

Women's Role in Agreement Implementation

Gender issues remain a challenge for the region. They stem from the particular historical development of the region and could be found in almost any sphere: culture (patriarchal society), education, politics, environment, and domestic life. The gender gap is particularly high in political empowerment. The gender gap and relatively low political empowerment of women is reflected in the dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo. Though there are women included in the dialogue and there are women in high positions both in Serbia and Kosovo, they remain highly underrepresented in decision-making bodies. The dialogue process could represent a chance to improve women's participation in the political process.

To address the gender gaps in political empowerment, and particularly in the dialogue, the Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) organized on May 13, 2023, in Prizren, Kosovo, a roundtable for a group of representatives of political parties, members of parliaments, and civil society organizations from Serbia and Kosovo to continue discussing issues related to incorporating a gender perspective into the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, increasing women's meaningful inclusion in the process and their influence in the implementation of the agreed documents. The previous, much larger discussion on the issues took place in Tirana on March 3, 2023.

Inclusion and contribution

There are two elements related to the inclusion of women in policymaking: representation and the concrete issues where women could contribute with their specific perspectives. Regarding inclusion, there is some progress. As reported from the previous roundtable, quotas for women introduced both in Serbia and Kosovo had an effect. Quotas have contributed to the fact that women politicians became recognizable on the political scene and are now an indispensable part of the political processes and the political spectrum. Women are regularly elected to significant positions and participate in major political processes.

Still, the problem persists: few women are included in political processes, including in the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue and the implementation of the agreements. "Quotas are good, but they are not evenly applied," said a participant, pointing out that there are many bodies and institutions where the quota rules are either ignored or non-existent." A participant called quotas just an ingredient and a technical issue. "For women, the only normal quota is a "mother-nature quota of 50/50." She said that the participation of women is essential to any political solution and that decision-makers should accept it.

Some participants referred to the processes of elections of officials, pointing out that everything is in the hands of the party leaderships. In other words, women do not feel secure as they depend on party leaders. With direct (or open lists) elections and positioning in the party based on their own

merit, they would be able to deal with the topics more comprehensively and bring a gender perspective. For example, one of the participants involved in talks between Serbia and Kosovo said that her approach was not conflictual and thus has softened the attitude of the opposite side. “But I was being labeled later by my party leadership as too soft.” Another participant outlined that party leaders are focused on the prevailing opinions among the population, not on changing them. Almost no politician in Serbia and Kosovo dares to say, “I want to achieve peace.” Another participant supported this, saying that the sides are not dealing with issues but trying to win over each other. “A narrative that promotes reconciliation will not get you elected.” But if there is more freedom in the interparty and institutional dynamics, with more focus on quality than loyalty to official party discourses, women and men would have more freedom to propose alternative approaches and shake up the discourse.

Some argued that Serbia and Kosovo remain patriarchal societies, which is reflected in the dynamics of policymaking and the level of inclusion of women in the policy processes. A participant said that patriarchal societies are not just a problem for women. “Men are also oppressed by being forced to be tough and focused on competition.” Adding women to processes and institutions does not necessarily change that. A participant argued that the focus should be on the change of the paradigm from “competition” (which is a product of a patriarchal society) to “care.” Many agreed that the key is a paradigm change.

A ‘folding chair’ mechanism

A participant suggested a mechanism (that she dubbed “a folding chair mechanism”) for the Serbia-Kosovo negotiations that would ensure the presence of women tasked explicitly with communicating with the public regarding the results of the process and the implementation. “It would be of substantial importance, as it could potentially open doors for a wider acceptance and thus more successful implementation.” She named it “a folding chair mechanism,” meaning that women tasked with this purpose are not negotiators but input providers and disseminators of messages.

Ideas have to come before decisions, and women can contribute. They could inspire male politicians also to adopt a different perspective. German Chancellor Willy Brandt knelt in respect to WWII victims in Poland, which is the move that made Germany what it is now. After such an act, it was not easy to continue as a German chancellor, but he did despite such considerations. With their broader societal approach to issues, women could push the leaders to retire the logic of real politics and make similar, honest breakthroughs.

A participant argued that gender and national identity work similarly in practical policy. He compared women that participate in the processes that are usually focused just on gender issues as minority representatives are focused usually on issues that are strictly related to minority issues. Women and men should work on all issues and not be referred to as “issue ghettos.”

Another participant argued for a formulation of a common goal that would be based on a shared vision for the future. “Germany and France first agree on the future, and only then on the past.” He said that the logic should be based on understanding. In other words, “we should try to find out why a particular person or a group is pushing a certain discourse and what she/he/they want, and

then we can find a confluence, common goals or goals.” This could help breakthroughs and implementation, and women could have a crucial role in it.

To reach this, the participants have proposed a mechanism called a “folding chair.” The Aarhus Convention should serve as an inspiration,¹ and it should be formally brought to the dialogue structure. The “folding chair” mechanism should not just serve for dissemination of information and outreach but also for coordination and help regarding the implementation of the agreements.

Another participant stressed that having women politicians and disseminators is not enough to contribute to a successful implementation. Women from local areas should also be included more in debates and implementation as only in such a way could we have a meaningful implementation. In addition, the people dealing with minority rights from Serbia and Kosovo should sit together and exchange views.

Conclusions and recommendations

Participants came up with several conclusions and recommendations on how gender mainstreaming and including women could help the process. Conclusions and recommendations were not necessarily based on consensus but encompassed the essence of the discussions at the roundtable.

- Initiate the discussion of the ‘folding chair’ mechanism – to have women experts together with the parties in the dialogue and the mediators at certain stages of the dialogue. This could be a powerful tool for disseminating relevant information and preparing the public, but also for coordination and implementation. It should also include persons from the local areas, mainly Albanian and Serb communities. The mechanism should build on other examples, including (but not limited to) the Aarhus Convention.
- The goal of the dialogue should be an agreement on a common future. Talks should be initiated to find the “smallest common denominators” and a vision of the future, and only when there is an agreement on key aspects, the parties should deal with the past. At this moment, the dialogue is consumed with the debates about the past.
- Women can help change the approach, which has been reflected in the constant desire for victory over the other side. Instead, women actors should insist on instituting auxiliary debates in the dialogue on understanding each other’s positions.
- Quotas for women remain a must. While they do not necessarily immediately bring change in the quality of the debate, they bring preconditions for it in the mid to long run. Quotas should be applied everywhere, not just in directly elected institutions. Also, a helpful element for gender mainstreaming and the change of discourse would be introducing rules allowing more independence to elected and appointed political representatives. It is the

¹ The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters was adopted on 25 June 1998 in the Danish city of Aarhus (Århus) at the Fourth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference. It entered into force on 30 October 2001. The Aarhus Convention is created to empower the role of citizens and civil society organizations in environmental matters and is founded on the principles of participative democracy.

only way to break monolith narratives and party discourses often focused on victory over the other.

Participants

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