

Women Struggle to be Heard

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Record numbers of women in Bosnia-Herzegovina have entered the political arena, but they still face an uphill struggle.

As the election campaign here reaches a climax, one of the highest profile candidates is a woman. Samra Tojaga, a 22-year-old former Miss Bosnia-Herzegovina from Mostar, has enjoyed widespread coverage as she campaigns to persuade voters in canton seven to tick off her name on their list of candidates for the October 5 election.

Elsewhere, however, voters could be forgiven for thinking that this is an all male event, as campaign receptions and high profile television debates are all dominated by men. Yet out of the 7353 people standing for election, 3144 - or 40 per cent - are women, a statistic that many western European countries would envy.

Since 1998, a rule imposed by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, OSCE, has required political parties across Bosnia to ensure that a minimum of 30 per cent of candidates on party lists come from the "minority gender". The results have been dramatic: between 1996 and 1998, the number of women elected to the state's lower house of parliament, the House of Representatives, jumped from two to 26 per cent. Female representation at cantonal level surged from five to 18 per cent between 1997 and 2000.

Women have achieved high office in the past, of course. The so-called "Iron Lady", Biljana Plavsic, was the first ever female member of the republic's collective presidency from 1990-92. A leading official in Radovan Karadzic's SDS, she was a member of the supreme command of Republika Srpska, RS, during the 1992-95 war, before becoming president of the entity from 1996-98. So far, the only woman to have been indicted by The Hague, she is currently awaiting trial for war crimes charges.

Today, the republic has one female minister at state level, Azra Hadziahmetovic, the minister for foreign trade and economic relations. At the entity level, RS has one and the Federation has four. A draft law on gender equality that includes a requirement that women make up 40 per cent of all public bodies is under consideration by the state parliament, which is currently 18 per cent female. So while the proportion of women elected still lags far behind their estimated 60 per cent share of the population, the country is doing well by regional standards for female representation in parliament - behind Bulgaria and Croatia, Macedonia, but ahead of Moldova, Slovenia, Serbia, Romania, Montenegro, Hungary, Greece, and Albania.

Yet despite these encouraging developments, in political terms, women here are still punching below their weight. Lack of visibility is a major problem. Currently, a member of the Sarajevo Canton Assembly and a delegate to the Federation's upper house of parliament, the House of Peoples, Svetlana Fabjanic is running for the entity's House of Representatives in the forthcoming elections. Yet while her male counterparts in the Social Democratic Party, SDP, were out on the campaign trail, Fabjanic was doing "backstage" work at the SDP's cantonal headquarters in Sarajevo, telephone canvassing voters alongside volunteers and party workers.

It is a division of labour that reflects the daily reality here. While socialism and industrialisation may have brought women equal rights and opportunities, "the culture of this country remains rural and patriarchal," said Fabjanic.

The problems women are up against transcend ethnic and entity boundaries. Gordana Vidovic, head of the RS Peasant Party's list of candidates for the Dobojski Region, said, "Women face a lot of different battles in

Bosnia. Those who want to take part in political life have to fight for that, even with men inside their own party. Things are improving. But the situation is much better in the Federation than here," she said.

According to Sonja Lokar, of the Stability Pact Gender Task Force Women, female candidates are ideally placed to deal with the practical problems facing Bosnia-Herzegovina, a cash-strapped country in transition. "Women know how to manage money; they perform miracles with their household budgets and stave off all the worst consequences of poverty," she said.

But many women find it difficult to compete against men in the public arena. "As a female candidate, the key to getting noticed is reaching out to your individual community," said OSCE democratisation officer Damir Hadzic. "The biggest challenge for women is to drum up sufficient PR, to be put forward by their political parties and to gain the time needed in public and in the media to present herself."

Mirjana Deak of the Party for Bosnia-Herzegovina, SBiH, agreed that social norms tend to transfer to the political arena, making it difficult for women to shine. "Men (in Bosnia) have more experience than women, they present themselves differently and are much more exhibitionist. Men use stronger language and they thrive on being the centre of attention, even if a scandal has put them there. Women tend not to talk in those terms. They don't inflame situations, they calm them down," she said.

To this end, a series of pre-election campaign training sessions were held for women across the country in the summer. The leading female NGO Zena Zenama, Women for Women, ran workshops on the importance of networking and lobbying; EU representatives talked about the importance of economic development as a campaign issue; and journalists advised candidates on how best to use the media to promote their campaigns.

Both the Federation and RS now have government-funded gender centres which monitor and promote the implementation of women's rights and a plethora of NGOs are working to the same end, hoping that their efforts will lay the groundwork for a new more politically active generation of women.

