

REPORT ON
THE STATE OF
HUMAN
RIGHTS OF
WOMEN IN
BOSNIA AND
HERZEGOVINA
IN THE PERIOD
2022-2024

ORANGE

REPORT

No. 8

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Bosnia and Herzegovina in the Period 2022-2024

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CONTENTS

SUMMARY	5
REPORT METHODOLOGY	7
POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE PRACTICES	8
PRIORITY MEASURES TO BE TAKEN	13
ANTI-GENDER RESISTANCE, ACTIONS AND NARRATIVES IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA	15
GENDER EQUALITY IN THE FIELD OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RIGHTS	57
<i>Gender equality and education, labour market</i>	57
<i>Maternity benefits</i>	58
<i>Reconciliation of private and work life</i>	68
<i>Care economy</i>	70
<i>Action guidelines</i>	75
SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH	76
<i>Normative and legal framework</i>	76
<i>Period poverty</i>	76
<i>Access to sexual and reproductive health services and family planning</i>	78
<i>Availability of HPV vaccines</i>	86
<i>Action guidelines</i>	87
POLITICAL LIFE AND DECISION-MAKING	89
<i>Normative and legal framework</i>	89
<i>Representation in government bodies and decision-making positions</i>	89
<i>Action guidelines</i>	90
GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE	91
<i>Normative and legal framework</i>	91
<i>Institutional mechanisms for combating domestic violence</i>	93
<i>Position and work of safe houses</i>	94
<i>Action guidelines</i>	95
AUTHORS AND EDITOR	96
ABOUT SARAJEVO OPEN CENTRE	98

SUMMARY

When we talk about the situation in the field of gender equality and human rights of women in the past three years, several topics are particularly important. However, one topic has notably dominated both public discourse and the feminist movement itself.

This is the field of **domestic violence, femicide and gender-based violence**. A large number of cases of femicide, i.e. murders of women because they are women motivated by hatred and gender prejudices, have been echoing strongly through Bosnian and Herzegovinian society for years. All these cases have completely exposed the shortcomings of the system, but also the deep rootedness of gender prejudices in society. This is the topic that the feminist movement, the pundits, and human rights defenders have been talking about for years. However, the murders and violence of men against women have also gained the attention of the general public, the media and political actors. While the consensus on the alarming nature of this issue and the need to provide a strong and systemic response is visible, a robust and agile response from decision makers and authorities was unfortunately lacking. Despite numerous examples supporting this issue, it is important to note that at the time of the publication of this report, the Federation of BiH has not yet amended the Criminal Code in order to harmonize it with the Istanbul Convention. Additionally, Republika Srpska has retracted, according to the opinion of the pundits, a well-regarded draft of the Law on Protection against Domestic Violence due to pressure from populist, ultraconservative, and clerical civil society organizations

This report devoted special attention to the analysis of the **mobilization of anti-gender actors** in the country, which is reflected in the growing social, political and cultural influence of many non-governmental and political actors gathered around populist ideas that oppose the idea of human rights and gender equality. They spread moral panic and misinformation by targeting the feminist and LGBTI movements in particular. This phenomenon is not new, but it has become more visible and influential, so it is necessary to fully shed light on it, and to bring its development and main actors closer to the general public.

Furthermore, in the realm of **sexual and reproductive health**, we have recorded the practices of health institutions that go against the autono-

my of a woman to make decisions about her body and even so far that certain representatives of the health sector arbitrarily interpret or refuse to apply the positive legal regulations governing this field.

The gender gap when it comes to **women's political participation** remains unchanged. Positive steps have been made regarding maternity benefits in the F BiH, although they are still not fully harmonized in all cantons. There were not significant steps forward in the sphere of **economic and social rights** through adapted and gender-sensitive policies in the field of care economy and reconciliation of private and work life, primarily due to the lack of awareness among decision makers about the importance of eliminating the gender gap.

As every year, we hope that this report will benefit the pundits, the media, the activist movement, but also the general public and encourage argumentative discussion and be the basis for the best possible regulations and policies in the field of gender equality in BiH.

REPORT METHODOLOGY

This report analyses the legal and institutional framework in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and highlights its shortcomings and level of application in the context of gender equality. The focus is on four key areas: socio-economic rights, sexual and reproductive health, participation in political life and decision-making processes, and gender-based violence against women and domestic violence. The structure of the report monitors the continuity of reporting and enables the monitoring of changes over the previous three-year period.

The eighth Orange Report primarily deals with the human rights of women in BiH, through the analysis of legal, institutional and social factors that contribute to their inequality and frequent violations of their rights. The report provides an overview of the current situation in the previous two years, maps the initiatives and efforts of different actors and provides recommendations and guidance for further work.

Different methodological approaches were applied during the preparation of the report. The basis consists of existing research and analysis, as well as data continuously collected by Sarajevo Open Centre, other non-governmental and international organizations. The dogmatic-normative method was used in the analysis of the legal framework, while the data of the institutions were obtained through a questionnaire submitted to them.

The eighth edition of the Report introduces a novelty that, in addition to the standard areas covered by the Report, special attention is paid to one of the issues current for the existing period. An analysis and research on the mobilization of anti-gender actors in BiH was selected for this Report. More on the goals and methodology of research in the chapter Anti-gender resistance, action and narratives in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE PRACTICES

POSITIVE PRACTICES

Alignment of the Brčko District Criminal Code with the Istanbul Convention

In early 2024, the Assembly of the Brčko District of BiH adopted amendments to the Criminal Code of the BD BiH. For the first time in BiH, the criminal offense of rape was defined as sexual intercourse that occurs without consent. Additionally, the statute of limitations for crimes against sexual integrity, marriage, and family committed against children starts from the day the victim reaches adulthood. The law also provides for new criminal offenses such as genital mutilation of female genital organs, forced sterilization, stalking, psychological violence and sexual harassment, and has expanded the group of protected characteristics within the criminal offense of public provocation and incitement to violence and hatred, which now includes, among other things, gender, sexual orientation and gender identity.

Maternity leave: Forms for exercising the right to compensation

In the Sarajevo Canton, three municipalities have changed the forms for receiving compensation instead of salary during the use of maternity leave. At the initiative of Sarajevo Open Centre, the Municipality of Centar, Novi Grad and Novo Sarajevo introduced a neutral term *parent*, which sends a message that fathers can also receive maternity benefits.

Maternity benefits

Compared to the last reporting period, there was an improvement in the situation regarding the amount of maternity benefits. In the Sarajevo Canton, the benefits for employed and unemployed new mothers have been equalized, and they now amount to BAM 1261.¹ The Zenica-Doboj Canton also equalized maternity benefits for employed and unemployed new mothers,² and the Assembly of the Bosnian-Podrinje

1 Unemployed new mothers receive the full amount, while employed mothers are paid the difference up to the amount of BAM 1261.

2 Assembly of Zenica-Doboj Canton: [www.zdk.ba](https://zdk.ba). Retrieved from: <https://zdk.ba/>

Canton did the same by adopting the Law on Amendments to the Law on Social Protection, Protection of Civilian Victims of War and Protection of Families with Children.³ In the Tuzla Canton, unemployed new mothers will also receive compensation in the amount of BAM 1,000, and employed new mothers whose compensation is less than BAM 1,000 will be paid the difference.⁴ Unfortunately, there is still inequality among new mothers, because maternity benefits are not yet uniform at the level of the Federation of BiH.

The FBiH Ministry of Labour and Social Policy has provided payment of one-time maternity benefits in the amount of BAM 1,000 for all children born in 2024. The application for the right to one-time assistance was facilitated by the creation of the online platform ePorodilja.⁵

Reaction of the Bar Association to the appearances of lawyer Omar Mehmedbašić

One of the positive examples worth pointing out is the reaction of the Regional Bar Association. Namely, upon the reporting made by Sarajevo Open Centre, the CURE Foundation and the Women's Network, the Bar Association initiated disciplinary proceedings against lawyer Omar Mehmedbašić. In a statement to the media, he defended his client accused of killing his wife and previously convicted of domestic violence, claiming, among other things, that the defendant loved his victim.⁶ The Regional Bar Association imposed a fine on the lawyer in the form of a public reprimand and a fine of BAM 100. The acting judge ordered him to send an apology to all women and organizations SOC, CURE and the Women's Network with the obligation to send a public apology to the

vijesti/10037-skupstina-zdk-usvojila-izmjene-zakona-od-1-septembra-porodiljne-naknade-1-000-00-km (29.11.2024)

3 Assembly of the Bosnia-Podrinje Canton. Retrieved from: <https://bpkg.gov.ba/media/images/2024/03/Zakon-i-izmjenama-i-dopunama-Zakona-o-socijalnoj-zastiti.pdf> (29.11.2024)

4 Assembly of Tuzla Canton, the Law on Social Protection, Protection of Civilian Victims of War and Protection of Families with Children of TC (second consolidated text). Retrieved from: https://skupstinatkc.gov.ba/Dokumenti/sl_novine/2023/Slu%C5%BEbenovineTKBR.18-20223.pdf (29.11.2024)

5 FBiH Ministry of Labor and Social Policy. https://eporodilje.fmrsp.gov.ba/?trk=public_post_main-feed-card_reshare-text#/portal/pocetna (29.11.2024)

6 N1 info, n1info.com. Retrieved from: <https://n1info.ba/vijesti/advokat-anela-becirovica-imat-cemo-svjedoke-da-je-emiru-puno-volio-i-nikada-nije-bio-nasilan/> (29.11.2024)

N1 info portal.⁷ Although the fine of BAM 100 seems low, we note that the reporting did not request the imposition of a fine, which means that the disciplinary court went a step further.

NEGATIVE PRACTICES

Removal of the Draft Law on Protection against Domestic Violence and Violence against Women in RS from the parliamentary procedure

The authorities in Republika Srpska sided with conservative organizations and initiated amendments to the RS Criminal Code, deleting the gender identity as a protected characteristic from all provisions of the Code. This move came after the Draft Law on Protection against Domestic Violence and Violence against Women in RS was prepared. “The Parents for Children’s Rights” Association *opposed the granting of special rights to members of the LGBT community and the possibility of promoting LGBT and gender ideology to children in schools*. Reactions and comments of non-governmental organizations advocating for the human rights of women and LGBTI persons were not taken into account, and the Law on Protection against Domestic Violence and Violence against Women, which was supposed to significantly protect victims from violence, was withdrawn, followed by the deletion of gender identity as a protected characteristic from the Protocol for the Protection of Children against Violence, Neglect and Abuse, and the Criminal Code of RS.⁸ “The Parents for Children’s Rights” Association went a step further and requested from the Constitutional Court of RS to examine the constitutionality of the concept of *gender* in the decision on the establishment of the Gender Center – Center for Gender Equity and Equality (Gender Centre) of RS. The Constitutional Court has established that this name is not in accordance with the Constitution of Republika Srpska because the word *gender* does not belong to any of the languages in official use.⁹

7 N1 info, ba.n1info.com. Retrieved from: <https://n1info.ba/vijesti/regionalna-advokatska-komora-kaznila-omara-mehmedbasica-i-izrekla-mu-javnu-opomenu/> (29.11.2024)

8 ba.n1info.com. Retrieved from: <https://n1info.ba/vijesti/nsrs-protjeruje-rodni-identitet-iz-krivicnog-zakonika-rs/> (29.11.2024)

9 Constitutional Court of Republika Srpska. *Press release from the 316th session of the Constitutional Court of Republika Srpska*. Retrieved from: <https://www.ustavnisud.org/Doc.aspx?cat=12&subcat=27&id=849&lang=bos&tekst=2562> (29.11.2024)

Sluggishness of decision-makers in the FBiH regarding the harmonization of the Criminal Code with the Istanbul Convention

At the time of finalization of the report, it is expected that the Draft Law on Amendments to the Criminal Code of FBiH and the Law on Protection against Domestic Violence of FBiH will be adopted. Nevertheless, in the past period, we have witnessed an extremely slow process of amending the law, in addition to numerous pressures from the public, civil society and the experts.

Termination of pregnancy: Limited availability, illegal actions of certain administrative bodies and non-governmental actors who oppose

Despite clear laws guaranteeing the right to abortion, women in Bosnia and Herzegovina do not have equal conditions to perform abortion-on-demand. The availability of treatment and the price – which goes up to BAM 600 – varies in the cantons. In some cantons, abortions are not performed at all.

The negative practice of healthcare professionals refusing to provide abortion services based on personal beliefs (so-called conscientious objection) has been recognized, and in some cantons, healthcare institutions are also guided by personal views. The Ministry of Labor, Health, Social Welfare and Displaced Persons of Canton 10 is of the opinion that the issue of abortion should be resolved in such a way that abortion is completely banned in BiH. When asked, they provided information that abortions are not currently performed in public institutions in this canton. “Health care institutions that perform abortions actually lose their sense of caring for the life of every human being from conception to natural death. Namely, life begins at conception, it is taught in school, colleges and it is an indisputable fact, regardless of the fact that someone wants to negotiate about the moment when life begins,” says the Ministry, where abortion is not seen as a medical but a moral issue.¹⁰

As a negative practice, we point out the emergence of an increasing number of groups, organizations and individuals who oppose abortion

¹⁰ More in the research: <https://soc.ba/zagovaranje-zabrane-i-protivljenje-abortu-su-u-bosni-i-hercegovini-organizacije-inicijative-i-pojedinci/>

and advocate its prohibition. More about this in the chapter Sexual and Reproductive Health.

Anti-gender resistance, actions and narratives in Bosnia and Herzegovina

There is an increase in the activities of actors that have the characteristics of anti-gender policies, especially in the entity of Republika Srpska. These are actors who resist legal improvements, the rights of women and LGBTI persons, and who are also active in the field of education, the non-governmental sector, politics and religious communities. More on the topic in the chapter of this report entitled Anti-gender resistance, actions and narratives in Bosnia and Herzegovina by Zlatiborka Popov Momčinović.

PRIORITY MEASURES TO BE TAKEN

Demonstrate commitment to the implementation of the Istanbul Convention and the fight against all forms of gender-based violence

All levels of government in Bosnia and Herzegovina still have a lot of work to do to combat gender-based violence and improve the legislative and institutional framework for a more intensive fight against domestic violence and violence against women.

