

Women's NGOs and Civil Society Building in Bosnia-Herzegovina

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Abstract

Very often conflict and post-conflict images of Bosnia-Herzegovina overshadow noteworthy developments and changes. Similarly the role and contributions of women's NGOs in the process of civil society building don't receive proper publicity and acknowledgment. Therefore, this paper aims to put in the perspective women's NGOs in Bosnia-Herzegovina by providing historical and theoretical analysis of their contributions towards peace-building and elections, state-building and civil society building. Furthermore, this paper aims to analyze origin and developments of gender legal, economic and socio-political framework as such framework is the precondition for actual application and achievement of gender equality. Finally, this paper applies theoretical framework of civil society functions on leading women's NGOs. The author uses ethnographic methodology, written sources, NGO and governmental reports and gender related laws. The results of this paper indicate that women's NGO's in Bosnia-Herzegovina made significant progress from providing mere humanitarian services to the establishment of gender institutional, legal, economic and socio-political framework. Such progress placed women's NGOs at the position of application and achievement of gender equality in Bosnia-Herzegovina. With regards to the fulfillment of civil society functions, results indicate that women's NGO's made significant achievements in advocating values of human rights, tolerance and understanding, offering civic training, promoting civic education and public issues through media, and promotion of conflict resolution and inter-faith dialogue. However, civil society functions such as control of political power, monitoring of political participation and elections and promoting of anti-corruption awareness don't indicate significant involvement of women's NGOs.

Keywords: gender, peace-building, civil-society building, women's NGOs and civil-society functions

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Introduction

Due to post-war ethnic and national divisions, Bosnia-Herzegovina couldn't affect desired social, economic and political changes and developments and, as a result, women's NGOs role in the process of women's emancipation was affected too. However, as a result of the state-building process the promotion of gender issues, women's rights, women's economic independence, protection from violence, political representation and the adoption of domestic and international laws and conventions, including *the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDEW) have become much more emphasized. Therefore, this paper introduces readers to the functions of women's NGOs in the process of civil society building in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The paper discuss the role of women's NGOs during and after the war, current gender legal, economic and socio-political framework and functions of women's NGOs in the process of civil society building.

This paper aims to discuss and analyze the role of women's NGOs in the process of civil society building in Bosnia-Herzegovina with an objective to present to what extent women's position in the society has changed from 1990s until today. In this regard, the paper will offer clear historical and chronological picture of these developments. Then, special emphasis will be placed on the development of legal, economic and socio-political framework. The last part of this paper will present civil society functions such as control of political power, monitoring of political participation and elections, promoting of anti-corruption awareness, advocating values of human rights, tolerance and understanding, offering civic training, promoting civic education and public issues through media, and promoting conflict resolution and inter-faith dialogue. In order to analyze civil society functions this paper will analyze contributions of the leading women's NGOs in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

This paper is based on ethnographic methodology, written sources, reports and direct observation of women's NGO's in Bosnia-Herzegovina. An attempt has been made to tackle: the origin, development and transformation of women's NGOs in Bosnia-

Herzegovina; an establishment of gender legal, economic and socio-political framework; women's NGO's involvement in analyzing, criticizing and opposing views and policies of political powers; monitoring political participation and election; promotion of the value of conflict resolution, peace-building, tolerance and understanding; promotion of civic education, civic training and human rights.

Women's NGOs in the War and Post-War Bosnia-Herzegovina

From the mid 19th century the non-governmental organizations have been successfully operating and the term itself began to be used more frequently with successful establishment of the United Nations, a period that indeed reflected the need of NGOs in fostering of the civil society. Since then NGOs, as independent societal organizations, began first focusing on assistance and social care services in terms of the distribution of food, shelter and medical assistance. In the following decades due to various needs NGOs expanded their scope from mere assistance to the capacity building in terms of education and training. In the past decade or so due to democratization process, NGOs promote political and institutional changes and development at local, national and international levels (Boli and Thomas, 1997, pp. 171-190 and Martens, 2002, pp. 271–285). Therefore globalization and democratization have contributed to the growing importance of NGOs worldwide and, as a result, the conception of the civil society was also popularized.

