is important to note that the association has a range of other activities and that one employee is a Roma mediator who collects field data to ensure that activities are focused on specific needs of local

communities and assesses the viability of their implementation.

**UŽ Romkinja from Bijeljina** was registered in 2012 and grew out of the Roma organisation Otaharin focused on the education of Roma children and provision of specific services to the Roma population. The need to form an association dedicated to Roma women was identified. The association has approximately 20 members, but the majority of tasks are performed by two persons, one of which is a full-time employee of the association Romkinja, while other members provide suggestions and participate in some activities because they come from large families and are faced with multiple problems due to economic depravity, social prejudice and specific inter-family dynamics. The association focuses on violence against Roma women, raises their awareness of this issue, liaises with the responsible institutions in this field, provides various services and strives to address infrastructural problems in Roma communities. Many of their activities are supported by Otaharin, which provides technical, psychological and legal assistance. Socialising and public events are seen as very important for socialisation of this group of women, so the association established cooperation with the city to mark e.g. the day of the Romani language, they participate in allocation of social housing to vulnerable categories and cooperate with the city office for minorities.

**Udruženje Žena za ženu from Konjic** was registered in 2014. Today they have 96 members of different age. The association was created spontaneously, when the group first came together on Facebook to organise preparation and distribution of hygiene parcels for women from the flooded areas of BiH. Soon after they registered the association for support and education and to date they have implemented many activities. Activities of note include those focusing on women in rural areas and activities aimed at promoting, supporting and affirming the
development of women’s entrepreneurship in the Municipality of Konjic. Inter alia, the association created the following awards: Inspirational Organisation, awarded to organisations; and Inspirational Woman, awarded to individuals in two categories - the Public Life category and the Invisible Woman category. They launched the tradition of handing out these awards during the Women’s Solidarity and Peacebuilding Week.

Udruženje žena Pašinke from Hajderovići (the Municipality of Zavidovići) started its work in 2016. The association has 25 members aged 40-60. Their activities are primarily focused on improving the status of women in rural areas and raising and developing awareness of the importance of women’s entrepreneurship. As the association brings together women from rural areas, organisation of social events and other joint activities (such as the round table discussion Women Change the Community - solidarity and political activism in BiH, or activities aimed at addressing problems in water supply), is very important and serves to empower the women and include them in the social life of the local community.

Udruženje žena Zvjezdangrad from Vareš was registered in 2017, after acting as an informal group for six months. Today the association has 28 members and represents a fairly heterogeneous group. Same as some other organisations, their range of activities is versatile and depends on current requirements and problems in the community. Amongst their other activities (such as workshops, organisation of bazaars, humanitarian actions, etc.) particular note should be made of environmental activities that included protests against unconscionable logging by posting pictures on Facebook, with the slogan: “A forest can do without people, but people cannot live without forests. The forest is a part of us, and I am from Vareš.”
Viktorija from Pale was registered in 2017. It was formed in the context of insufficient civil engagement of women in this municipality. It has around 100 relatively young members and a homogenous educational structure - the association’s members are highly educated and employed women. In this phase the association is focusing on social events, study visits, organisation of workshops and promotions, including healthy living, and has identified the need to expand their range of activities. The members are also engaged in political parties and recognise the problem of under-representation of women in the political domain. The association currently does not have office premises and expects to receive them from the municipal authorities, and has established cooperation with dedicated women’s associations (with an accent on Foundation CURE) for the purposes of training and other forms of support.

With regard to informal groups in the research sample, it is not possible to precisely determine their age. The lobby group in UG Horizonti from Tuzla took several years to form, as indicated by the core group of 20-30 women who are now very active in this informal group. Upon examining their activities, it appears that they have successfully combined informal and formal action, as the informal lobby group uses the space and expertise of the formal one and also complements it since it includes women politicians from various political parties, educators and young educated women without disregarding the rights and needs of unemployed women and women from rural areas who are also specifically included in the work of this group and its activities. The group strives to provide long-term training in gender equality, keeping in mind that the urban-rural dichotomy does not always reflect the level of awareness of one’s rights (which is often inadequate even in a group of educated and employed women from the urban parts of Tuzla). The group is lobbying for a 50/50 ratio not just for women’s representation in politics but also in
the context of budget allocations for women’s organisations. The group’s work compensates for activities within the remit of the Committee on Gender Equality (preparation of GAP reports at the cantonal level) and strives to improve the performance of these committees by ensuring that they include activists with adequate expertise who can ensure continuity even with frequent rotations of political members who need training.