Zena Zenama regularly works with the government on issues such as shelter, domestic violence and trafficking. Selma Hadzihalilovic, who has been involved with the group, described how they are gradually trying to shift views by establishing contacts with women already working inside the government departments they need to lobby. "Women are actually the majority in secondary executive seats," she pointed out. Hadzihalilovic believes that NGOs can not only facilitate the election of more female politicians, but also improve their skills once in office.

But women candidates and politicians are only one side of the story. In a population that is currently 60 per cent female, female voters are also part of the problem. "I know the NGO sector has been working hard with women voters, but the problem is that women are still not very politically conscious," said Gordana Vidovic. "They still prefer to vote for a man, or they will just vote the same way their husband is voting."

"The problem is that women don't vote for other women," agreed Nada Pozderac, a Croatian Peasant Party, HSS, candidate for the Sarajevo Canton Assembly. "Unfortunately, we are still a very traditional society. A lot of women will say 'My husband knows best' even when it comes to a simple household matter. Why do we not have more women in the public sphere? Because there is no real support for women to play this very responsible role. Things are changing, but not enough," she said.

These tendencies are even stronger in the rural areas where voter turnout tends to be highest, according to Vera Markos, political adviser to the head of the OSCE mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Illiteracy amongst women is highest in the countryside and few rural women voters venture out to pre-election campaign rallies. With no basis for making their own decisions, they vote for the same candidates as their husbands - who tend not to vote for women.

Moreover, while the gender minority rule has guaranteed a minimum proportion of female candidates, more recent changes have removed other mechanisms that could be used to advantage women candidates.

The first elections with the gender minority requirement used a system of closed lists, whereby voters chose between different parties listed on the ballot papers. The parties placed their candidates in descending order of preference, enabling them to increase the chances of certain candidates by placing them at the top of the list. Proportional representation then dictated how many candidates were elected from each party list.

In the 2000 elections, this system was replaced by a one of open lists, where the voters could choose candidates directly. Overall party votes are still determined by proportional representation, but the lists of candidates are indicated on the ballot paper and voters can, if they wish, vote for the candidates in a different order of preference. Under this voting system, the number of women in the state's House of Representatives fell from 26 per cent to 18 per cent.

"Open lists mean that the most popular candidates will get the seats, but often the most popular candidates are not women," explained Vera Markos. "The high profile women are the ones who get through." With women struggling for visibility on the political scene, open lists can reduce their chances, but supporters point out that by allowing voters to cast their votes directly for specific candidates they are more democratic.

Once elected, women still face an uphill struggle. In an interview with IWPR, Hadziahmetovic was candid about the challenges facing them in office. "People here pay far more attention to the appearance of a woman in public, than to that of a man," she said. "A woman has to work three times as hard to achieve the same goal as a man. I am trying to show that we can do at least as well as men, and even better in some areas. We are the ones most capable of cleaning things up and building a system that works."

Deak agrees. "Discrimination exists in Bosnia-Herzegovina, but it's an invisible kind discrimination," she said. "For example, in parliament all the decision making bodies are composed of men. Women are guilty too, because in many cases they don't recognise this as discrimination. I am the only woman to have stood up in parliament and say that I refuse to accept that women are not capable of making important decisions."

The Croatian Peasants Party, HSS, one of the smaller parties on the scene, has decided to campaign on gender issues, making the fight against discrimination, domestic violence and trafficking of women a major plank of its manifesto. "We are determined to say no to all forms of abuse and to be involved in all decisions of vital importance," said Mira Lasic, head of the HSS list for the Hercegovina-Neretva canton. The party has even formed a woman's forum, called Our Strength.

In a country where nationalism has dominated politics for over a decade, it remains to be seen how much mileage can be gained by going after the "woman's vote", however. "Unfortunately we don't have that tradition," said Hadzihalilovic. "Politicians here tend to pursue their own politics, not the voters."

In 1998, Amila Omersonfic, the wartime director of Sarajevo radio and television founded Stranka Zena BiH, the Woman's Party of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The party came close to disqualification by the OSCE in the 2000 elections for not having the requisite 30 per cent of minority gender candidates - in this case men. It faced the same problem this year, but eventually found a number of men prepared to stand as candidates. The Woman's Party does not appear to have been actively campaigning, however, and calls to its headquarters went unanswered.

Moreover, while the number of women active in politics is growing, most are over 35. With the exception of Samra Tojaga in Mostar, of the People's Party Working for Prosperity, who has appealed directly to young Bosnians considering emigration to stay and build a better life, there is little sign of an emerging, younger generation of female politicians. "Young people are pessimistic, they are looking for a way out of this country," said Markos. As for female prospects in the forthcoming polls, Markos is circumspect. "I don't think the mentality has changed enough to make a significant difference in this year's elections."

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