In the coming period, it is necessary to harmonize the Criminal Code of the Federation of BiH, and work on harmonizing the law on protection against domestic violence with the convention. Also, it is necessary to regulate and criminalize sexist and misogynistic speech and calls for violence against women and gender-based violence in all criminal codes in BiH. Additional efforts must be made to provide legal bases and financial resources for the functioning of safe houses and provide adequate protection to victims of violence. In order to adequately confront the problem of gender-based violence, it is necessary to work through schools and the media to raise public awareness of the harmfulness of this behaviour and to eliminate gender-based stereotypes and prejudices.

Provide unimpeded access to health services relevant to women's sexual and reproductive health and family planning

At the levels of the entities, cantons and Brčko District, it is necessary to develop and implement a program containing measures and activities to achieve equal rights and equal access to health care, including strengthening the professional capacity of health institutions to apply domestic and international standards in the field of sexual and reproductive health. Health institutions must carry out gender equality trainings for health professionals in order to ensure the provision of health services that take into account the different needs and interests of women and men. Greater attention must be paid to raising awareness of proper sexual and reproductive health care, ensuring access to contraception for both men and women, and access to health care for marginalized groups of women, especially women with disabilities. It is necessary to additionally work on the implementation of entity laws

and the establishment of a uniform procedure for the implementation of pregnancy termination throughout BiH. It is also necessary to improve the Law on Infertility Treatment with Bio-Medically Assisted Fertilization of FBiH, and to adopt an identical law in Republika Srpska, in order to regulate bio-medically assisted fertilization in a uniform way in BiH entities and to enable an individualized approach to each couple.

Improve the legal and institutional framework for the reconciliation of private and work life

In order to achieve the conditions for reconciling private and work life, it is important to adopt legal changes, policies and develop family support measures in terms of adequate regulation of issues and timely payment of maternity benefits (both employed and unemployed mothers). It is then necessary to provide everyone with equal access to preschool institutions for child care, where the cantons need to specifically consider subsidizing or provision of additional incentives for access to kindergartens for children from socially disadvantaged families and low-income families. Likewise, it is necessary to promote gender-sensitive models of parenting and family life, encourage men to use parental leave and participate in family care in cases of absence from work due to illness, nurturing a family member, etc. When creating policies and measures, it is important to consider and envisage the establishment and subsidization of access to preschool institutions, day care centres for children with disabilities, institutions for older family members, etc., which would reduce the burden of care that falls on women within the family and makes it difficult for them to reconcile work and private life.

Improve the legal framework for equality between men and women in the executive and legislative branches

Although the Election Law is harmonized with the Law on Gender Equality of BiH, and the parties are obliged to include at least 40% of the underrepresented sex on the candidate lists, this measure has not achieved its goal. Considering that this is an affirmative measure aimed at ensuring equal participation of women and men, it is necessary to introduce mechanisms equal to those applicable to the participation of

constituent peoples in these bodies. Also, women in BiH make up 51% of the population, and it is necessary to change the existing quota of 40% to 50% in order to reflect the social reality as well as the interests of the population. In order to ensure equal representation of women in the executive branch, it is also necessary to amend the Law on the Council of Ministers, laws on governments and ministerial appointments of entities and cantons so that, in a way that ensures the participation of constituent peoples, they also ensure the participation of at least 40% of women in these bodies.

ANTI-GENDER RESISTANCE, ACTIONS AND NARRATIVES IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

INTRODUCTION

Anti-gender actions, i.e. anti-gender mobilization and movements that arise as a result of this actions and narratives that spread in the public space, is a wider and global phenomenon. Most authors believe that this is not a mere continuation of antifeminism and classical homophobia, but a new phenomenon that has successfully exploited splits in the feminist movement, the crisis of the left, the rise of so-called identity politics and right populism, for its profiling.¹¹ The impact of the economic crisis and recession, neoliberal austerity policies and increased migration on anti-gender mobilization in Europe is also significant.¹² These factors and in particular the crisis of masculinity and the successes of the feminist and LGBTI movements in certain strata of society have produced moral panic, and the wave of evangelization in the Catholic Church and Protestant denominations has facilitated the expression of

11 See: Grzebalska, W. Kováts, E., & Pető, A. Gender as symbolic glue: how 'gender' became an umbrella term for the rejection of the (neo)liberal order. HAL open science, 2017; Paternotte, D. & Kuhar, R. Disentangling and Locating the "Global Right": Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe. *Politics and Governance*, 6 (3), 2018.; Corredor, E. S. Unpacking "Gender Ideology" and the Global Right's Antigender Countermovement. *Signs*, 44 (3), 2019.

12 Kováts, E., & Pető, A. Anti-gender discourse in Hungary: A discourse without a movement. And R. Kuhar & D. Paternotte (eds). *Anti-gender campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against equality*, 2017, p. 118.

these fears and discomforts.¹³

A significant *novelty* is that those who oppose equality have actually taken on concepts such as gender and feminism and redefined what liberal voices have been trying to articulate in recent decades, thus increasing confusion among average citizens.¹⁴ Furthermore, they have taken over the discourse of human rights and the ways of fight used by the feminist and LGBTI movements (e.g. walks with loud music) and the use of so-called democratic tools (public discussions, petitions, referendums), which makes them different from the previously known conservative resistance to gender equality.¹⁵ In this regard, Kuhar and Paternotte (2017) distinguish between old and new actors, as well as their allies from the political, religious sphere as well as the scientific community. Old anti-gender actors are commonly considered to be the Catholic Church and conservative institutes in the US associated with the Christian right, which represent an important stronghold for the traditional notion of gender roles in society and human sexuality. On the other hand, the momentum of new organizations and groups, some of which are motivated by an evangelization project such as the Catholic *Opus Dei*, all the way to groups of “concerned parents” or “concerned citizens”, confirms that this is a rather diverse composition.¹⁶ The work of transnational organizations is also important, such as the *International Organization for the Family*, which through the *World Family Organization* brings together Christian fundamentalists around the world to protect the so-called natural families.¹⁷ It should also be noted that these actors are often not easy to locate, given the lack of transparency in the work, especially when it comes to goals, activities, communication and, above all, financial and other transactions.¹⁸ They often use the “chameleon strategy” or “wolf in sheep’s clothing” strategy – they

13 Kuhar, R. & Paternotte, D. (eds). *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing Against Equality*. London & New York, Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017, p. 13.

14 Ibid., p. 10.

15 Paternotte, D. & Kuhar, R. Disentangling and Locating the “Global Right”: Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe, p. 10.

16 Mayer, S. & Sauer S. “Gender ideology” in Austria: Coalitions around an empty signifier. In: R. Kuhar & D. Paternotte (eds). *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing Against Equality*, p. 27.

17 McEwen, H., & Narayanaswamy, L. *The international anti-gender movement: understanding the rise of anti-gender discourses in the context of development, human rights and social protection* (No. 2023-06). UNRISD Working Paper, 2023, pp. 10, 11.

18 Desperak, I. The Anti-Gender Movement and its Central and East European Main Actors. *Polish Political Science Review/Polski Przegląd Politologiczny*, 11 (2), 2023, p. 17.

present themselves in a positive light, invoke moral values and the right to freedom of speech, while essentially encouraging discrimination and restriction of human rights and freedoms of those they see as a threat.¹⁹

The concept of gender, gender ideology and gender theory were not chosen by chance, since they can be filled with different, often contradictory ideas.²⁰ Also, words such as *gender* and expressions such as “genderism” sound sinister and foreign in most cultural contexts and have replaced “feminism” in global right-wing rhetoric, thus creating an image of the gender equality movement as a powerful and foreign “colonizer”.²¹ Also, anti-EU and anti-Western sentiments are used generously in anti-gender narratives and give an important impetus to anti-gender action in some parts of the world.²² And while anti-gender campaigns are run globally, they adapt in a specific way to the local context, political structures, and circumstances in a particular society.²³

OBJECTIVES AND METHOD

The objective of this research is to provide understanding of anti-gender activity in BiH society in the spirit of Weber’s interpretative sociology, without the intention of labelling or ridicule, but from the position of the importance of protecting democratic values and human rights, with special emphasis on the rights of women and LGBTI persons. Desk analysis, i.e. analysis of documents, *online* media content, websites of organizations, churches and religious communities, and posts on social networks were used, and relevant scientific and activist literature was consulted. Focus groups and in-depth interviews were also conducted during October, November and December 2024. Persons who advocate for gender equality in the sphere of their professional and activist engagement have been selected for interviews and focus groups, i.e. they have relevant knowledge and experience on the work of anti-gender ac-

19 Ibid., pp. 16, 17.

20 Mayer, S. & Sauer B. “Gender ideology” in Austria: Coalitions around an empty signifier, p 24, 36.

21 Korolczuk, E., Graff, A. Gender as ‘Ebola from Brussels’: The Anti-colonial Frame and the Rise of Illiberal Populism, *Signs*, 43(3), 2018, p. 799.

22 Paternotte, D. & Kuhar, R. Disentangling and Locating the “Global Right”: Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe, p. 9.

23 Norocel, C. O. & Paternotte, D. The DIS/Articulation of AntiGender Politics in Eastern Europe: Introduction, *Problems of Post-Communism*, 70 (2), 2023, p. 124.

tors. A qualitative methodological approach has enabled gaining deeper insights into the ways in which these actors try to act and articulate their views with the intention of influencing public policies and directions of social movements in BiH. However, there are also limitations. Namely, anti-gender actors do not always act in an obvious, public and transparent way, and those who support them are not necessarily aware that they are part of anti-gender mobilization. Then, the complex political system and divisions in society are an obstacle to the action of progressive social movements, but they also partly prevent the more articulated and connected action of anti-gender actors. Also, in BiH society, gender equality is not part of the social and political *mainstream*, so, consequently, the movements themselves are often fragmentary and insufficiently articulated. However, in the recent period, there has been a clearer profile of anti-gender activity in terms of using gender as the main matrix for expressing concern about the situation in society and resistance to public policies and reforms in BiH, which, according to Paternotte and Kuhar, is a *differentia specifica* of anti-gender actors.²⁴

In order to better understand the formation of anti-gender activity in BiH, to locate explicit anti-gender actors and their allies, a process analysis was used to gain a dynamic and contextualized insight into this phenomenon. Namely, the most common reasons for anti-gender mobilizations are the signing or ratification of the Istanbul Convention, the announcement or adoption of laws on same-sex marriage or partnership, the introduction of certain reforms in the field of education or the gender mainstreaming of teaching content, and they are also aimed at depriving previously acquired rights, especially women's reproductive rights. The first part of this study focuses on clearly describing the resistance that occurred during the improvement of legislation, the introduction of new educational programs or reforms, as well as during LGBTI organized events and public appearance. The second part of the study focuses on recent and visible anti-gender actors who prominently utilize gender and gender-related terms and phrases as a key strategy in their actions, i.e. as the specific targets against which their narratives and attacks are directed, as well as the tactics they employ. The third part analyses what kind of narratives or activities are carried out by those who are considered their most

24 Paternotte, D. & Kuhar, R. Disentangling and Locating the "Global Right": Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe, p. 8.

important allies – politicians and churches and religious communities.

1. BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA – FROM PROTO-RESISTANCE TO ANTI-GENDER MOBILIZATION

Post-socialist and post-conflict BiH society, in which ethnocracy shapes not only political and public life but also greatly affects everyday life in the semi-peripheral society, is a favourable ground for spreading anti-gender narratives. The policies of division and fear that the elites continuously produce in order to remain in power have led to the dissolution of the social fabric and the creation of constant social confusion that favours the easier acceptance of rigid ideas, both old and new. On the other hand, there has been a significant improvement in the legal framework in BiH, which is attributed to the enormous presence of a foreign factor embodied in the so-called western part of the international community in the post-war period, and the legacy of socialist emancipation “which distanced itself from religious doctrines and prioritized the education of women, valued their work and treated the now contested issues such as abortion relatively liberally”.²⁵ The lack of articulation of anti-gender narratives during these first improvements comes from several causes, and one of them is the lack of real intention to truly implement and bring these improvements to life, and they were mostly adopted in order to adapt to international standards without encouraging wider deliberation. But the key factor is the fact that anti-gender mobilizations (the most significant of which is the one in France launched by *La Manif pour Tous*)²⁶ started later, during 2012 and 2013.

1.1. Law improvements and resistance

The Law on Gender Equality was adopted in 2003, and the female par-

25 Halilović, M. *Gender and Violent Extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Policy Document*. Sarajevo, Atlantic Initiative, 2023, p. 10.

26 La Manif pour Tous is an organization that launched a mass mobilization in France against President Hollande’s intention to legalize same-sex marriage in 2012. The participants in the protest carried banners that read “Stop Gender” and “No to Gender Theory”, which then encouraged similar mobilizations in other countries around the world. Kuhar, R., & Pajnik, M. Re-nationalizing Citizenship and Democratic Backsliding: Anti-gender Mobilizations in Central-Eastern Europe. In *The Palgrave Handbook of Gender and Citizenship*, Cham, Springer International Publishing, 2024, p. 365.

ticipants in these processes pointed out that some political actors reacted by asking questions about whether this meant that we would not be able to tell jokes about blondes and “whistle after a good-looking woman passes by us”.²⁷ This banalisation is certainly one of the tactics of action of anti-gender actors who treat issues related to gender equality in a derogatory manner. The female interlocutors from the academic community believe that the law itself is a resistance to gender because it essentially adheres to the binary definition of gender that extends heteronormativity.²⁸ A significant step forward is *the adoption of the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination* from 2009. The 2016 amendments finally named sexual orientation and gender identity correctly as the basis of discrimination, and gender characteristics in addition to them.²⁹ However, a negligible number of reported cases or convictions for discrimination based on these characteristics shows that there is institutional resistance. This is also evident in the fact that, for example, the state does not organize the necessary education for judges and prosecutors, but only civil society does that.³⁰ The female activist and journalist with whom the interview was conducted thus states that “**the entire BiH society is anti-gender**”.

This problem is also present when it comes to domestic violence, although BiH has easily ratified the **Istanbul Convention** of the Council of Europe. While mass protests against the Istanbul Convention were organized in neighbouring Croatia, little is known about the convention in BiH and progress in achieving the planned goals is limited.³¹ Otherwise, the convention is a common reason for expressing anti-gender narratives and for anti-gender mobilization in some European countries, so that a part of the countries has withdrawn their signatures in the meantime. In BiH, the convention has so far not been significantly problematized from this aspect in public discourse, and mostly sporadic cases have been recorded, for example at the 72nd regular meeting of

27 Popov-Momčinović, Z. *Activism in the women's movement in Bosnia and Herzegovina – Challenges, steps forward and social changes*. Sarajevo, CURE Foundation, 2024, p. 150.