**The informal group Posebne mame** started to form some three years ago. The group mostly communicates via Facebook and Viber. This informal group brings together members who also belong to other similar groups for parents of children with disabilities and have different relationships with certain formal associations and institutions, including centres for special education and regular schools, in the context of (non) implementation of inclusion. Since some of these associations tend to establish ‘ownership’ and since they cooperate with the competent institutions in different ways, the parents need to be further empowered to deal with the unfavourable circumstances. Also, keeping in mind the various projects focusing on children and the lack of systemic support to families and mothers in particular, informal associations should have a more defined structure, which does not negate their importance in terms of e.g. sharing of information about their rights in the domain of healthcare, education and social protection. The group has recognised that the responsible institutions must systemically address the issues affecting this category.

4.2. **Some motives why women form associations**

As can be seen from the above, formal registration of an association was usually preceded by informal gathering of women for different causes (such as sewing courses or humanitarian actions). Some organisations include members who are active in other NGOs that work
with specific population categories, who have decided to register after recognising the need for a more targeted approach to activities focusing on women. Still, many of the women taking part in these organisations have basically learned how to manage the association and its projects after the registration.

Some organisations focus on only one type of activities (e.g. economic empowerment) while others have more versatile activities, in the context of the fact that violence against women and in the society as a whole is linked to economic dependence of women and the economic stagnation which perpetuates the culture of violence even after the war, and especially affects women. Some organisations in the research sample include members who are also users of specific services, so they have a specific/fluid organisational structure. This fluidity is also present in the two informal groups in the sample, but with certain differences. The lobby group may gradually lose members while at the same time gaining new members (one woman brings another, etc.) but the core group remains unchanged, while the purpose of the group Posebne mame is to organise informal gatherings and activities and provide advice, etc. Although some mothers of children with disabilities are recognised in public and take a more active approach, in this case it would again be beneficial to constitute a ‘core group’ that could address the problems of this category of women in a more focused way, particularly in the light of their heterogeneity in terms of their children’s disorders and relationships with formal associations.

Although, as also noted in other studies, there are differences between local contexts, smaller communities suffer from even more politicisation of almost every aspect of life, which creates an unfavourable environment
for civic engagement. In addition to this, according to activists from smaller communities (especially returnee communities) the messages disseminated by higher-level politicians have an even more potent and negative impacts there. The impact of those messages is in fact negative for all groups covered by this research, because the politics of division and fuelling of ethnic tensions leads to dysfunctional institutions and, in turn, neglect for specific needs of marginalised groups.

Although local authorities note the importance of cooperation with civil society organisations in their development strategies, it is rarely described in a specific manner, and formulations often include buzzwords such as ‘inadequate capacities of the NGOs’, ‘passive citizens’, etc. The use of such phrasing is problematic and is even inadequate for the two cities included in the research sample that have a strong and well-profiled civic engagement and strong NGOs, including women’s organisations (Tuzla and Bijeljina). On the other hand, by describing the situation in this manner the local authorities create a framework for the work of these associations and their actions may de-stimulate and prevent their development. One interlocutor emphasised the fact that substantially more money from the local budget is allocated to ‘men’s’ associations (veterans, sports) and that it is necessary to establish a 50/50 ratio in this matter.