The above historical development of NGOs was presented in order to introduce readers to the development of NGOs in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Since the beginning of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, socialist structured NGOs sector began to change and transform rapidly. It is significant to mention that when the Yugoslav crisis emerged socialist civil society was unable to counter spreading of nationalism that was one of the major causes that contributed towards conflicts in the early 1990s. Sejfića (2006) explains that newly established NGOs in Bosnia-Herzegovina with the assistance of the international organizations and actors in the 1990s were mostly emphasizing humanitarian assistance and social care services. However, after signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement, NGOs began to play a significant role in the peace-building,

post-war trauma and the reintegration of the country (p. 125). Nowadays, NGOs take an active role in the monitoring of political leadership, political participation and elections, advocating anti-corruption awareness, values of tolerance and understanding, civic education and human rights, and promoting of public issues. Certainly, any post-war country, including Bosnia-Herzegovina, goes through three phases of development namely: peace-building and elections, state-building and civil society building (Deacon and Stubbs, 1998, pp. 99-115).

Women's organizations began playing significant role in Bosnia-Herzegovina immediately by the beginning of the war. The first women's organizations in Sarajevo and Tuzla consisted of volunteers who provided services such as food, clothing and shelter for refugees and counseling and medical care for war victims, especially rape victims. Some of the women's organizations became partners of the UNHCR, which coordinated humanitarian relief during and after the war. Therefore the first NGOs were attempting to respond to the crisis of the war and its outcomes. For instance, *Medica Zenica* and *Women to Women* NGOs were the first women's organizations that provided a place for refugees in the war. They were offering medical, psychological and social support and dealt with war trauma (Simić, 2009, p. 5; Kleck, 2006, pp. 343-355 and Belloni, 2010, pp. 129-153). *Medica Zenica* on its website presents itself as

an expert non-governmental organisation that continuously offers psycho-social and medical support to women and children victims of war and also post war violence, including victims of war rapes and other forms of war torture, sexual violence in general, domestic violence survivors, as well as victims of trafficking in human beings (medicazenica.org).

Throughout the years of the war NGOs were working together and often under direct control of larger international humanitarian organizations. Therefore, due to war circumstances NGOs were rather apolitical. However, women's NGO's played significant role in peace building process in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Cockburn (1998) holds that,

even prior to the beginning of wars across former Yugoslavia, women activists under the name *Women for Peace* called for negotiations and peaceful conflict resolution (p. 167). Considering the fact that men make wars and women make peace, international organizations and donors targeted women's NGOs for the projects of ethnic reconciliation and the establishment of cross-ethnic communication and dialogue (Helms, 2010, pp. 17-32 and Helms, 2003, p. 18).

A year after signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement the impact and role of NGO-s had significantly changed. In this regard many women's NGOs were registered and they began to have an important role. Such change was strongly supported by the international organizations that made the first attempt to bring women to cultural, social, economic and political spheres of life because earlier they had no adequate place in these spheres of life in Bosnia-Herzegovina. A period after the war also affected the scope and activities of women's NGOs that began to emphasize direct support for refugees and returnees, monitoring of violations of human rights and facilitating the return and reconstruction process. Women's NGOs became interested in overall improving the position, status and rights of women in the society. Therefore, women's NGOs during this period were not tackling legal and political aspects of life of women in Bosnia-Herzegovina but on the contrary humanitarian and social aspects of women's life. In this regard it is important to mention that many NGOs were established to secure women's rights and human rights.

In the past decade women's NGO's made significant shift from mere humanitarian civil society activism towards direct involvement in shaping a legal, economic and socio-political framework. Indeed, women's NGOs began taking a much more active role in seeking an adoption of laws and establishment of ministries and institutions that would guarantee women's rights in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Since gender, legal and institutional framework has been significantly established, women's NGOs presently take an active role to ensure its application. Such an application stage of women's NGO's will be clearly illustrated in the last part of the paper that aims at an assessment of women's NGOs functions in the process of civil society building.