28 See: Banović, D. *Rights and Freedoms of LGBT Persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina*. Sarajevo, Sarajevo Open Centre, 2011

29 Bošnjak, E. et al. *Pink Report 2017. Annual Report on the State of Human Rights of LGBTI Persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina*. Sarajevo: Sarajevo Open Centre, 2017, p. 12.

30 Brković, A. et al. *Pink Report 2023. Annual Report on the State of Human Rights of LGBTI Persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina*. Sarajevo: Sarajevo Open Centre, 2023, p. 21.

31 <https://www.vecernji.ba/vijesti/istanbulska-konvencija-ni-nakon-pet-godina-nije-zaustavila-nasilje-nad-zenama-1246686>

the Bishops' Conference of Bosnia and Herzegovina.³² However, from an anti-gender position, Bishop Nikola Kekić, a delegate of the Bishops' Conference of Croatia, actually spoke, pointing out that the bishops support the fight against violence against women and children, but also warn of the potential damage from *the Istanbul Convention, which seeks to introduce gender ideology into society through insufficiently clarified terms... and call for the ratification of the said Convention not to be taken lightly.*

Resistance during this period remained mainly in such, sporadic comments, but the laws are still not harmonized with the Istanbul Convention. The events of 2023 and 2024 in Republika Srpska show that even on the occasion of the improvement of laws related to domestic violence, anti-gender resistance is now explicitly articulated, and anti-gender mobilization is taking place. According to the female interlocutor from the academic community, everything that contains the term *gender* in its name encounters resistance and misunderstanding in BiH, including gender-based violence.

Also, the adoption of the **Law on Same-sex Partnership** has been delayed in the FBiH since 2018.³³ The female politician who advocated the introduction of this law states that a specific climate of silent resistance is created in the parliament when this issue is mentioned at the session.³⁴ Since anti-gender mobilization often occurs when it comes to laws that allegedly violate the traditional concept of marriage and cohabitation, the failure to pass laws and the absence of wider deliberation has prevented stronger anti-gender articulations.

1.2. LGBTI organizing and resistance in public action

LGBTI persons have been facing obstacles in organizing for many years, and it is only in 2004 that the Q organization was registered, which places BiH significantly behind other countries in the region.³⁵ In

32 <https://www.bkbih.ba/info.php?id=1029>

33 Adilović, A. et al., *Pink Report 2024 Annual Report on the State of Human Rights of LGBTI Persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina*. Sarajevo: Sarajevo Open Centre, 2024, p. 48.

34 Popov-Momčinović, Z. Women activists and women parliamentarians as actors of the political representation of women in Bosnia and Herzegovina. What claims with what successes?, *Genero*, 27, 2023, p. 160.

35 Gavrić, S. (2011). LGBT/Queer activism in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In S. Gavrić, L. Huremović & M. Savić (ed.). *Reader of Lesbian and Gay Human Rights. The first, Bos-*

2007, the Q organization also announced the holding of the first *queer* festival in BiH, which triggered counter-action from right-wing politicians (especially the SDA party), the Islamic Community of BiH, and the media.³⁶ Everything culminated in violence when Wahhabi members took to the streets of Sarajevo, shouted *Allahu Akbar* (God is great) and physically attacked the participants of the festival. At that time, the main anti-gender actors in the *proto* sense were Wahhabis because they represent “suitable others” when it comes to identifying opponents of gender equality, since believers who practice traditional Bosnian Islam also distance themselves from them.³⁷ A new attack was committed by a group of masked young men at the Merlinka 2014 festival in Sarajevo, although Sarajevo Open Centre duly reported the event to the police. The existence of anti-gender resistance within the institutions is evidenced by the fact that the police did not provide adequate protection, and it took four years after the attack to convict one of the perpetrators.³⁸

In Republika Srpska, LGBTI organizing went even slower. Only in 2014, the Banja Luka Association of Queer Activists (B.U.K.A.) was registered, which, in cooperation with the Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly Banja Luka, the Centre for Youth (KVART) and UNSA Ghetto, organized the IDAHOT festival.³⁹ These activities were held under the protection of the police, and there were numerous verbal attacks on activists of the B.U.K.A.⁴⁰ In the meantime, there was a trend of shutting down organizations due to authoritarian trends and hostile climate towards the community. In formal terms, today only the “*Kvart*” Association from Prijedor systematically and strategically deals with LGBTI rights in RS,⁴¹ while some organizations (such as *Sharp Zero /orig. Oštra nula/*) have included LGBTI topics in some of their activities. However, these, as well as other organizations dealing with human rights, face

nian-Herzegovinian edition (111–117). Sarajevo: Sarajevo Open Centre & Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2011, p. 113.

36 See: Durkalić, M. Bosnian and Herzegovinian Media and *Queer Sarajevo Festival* U S. Gavrić, L. Huremović & M. Savić (ed.). *Reader of Lesbian and Gay Human Rights. The first, Bosnian-Herzegovinian edition* (144–161).

37 Halilović, M. *Gender and Violent Extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Policy document*, p. 11.

38 Dizdar, A. et al. *Pink Report 2019 Annual Report on the State of Human Rights of LGBTI Persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina*. Sarajevo: Sarajevo Open Centre, 2019, p. 25.

39 <https://lgbti.ba/obiljezen-idahot-u-banjaluci/>

40 <https://lgbti.ba/idahot-2015-pregled-desavanja-u-bih/>

41 Brković, A. et al. *Pink Report 2023 Annual Report on the State of Human Rights of LGBTI Persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, p. 54.

obstacles in the use of space for the work of associations, and in organizing workshops in schools. In March 2023, when the police actually “allowed” the right-wing and fan groups to physically attack activists in the city of Banja Luka, the trend of withdrawing the community as well as leaving the country continued, making LGBTI persons virtually invisible: *Before there were some stickers on the lampposts, then some graffiti, so, we can occasionally see “here we are, we are on the streets, we are claiming space”, but it seems to me that there is no such thing either...* (Interview, female journalist).

1.2.1. Pride March

A major shift for the community is the holding of the 2019 BiH Pride March in Sarajevo, which makes BiH the last country in the region to organize the Pride, with great security measures. The day before the first pride, a counter rally called *Traditional Family Day* was held, and the People and Justice Party (NiP) also played an important role in organizing it. The gathering, as reported by *Dnevni avaz*, gathered a few hundred people, and some carried banners. *We know what is the key and what is the lock, why the will of the majority is not respected, support for biological survival, the family is the compass that guides us. It inspires us to reach great heights and comforts us when we occasionally fall*, and pink and blue balloons were shared. A proclamation was also read on which it was pointed out “that the pillar of the family is marriage between a man and a woman.”⁴² It calls for the will of the majority, the protection of the traditional family, and expressed fear for biological survival. These are typical narratives or tactics used by anti-gender actors when articulating resistance and demands.

Similar rhetoric was used by the president of the People and Justice party, Elmedin Konaković, and his FB post (9 September 2019) is a school example of how to “pack” anti-gender narratives and adapt them to the local context. Allegedly, discrimination is not advocated, but it is encouraged: *We are against any form of discrimination. But we are also against the march and any kind of promotion of sexual orientation*; the importance of protecting children and young people is emphasized: *We will never raise our hands for laws that introduce LGBTQ into educa-*

42 <https://avaz.ba/vijesti/bih/514409/poruka-s-transparenta-na-skupu-protiv-povorke-ponosazna-se-sta-je-kljuc-a-sta-brava>

tion, in which children choose their own gender, in which teenagers are offered options of gender change, in which same-sex marriage is legalized, etc.; it calls for the will of the majority and the use of democratic tools: The citizens of this country should vote on these major topics in a referendum; the minority, which has support “on the side”, is accused of intolerance: The march had an extremely strong marketing, media, PR and international support. It was supported by activists from several countries...and your “endless tolerance” crucified a covered girl on a pillar of public shame because of the banner The so-called anti-EU discourse (“EU dictate”) is connected with the war of the 1990s to produce a resentment: Once again, the citizens of Sarajevo taught us a lesson in tolerance to those who silently watched us being killed, set fire to our hearths and displaced us; in the end, the real fight is yet to come: We will fight even harder for the protection of family, births, mothers, mothers of newborns...

After a two-year break due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Pride March was held in Sarajevo in 2021, 2022, 2023 and 2024, and the counter-gatherings titled “Give Us Back the Rainbow” were organized by a former Salafi preacher, now the president of the “obscure political party Faith, People, State⁴³”. However, these gatherings did not gather many people (see chapter 3.1.3.). After successfully holding several parades in the capital city successively to date, the interviewed female politician believes that excessive, continuous securitization is also a form of anti-gender resistance of institutions, in order to create an image and general climate that it is something “dangerous”.

Research shows that in the summer months, i.e. during the Pride March, there is an increase in disinformation directed against LGBTI persons in BiH.⁴⁴ This contributes to an unfavourable social climate and is also a form of dissemination of anti-gender narratives. Many posts of users of social networks from BiH actually represent content from Croatia and Serbia, as well as the world. Typical tactics such as invoking freedom of speech, protecting children, and strong anti-Western rhetoric are used. Also, due to the administration of inappropriate content on social networks, it is increasingly resorted to not expressing explicit negative condemnations, but the essence of the messages is clear: *You can find*

43 Halilović, M. *Gender and Violent Extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, p. 20.

44 Salkanović, M. & Šehović, N. *Gender and Identity-Based Disinformation in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, Sarajevo, Why Not, 2014, p. 13.

there, “difficult days for a real family”, etc., but you do not have an invitation to violence. But also, it is very clear to conclude what these people are actually saying. (Interview, media expert)

1.3. Resistance in the sphere of education

Gender studies are a frequent target of attacks by anti-gender actors. According to the female interlocutors from the academic community, this happened in BiH during the launch of postgraduate gender studies within the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of the University of Sarajevo (CIPS) in 2008, which were organized for a total of three generations. The launch of the study was met with quiet resistance within the structures of the university, and the *key point of dispute was the use of “gender” in the “gender study” syntagm*. Also, the first generation waited much longer for the diploma than usual, *because it was not known what would be written on the diplomas!*

Gender studies were also the reason for hateful texts in the SAFF magazine, known for fundamentalist texts that are often religiously motivated. In the article titled “*In Sarajevo promoted masters of faggotry: 44 experts for debauchery*”, it is stated that gender studies *study the history of faggotry and advocate for same-sex marriage and adoption of children by faggots and lesbians*, and masters of gender studies are called “faggot experts”, who will produce “graduated faggots”, and *who will become an army to re-educate our natural order and tradition*.⁴⁵ In addition to traditional homophobia (“faggots”, “faggotry”, etc.), this 2011 article also uses typical anti-gender narratives such as the necessity to defend and protect tradition against the so-called “dangerous intentions” of gender studies to re-educate young people and the entire society. In a similar style, the SAFF magazine also warned about “dangerous intentions” in primary education in the Sarajevo Canton, where, through the new elective course *Healthy Lifestyles, children from the 5th to the 9th grade are raised to be bisexual and faggots*.⁴⁶ It is pointed out that this important issue is unnecessarily burdened with erroneous processing of gender identity, and parents are urged *to think carefully before agreeing to their child being indoctrinated in this way*. Based on the syntagms used in the text, which has the obvious intention of

45 <https://vzs.ba/odluka-urgentne-zalbene-komisije-po-tekstu-objavljenom-u-magazinu-saff-sarajevo-28-oktobar-2011/>

46 <https://saff.ba/djecu-od-5-do-9-razreda-odgajaju-da-budu-biseksualci-i-pederi/>

creating a moral panic, especially among parents, it is clear that it is an explicit anti-gender narrative.

Demands for questioning gender ideology in the field of education appeared in 2017 in the area with a predominantly Croatian Catholic population, i.e. in the West Herzegovina Canton and Široki Brijeg, and the events in neighbouring Croatia certainly gave an impetus.⁴⁷ In doing so, portals (such as Ljubuski.net) *warned* that there was a desire of certain groups to deconstruct gender and national identity, and the Ministry of Education was invited to publicly respond (Figure no. 1).



Figure no. 1

Otherwise, there is no much talk about these topics at the faculties and the female interlocutor from *the academic community points out that silence is the easiest and the best and most effective way of expressing an anti-feminist attitude in the academic community*. The female activist from Herzegovina also states that there were no events, round tables or lectures on LGBTI rights at the University of Mostar (to her best knowledge), and *when lectures on UN activism related to the fight against violence against women were organized, only three to four students came*. The female interlocutors also pointed out that a negative climate is created at the faculties when defending master's theses on

47 Spahić-Šiljak, Z. & Anić, R. Gender and Religion in the Balkans: The Example of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. And S. Odak & Z. Grozdanov (eds). *Balkan Contextual Theology. An Introduction*. London & New York, Routledge, 2022, pp. 96, 97.

these topics: *And I already hear “will people from the LGBTIQ population come to the faculty, will there be an invasion there?”* The activities of university professors should also be mentioned who successively promote homophobia and transphobia in their works and in the promotion of their books at universities, such as Fahira Fejzić Čengić, PhD from the Faculty of Political Sciences in Sarajevo.⁴⁸

Also, some activities within the UNIGEM project⁴⁹ gave rise to the expression of anti-gender resistance, which was recorded during forums on gender-sensitive language in RS. The Gender Equality Advisory Board at the University of Banja Luka has even received a letter from a law office in Belgrade asking them to publish all information about the activities of the advisory board members within projects, and points out that the gender-sensitive language “should not be introduced to the university”. In the meantime, round tables were organized at the Faculty of Law in Banja Luka in March 2024, where anti-gender resistance was articulated. On that occasion, Srđan Mazalica, a representative of SNSD, also participated and promised to revise all laws of Republika Srpska in order to remove gender and gender identity.⁵⁰ The case of a female professor of the Faculty of Law from RS who advocates anti-gender goals, such as the ban on abortion, and uses anti-gender tactics such as devaluing domestic violence, was also noted.