4.3. Spatial and technical capacities

In some cases the members initially came together on social networks, sometimes for a one-off humanitarian action, but for continued operation an association needs to have its own premises. Associations rarely own their premises. Most use premises provided by the municipality or share

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17 Tamara Žarković, Žene koje inspirišu... Istraživanje o mogućnostima i uslovima života žena u malim lokalnim zajednicama u BiH, Fondacija CURE, Sarajevo, 2017, p. 17
their premises with another organisation. Interlocutors mostly say that they have adequately equipped premises for their current activities and often state that the municipality covers some or all of their monthly utility costs. However, these data should be interpreted in the context of individual in-depth interviews as well as in the context of the scope and complexity of each association’s activities. Associations that currently have few activities may not require more than an office equipped with a couple of computers.

It should be noted that, regardless of their current activities, women’s associations must have adequate premises because the lack of physical premises would narrow their range of activities, while with a dedicated space they will be perceived as more accessible to the local community and more competitive when applying for projects. It should be noted that not all organisations have (adequately equipped) premises as one of the main prerequisites for their work. In those cases, they expect the local authorities to provide the space and cover the associated costs, which can be a two-edged sword. Namely, once they receive support from the local authorities, whether in the form of space or symbolic annual funding from the local public budget, women tend to idealise this support from the local authorities and loose the critical perspective. Research conducted by Edita Miftari in cooperation with Foundation CURE indicated that 35.8% of municipalities and cities allocate funds for women’s organisations, but only 12.3% of them use gender responsive budgeting.18 Concerning the premises, it should be noted that many of these organisations operate in inadequate premises. Considering that they also provide services, and that some of those services require technical equipment (sewing machines, dining area, etc.), the support should not be limited to standard office

18 Edita Miftari, Ravnopravnost spolova u općinama/opštinama i gradovima u Bosni i Hercegovini, Fondacija CURE, Sarajevo, 2015
space. This is particularly relevant in some rural areas and in associations that have problems with Internet access, sanitary facilities and drinking water, again due to the previously noted lack of infrastructure.

4.4. Organisational visibility

Most organisations do not have a website and instead rely on Facebook groups and occasionally other social media such as Instagram and Tweeter. There is a need to create dedicated websites, considering the fact that some organisations experienced difficulties when their Facebook profiles were temporarily suspended due to malicious reports in response to come of their activities. There is also the fact that a website and a Facebook page are not the same thing. Information flows on Facebook are too fast to follow. A website functionally combines several aspects and provides a permanent Internet presence, whereas the Facebook feed is chronological and does not ensure continuous visibility. Facebook is an excellent promotional tool for the website, and a website ensures a permanent presence and offers functional advantages, but it requires two types of maintenance: technical maintenance and continuous information updates. The first requires money, and the second depends on the members. In this context we need to consider the number of members, their knowledge, skills and ability to actively participate in the organisation, as well as the number and type of activities they implement.

Still, it should be noted that all organisations are visible in the local media and some of them even in other media in Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, we should keep in mind that some local media are just information portals, but they do publish some information about the activities of women’s associations. Some local TV stations do not have enough reporters to cover all field activities taking place in the community. Some radio stations have taken on the role of the media
that provide information to citizens. Generally, the financial status of the local media greatly impacts the number of activities - including those of women’s associations - they will cover and report on. This research has noted many examples of a positive image of women’s associations in the local media (and often not just local). Still, there is also the example of an association which did receive media attention until the moment when they took a critical stance towards something that was happening in their community, and that story was not reported. Since these associations actively use social networks, this becomes the place for provision of all rather than only selected information about the association and its activities.

4.5. Human resource capacities and membership structure

It seems that human resource capacities are frequently a problem in these organisations, and it was noted that the majority of work is performed by a handful of women in the organisation. With regard to each organisation we should keep in mind the total number of members, number of active members and the number of users/beneficiaries, as well as the group structure (homogeneous or heterogeneous).

There is no need to provide a detailed analysis of the number of (active) members of each organisation here, but we can mention some extremes in terms of the number of members and types of their involvement on the one hand, and the organisation’s activities on the other. The important fact is that all analysed groups operate in continuity, which is one of the prerequisites for their sustainability. One of the questions concerned the number of full-time employees in the organisation. Organisations without full-time employees are aware of the need to have at least one part-time employee, while one organisation, due to the nature of its activities and a large number of educated and dedicated members, does not see this as a
problem. However, with a view to future growth and development of this organisation and the planned expansion of activities and projects (e.g. the planned application for the very demanding ReLoad programme), reliance on a large number of members in the application and implementation phase of such a project would not be technically feasible.