Gender Legal, Economic and Socio-Political Framework

This part of the paper attempts to analyze gender legal, economic and socio-political framework and developments as based on *the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)* reports from Bosnia-Herzegovina. Beginning from 2004, five reports clearly indicate an establishment of gender framework and developments in Bosnia-Herzegovina (www.arsbih.gov.ba).

As a requirement for the process of European integration, in recent years Bosnia and Herzegovina has undertaken series of security, legal, economic, social, educational and political reforms. Throughout these processes of the reformation gender legal frameworks, policies and reforms have also been developed. By considering challenging post-war circumstances Bosnia-Herzegovina made significant legal and institutional developments towards fulfilling its domestic and international gender legal obligations. In 1993, Bosnia-Herzegovina ratified UN Convention on *the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)*, which obliged Bosnia-Herzegovina to eliminate women's discrimination from legal, political, economic and cultural aspects of life. Then, by signing *the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action* in 1995 Bosnia-Herzegovina was obliged to take direct steps towards the elimination of women's discrimination. This declaration requested each member state, including Bosnia-Herzegovina, to develop *Gender National Action Plan*. Then, in 2000 the Security Council adopted UN Resolution No. 1325 on *Women, Peace and Security*, which made mandatory women's participation in all important matters of peace and security.

Since 1993 in the process of fulfilling its international obligations Bosnia-Herzegovina made significant progress with regards to the gender legal position. Therefore, institutional legal mechanisms have been introduced at all levels of governance. Different commissions have been established to coordinate gender issues across the state, entities and cantons. Apart from the earliest establishment of the *Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees in Bosnia-Herzegovina* major breakthrough towards greater institutional tackling of gender issues was the establishment of

Gender Equality Agency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, (www.arsbih.gov.ba), *Gender Center of the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina* (www.fgenderc.com.ba) and *Gender Center of Serb Republic* (www.vladars.net). Besides establishing institutional legal gender framework Bosnia-Herzegovina adopted a *Law on Gender Equality, Anti-Discrimination Law* (www.fgenderc.com.ba) and the *Gender Action Plan* (www.arsbih.gov.ba).

In the past decade, gender legal reforms and developments point to a significant improvement over the previous period. The adoption of gender legal framework was largely the result of persistent work of women's NGOs in Bosnia-Herzegovina, which demonstrate efforts in the process of civil society building. However, there is still a need to harmonize a number of laws at the state, entity and cantonal levels as to ensure an application of equal rights and equal treatment of women in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Besides, there is a need of greater coordination of different agencies and institutions in tackling domestic violence, women's social protection, war victims and women trafficking. As indicated in the above Bosnia-Herzegovina made significant gender legal changes and reforms as confirmed by General Recommendation No. 6 of the UN CEDAW Committee. Legal framework in Bosnia-Herzegovina, though partially, articulated gender issues and as a result perceptions, attitudes and understandings of women's role in the society are being gradually changed. However, as Moranjak-Bambura (2007) claims women's NGOs hold that legal changes and reforms couldn't foster an achievement of women's rights because gender legal framework and policies are not being implemented on the ground.

An economic and socio-political framework has also been significantly adopted across the state, entities and cantons. *The Law on Gender Equality* and *the Anti-Discrimination Law* have introduced special provisional measures in order to achieve economic and socio-political gender equality. Furthermore, Article 24 of this law requested state, entity and cantonal authorities to provide special measures, laws regulations, and other related acts, policies, strategies and plans that clearly regulate economic and socio-political aspects of life. In this

regard, the law must ensure equal representation of women in the governance, decision-making and representation at all levels.