2. ANTI-GENDER ACTORS AND THEIR ALLIES

2.1. 21 organizations from Republika Srpska

The greatest public attention was caused by the activities of 21 organizations from Republika Srpska, whose representatives sent an open letter to President of Republika Srpska Milorad Dodik, other officials and ministries in January 2024 in order to prevent the adoption of the Law on Protection against Domestic Violence and Violence against Women.⁵¹ In the words of one female interlocutor, “many have the words

48 Bošnjak, E. et al. *Pink Report 2017 Annual Report on the State of Human Rights of LGBTI Persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, p. 28.

49 UNIGEM – Gender mainstreaming in education is a project implemented by TPO foundations in cooperation with 18 universities from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro, starting from the academic year 2021/22.

50 <https://www.bhrt.ba/mazalica-amandman-na-zakon-o-izmjenama-krivi%C4%8Dnog-zakonika-rs>

51 Отворено-писмо-са-печатима-поводом-Нацрта-закона-о-застити-од-насиља-у-

peace, love, friendship, God, humanitarian in their names, which is completely opposite to how they act at that moment.”⁵²

In an open letter, they present themselves as “Associations of Citizens of Republika Srpska” and point out that under the guise of protecting women from domestic violence, “gender ideology” is actually legalized “in a deceptive manner”. Before that, a part of these organizations (13 organizations from Banja Luka) jointly came forward in March 2023 by sending a letter to the President of Republika Srpska, the Prime Minister of Republika Srpska and the Mayor of Banja Luka. The main motive of this letter is the “danger” of promoting the LGBT “lifestyle” in public, and exposing children to content that is considered “aggressive”, “provocative” and “offensive”.⁵³ Previously, there were seven of them, and they demanded from the Ministry of Education and Culture to ban the celebration of the *Halloween* as part of the teaching of English in schools.⁵⁴ This gradual increase in the number of organizations gathered around a common goal, as one female interlocutor points out, indicates that mobilization is at work, with the tendency to spread.

Although it is a “rather diverse composition”, these organizations can be conditionally divided into extreme right-wing (such as the Serbian People’s Movement “The Choice is Ours”⁵⁵), conservative (e.g. Pot-

породици-и-насиша-према-зенама-PC.pdf

52 These are: Association of Citizens Parents for the Rights of Children; Society of Friends of the Hilandar Monastery; Circle of Serbian Sisters; Krajina Cultural Center St. Sava; Ravna Gora Movement of the Serbian Homeland – Krajina District; Serbian People’s Movement – The Choice is Ours, Serbian Assembly Baštonik; Association of Citizens Jadovno 1941; Association of Fiddlers and Epic Poets Starac Vujadin; Association of Families with 4 or More Children of the City of Banja Luka; Peace of God Foundation; Foundation for the Family; Humanitarian Association of Women Duga; Association of Teachers of Serbian Language and Literature; Conservative Club; Association of Citizens Potkozarje Through Time; S.P.K.D. Prosvjeta O.O. Kozarska Dubica; Orthodox Humanitarian Association “St. Sava”; Association of Citizens of Saint Basil of Ostrog; S.P.K.D. Prosvjeta O.O. Srebrenica; Prince Miroslav Humski Foundation.

53 <https://bastionik.org/2023/03/15/zajednicko-otvoreno-pismo-trinaest-nevladinih-organizacija-iz-banjaluke/>

54 <https://srpskainfo.com/foto-zakone-nam-kroje-antivakseri-i-lovci-na-vjestice-zasto-jaca-uticaj-konzervativnih-udruzenja-u-srpskoj/>

55 This association previously acted in the direction of seeking independence for Republika Srpska in 2008, and in 2023, after NATO aircrafts flew over Bosnia and Herzegovina, they held a performance with the message “Fuck you B-12”. <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/snp-izbor-je-nas-zatrazio-nezavisnost-rs-a/080327123>; <https://www.oslobodjenje.ba/vijesti/bih/video-uvredljiva-poruka-za-bombardere-u-banjoj-luci-desnicari-poslali-poruku-braci-bosnjacima-865055>

kozarje Through Time /orig. Potkozarje kroz vrijeme/, Conservative Club from Brčko), organizations that are engaged in the documentation of war crimes (such as the organization Jadovno 41), conservative organizations based on faith (“Peace of God” Foundation /Fondacija “Mir Božiji”/, Society of Friends of the Hilandar Monastery /orig. Društvo prijatelja manastira Hilandara/, Association of Citizens “St. Vasilije Ostroški”, Orthodox Humanitarian Association “Sveti Sava” /orig. Pravoslavno humanitarno udruženje „Sveti Sava“/), organizations that fight for the rights and protection of families and children (Association of Citizens “Parents for the Rights of Children” /orig. Udruženje građana Roditelji za prava djece/, Foundation for the Family /orig. Fondacija za porodicu/, Association of Families with 4 or more children of the City of Banja Luka /Udruženje porodica sa 4 i više djece grada Banjaluke/), conservative women’s organizations (Circle of Serbian Sisters /orig. kolo srpskih sestara/, Humanitarian Association of Women “Rainbow” /orig. Humanitarno udruženje žena Duga/), and organizations that operate in the field of education, science and education systems (Association of Teachers of Serbian Language and Literature /Društvo nastavnika srpskog jezika i književnosti/, S.P.K.D. Prosvjeta O.O. Kozarska Dubica, S.P.K.D. Prosvjeta O.O. Srebrenica). Based on their activities on social networks, it can be seen that some have a considerable degree of mutual exchange when forums and round tables are organized where they exchange opinions as speakers.⁵⁶

Some of these organizations have been operating for many years and, according to activists, have already been known to promote nationalism, exclusivity, Chetnik narrative and deny war crimes. Some have started operating more recently, and often point out that their establishment has received a positive response from the public.⁵⁷ Most of these organizations, regardless of the normative basis and focus of action, are also engaged in humanitarian work. With right-wing organizations, the focus is mainly on collecting material and other forms of assistance for the Serbian population in Kosovo and Metohija, as well as for multi-child families (“families with more than one child”) who live in dif-

56 For example, at the panel “Serbian Identity in Bosnia and Herzegovina”, organized by the Conservative Club from Brčko, the president of the Serbian Assembly Baštonik from Banja Luka, who is generally very active when it comes to these forms of exchange, also spoke.

57 For example: <https://srpskainfo.com/konzervativni-klub-iz-brckog-cuvar-srpske-tradicije-i-kulture/>

difficult financial conditions. Assistance is also directed to the families of former soldiers of the Republika Srpska Army who live in difficult financial conditions and who have been forgotten by the system. Some forms of material support are aimed at families who have returned to the countryside to live in harmony with nature, thus promoting the so-called family harmony and emphasizing that a healthy family is a pillar of society.⁵⁸ When it comes to the so-called family organizations, humanitarian work is directed at families with several children who live in difficult life conditions. Serbian families in Kosovo are often included and assistance to those children is described by the Foundation for the Family from Banja Luka /orig. Fondacija za porodicu iz Banje Luke/ and the Serbian Assembly Baštionik /Srpsko Sabranje Baštionik/ as “assistance to little guards in Kosovo and Metohija”.⁵⁹ These and other forms of humanitarian activities make it possible to create a positive image in the public of Republika Srpska that is emotionally related to the fate of the Serbian people in the area.⁶⁰

Despite the fact that these 21 organizations can be conditionally named as explicit anti-gender actors, after journalistic inquiries about the motive for overthrowing the law on protection against violence, some did not even know what exactly they signed, some claimed that they may have known, but that they do not remember, that is, that they signed after some others signed.⁶¹ In the mobilization for the signing of the letter, according to some of them, “Peđa from Baštionik” played a key role.⁶² According to the interviewed female journalist and activist, as well as the female interlocutors from the academic community, most of these organizations are not *even capable of engaging in such discussions: they do not use these terms at all, they are family, tradition, children, women, I would say very primitive. I think it is impossible for you to hear the term genderism or misogyny from them, no! It's such a primi-*

58 <https://bastionik.org/2024/04/30/zdrava-porodica-je-stub-drustva/>

59 <https://bastionik.org/2024/07/09/stipendije-za-male-strazare-kosova-i-metohije/>

60 It should be noted that in Serbia, some far-right organizations “use the humanitarian image as a front” in order to “rebrand” themselves and alleviate any negative connotations about their work. See: Ivančević, T. *Challenges of feminist politics. Remind us what security means*, Befem, Belgrade, 2024, p. 19.

61 <https://srpskainfo.com/ima-ih-i-u-vlasti-i-u-opoziciji-a-tradicionalnu-porodicu-svako-tumaci-na-svoj-nacin-za-koga-igraju-lideri-patrijarhalnih-udruzenja-u-rs/#::~:~:text=Deklaraci%C5%A1u%20se%20kao%20za%C5%A1titnici%20tradicionalne%20porodice%20i%20s%20tom%20argumentacijom>

62 <https://srpskainfo.com/foto-zakone-nam-kroje-antivakseri-i-lovci-na-vjestice-zasto-jaca-uticaj-konzervativnih-udruzenja-u-srpskoj/>

tive terminology, and that's why I think they're dangerous.

Despite this, the goals of some organizations are quite in line with the anti-gender agenda. The goals of **the Foundation for the Family** from Banja Luka /orig. *Fondacija za porodicu iz Banje Luke*/ are, among other things, to nurture and promote the value of the natural family; to advocate for traditional family values, to increase birth rates, as well as to reduce the number of foeticides/abortions/miscarriages⁶³ The Foundation is also supported by the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Republika Srpska. Cooperation has been established with a large number of cities and municipalities within the program of so-called proud cards intended for families with three or more children in order to achieve additional discounts. The organization holds family walks and similar events, and as is the case with **the Association of Families with Four or More Children 4+** from Banja Luka.⁶⁴ This association organizes various workshops for children and young people and lobbies decision-makers for legal solutions that would benefit multi-child families. The proposal of the so-called “Law on Mothers” (the initiative was launched in 2020) defines the right of all mothers to a monthly allowance and the right of mothers with four or more children to a guaranteed pension after their children reach adulthood.⁶⁵ Activists believe that one of the motives for the activities of this organization and the proposed legal solutions is the “return of the woman to the house”. They find it particularly indicative that the president of this association, Jovo Radovanović, is an advisor to the president of the RS National Assembly, Nenad Stevandić, *from the United Srpska party*,⁶⁶ which means that there is also a connection with high politics, i.e. a party that represents extreme right-wing ideas. They point out that Radovanović actively participated in *the ProLife Summit* in Belgrade,⁶⁷ and that he is also connected with educational institutions. On the family walks organized at five to twelve, the authorities are told that the family is the

63 <https://zaporodicu.org/lat/kategorije/678/ciljevi-fondacije>

64 <https://srpskainfo.com/foto-zajedno-promovisemo-prave-vrijednosti-stanivukovic-prisustvovao-porodicnoj-setnji-u-banjaluci-najavio-kartice-za-bezbrizno-i-zdravo-odrastanje/>

65 <https://katera.news/lat/udruzenje-cetiri-plus-pripremilo-inicijativu-svim-majkama-dati-dodatak>

66 <https://nebojsavukanovic.info/nastavlja-se-drske-zloupotrebe-nenada-stevandica-u-narodnu-skupstinu-zaposlio-i-brata-svog-sefa-kabinetu/>

67 The summit was organized by two of the most active *anti-choice* organizations from Serbia – the Alliance for Life and the Center for Life, and was supported by the Serbian Orthodox Church. See: Ivančević, T. *Challenges of feminist politics. Remind us what security was*, p. 20.

foundation of society. These walks are called „Walks for Life“⁶⁸, which also suggests a *pro-life* position.

During the interviews and focus groups, it was pointed out that in fact two organizations were the “brain of the operation” – the *Baštioni* Association played a key role in mobilization with the aim of preventing LGBTI events in Banja Luka in March 2023, and *Parents for Children's Rights* in the overturning of the 2023 Draft Law on Protection against Domestic Violence and Violence against Women. The *Baštioni* Association also played an important role in the mobilization to overturn the law. At the round tables held on this occasion, the president of this association used very harsh and aggressive rhetoric, and was hostile to women's organizations that run safe houses in RS.

2.1.1. *Parents FOR Children's Rights*

The organization *Parents FOR Children's Rights* from Bijeljina was formed in 2021 on the wave of anti-vaxxers when they opposed protective measures in schools during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶⁹ After the pandemic, it is obvious that gender is becoming a new, suitable target for action with also abundant use of pseudoscientific and incomplete information. Gender obsession is also visible in the public appearances of the president of the association, Jelena Sarafijan, who often uses the terms gender, and gender ideology and spreads moral panic caused by a potential gender threat. Thus, she participated in shows on the public service broadcaster and media close to the ruling structures, and often made various statements to the media on these and other occasions. She teaches at the Faculty of Education in Bijeljina and uses this position to promote anti-gender narratives. This was the case in January 2024, when, in cooperation with *the Alliance for Life /orig. Savez za život/* from Serbia and with the support of the Faculty of Education of the University of East Sarajevo, students were shown a Russian film entitled “*The Right to Life*”, which talks about the demographic decline of society as a result of abortion.⁷⁰ The association pointed out

68 <https://www.rtvbn.com/4050515/poruka-vladi-srpske-porodica-je-temelj-drustva#:~:text=Simboli%C4%8Dno%20u%205%20do%2012%20%C4%8Dlanovi%20Udru%C5%BEenja%20porodica%20sa%20%C4%8Detvoro>

69 <https://detektor.ba/2024/12/11/kako-americke-prolife-organizacije-podrzavaju-napore-protiv-abortiona-u-bih/>

70 <https://detektor.ba/2024/12/11/kako-americke-prolife-organizacije-podrzavaju-napore-protiv-abortiona-u-bih/>

that they organized this event “because according to demographic data, Republika Srpska is slowly disappearing”. The dissemination of fear of the so-called “demographic winter” and biological disappearance is a common tactic of anti-gender actors, especially among “small nations”, whereby demographic problems are often associated with homosexuality and *pro-choice* activism.⁷¹ The fact that women often play a key role in promoting anti-gender narratives elsewhere in the world is⁷² obviously one of the strategies used in this case *as well, with the aim of confusing the public: I find it very devastating that this anti-gender story about femicide is led by a woman, led by a lawyer from Bijeljina, and then I believe that the public is confused, ‘if it does not suit women, why are we pushing it’* (Interview, female journalist).