Some organisations have full-time employees and also engage experts for project-specific tasks, as needed. Still, research findings indicate that the capacities are inadequate for the scope and type of activities carried out by these organisations. On the other hand, some recently formed associations do not have any employees and rely on a single person that has knowledge and skills to perform various tasks on a voluntary basis. But we must not ignore the differences, not just relative to the number of members but also relative to the activities carried out by these organisations. For example, five employees may not be enough for the planned activities and the given number of beneficiaries, just as it may not be enough to have a handful of volunteers who work with a lot of enthusiasm in the specific circumstances of their local community. Such organisations frequently start with 40-50 members, who eventually start to lose their motivation and the membership gradually declines. Interlocutors explained that members leave the organisation for various reasons, but the most frequent reasons are that they saw the association as a place to socialise, or that they expected some instant benefits. This is why some organisations see the need to revise the number of their members as a prerequisite for implementation of certain activities and formulation of new ones.

Young women with specific knowledge and skills (mainly English language skills, often necessary to respond to calls for project (co) financing) are often very valuable members of the association. But they
are also the first to leave their local community, whether to emigrate from Bosnia and Herzegovina or to move to major cities to continue their education, and, as a rule, they never return to their local community. It is important to ask what could keep those young women there, what could their environment offer them to motivate them to stay. This is not just a matter of sustainability of associations but also a matter that concerns the sustainability of those local communities. In the context of associations, heterogeneous age structure is often perceived as favourable because it allows for transfer of knowledge and skills, however one organisation perceives its homogeneous age structure as an advantage because this avoids intergenerational conflict that might occur otherwise.

**4.6. Cooperation with other organisations**

Linkages and cooperation with other associations can sometimes be important, not only because of joint efforts but also as a motivating factor. For example, in two in-depth interviews the interlocutors emphasised the importance of cooperation with other organisations that motivated them to continue their efforts. One interlocutor said, with regard to cooperation with the Foundation for Women’s Empowerment: “They have something to say to women, to make them get out of their comfort zone sometimes, to take a different perspective.” Another interlocutor spoke about the cooperation with Foundation CURE, whose visit energised the members of the association to act in order to change the local context, and explained that when members heard about the accomplishments of other organisations they were motivated to act and create change in their local community. In the context of Roma women’s organisations, they particularly benefit from cooperation with and support from other Roma associations and the Roma Women Network, coordinated by a dedicated and strong Roma organisation Bolja budućnost. This solidarity between
Roma organisations should not be idealised or generalised, considering that other studies\(^{19}\) found that the Roma community and its civic action relies on strong patriarchal structures and is usually dominated by men. In this broader context, Roma women’s organisations need further strengthening. Based on some informal observations, mainstream women’s organisations tend to be prejudiced against Roma women (however, this should not be generalised) and it seems that mutual recognition is somewhat lacking. Concerning the mothers of children with disabilities, fragmented associations and the lack of a systemic approach to addressing their problems often creates additional frustrations for these mothers.

4.7. Cooperation with local governments

While some major organisations, which we can certainly designate as feminist, are highly critical of the performance of local authorities and do not accept their good cooperation with certain individuals as a starting point but continue to raise the issues of performance of local executive branches of the government and specific issues concerning (non)implementation of adopted action plans, non-gender-responsive budgeting, etc. Even if cooperation with local authorities is assessed as positive, it is further illustrated by facts such as: the association was provided with premises and when those premises are not adequate for certain activities they have the option to use other municipal premises; utility bills are fully or partially subsidised; mayors always respond to their initiatives; some funds were allocated from the municipal budget (although these are rarely substantial); they have good communication with individuals in the local authorities, etc. These reasons are often cited

\(^{19}\) Currently unpublished research by Lejla Somun Krupalića and Zlatiborka Popov Momčinović, *Evaluacija ženskih mreža u Srbiji i Bosni i Hercegovini*, conducted in 2017 in cooperation with TRAG and the OAK Foundation.
as evidence to support their view that the local budget is gender-responsive. Most organisations know that they can build a positive relationship with the local authorities, to a certain degree. If cooperation was assessed as good by the interlocutors, this usually refers to the premises. However, this is only the first step in the cooperation between the public sector and women’s associations because that cooperation should strive to improve the lives of women and girls in the local communities.