Women's political, legal and public rights have been secured in the following laws: *Election Law of Bosnia-Herzegovina* and *Law on High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council of Bosnia-Herzegovina*. Then, women's maternity rights, rights to work, pension, health insurance and social protection have been secured by *the Law on Civil Service, Labor and Wages in Bosnia-Herzegovina* and *the Labor Law of Bosnia-Herzegovina*. *The Resolution on Combating Violence Against Women in the Family* was adopted to combat violence against women in the family. The strategic plans for the prevention of violence against women have been adopted by both entities, and, as well as, financial support has been provided for 173 safe houses that shelter women violence victims. *The Criminal Law of Bosnia-Herzegovina* also provides the framework for protecting women from human trafficking and sexual exploitation.

Post-war and economic growth in Bosnia-Herzegovina was significant; however beginning from 2009 there is a sharp economic decline. Such economic decline was due to poor economic planning and the effects of global economic and financial crisis. In the past two years economy in Bosnia-Herzegovina is characterized with high government expenditures, tax-revenues declines, high rate of unemployment and external borrowings and debts. Therefore, the current economic crisis has serious impact on women and their economic and social rights. According to CEDAW Report, "despite the fact that women comprise 51.7% of the total employable population, only 37.1% of employees are women" (www.rightsforall.ba). Employed women are also discriminated with regards to jobs on full-time basis, the rights to maternity leave, illegal dismissals, non-payments of health and pension insurances for the duration of maternity leave, exposure to mobbing, sexual harassment and others (www.rightsforall.ba). Finally women's exercise of political rights and participation in political processes is inevitable for the democratic development of the state. In Bosnia-Herzegovina there is the inadequate representation of women in elected political bodies at all levels including state, entity cantonal and even municipal levels of government. Currently

a preference is given to ethnic representation rather than gender representation.

As clearly illustrated in the above women's legal, economic and socio-political framework in Bosnia-Herzegovina has been established. However, Bosnia-Herzegovina is far away from applying and realizing women's economic and socio-political rights in particular. For instance, after general elections in 2010 only 17% of women take an active role in the governance. This and similar examples are indeed clearly supported by the statistical data of 2011 CEDAW Report, which needs not further elaboration. Therefore, Bosnia-Herzegovina has only prepared the ground while state actors and especially women's NGOs must move one step further towards an implementation of gender laws, policies and plans. Such position of gender rights is great opportunity for the wider community and especially for women's NGOs to embark on gender's rights realization because the first step of establishing legal, economic and socio-political framework has been successfully established.

Functions of Women's NGOs in the Process of Civil Society Building

Civil society should become a middle ground between the individual and the state, a space that can check and balance state's use of power and allow an individual to be expressed. Such civil society should also use its role in the process of moderation and dialogue as to counter the nationalist grip on power that often give a preference to national over civic aspects of the state (Belloni, 2010, pp. 167-168). In this regard it is significant to analyze civil society functions in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the contributions of women's NGOs in the process of civil society building.

The most important function model of civil society was developed by German political scientists Merkel and Lauth. Their function model of five essential functions of civil society is directly linked to democratic processes within regional, cultural and societal contexts. Five essential functions of civil society include protection, intermediation between state and citizens, participatory socialization community building or integration and communication. Then, Edwards (2007) argued for the synthesis of the different roles of civil society such as civil society as

associational life, civil society as the good society and civil society as the public sphere (pp. 607-614). These two theoretical approaches indicate key functions of civil society such as control of political power, monitoring of political participation and elections, promoting of anti-corruption awareness, advocating values of human rights, tolerance and understanding, offering civic training, promoting civic education public issues through media, promoting conflict resolution and inter-faith dialogue.

Women's NGOs should monitor how state officials use their political powers as to raise public concern about any abuse of power. They should lobby for access to information, including freedom of information laws and for the adoption of procedures and establishment of institutions to monitor and control corruption. Women's NGOs should expose the corrupt conduct of public officials; lobbying for good governance reforms and their support for the implementation of anti-corruption laws is inevitable. Then, women's NGOs should provide services to the people as to educate them about their rights and obligations as democratic citizens with regards to the political participation. They should encourage people to get involved in public debates by expressing their views.