On the official website of the association, there is a lot of content that strategically attacks the notion of gender and everything related to it, especially gender-sensitive language and gender-based violence. In the text, *Gender Indoctrination of Republika Srpska – Introduction*, “gender ideology” is described as a modern “devshirme - blood tax” where current world powers and governments, like the former Ottomans, try to “alienate children from their gender”.⁷³ The goal of such a comparison is clear – to invoke the memory of the so-called slavery under the Turks in order to heat up ancient fears, which is openly suggested in the announcement/introduction of the text in which it then comes down on the modern “occupiers of the family”. In addition to the dissemination of fear, narratives often use seemingly half-joking word play and linguistic gimmicks such as *Let’s start in order. In fact, let’s start with gender*.⁷⁴

The announcement of content is often “equipped” with photo-shopped photos in order to intimidate or create a feeling of discomfort in readers or, possibly, to awaken curiosity (Figure no. 3):

71 Kuhar, R. Changing Gender Several Times a Day: The Anti-Gender Movement in Slovenia. *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing Against Equality*, p. 225.

72 Kuhar, R. & Paternotte, D. (eds.). *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing Against Equality*, p. 261.

73 <https://roditeljizapravadjece.org/rodna-indoktrinacija-republike-srpske-uvod/>

74 Ibid.

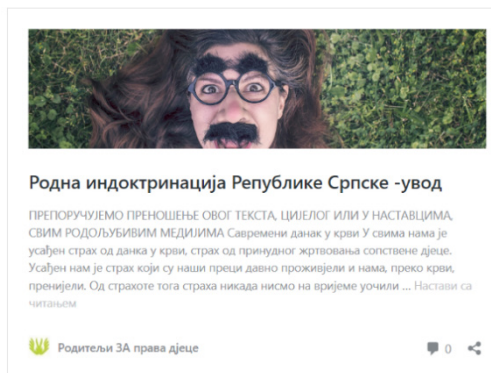


Figure no. 2: Screenshot – Dangers of “gender indoctrination”

Different contents of organizations from around the world that have the same or similar goals are shared, and the import of the so-called *know-how* is also a tactic of action. In December 2023, in Bijeljina, “an expert lecture was held by Dr. Vladimir Dimitrijević and Dr. Dušan Ilić on the topic: Who is killed by the law on femicide – Anti-family ideologies in the world and in our country.”⁷⁵ On this occasion, the association pointed out that Republika Srpska was faced with a temptation that it was not even aware of and that the society was threatened by a gender ideology aimed at destroying the family. The lecture is also an opportunity “to hear a lot of useful information about the situation in the neighbouring and fraternal Republic of Serbia, where the door to gender ideology is wide open by adopting the Law on Gender Equality”.⁷⁶ Due to the mentioned fraternal relations with Serbia, the local anti-feminist literature is also promoted⁷⁷ and content from the portal is shared, and some, for example, target women activists from Serbia who deal with gender-based violence (*Why LGBT women lobbyists do research on violence against women and children*⁷⁸).

75 <https://www.bijeljina.org/novosti/92480/64/U-Bijeljini-odrzano-strucno-predavanje-Koga-ubija-zakon-o-femicidu.html>

76 Ibid.

77 As, for example, the books *Sociology of the Gay Movement and Temptations of Radical Feminism: Power and Boundaries*, authored by Slobodan Anonić, full professor of the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade. Slobodan, otherwise an active fighter against the so-called gender ideology. <https://roditeljizapradjece.org/category/dokumenti/brosure-i-knjige/>

78 Orthodox Parent – Why are LGBT lobbyists conducting research into violence against women and children?

The organization sees its activities as patriotic, so the link between the fight against “gender ideology” and ethno-nationalism here is obvious. In order to “preserve” the traditional family at all costs, the association, immediately after the adoption of the Family Law of Republika Srpska, even demanded that the provisions of the law be amended or abolished so that social welfare centres can temporarily separate a child from the family without a court decision in cases provided for by law, such as domestic violence. In the words of the female president of the association, **“no institution can be above the parent and his/her love for the child”**.⁷⁹

The narratives on “gender ideology” / “gender theory” underline that the thesis about the harmfulness of patriarchal upbringing is not scientific. While in attacks on “gender ideology” they refer to science or non-science, in public appearances they often make generalized and unfounded claims, and use a tactic that Kuhar called *“playing with science”*.⁸⁰ For example, when appearing on television, one of the female members of the association pointed out that it was more important to talk about the murders of children than the murders of women, and at the same time claimed that in comparison between men and women, the number of men killed was higher.⁸¹ Under the guise of science and ethics, the organization is also openly acting against vaccination or immunization against human papillomavirus (HPV), which is considered not only unnecessary but also dangerous to the health of children, about which a lecture was held in Bijeljina in December 2022.⁸² Like other anti-gender actors in the world, the organization also attacks the pharmacological industry. In doing so, claims are often made that seem confusing or are inherently disinformation, and are often paired with “conspiracy” narratives and/or anti-Western propaganda.⁸³ One of the active members of the association also shared anti-abortion content on Facebook, as well as texts marked as disinformation, e.g.

79 Info Bijeljina - Parents express strong opposition to changes in the Family Law

80 See: Kuhar, R. Playing with science: Sexual citizenship and the Roman Catholic Church counter-narratives in Slovenia and Croatia. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 49, 84–92, 2015.

81 <https://detektor.ba/2024/12/11/kako-americke-prolife-organizacije-podrzavaju-napore-protiv-abortusa-u-bih/>

82 Lecture “Justification and safety of HPV vaccine for children” held - Parents FOR Children's Rights

83 For more on such disinformative narratives in BiH, see: Salkanović, M. & Šehović, N. *Gender and Identity-Based Disinformation in Bosnia and Herzegovina*.

“Ultrasound – an impact on the health of the unborn baby”.⁸⁴

2.1.2. *Faith, People, State* movement

The *Faith, People, State* movement is active in the FBiH and declares itself as a movement of “believers who know what the state and the people are, and patriots who are turned to faith”. In one of the FB posts, they state “that the fact that atheists, neo-communists and Yugo-nostalgia people are being listened to has led to the fact that it is time for Muslims to take the reins of this country into their own hands.”⁸⁵ Their narratives are characterized by a division into we vs. them, labelling, a strong anti-western narrative, a strong anti-LGBT position with the aim of allegedly protecting a “normal family”, especially children, and there are a lot of typical narratives and tactics used by anti-gender actors around the world. In a large number of FB posts and statements, LGBT is written in lowercase (lgbt) for devaluation and disparagement. The president of the movement, Sanin Musa, a professor of Islamic sciences, who previously led the *Step Forward /orig. Iskorak/ initiative*, describes LGBTI rights as a form of imposing “a kinky and unnatural way of life that wants to be installed in society and institutions as something good and completely acceptable”. At the party rally before the local elections in 2024, the opportunity was also used to condemn the “rigid LGBT agendas that are being radically attempted to be delivered to the hearts, minds, homes, schools, kindergartens” (FB post of the *Faith, People, State* movement, 22 June 2024). On several occasions, he organized a counter-protest on the day of the Pride March in Sarajevo under the motto of protecting the traditional/normal family. At the counter rally held in 2022, the slogan was *Give Us Back the Rainbow*. In addition to this message and awards intended for children for the best work on the topic of the rainbow, it was also aimed at the potential mobilization of parents and the youngest. During the 2024 Pride, no counter rally was organized, which Musa announced at the previous one due to low attendance.

Musa’s work also focuses on issues that he considers “state-building”,

84 Husarić Omerović, A. *Advocating the Prohibition and Opposition to Abortion in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Organizations, initiatives and individuals*. Sarajevo: Sarajevo Open Centre, 2024, p. 46.

85 Former Salafist preacher founded a political movement “Religion. People. State.” - Detektor

including ethnic, religious and identity issues, about which he writes books, organizes their promotions⁸⁶ and lectures abroad, where the diaspora gathers.⁸⁷ On the occasion of Independence Day, on 1 March 2024, he organized a procession in Brčko, but the Islamic Community's *mejlis* in Brčko did not allow him to hold a gathering at the White Mosque.⁸⁸ It is believed that the movement does not have the potential to mobilize a significant number of people because it uses symbols that are not receptive in society, and also because the Islamic Community of BiH does not look with sympathy on this political phenomenon. Otherwise, the movement managed to collect enough signatures to go to the local elections in 2024 in four cities/municipalities – Novi Grad Sarajevo, Donji Vakuf, Gračanica and Živinice, but the number of votes received is negligible.⁸⁹



Figure no. 3: Announcement of the counter-LGBT rally in 2022 on FB

86 <https://radioilijas.ba/u-ilijasu-odrzana-promocija-knjige-sanina-muse-ko-smo-mi-bosnjacka-identifikacija-od-batona-do-alije-izetbegovica/>

87 <https://www.facebook.com/100063699005923/videos/obra%C4%87anje-mr-sanina-muse-na-reformatorskoj-konferenciji-refko-2019-u-islamskom-k/2359061671001033/>

88 <https://times.ba/01/03/2024/15519/>

89 According to CEC data, in the municipality of Novi Grad Sarajevo, the movement got only 144 (0.32%) votes, in Donji Vakuf 91 votes (1.35%), Gračanica a total of 64 votes (0.31%), in Živinice 154 votes (0.56%).

2.1.3. Young Sun /orig. Mlado sunce/

Young Sun is an association from Široki Brijeg dedicated to evangelization and open to the admission of new members⁹⁰. On their website, they regularly report the views of Catholic officials from Croatia and other countries pointing out the dangers of “gender ideology”. They also launched public campaigns against abortion and put up posters throughout Herzegovina in 2019 and 2024 saying DON’T GIVE UP ON ME, MOTHER! An image of a uterus with a baby holding the mother’s heart with an umbilical cord while the scissors are underneath, imposes a sense of guilt on women with abortion experience. They also organized prayer vigils in front of the University Clinical Hospital in Mostar where abortions are performed.⁹¹

In addition to religious, *they also pack their* views into the framework of human rights – they point out that “they are not against women’s rights”, but that they are fighting for the rights of those who do not have a voice.⁹² Feminists, on the other hand, are presented as prone to hysteria, violence, and some that they like to kill babies.⁹³ Artificial insemination is viewed as a serious sin and a reflection of social hypocrisy, particularly because abortion is encouraged simultaneously. In doing so, they also make allegedly scientific arguments and claims that cause moral outrage. For example, “in one of Zagreb’s clinics where they perform the sins of artificial insemination, there are now 18,000 live frozen children.”⁹⁴ The so-called sexual education is criticized because in this way human sexuality is tried to be separated from marriage, conception and childbearing, which is also a typical anti-gender narrative.

They are affiliated with other similar organizations in Croatia, and regularly participate in events there, such as the paternity conference in Zagreb (FB posts, 7. 10. 2024). Their special target group are men for whom they organize so-called spiritual exercises of silence, which connects them with the *Be Masculine* /orig. Muževni budite/ movement from Croatia, which organizes prayers “intended for men who are looking for answers to questions about their lives, their masculinity and

90 <https://mladosunce.com/upis-novih-clanova/>

91 <https://www.jabuka.tv/udruga-mlado-sunce-organizira-kampanju-dani-za-zivot/>

92 <https://www.jabuka.tv/krik-za-nerodene-ponovno-odjekuje-hercegovinom/>

93 <https://mladosunce.com/feministice-zanimljivo-docekale-katolike/>

94 <https://mladosunce.com/sotonske-strane-umjetne-oplodnje/>

fatherhood”.⁹⁵ They are also active in collecting humanitarian aid, especially on the occasion of major Christian holidays such as Christmas.

2.2. Politicians

As the interviewed female journalist pointed out, BiH politicians have been creating a general climate of division in society (us vs them) for years, which then easily spreads to other groups (women, the LGBTI community and other minorities). Also, politicians and especially party leaders who are right-winged on the political spectrum often refer to “faith and family”, and quite explicitly advocate patriarchal gender models. The strongest right-wing party in BiH in terms of the number of votes – the Party of Democratic Action (SDA) – used to be on the first line of defence of family values against “homosexuality”, as it was the case during the *Queer* Festival in 2007. Today, probably under the influence of the official position of BiH that believers should distance themselves from this topic, it is more about sporadic cases and statements. According to the interviewed female politician, such outbursts are occasionally organized by Haris Zahiragić, a younger SDA member (e.g., in statements about transgender people – “it is not known who is a male or a female”). Back in March 2016, as the president of the Student Parliament of the University of Sarajevo, through social networks, he called for “treatment” and “marking” of LGBTI persons.⁹⁶ He was building a part of his election campaign in the 2022 elections for the Sarajevo Canton Assembly on the spread of moral panic that there would be a potential gender abolition in schools and that there would be no more boys and girls⁹⁷ (FB posts, 27 September 2022). During his appearance on N1 television in January 2025, Zahiragić problematizes the concepts of gender at the very beginning of the show and points out that he is happy in an ideological sense that Trump was elected as the new US president.

The most important political ally and even more “dangerous player” in the Bosniak political corps is the **People and Justice Party (NiP)**. Party leader Elmedin Konaković has expressed his opposition to the Pride March on several occasions, and in 2022 when the Pride March

95 <https://muzevnibudite.com/duhovne-vjezbe-u-sutnji-za-muskarce/>

96 Bošnjak, E. et al. Pink Report 2017 Annual Report on the State of Human Rights of LGBTI Persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Sarajevo: Sarajevo Open Centre, 2017, p. 9.