This perception that the cooperation with local governments is good does not apply to all organisations included in the research sample or in general, because even a positive assessment of this cooperation does not mean that important infrastructure issues have been resolved (especially in rural areas, where this impacts economic empowerment through agriculture) and does not imply adequate healthcare and welfare services or the availability of nurseries and adequate programmes for children and youth. In the words of one activist from a rural area exposed to a divisionist discourse from higher levels: “And none of the politicians care whether the children have nurseries, whether schools offer activities where the children can develop their skills and socialise regardless of their ethnicity...”

Some interviewed activists noted the lack of compliance with the Law on Gender Equality in terms of representation of women in local politics and absence of gender responsive budgeting. One association had some specific activities dedicated to promotion of all candidates from different cities in the elections. However, towards the end of that interview, as well as in several other interviews, we noted a degree of disappointment with the (non)performance of women politicians, especially at the local level. Despite that disappointment, they still believe that women’s presence in politics is important. Ultimately,
formal and informal political engagement is not mutually exclusive, and we have examples of women who are active in both spheres. Precisely due to the freedoms provided by the civil society, it is now possible to create networks of women from conflicting political communities who are willing to come together, form alliances and cooperate in order to pursue their common interests. One group in the research sample showed distinct progress in this respect, as it successfully brings together women politicians from different political options who actively and publicly support each other, which could be a good model for another organisation composed of women with differing political preferences that currently focuses more on socialising, promotion of healthy living and workshops rather than advocacy.

Good cooperation sometimes arises from the fact that local authorities actually transfer their obligations to women’s associations. For example, some Committees for Gender Equality have almost fully transferred some of their duties to certain women’s organisations. Although cooperation between these committees and women’s associations is seen as positive, we should not lose sight of the following: “Regardless of any cooperation between the commission and the civil society, we must always remember the fact that the government is ultimately responsible for the implementation of the Law on Gender Equality and that this responsibility cannot be transferred to one or more NGOs.”20 Activists from the lobby group propose to solve this problem by means of a permanent appointment of at least one activist to each of these Committees for Gender Equality in order to mitigate the effects of frequent rotation of appointees to these committees after each election, who always require training.

20 OSCE (2009), Status i aktivnosti općinskih komisija za ravnopravnost spolova u Bosni i Hercegovini. Pregled i preporuke, p. 40.
In-depth interviews provided the information that local authorities sometimes contact certain associations to obtain data, which can be seen as a positive aspect, but this requires a clearly defined cooperation with respect to the use of those data, i.e. formulation of activities planned on the basis of the provided information and statistics.

An example of good cooperation was noted in one city with respect to allocation of social housing to vulnerable categories,\textsuperscript{21} which included Roma associations. This cooperation was included in the city budget and in the local development strategy, and was confirmed in an interview.

Positive attitudes towards local authorities sometimes arise from the prevailing type of activities and the fact that, in certain environments and in certain target groups, the first objective is to ‘make’ the women get out of the house, give them opportunities to socialise, develop solidarity with the group and organise them around a specific activity. In this context, some interviewed activists said: “A woman is afraid of judgements if she tries to start something” and “So that was our goal, to get women out of the house and get them to socialise.” This is how women manage to shake loose of the patriarchal codes that are so deeply ingrained in the daily life of small communities, where the woman is expected to remain within the bounds of the family and household. Although some point out that activities of such associations, even though they implement some projects, involve little more than social contact and that they lack the activist role, it should be noted that socialising and companionship, exchange of personal stories and experiences are the cornerstones of women’s activism.\textsuperscript{22} This is particularly true if we take