Political participation and elections indeed affect legal, socio-economic and political position of women. Therefore, women's NGOs have been very active in promoting political participation. Their concern for the establishment of the democratic state government after successful conducting of the general elections is clearly illustrated by activities of *Udružene žene*, Banja Luka [*United Women*] that organized a protest together with other women's NGOs due to

not forming the executive authority at the state level and continuous ignorance of the Law on Gender Equality in BiH. 13 months after the general elections in BiH, we still have no the executive authority. The Council of ministers in technical mandate did not adopt neither the program of work nor the budget for 2011 but it did not distract the members of the Council of Ministers to receive their salaries on a regular basis (www.unitedwomenbl.org).

Women's NGOs in particular attempted to involve women in political participation and elections as to increase the gender political representation in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In this regard, *Udružene žene*, Banja Luka [*United Women*] supported female politicians in the local elections that were held in October 2008. Also women that were elected as delegates in local councils/municipal assemblies in Bosnia-Herzegovina have been offered supports and cooperation (www.unitedwomenbl.org). Similarly, prior to the general elections in 2010, *TPO Foundation* made a campaign "Empowerment of Women Voters: 101 Reasons to Vote for Women" which was purposefully aimed at motivating women to take an active role in political participation (www.tpo.ba). It is needless to mention that the number of other women's NGOs from Tuzla, Bijeljina, Banja Luka, Mostar, Zenica, Bihać and Sarajevo made numerous street political campaigns aimed at women's political participation in the general elections.

Women's NGOs should get an active involvement in promoting democratic values. Obviously the role of civil society is to promote tolerance, moderation, compromise and respect for opposing views. To what extent women's NGOs have been involved in the promotion of the value of human rights, tolerance and understanding through specific projects and activities? Do women's NGOs have programs, trainings, debates, seminars and workshops aimed at resolving the socio-political differences among major ethnic groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina? Indeed the promotion and advocacy roles of women's NGOs in Bosnia-Herzegovina have been very impressive. For instance, one of the advocacy roles of *Medica Zenica* is to

to influence and propose amendments to legislation to ensure the improvement of the status of survivors of war trauma and violence in peacetime in accordance with international standards...For 18 years Medica has been advocating for: rights of women, war rape survivors, survivors of domestic violence and other violence forms, and rights of victims of trafficking; human rights and

gender equality; better position of the safe house and counseling of Medica Zenica (www.medicazenica.org).

Similarly *Žene ženama*, Sarajevo [*Women to Women*] NGO has been involved in many projects directed towards peace building and coexistence in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In 2011 this NGO worked on a project entitled “Women in Peace Building – Reconciliation in the Local Community.” This project was aimed “to promote good practices and experiences in overcoming social conflicts among members of the constituent peoples, through creating a space for encounter and dialogue among them.” Then, *Žene ženama* played significant role in the process of adopting laws that prevent human trafficking and organizing many important campaigns aimed at creating public awareness about human trafficking (www.zenezenama.org). Other women's NGOs such as *Lara*, Bijeljina, *Udružene žene*, Banja Luka [*United Women*], *Žena BiH*, Mostar [Women BiH] and *La Strada*, Mostar also took an active role in fighting human trafficking and providing free legal services.

Women's NGOs should provide training and services. Women's NGOs in Bosnia-Herzegovina have been involved in the promotion of civic education, civic training and human rights? For instance

Medica Zenica implements a variety of educational, research, advocacy, and publishing projects focused on promotion and protection of human rights, prevention and rehabilitation from war trauma, sexual and domestic violence, combating trafficking in human beings and provision of legal aid through outreach programs... In this regard, professional training is provided... Training for hairstyling, tailoring/sewing, and upholstering. The training cycle lasts for 6 months of practical work. Upon finished training the trainees take a final exam and upon passing the exam they receive a certificate from the Employment office of Zenica Doboje about the skill acquired. The certificate is validated and recorded in the person's work card. In the past 18 years, Medica Zenica has enabled **777** women and girls to receive a state

accredited certificate on vocational education (www.medicazenica.org).