97 (20+) Haris Zahiragić - Potential News from the Future! If not... | Facebook

was taking place, Adnan Delić, a member of this party, even misused the official website of the Ministry of Economy of the Sarajevo Canton to express his position that he did not support this gathering as the office holder.⁹⁸ In this context, Naida Hota-Muminović, Minister of Education of the Government of the Sarajevo Canton, and a religious practitioner, is also mentioned. Without any notice, a document on the reform of education in the Sarajevo canton titled SAFER appeared in the public. The document was prepared for the needs of the ministry by the Mulalić Foundation, which advocates the promotion and protection of family, spiritual, cultural, educational and traditional values.⁹⁹ At the same time, cooperation with civil society organizations that had previously collaborated with schools to prevent peer violence in Sarajevo Canton has been suspended. In response to this action, the feminist organization CURE Foundation has expressed its objections.¹⁰⁰

The strongest and most explicit anti-gender ally is certainly Milorad Dodik, as well as his close associates who perform the highest political functions (such as RS Prime Minister Radomir Višković) and advisors (such as Pavle Romić, MSc, a teaching assistant at the Faculty of Law in Banja Luka). Close ties and meetings with Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán and Russian President Putin are common reasons for expressing explicit anti-gender views. Thus, in his speech at the 4th Demographic Summit in Budapest, held in September 2021, he used typical anti-gender strategies – criticism of the West and anti-EU rhetoric, the thesis of imposing values and non/tolerance, and the right to express one's own beliefs and attitudes: "How is it possible – I can say this, because we will certainly not be admitted to the European Union, so I do not have to flatter them... They want to impose their values on me, and I am running away from it... Get away from me, do what you want, but don't bother me. And now I am incorrect, and they are correct. There is parent number 1 and parent number 2. I have not yet heard that parent number 1 and number 2 gave birth to a child."¹⁰¹ He sometimes expresses similar views less explicitly, so during his visit to Russia on 6 June

98 <https://n1info.ba/vijesti/delic-iskoristio-facebook-stranicu-ministarstva-za-lic-ne-stavove-o-paradi-ponosa/>

99 <https://n1info.ba/vijesti/ministrice-hota-muminovic-o-reformi-obrazovanja-i-dokumenta-safer-koja-je-uloga-fondacije-mulalic/>

100 <https://fondacijacure.org/fondacija-cure-izrazava-duboku-zabrinutost-zbog-porasta-nasilja-u-skolama-u-kantonu-sarajevo/>

101 <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/dodik-zbog-stavova-o-lgbt-osobama-dobio-gromoglasne-aplauze-na-demografskom-samitu-u-budimpešti/210923164>

2024, he pointed out “that Russia and the Serbian people are opposed, not to NATO and the West, but to evil. These are opposing civilizations because we just want to preserve our family values, faith, and history, and that’s something that’s trying to be destroyed today.”¹⁰² He published explicit anti-gender views “at home” on Platform X, after a letter sent to him by 21 associations. Here, he expressed that he supported the position of the associations of citizens who approached him, and that *the law should truly protect women’s rights*, and not introduce gender ideology through the back door.¹⁰³

Srđan Mazalica, MP and head of the SNSD caucus in the RS National Assembly, is also active in the field of combating the so-called gender ideology. At the parliamentary session in March 2023, on behalf of seven caucuses (SNSD, SP, DEMOS, US, NPS, SPS and DNS), he said, among other things: *Everywhere in the legislation of Republika Srpska, we must not allow gender ideology to enter and wherever we have, we should exclude these elements*.¹⁰⁴ At the session in October 2024, he pointed out that the adoption of “gender ideology” would mean that a man could easily take second place on the electoral lists for parliament if he declared himself a woman.¹⁰⁵ Otherwise, Mazalica often refers to constitutionality and legality, and possible abuses of freedoms and rights, which is also a tactic often used by anti-gender actors.

The general position of the interlocutors is that there is not much difference between the government and the opposition in Republika Srpska when it comes to the importance of defending tradition and family values from the “aggressive minority”. The mayor of Banja Luka, Draško Stanivuković (recently the president of the PDP), after a letter sent to him by 13 organizations from this city, pointed out, among other things, that Banja Luka is a bastion for the protection of patriarchal and traditional values of “our people”, and “someone is doing it there in Sarajevo and let them do it”.¹⁰⁶ During the interview, one female interlocutor

102 Dodik signs Plan for cooperation between the Government of St. Petersburg and Srpska with Beglov (PHOTO)

103 THE WORD “GENDER” DANGEROUS for RS: Right-wing adulation protocol | Valter Portal

104 <https://antikorupcija.info/opozicija-u-rs-prioritetom-smatra-borbu-protiv-korupcije-i-kriminala-a-vlast-da-se-krivicni-zakon-ocisti-od-rodne-ideologije/>

105 MPs of the NSRS in the ‘vortex of modern trends’: ‘gender identity’ from the Criminal Code of RS is expelled? | DEPO PORTAL

106 <https://www.dw.com/hr/osu%C4%91en-napad-na-lgbt-aktiviste-i-novinare-u-banja-lu->

noticed that Milan Savanović, an opposition MP in the RS National Assembly from the List for Justice and Order of Nebojša Vukanović, supported comments on social networks calling for the beating of LGBTI people.

When it comes to the so-called Croatian parties, no explicit anti-gender narratives were observed in the HDZ party, but this party certainly contributes to the general climate of intolerance by constantly focusing on ethno-national issues, discourse on the vulnerability of Croats in BiH, and especially by tolerating extreme right-wing violence (such as the desecration of the Partisan cemetery in Mostar). Occasional anti-gender rhetoric has been observed in the Croatian Republican Party, but its political influence is considered marginal in the context of a nationwide Croatian gathering within the HNS led by the HDZ party.

The trend of using anti-LGBTI rhetoric during the campaign for the local elections in 2024 is worrying. For example, the candidate for mayor in front of the Independent List for Cazin, Sanel Zulić (after the election defeat he switched to NiP), among other things, said that his goal is to fight against those *who try to steer our youth in the wrong direction, against all kinds of attempts at systemic actions of LGBTI groups and the like*.¹⁰⁷ SNSD president, Milorad Dodik has “renamed” the PDP (Party of Democratic Progress) to “*a bunch of faggots*”, and Ljubo Ninkovic of SNSD Banja Luka said in a similar tone that a *group of kinky boys attacked their city*.¹⁰⁸ At the same time, there was a strong emphasis on family values in the campaign, so the Socialist Party of Srpska started the campaign with a “family walk”.¹⁰⁹

2.3. Churches and religious communities

Institutional religions and their leaders enjoy great power and trust in BiH society, as a result of war, identity crises and numerous problems that plague BiH society. Although they play an important symbolic role

ci/a-65039945

107 <https://detektor.ba/2024/10/16/kako-je-lgbt-zajednica-postala-meta-mrznje-na-lokal-nim-izborima/>

108 <https://detektor.ba/2024/10/16/kako-je-lgbt-zajednica-postala-meta-mrznje-na-lokal-nim-izborima/>

109 <https://lat.rtrs.tv/vijesti/vijest.php?id=568875#:~:text=Socialists%C4%8Dka%20partija%20Srpske%20Today%20je%20po%C4%8Dela%20kampanju%20u%20Banjaluci%20porodi%C4%8Dnom>

in deepening the differences between BiH citizens, they are certainly united by pronounced conservatism and the traditional view of gender roles: *and it is unfortunate if can they agree only on this issue...* (Interview, female activist from Herzegovina).

2.3.1. Catholic Church in BiH

The phenomenon of anti-gender activity is linked to the efforts of the Catholic Church during and after the UN Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo in 1994 and the Beijing Conference in 1995. The Church perceives them as its “great defeat”.¹¹⁰ Subsequently, Pope John Paul II and other Catholic high officials actually framed gender as an ideology, and numerous Vatican officials considered opposing “gender ideology” a priority. Thus, the pastoral letter of the bishops of HBK and BK BiH emphasizes the *unacceptability of gender ideology*, and the introduction of some “new rights”, and states that it is an “ideological colonization” and “single-mindedness”.¹¹¹ Therefore, *the commitment to respect and value marriage as a union between a man and a woman and family unity as a source of grace*.

In general, the main thesis is the so-called inseparability of sex and gender, and “gender ideology” is considered unscientific because it is based on subjective criteria, and dangerous, because it seeks to create an abstract society without sex differences. Zorica Maroš, a professor at the Faculty of Catholic Theology of the University of Sarajevo, also “explains” this intention in more detail in a 2024 scientific article.¹¹² The author points out that the struggle of women throughout history against subordination is justified, but that “gender theory” or “gender ideology” is unfounded, and has negative consequences for vulnerable categories such as transgender people, who precisely show that gender cannot be separated from sex. Another Catholic theologian from BiH who uses phrases such as “gender ideology”, “gender theory” and genderism in his writing and work is Assistant Professor Hrvoje Kalem, PhD, who uses a much sharper tone in dealing with *powerful and sponsored ideologies that strike at the family*. From the position of moral

110 Paternotte, D. & Kuhar, R. Disentangling and Locating the “Global Right”: Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe, p. 11.

111 <https://www.bkbi.h.ba/info.php?id=1474>

112 Maroš, Z. Feminism, gender ideology and transgenderism. Some aspects and attitude of the church. *The Church in the World*, 59 (2): 376–398, 2024.

arbiter, he points out that it is a *sacred* duty of the state to recognize marriage as a life union between a man and a woman, and contrary to the *LGBTIQ agenda, which wants to create new human rights and a new culture*.¹¹³ In March 2017, in the premises of the archdiocese, a lecture titled *Genderism – a Sign of a Decadent Society* was held in Banja Luka, and the lecturer was professor Ivan Poljaković from Croatia.¹¹⁴ On that occasion, he pointed out that genderism is a “pseudoscience” that *tries to present itself as the most modern and the only correct theory about human sexuality*, the backbone of which is the so-called *ideology of abortion*. The meeting was also attended by female believers and social workers from Livno, *who publicly testified to the problems they face every day when it comes to gender ideology and its introduction to schools and kindergartens*. Likewise, religious portals based in Western Herzegovina (such as Medjugorje-info.com) often share similar content and addresses of priests, Catholic intellectuals and activists from Croatia, warning about the dangers of “gender ideology”.¹¹⁵

The interviewed Catholic theologian interprets the emergence of anti-gender narratives in parts of BiH with a predominantly Catholic population as spillover of influence from Croatia *to a neighbouring, homogeneous Catholic space*. The so-called walks for life and the fight against abortion spilt over into BiH from Croatia, so the students from the Secondary Medical School “The Sisters of Mercy” in Mostar held a “March of Love for the Unborn Babies”.¹¹⁶ The spillover trend is also evident in the appearance of the so-called Rosary Prayers in Mostar, who are associated with the ethno-clerical organization *Vigilare* from Croatia, which inspires men to take on their traditional roles. For these purposes, public prayers are organized in the squares that bring togeth-

113 See: Coil, H. A family between Christian teaching, practice, and contemporary challenges. U A. Mujezin-Čolo (ed.) *Collection of Papers of the Round Table “Family between Religious Teachings, Practice and Contemporary Challenges”*, held in Sarajevo on 23 December 2023. Sarajevo, El-Kalem - Publishing Center of the Riyaset of the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina & Directorate for Religious Affairs of the Riyaset of the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, p. 21–29.

114 <https://www.biskupija-banjaluka.org/vijesti-2017-godina/rekolekcija-svecenika-banjolucke-biskupije/>

115 For example: <https://www.medjugorje-info.com/hrvatska/don-damir-stojic-pobacaj-je-apsolutno-zlo-a-rodna-ideologija-veliki-neprijatelj-braka> ; <https://www.medjugorje-info.com/intervju/nadbiskup-kutlesa-rodne-ideologije-namecu-jednoulje> ; <https://www.medjugorje-info.com/hrvati-u-svijetu/nadbiskup-eterovic-upozorio-iz-wiesbadena-rodna-ideologija-je-opasnost-za-biblijsku-sliku-o-covjeku>

116 <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/trend-iz-hrvatske-presao-u-bih-u-mostaru-odrzan-hod-ljubavi-za-nerodjene/230511103>

er men of different ages to pray for the homeland and the conversion of the Croatian people, for men to become a spiritual authority in the family, for the termination of premarital relations and abortion, and for chastity in behaviour.¹¹⁷ Also, in Visoko, *Spiritual Exercises in Silence were organized for men*, and the *emphasis of this silence is on God's fatherhood, which is the source of all fatherhood and all true masculinity*.¹¹⁸ In this way, an analogy is made between God's and the authority of a man in the family.

By the way, the wave of evangelization that has affected Catholics around the world is visible *in the activities of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal in the Holy Spirit of Bosnia and Herzegovina* (KKODS),¹¹⁹ an organization that began its work in 2014 and coordinates prayer communities from various places of BiH – Sarajevo, Mostar, Gorica Sovići, Drinovci, Šujica, Livno, Podhum, Kupres, Bugojno, Kiseljak, Novi Travnik, Travnik, Vitez, Tolisa, Banja Luka and Jajce.¹²⁰ Joint prayers, charismatic gatherings and seminars are organized.¹²¹ At youth meetings in Teslić in July 2024, marriage and sexuality were discussed, and testimonies were given on the importance of *living in pre-marital purity*. The panel for young men (*Healthy Christian Man*) emphasized the importance of authority and male role in the spiritual life, family, protection and upbringing of children, with an emphasis on the fact that today masculinity and fatherhood are in a major crisis.¹²² According to the interviewed Catholic theologian, it is precisely in microcommunities at the local level that anti-gender narratives are spread, and they are also aimed at limiting the right to abortion.

2.3.2. Serbian Orthodox Church

The Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC), unlike the Catholic Church, does not have a doctrine on the so-called gender ideology, and statements concerning LGBTI rights are often correlated with other topics, such as

117 Halilović, M. *Gender and Violent Extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Policy document*, p. 12.

118 <https://muzevnibudite.com/duhovne-vjezbe-u-sutnji-za-muskarce/>

119 <https://www.kkodsbi.com/katolicka-karizmataska-obnova-u-duhu-svetom/>

120 <https://www.kkodsbi.com/kkods-bih-povijest-strukturiranje-i-djelovanje/>

121 <https://www.kkodsbi.com/vijece-hbk-za-nauk-vjere-usvojilo-dokument-o-karizmatiskom-pokretu-i-obnovi-u-duhu/>

122 <https://www.kkodsbi.com/teslic-godisnji-susret-mladih-kkods-bosne-i-hercegovine-i-hrvatske/>

the status of Kosovo.¹²³ When it comes to BiH, the Serbian Orthodox Church did not have significant appearances in public on this issue, which (probably) stems from the fact that major public events (such as the Pride March) took place in Sarajevo, where the church does not have significant influence.¹²⁴ With the strengthening of anti-gender narratives and anti-gender mobilization in Serbia, the SPC is becoming more engaged in BiH than it used to be. However, the trend of speaking about these topics regarding other issues that are considered to be burning for the Serbian people and the church still dominates, and the statements of the bishops from Serbia are often conveyed.¹²⁵

However, the SPC continuously and very strongly advocates for the traditional family and appropriate gender roles, where the woman's primary role is maternal. Metropolitan of Dabar-Bosnia thus pointed out at a church service that mothers *turn their hearts into temples of love for their husbands, their children, family and homeland*.¹²⁶ Families are *churches in miniature* and through the Serbian-Orthodox tradition they connect the people with the very birth of the Lord Jesus Christ.¹²⁷ On the occasion of major Christian holidays such as Christmas or Easter, political officials also emphasize the importance of Orthodoxy for the spiritual survival of the Serbian people. On the occasion of Easter, RS President Milorad Dodik pointed out that *all Orthodox holidays, and certainly Easter, point to family values that bring us together and that have sustained us*.¹²⁸

Searching the web pages also leads to officials of the Serbian Orthodox Church in BiH who sometimes comments about “gender ideology” (sometimes referred to as “transgender ideology” or “gender theory”),¹²⁹ which is considered one of the biggest “threats” to the traditional family.