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\textsuperscript{21} Grad Bijeljina (2019), Budžet za gradane, p. 9
\textsuperscript{22} Ristin Thomasson, To Make Room for Changes. Peace strategies for women organizations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kvinna till Kvinna, Johanneshov, 2006, pp. 21-23
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into account the patriarchal structure of some local communities where any public engagement of women is frowned upon, where formal and informal gossip often doom all their attempts at activism to failure. In the words of the president of one association: “We have decided to be at our market stall every Friday or Monday, doesn’t matter - we have a stall in our local community - and women bring their products. So there’s me and maybe two other women, and most, maybe 70% will walk by and say: ‘It’s pointless you standing there, go home...”

Although local authorities were often supportive in providing space for certain activities, in some rural environments this is not always the case. Activists from the lobby group have mentioned examples of local community premises being locked when they needed to organise something.

4.8. Distribution of duties, administration and logistics

Women’s civic engagement is often said to suffer from the problem of leadership rotation, to enhance equality and avoid elitism. In our research sample, leaders do not strive for ‘ownership’ and the problem of distribution of duties, including leadership, often arises due to the membership structure. In some organisations with a structure unsuitable for civic engagement (inadequate age or education structure, members with many children - the fact that they live in large families with traditional gender roles) the majority of tasks are carried out by a single person who is then exposed to the risk of ‘burn-out’. In this regard, it is necessary to focus on empowering their members and on distributing duties across teams. Some organisations already have a systematic distribution of duties, but they are an exception rather than the rule. Considering the similarities between these organisations, there is a need to improve mutual exchange of experiences and organise meetings between them
to improve organisational performance and strengthen relationships between organisations with similar activities. It is also important to note that all registered associations have a statute, which is mandatory for registration, but strategic planning remains a segment which will need active support in the future.

4.9. Obstacles to women’s activism

In order to address these challenges, activists need access to organisational, technical and human resources. Since these women belong to multiply marginalised groups, even in the event that the organisation has certain capacities, there is a problem of linking those capacities with the available human resources and vice versa. Women’s activism also requires a lot of effort and the pressures of traditional women’s roles, particularly in these environments and within these categories of women, makes those efforts more exacting. This challenge is sometimes overcome by women’s engagement in traditional activities (handicrafts, transfer of traditional women’s skills) and marketing of their products as a means of empowerment, but this does not eliminate certain obstacles and shortcomings. Some obstacles are financial, whether in terms of economic or human/symbolic capital. These include the lack of financial means, lack of knowledge about women’s rights or certain skills required for civic engagement (IT skills, writing project proposals, poor educational membership structure) and specific activities (promotion and placement of products of women’s entrepreneurship).

In the financial sense, women from targeted organisations mainly implement ‘minor’ projects, minor not in terms of importance but in terms of available funds. Some organisations suffer from a lack of experience and training, not just in writing project proposals but also for promotion of their activities, although the majority of them indicate that
they have good cooperation with the media. However, we should keep in mind that access to media is usually easier in smaller environments because local media focus on local events, but while they do report on the activities of women’s associations and NGOs in general, they often lack a developed sensibility and do not delve into details. Good cooperation with the media is not an indicator of the media’s awareness and duty to promote gender equality. With a view to the importance and also the duty of the media to promote gender equality, we need to develop certain strategies particularly for the publicly-owned (local) media and the public broadcasting services. Greater visibility in the public broadcasting services would certainly increase the associations’ overall visibility and potentially improve their access to donors.