Žena BiH, Mostar [Women BiH] also provides numerous services and trainings. According to the data this NGO provided knitting training for 2000 women and sewing training for 600 women. Then, 38 women received professional training and embarked on lifelong learning. Numerous trainings have been conducted for both public and civil sectors on multidisciplinary approaches to violence victims (www.zenabih.ba). Similarly other women's NGOs as for instance *Udružene žene*, Banja Luka [*United Women*] also provided numerous trainings and services on leadership organization and management, public advocacy trainings, strategic planning training, project and research training and business and market panning training (www.unitedwomenbl.org).

It is essential for women's NGOs to inform the public about important public issues and debates. This is not only the role of mass media, but of NGOs which can provide forums for debating public issues and disseminating information about issues before parliament that affect the interest of different groups or society at large. Women's NGOs have been involved in informing the public about important public issues and debates. Numerous women's magazines, reports and publications indicate the role of women's NGOs in using the media for the promotion of civic values, especially those related to women. In this regard, among its strategic priorities and objectives *Udružene žene*, Banja Luka [*United Women*] is "strengthening awareness of women and men citizens about violence against women and gender based violence through media advocacy" (www.unitedwomenbl.org). Similarly

...in the past 18 years Medica Zenica issued 42 publications. This area of work includes publishing of advocacy, informational, presentational and promotional materials created in Medica Zenica...In 2010 Medica Zenica was present in 33 types of media and had 66 media appearances. Out of that number 61 appearance was in 28 media in BiH, i.e. 11 hours in electronic media (TV and radio) and 8.5 pages of printed media and web sites, and 5

appearances in foreign media. The average monthly appearance of Medica Zenica in all types of media was 5.5 times (www.medicazenica.org).

Thorough analysis of women's NGOs reports with regards to fulfilling civil society functions indicate significant contributions especially in advocating values of human rights, tolerance and understanding, offering civic training, promoting civic education and public issues through media, and promoting conflict resolution and inter-faith dialogue. However, women's NGOs should increase their involvement in controlling the political power, monitoring of political participation and elections and promoting anti-corruption awareness.

Conclusion

This paper has indicated the continuous activism of women in Bosnia-Herzegovina that reached its peak during the last decade. Beginning from 1990s as a result of socio-political and economic changes, women began to take active role in providing humanitarian assistance and social care services. Then, after signing of Dayton Peace Agreement women's NGOs contributed significantly towards the peace-building and healing of post-war trauma and the reintegration of the country. For the last decade women's NGOs have taken an active role in civil society building.

The establishment of gender legal, economic and socio-political framework, as a milestone and most inevitable precondition for gender equality, was the most significant contribution of women's NGOs in Bosnia-Herzegovina. By signing and adoption of international gender conventions and declarations Bosnia-Herzegovina made the first step towards national reforms and the establishment of gender equality framework. At the national level, Bosnia-Herzegovina adopted laws and established institutions that could facilitate application and achievement of gender equality. Therefore, without an establishment of such framework, seeking application and achievement of gender equality in Bosnia-Herzegovina would have been impossible. This paper also indicated, based on women's NGOs reports and CEDAW reports that

Bosnia-Herzegovina is currently at the stage of application and achievement of gender equality.

The last part of the paper made analysis of functions of women's NGOs in the process of civil society building. By considering historical and socio-political circumstances of Bosnia-Herzegovina, women's NGO's rightly gave preference for protection, advocacy, service delivery and intermediation civil society functions. Then, due to the establishment of gender framework women's NGOs in Bosnia-Herzegovina will focus more on monitoring role, which has been to great extent neglected. Certainly, women's NGOs should increase their involvement in controlling the political power, monitoring of political participation and elections and promoting anti-corruption awareness.

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