123 Jovanović, M. Silence or Condemnation: The Orthodox Church on Homosexuality in Serbia, *Social Science Forum*, 29 (73), 2013, p. 87.

124 Popov-Momčinović, Z. & Ždralović, A. Religion and Gender in Bosnian-Herzegovinian Ethno-Populist Stabilocracy. In A. Giorgi, J. Garraio & T. Toldy (eds.). *Gender, Religion and Populism in the Mediterranean*, London & New York, Routledge, 2023, p. 117.

125 For example: <https://www.eparhijazt.com/sr/news/predanje//6675.episkop-bac-ki-dr-irinej-bozicni-intervju-pecatu.html>

126 <https://www.mitropolijadabrobosanska.org/vijest1983.html>

127 Ibid.

128 <https://faktormagazin.ba/desk/porodicne-vrijednosti/#:~:text=Dodik%20je%20naveo%20da%20svi%20orthodox%20holidays,%20a%20anyway%20i>

129 <https://www.eparhijazt.com/en/news/predanje/6884.porodica-i-danasnji-duh-vremena-%E2%80%93-transrodna-ideologija-kao-najveca-pretnja-porodici.html>

Other topics that are the focus of the activities of anti-gender actors are also mentioned, so during his service in Doboj in September 2024, the Metropolitan of Zvornik-Tuzla, Fotije also criticized artificial insemination. In doing so, he warned about the dangers of *genetic changes in our people: Today, people have become impatient and cannot wait for God's will. Instead, they seek various methods such as IVF, fertilization with other cells or people of other nations, which ultimately leads to genetic changes in our people. These children will not be Serbs, but something mixed up*,¹³⁰ which correlates with the views of the far-right party "Dveri" from Serbia.¹³¹ At a scientific conference in Sremski Karlovci held in October 2024 as part of the Lecture titled "A Word on Church Education", at the end of the exposé, he pointed out or asked the question: "[O] How did the gender theory appear in our seminaries, how did the LGBT ideology of Sodom and Gomorrah appear in our secondary theological schools?"¹³² Gender-sensitive language is also under attack and announcements are reported, for example *Matica Srpska*, pointing out *violence against the Serbian language and people*.¹³³ It is important to note that in the Easter epistle of 2023, Patriarch Porfirije called for the *cessation of violence against the Serbian language* and the abolition of the provision of the "unconstitutional" Law on Gender Equality of 2021, which imposes gender-sensitive language.¹³⁴

At this stage, it can be said that representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Bosnia and Herzegovina/Republika Srpska sporadically use anti-gender narrative and make appropriate requests, and that such content from Serbia is more shared through information channels. When it comes to abortion, most of the interlocutors who had some knowledge on this topic point out that the Serbian Orthodox Church in Republika Srpska, although it has a clear position on abortion, which it explicitly calls infanticide, does not come out too strongly with such a narrative in public. On the other hand, the activists point out that some priests expressed such views during their appearances on TV shows. The media reported that one priest is a member of the ethics committee at UCC

130 <https://www.eparhijazt.com/en/news/vijesti-iz-eparhije/bogosluzenja/7396.mitropolit-fotije-sluzio-u-doboju-povodom-slave-hrama-rodenja-presvete-bogorodice.html>

131 <https://vreme.com/vesti/reakcije-o-pokretu-dveri-da-objasne-sta-je-cisti-srpski-genom/>

132 <https://www.eparhijazt.com/sr/news/vijesti-iz-eparhije/besede-izjave/7450.mitropolit-fotije-na-medunarodnoj-naucnoj-konferenciji-u-sremskim-karlovcima.html>

133 <https://www.eparhijazt.com/sr/news/drustvo/3953.nasilje-nad-srpskim-jezikom-i-narodom.html>

134 Ivančević, T. *Challenges of feminist politics. Remind us what security means*, p. 20, 21.

Banja Luka,¹³⁵ which, among other things, decides on abortions after week 20.¹³⁶

More proactive action in the anti-gender direction is recognized through cooperation and tacit or open support to organizations that act from this position, so, *for example, the connections of the Parents FOR Children's Rights* association with the church are obvious. According to one female interlocutor, the female president of that association came to the show about femicide and domestic violence with an icon. In Bijeljina, priest Miroslav Todorović participated in a round table organized in March 2024 on the occasion of the Draft Law on Protection against Domestic Violence and Violence against Women, after which he wrote the text “Are we Friends or Foes */Jesmo li rod ili pomoz bog/*”, which this association shared in its entirety.¹³⁷ In the text, the priest strongly criticizes what is referred to as “gender theory.” He argues that its promoters are associated with *open or covert Satanism, reminiscent of ancient practices of child sacrifice*. He urges the need to defend our families and our sanctity. He states that men and women are one in Christ and that a patriarchal society protects women (*ladies have priority*), while modern feminism polarizes the society. In this regard, it also calls for the abolition of the Gender Center with the Government of RS, comparing it to an aggressive cancer *that uses budget funds to destroy us from the inside*. There is also coordination with the authorities in RS, and at the round table in Banja Luka at which the draft of the aforementioned law was discussed, the priest sat next to the advisor to the president of RS, Dodik, sending non-verbal but fairly clear messages about the position of the church on this issue: *The priest and Dodik's advisor were sitting in the first row, which was empty, directly in front of the female minister. All the time, the priest was literally just looking at her, at no one else, and it was such a pressure, she was visibly frightened*. (Focus group, women activists).

2.3.3. Islamic Community of BiH

There is no explicit content on the official website of the Islamic Community of BiH that problematizes gender, gender equality or uses the

135 <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/svestenik-clan-komisije-ukc-a-u-banjoj-luci-koja-odlucuje-o-abortusima/170303043>

136 [kc-bl.com/Lat/docs/UKCRS/Eticki board/List of members EO.pdf](https://kc-bl.com/Lat/docs/UKCRS/Eticki_board/List_of_members_EO.pdf).

137 <https://roditeljizapradjece.org/jesmo-li-rod-il-pomozi-bog/>

phrase “gender ideology” when articulating theological or social topics. There are “older” texts in which anti-modernist and especially anti-Western rhetoric is implemented, mostly from the period around and after the *Queer Festival*. At that time, the most discussed topic was “homosexuality”, which is directly or indirectly related to the problems of modern society and modern man. Intolerance towards “homosexuals” is also seen in the answers to the questions of believers who seek advice on what to do when a homosexual lives in their environment, or is part of their religious community (jama’ah).¹³⁸ During this period, texts with open hate speech that can be found on the website of the Islamic Community were written by Fatmir Alispahić, a journalist and publicist, and information about his lectures and public forums were published, some of which were also organized in the premises of the Islamic Community (e.g. in a mosque in Brčko, September 2011). Alispahić then used typical anti-gender narratives, e.g.: *that marriage between a man and a woman is the womb of civilization, without which nothing would exist today, while the industry of debauchery... imposes same-sex unions, and religion and tradition are persecuted as forms of fascism*.¹³⁹

On the other hand, most of the texts on the IC BiH page that can be related to the topic of research problematize the so-called collapse of traditional values and the crisis of the modern family, especially due to the alleged Western influence. Thus, an article published in September 2012 titled *The Cult of Nudity /orig. Kult golotinje/* blames the unrestrained or excessive behaviour that flooded the West, which was also contributed by the feminist movement that distanced women from the maternal role, i.e. the essence of the woman’s being. This leads further to *fornication, illness, abortion, infanticide, unborn children, and disgust with marriage, which dissolves the vital forces of society and accelerates its death*.¹⁴⁰

There is a noticeable decline in interest in LGBTI topics, which is certainly a consequence of the official position of the Islamic Community, i.e. the conclusion of the Council of Muftis of the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina reached in August 2019 that believers should not interfere in the pride march, but distance themselves from

138 E.g. <https://islamskazajednica.ba/index.php/ostalo/7706-homoseksualac-u-dematu>

139 <https://islamskazajednica.ba/index.php/aktuelno-arhiva/11898-predavanje-fatmira-alispahia-u-brkom>

140 <https://islamskazajednica.ba/index.php/aktuelno-arhiva/14980-kult-golotinje>

it.¹⁴¹ In conclusion, it is underscored that the marriage is a *contract on cohabitation between a man and a woman concluded by mutual consent with the aim of establishing a family*. In this sense, there is a strong narrative on the protection of the traditional family and the so-called family values, which is reflected in the new 2015 systematization within the Riyaset, which now includes the *Department for Marriage and Family*, with competence in the field of work with the female part of the religious community (jama'ah).¹⁴² Within the Mufti organisation, special bodies have been formed for this purpose, which also organize the *Days of Family Values* and affirm *the importance of our home, house, homeland, country and state*.¹⁴³ At these events, concerns are raised about the declining number of newborns, emphasizing that *nothing is more important than a healthy and noble lineage*.¹⁴⁴ Advocating traditional values sometimes contains elements that coincide with anti-gender narratives. For example, the female coordinator of the Department for Marriage and Family of the Mufti organisation of Tuzla points out that sacred family values are *under attack*, including abortions, the “imposition” of same-sex relationships and marriages, and the *condemnation of anyone who condemns them*.¹⁴⁵ Due to these and other challenges, a round table was held in Sarajevo on 23 December 2023, under the auspices of the Department for Marriage and Family of Riyaset of the IC BiH, which also brought together theologians from other denominations.

Muharem Štulanović, professor of the Islamic Pedagogical Faculty of the University of Bihać, wrote explicitly about the danger of “gender ideology”. In the article published in the Collection of Papers of the Islamic Pedagogical Faculty, Štulanović points out that the so-called members of the dominant culture, i.e. “believers, Muslims”, should

141 <https://www.preporod.com/index.php/sve-vijesti/islamska-zajednica/vijesti-izbih/item/11045-imami-pozvali-vjernike-da-se-distanciraju-od-okupljanja-lgbtiq-osoba-u-sarajevu-i-promocije-homoseksualizma>

142 <https://medzlistuzla.ba/odjel-za-brak-i-porodicu/>

143 <https://preporod.info/bs/article/4841/tuzla-cetnaesti-dani-porodicnih-vrijednosti-o-velicini-tradiciji-i-sudbini-bosne-i-hercegovine#:~:text=Dani%20porodi%C4%8Dnih%20vrijednosti%20su%20manifestacija%20kojom%20u%C4%8Denici%20i>

144 <https://az.medzlistuzla.ba/2020/02/18/neprolazne-porodicne-vrijednosti/#:~:text=Va%C5%BEno%20je%20podsje%C4%87anje,%20ali%20i%20na%C5%A1e%20nove%20spoznaje>

145 <https://preporod.info/bs/article/24113/porodicne-vrijednosti-su-temeljne-vrijednosti-islama#:~:text=Gledano%20sa%20aspekta%20islamskog%20u%C4%8Denja,%20isti%C4%8De%20Kasumovi%C4%87,%20porodica>

have a clear attitude and understanding of the LGBT movement and its ideology in order to protect the traditional family *in the constellation of apocalyptic, contemporary relations*. So-called LGBT rights are a form of hypocrisy because hostilities and wars are tolerated, in which, according to him, Muslims are the biggest victims.¹⁴⁶ The main culprit is the decadent West and the international community and the ultimate centres of power that imposed certain legal solutions on Bosnia and Herzegovina *under the guise and motto of tolerance*.¹⁴⁷ The author also criticizes the Istanbul Convention because, allegedly, it aims *to create the belief that man is born as a neutral being who can later choose whether to be a man or a woman or some other of the numerous “genders”*. He also believes that the convention is “unnecessary” because *in BiH all socio-political entities agree on the condemnation and sanctioning of all violence against women and domestic violence*.¹⁴⁸ This and other examples show that a number of theologians are acting independently, and the influence of the so-called missionaries who use social networks to bring together a significant number of Muslims and represent extremely conservative views on women and minorities, especially LGBTI persons, is also noticeable.¹⁴⁹

One of the “missionaries” is **Elvedin Pezić**, who has more than 350,000 followers on Facebook and gathers a significant number of people in the forums he organizes throughout BiH. Pezić communicates his views on social networks daily (often several times a day), and often sends simple messages, sometimes in just one sentence, and sometimes broadly elaborates his conservative views. And so-called banal messages get hundreds of likes with short and mostly supportive comments. Somewhat broader Pezić’s elaborations sometimes cause discussions and sharing of personal experiences, which implies that this influencer has the ability to produce a greater degree of engagement with his followers. Behind the view of the world and society that he considers desirable and “ideal” is a clear intention to place women under strict control. So he often shares various tips on how women should dress and criticizes modern trends in dressing (for example, “Everything for fashion and

146 Štulanović, M. Homosexuality on the scale (mizan) of faith, tradition, beautiful, acceptable customs and healthy human nature. *Collection of papers of the Islamic Faculty of Education in Bihać*, XI, 2020, p. 53.