This is supported by the fact that many associations do not have a website due to the lack of financial and technical means to keep it up-to-date, which is again important for better access to donor funding. Some organisations are trying to bridge this gap by forming Facebook groups, etc. but some lack the capacity and IT-literate human resources necessary for this type of promotion, and intergroup communication promotes their efforts and contributes to awareness-raising and empowerment through these forms of communication. Also, even though membership fees are quite symbolic, some associations do not charge membership fees because, as they explain it, they do not have major activities and lack their own premises, or because of the fact that they work with particularly vulnerable categories which struggle to make ends meet. With regard to donations, these are usually sub-grants from other projects (e.g. ProBudućnost, projects implemented by major women’s NGO networks such as the Roma Women Network, Women’s Network). These projects sometimes provide fees or compensation for activists from these associations, which they then use to contribute to the work of the association. Although the
amounts are usually symbolic, this is an indicator of their dedication to the association and the general solidarity.
5. Conclusions and recommendations

Association of women into non-governmental organisations, informal associations and movements has multiple impacts on the democratisation of the society. It is quite difficult, and dangerous, to decide when these associations should be labelled as feminist. We neither have, nor should we have a list of criteria to make that judgement. In a broader context in which the feminist movement as such remains open to inclusion of the most different of voices, and which starts from the margins rather than from the centre, any action aimed at improving lives is a feminist action and will benefit from the broader space provided by the civil society “where you work not just because of need, but because of love.”

The findings of this evaluation of capacities in eight selected women’s organisations and two informal groups definitely confirm their great enthusiasm and desire to create positive social change. Each association is specific in its own way, but the need to create positive change in the local context is a common denominator for all of them. A common characteristic is that their efforts are ultimately aimed not only at improving the lives of women and girls but also towards advancement of all citizens, both men and women, in the local community, whether through peacebuilding, infrastructure improvements or other activities.

Their capacity limitations must be mentioned if their work is to be improved in the future. The first and main identified issue is a small number of active members, i.e. members involved in more complex tasks in these

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23 Popov Momčinović, Zlatiborka Ženski pokret u Bosni i Hercegovini: artikulacija jedne kontrakulture, Sarajevski otvoreni centar, Centar za empirijska istraživanja religije u Bosni i Hercegovini, Fondacija Cure, Sarajevo, 2013, p. 118.
associations. Although these associations have found ways (most often informal) to ensure that all members participate in discussions about the content of activities (which is particularly easy in smaller associations), ultimately the burden of implementation of specific activities is borne by a few persons. Sometimes the wider membership tends to be passive and it is necessary to find ways to motivate them, which is particularly the case in patriarchal environments. Even regular associations, especially in cooperation with other, ‘stronger’ associations, can have a motivating effect on their members.

The most frequent problem, however, is the shortage of persons with appropriate knowledge and skills. This problem can be solved in some circumstances with temporary engagement of experts to perform specific tasks, which again greatly depends on the availability of funds. Still, such solutions are only temporary and are only applicable to specific activities. In the long term, it is important to train the existing members who wish to be active but lack the necessary knowledge and skills.

In this context, training should focus primarily on strategic management and project management in all stages of a typical project cycle. Considering that some associations are relatively new and that they have learned about the formal and legal requirements applicable to NGOs sporadically, along the way and by relying on different resources (assistance from acquaintances, other associations and through independent learning), training focused on this area would be important for their future performance. Also, training should include strategies and techniques for public advocacy as well as the topic of gender equality in general.

According to some, the civil society in BiH is donor-oriented. We will not attempt to analyse that claim in this closing section, as its primary objective is to provide recommendations. However, in order to avoid the
risk of reliance of these associations on donors’ calls for proposals as the main criterion for selection of their activities, as opposed to reliance on clearly defined goals resulting from a strategic planning process based on the interests of the association’s membership, training must also cover the area of strategic planning.

The term *training* is used here in its broader meaning and should not be reduced to workshops and sets of 45-minute lectures. Training can and should include on-the-job training, as under the circumstances this would provide continuous support to women’s associations in the performance of their main tasks. Each registered association had to produce a statute and certain plans for the future as a requirement for registration, but these activities were sometimes seen as a necessary formality for continuation of their work. In some situations the members were aware of the importance of these tasks, but they are also aware that they are not able to do them any other way at this stage. In the course of further strengthening of these organisations, it may become necessary at times to go back to the very beginning in order to design their operations to match the specific circumstances and the profile of each organisation.

The positive aspect is that these organisations are guided by the needs of their community and their members. But this often leads to involvement in numerous activities and a departure from the main goals of the organisation. Sometimes this is hard to avoid, as some associations come from areas with a generally underdeveloped NGO sector where the circumstances force women’s organisations to ‘wear many hats’ in order to cover a wide base of interest groups. Their activities are guided not just by the prevailing circumstances in their social community but also by the inherent ethics of care. However positive these potentials may be and however much they contribute to the quality of life in the local
community, there is a need to clearly define the association’s mission and vision to inform the planning and design of future activities. Associations focusing on, for example, strengthening women’s entrepreneurship should have the necessary capacities in-house, to not just motivate women but also to assist them in first sustaining and later developing their start-ups.

Finally, even in the presence of strong predispositions, there is still a need to focus on raising awareness and strengthening civic activism. The act of registering an association is in itself a sign of commitment to promotion of both individual and group interests and participative decision-making. However, this is still not civic activism in its full capacity but rather a necessary assumption for its development. Again, without any intent to qualify and assess any association as (purely) women’s or feminist, we must not forget the fact that women may also associate around a patriarchal matrix. In this regard, some interviewed activists insist on the importance of ongoing, continuous training for both women and men. Namely, even women who are educated, employed and reside in urban environments are not sufficiently familiar with their rights, and many of those rights cannot be successfully exercised without raising the awareness in the male part of the population.


10. Popis stanovništva, domaćinstva i stanova u BiH, 2013: Rezultati


18. Žarković, Tamara „Žene koje inspirišu...“ Istraživanje o mogućnostima i uslovima života žena u malim lokalnim zajednicama u BiH, Fondacija CURE, Sarajevo, 2017.
Summary of the project “Women’s Rights Agenda for Positive Change”

Project “Women’s Rights Agenda for Positive Change” in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is a two year project of the CURE Foundation and the Foundation for Women’s Empowerment (FWE), funded by the European Union through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The project aims to contribute to the promotion and respect of women’s human rights, eradication of discrimination against women belonging to minority and marginalized groups in BiH. The project represents an outstanding opportunity for engaging mechanisms in continuation of practical work around human rights of women belonging to minority and marginalized groups, through organization of joint trainings, implementation of comparable activities and exchange of good practice among actors and stakeholders.

Objectives of the Project are to directly contribute to the promotion and respect of women’s human rights and increase socio-economic inclusion of women and girls belonging to minority and marginalized groups through strengthening of their capacities and creating concrete actions to combat discrimination, racism and xenophobia and address their human rights issues in BiH.

The project will take an integrated approach seeking to address the pervasive marginalisation, exclusion and discrimination against women belonging to minority and marginalized groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) who are facing the unfavourable attitude and who are not only exposed to extreme poverty, discrimination and prejudice, but are also largely excluded from decision-making processes on various levels.
About CURE Foundation:

CURE Foundation is a feminist-activist organization that promotes gender and sex equality and works for positive social change through educational, cultural and research programs. By organizing affirmative collective actions, CURE celebrates the strength and power of women, and helps to empower individuals to become initiators of social change in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the world. The feminist activism has created a safe space where women are strong, fearless, competent, and united with all their differences. CURE is an organization of professionals and volunteers who take to the streets to protest against violence, discrimination, violation of laws and basic human rights. Furthermore, CURE organizes art performances against violence, inviting artists, scholars, lecturers, activists, and citizens to act, participate, and contribute to the creation of a better, sounder Bosnian-Herzegovinian society.

About partner organization Foundation for Women’s Empowerment:

The FWE for Women’s Empowerment (FWE) is an independent and non-profit local women’s foundation based in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) which is fully committed to supporting initiatives by Women’s Grassroots Organizations (WGOs) aimed at promoting empowerment of women, women’s human rights and gender equality.

The FWE was born in response to enormous calls by WGOs across the country to create a mechanism for channelling technical and financial assistance for supporting their relevant initiatives in advancing women’s human rights, gender equality and social justice.
Authors:

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