147 Ibid., p. 54.

148 Ibid., p. 58.

149 Spahić-Šiljak, Z. & Anić, R. Gender and Religion in the Balkans: The Example of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, p. 99.

the Devil!”), talks about hygiene (nail and hair length), ways of desirable social interaction between men and women (e.g. *Shaking hands between men and women is not our custom, but a custom taken from other nations*, FB post, 9 December 2024), and the correct wearing of the hijab. In general, women often respond positively to his posts, and Pezić in his status shares messages from women who allegedly thank him for showing them the right way, while he himself says that feminism is by no means the way of a believing woman. On his FB profile, he also writes about other topics that are the focus of anti-gender actors – he considers LGBTI rights a big, “imposed” sin and strictly rejects the right to artificial insemination (*The procedure of giving birth to children by the method of a surrogate mother according to the principles of Islam is strictly prohibited*). In doing so, he often places these phenomena within the framework of negative movements that have flooded the world, especially the West. Some of his views provoked a reaction from the Islamic Community of BiH. After announcing in June 2021 that *Western society had morally collapsed the moment a woman was taken out of the house, and when a woman became everything but a mother; the Department for Marriage, Family and Women’s Affairs of the Religious Affairs Administration of the Riyaset of the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina pointed out that these were views that were contrary to the teaching of the basic sources of Islam, the Quran and the Sunnah, i.e. the rights and obligations of Muslim women.*¹⁵⁰

3. CONCLUDING OVERVIEW

Although anti-gender mobilization has also affected Bosnia and Herzegovina in the recent period, even before there have been *proto* forms of anti-gender mobilization that have occurred on various occasions (e.g., when LGBTI people came out in public, initiating certain reforms or introducing innovations in the field of education). Ethnic homogenization and repatriarchalization of society, permanent divisions between *us* and *them* in political discourse, and the great symbolic power of the local religions give important support to anti-gender narratives and actors who, as elsewhere in the world, often rely on right-wing populist policies of fear and polarization. Despite the improvement of legislation and other regulations in the post-war period, the position of the soci-

¹⁵⁰ <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/iz-rijaseta-porucuju-da-stavovi-islamskih-influencera-o-statusu-zena-nisu-njihovi/210626101>

ety residing in the never-ending EU waiting room essentially reduced these improvements to a formality and strengthened anti-EU sentiments and anti-Western rhetoric, which was also contributed by the increasing Russian influence in Republika Srpska.¹⁵¹ Also, the crucial importance for the increase of anti-gender narratives and activities is, of course, the spillover factor from Croatia and Serbia, and especially the influence of anti-gender organizations there, as well as the attitudes of religious leaders and political officials, such as Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski, better known as *Milica Zavetnica*,¹⁵² who from her new position as Minister of Demography in Serbia often visits Republika Srpska and promotes “family values”.¹⁵³

Authoritarian tendencies in RS represent an important momentum that led to the acceleration of anti-gender narratives, as well as the obvious need of the government to create a climate of fear of a potential, new “threat”. In an ethnically homogeneous entity, *Others* are no longer (only) members of other nations, but sexual minorities and all those who threaten our “values” and traditions. Anti-gender actors are increasingly connected and operate globally, and their tools, strategies and tactics were also used in the anti-gender surge in RS during 2023 and 2024, which, thanks to cooperation with the ruling structures, partly achieved the desired effect. The draft Law on Protection against Domestic Violence and Violence against Women has *been overturned*, the term gender identity is *being removed* from all laws, the Gender Center of Republika Srpska no longer bears that name, and LGBTI activism is factually completely marginalized. At the same time, the authorities have passed a law that encourages the birth of children and the return of women to the private sphere.¹⁵⁴

On the other hand, in the Federation of BiH, as an ethnically and politically more pluralistic entity, explicit anti-gender narratives are mostly reactive and present during and after the BiH Pride March in the capital

151 More about Russian influence in RS, see: <https://detektor.ba/2024/12/20/birn-bih-i-obja-snjava-kako-rusija-inspirise-antirodne-pokrete-u-bih/>

152 <https://6yka.com/kolumne/put-od-luizijane-do-republike-srpske-mozda-ide-preko-bijeljine/>

153 <https://058.ba/2024/09/visegrad-ce-naredne-godine-biti-mjesto-promovisanja-porodice-nih-vrijednosti/>

154 <https://www.narodnaskupstinars.net/?q=la/news/pobjen-zakon-o-podr%C5%A1ci-ne-zaposlenom-roditelj-%C4%8Detvoro-i-vi%C5%A1e-djece-u-republici-srpskoj-i-izmjene-tri-zakona-potrebne-za-njegovo-sprovo%C4%91enje>

city. Despite the clear or tacit support they receive from some political structures (such as the *People and Justice* Party) or individuals (such as Haris Zahiragić from the SDA party), they have not, for the time being, achieved greater results, but have, certainly, contributed to the ineffective application of existing laws and prevented the improvement of legislation (such as the adoption of the Law on Same-Sex Partnership). Some of the main anti-gender actors in this part of the country do not have the potential for greater mobilization since they use symbolism that connects them with radical Islam, which is not receptive to most people, including Muslim believers. However, the influence of Islamic influencers and promoters of religion who explicitly propagate such views on social networks and fill the forums in cities across BiH, regardless of religious structures, should not be underestimated. In general, most of the interlocutors point out **that the situation in Sarajevo (and the Federation of BiH) should not be idealized, and that it is more a combination of circumstances that slowed down stronger anti-gender activity in relation to the ethnically homogeneous entity Republika Srpska. The Pride March that is organized in Sarajevo is a litmus test for this part of the country and anti-gender narratives as well as anti-gender actions emerge to the surface exactly at that moment, and can be clearly recognized.** In parts of the country with a majority Croatian population, there is a momentum of various groups formed on the wave of Catholic evangelization who advocate patriarchal values and traditional gender roles, and some (such as *Young Sun*) are strategically coming down on women's reproductive rights, especially abortion, but also artificial insemination and the use of contraception. However, this does not seem to have significantly spilled over into other parts of the country and has been systematically linked to other, typical anti-gender demands, although narratives about the so-called gender ideology are quite present in this and similar organizations. Also, the research of Sarajevo Open Centre on the availability of abortion in BiH warns that this impact should not be ignored, especially given that various *pro-life* organizations have been operating throughout the country for a long time and that many are funded by powerful sponsors, especially from the US.¹⁵⁵ Also, there is a potential to politicize the topic of prohibition/restriction of abortion in other parts of the country, and growing calls for family protection, defence of traditional

¹⁵⁵ Husarić Omerović, A. *Advocating the Prohibition and Opposition to Abortion in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Organizations, initiatives and individuals.*

values, accompanied by fears of demographic decline, are heading in that direction. In RS, for now, the biggest negative impact has occurred on LGBTI rights, and the climate of fear and intolerance has led to an almost complete withdrawal of the community into the private sphere. Also, since established relations of power and hierarchy are created or confirmed through language, anti-gender narratives regarding the use of gender-sensitive language are very strong in RS, and the rigid attitude of the Serbian Orthodox Church towards this issue provides important support.

Finally, it is questionable how much anti-gender narratives and anti-gender actions are really used, given that attacks on gender, “gender ideology”, *genderism*, etc., are used fragmentarily and unsystematically in RS (the exception is the organization *Parents for Children’s Rights*). The reason is probably that gender has not entered the social *mainstream*, so the resistance is also unconvincing. **While in other contexts the term gender is a powerful “empty signifier” for initiating broader mobilizations and demands, in RS and generally in BiH such an “empty term” used is a tradition or a traditional family.** On the other hand, implicitly, it is also a matter of tactics because it is more effective to address the public in a more understandable language and to call for almost generally accepted values and common ideas such as the people, the state and the faith, and to invoke the so-called ancient fears and resentments. But even when such narratives are not used, the connotations are very much present, and it is necessary to emphasize once again that a group of organizations from RS gathered against the draft Law on Violence because, allegedly, it introduces “gender ideology”, and some groups from an anti-gender position also asked for the ban on LGBTI events. Also, tools and tactics used by anti-gender actors elsewhere in the world are used relatively successfully – creating a positive self-image, calls for the protection of the “rights of the majority” and vulnerable categories such as children and young people, and the use of so-called democratic tools (forums, round tables and walks). There are also less “benevolent” tactics such as spinning, aggressive rhetoric, distortion of scientific facts and creating moral panic. The research also found that there are different connections between these organizations, and that many lead to high politics, thus forming a solid “anti-gender cluster” in RS. **However, its expansion and stronger integration at the level of BiH is unlikely given the existing ethnic and religious**

divisions in society, and the numerous administrative borders within the state. Namely, these divisions often have a negative impact on civil society as well, as they prevent more effective interethnic cooperation in order to achieve essential democratic outcomes. On the other hand, they prevent even more effectively the stronger connection of its anti-civil, anti-liberal part, which consists of various associations and groups of citizens who base their activities on ethnic and other exclusives, and not on interethnic cooperation.

The problem of insufficient transparency in the work of anti-gender actors should certainly be borne in mind. This is also the main limitation of the results of this research, which is based on “traditional” sociological methods. Cash flows and funding are difficult to determine, and it is certain that the authorities are favouring traditionalist organizations in various ways, including through budget allocations to civil society organizations. It is almost certain that there are other anti-gender actors that have not been analysed here, as well as a number of potential ones. What is worrying is the possibility of additional mobilization of extreme right-wing organizations associated with criminal circles that would “take the batons to the streets”.

GENDER EQUALITY IN THE FIELD OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RIGHTS

Gender equality and education, labour market

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the percentage of girls among all students enrolled in higher education institutions (all years) in the academic year 2022/2023 was 60.13%.

In 2022, 10,066 women and 6,531 men completed higher education. More than half of women have graduated, obtained a master's degree and a doctorate in the fields of health and social care, education and social sciences, and these are also areas of education in which women outnumber men. A larger number of men completed their higher education in the fields of information and communication technologies, engineering, production and construction, and services.¹⁵⁶

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, almost all preschool teachers are women (99%). Going towards higher levels of education, the gender structure of teaching staff is changing, so that women are more represented in primary and secondary education, while more than half of teachers and associates in higher education institutions are men.¹⁵⁷

As stated by the Agency for Gender Equality of BiH in the analysis of the situation reported by the Gender Action Plan of BiH (2023–2027), the available data show that the number of women masters and doctors of science has increased, and it is higher than the number of men. However, among high academic and research positions and management positions, men dominate, which is why it can be said that the phenomenon of “glass ceiling” in this area is present.

According to the Agency for Statistics – Labour Force Survey 2022, the gender gap in employment among men and women in BiH is 27.7 pp, i.e. the employment rate of men was 67.7%, and women 40.0%.

¹⁵⁶ Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2023), Women and Men in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Retrieved from: https://bhas.gov.ba/data/Publikacije/Bilteni/2024/FAM_00_2023_TB_1_BS.pdf, p. 51.

¹⁵⁷ Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina, *ibid.*, p. 53.

In BiH, there is no comprehensive way of collecting data on the differences in salaries between men and women. According to data from the platform Plata.ba, which monitors annual average salaries in Bosnia and Herzegovina, men earn as much as 14.7% more than women. However, it is positive that this difference has decreased by almost 2% compared to 2023 in favour of women.¹⁵⁸

Maternity benefits

It is important to point out that the rights of women regarding maternity leave and in this regard the right to salary/salary compensation are regulated differently by regulations in the field of labour and social and child protection.

we have prepared a special overview of women’s rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina in accordance with the level of regulation due to changes in regulations in the field of social protection, in particular, maternity benefits that are uneven for the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹⁵⁹

LEVEL		SALARY COM- PENSATIOIN	MATERNITY ALLOWANCE
FBiH			
	SARAJEVO CANTON	Salary com- pensation for a woman-mother who has an em- ployment contract or a decision on employment and registration for mandatory insur- ance on the basis of employment at least 12 months before leaving for maternity leave is	The woman-moth- er receives finan- cial assistance in the amount of 30% of the average salary.

¹⁵⁸ Report (11.03.2024), Women in Bosnia and Herzegovina are still paid less than men, here’s how much. Retrieved from: <https://raport.ba/zene-u-bosni-i-hercegovini-i-dalje-sومانje-placene-od-muskaraca-evo-za-koliko/>

¹⁵⁹ The overview of the amount of fees relies on the previous edition of the Orange Report (2022), with certain changes that have occurred in the meantime.

		<p>determined in the amount of 60% of the average salary, provided that this amount cannot be less than the lowest salary in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.</p> <p>Salary compensation for a woman-mother who has an employment contract or a decision on employment and registration for compulsory insurance on the basis of employment less than 12 months before leaving for maternity leave is determined in the amount of 30% of the average salary.</p>	
	UNA SANA CANTON	<p>Compensation instead of the salary for the woman-mother referred to in Art. 107 of this Law is determined in the amount of 50% of her average salary earned in the period of six months before childbirth, valued on the basis of salary growth in the Canton during that period.</p>	<p>The amount of financial assistance referred to in Article I of this Decision shall be determined in the amount of BAM 100 per month.</p>

		<p>The amount of compensation referred to in the previous paragraph shall be determined in the procedure for each woman-mother separately, provided that this amount cannot be less than 50% of the average monthly salary earned in the Canton in the previous year and published by the competent authority.</p> <p>If a woman mother did not receive a salary in the period of six months before childbirth for reasons that are not her fault (company insolvency, etc.), the compensation instead of the salary for the woman-mother is determined in the amount referred to in the previous paragraph.</p>	
	CENTRAL BOSNIA CANTON	Compensation instead of salary is determined in the percentage in which the employer regularly pays contributions for pension and disability insurance and maternity health insurance,	Financial assistance pertaining the childbirth for a woman-mother who is not employed is realized as a one-time financial assistance in the amount of 35% of the average

		provided that it cannot exceed 50% of the amount of salary earned for the period of six months before childbirth, valued on the basis of salary growth in that period in the Canton.	monthly net salary earned in the previous year in the Canton.
	ZENICA-DOBOJ CANTON	The Zenica-Doboj Canton amended the Law on Social Protection, Protection of Civilian Victims of War and Protection of Families with Children and provided maternity benefits in the amount of BAM 1,000 for employed and unemployed mothers in the same way as it was done in the Sarajevo Canton. For twins, third and each subsequent child, the compensation is increased by 20%.	Financial assistance during pregnancy and childbirth of a woman-mother who is not employed is realized in the amount of 25% of the average salary in the Canton earned in the previous year.
	BOSNIA-PODRINJE CANTON	In the Bosnia-Podrinje Canton, the position of mothers has also been improved, with employed mothers now entitled to maternity benefits in the amount of 80% of their average salary earned for the duration	Financial assistance during pregnancy and childbirth of a woman-mother who is not employed is realized in the amount of 25% of the average salary in the Canton earned in the previous year.

		of six months prior to childbirth.	
	CANTON 10	The amount of maternity benefits for employed mothers in Canton 10 is regulated by the Decision on the right to compensation instead of the salary for the woman-mother during the absence from work due to pregnancy and amounts to 100% of the salary earned in the month preceding the maternity leave.	<p>The beneficiary is entitled to financial compensation from the date of birth of the child until the child reaches the age of one year.</p> <p>The amount of financial compensation is BAM 100 per month per child born.</p>
	HERZEGOVINA- NERETVA CANTON	<p>The basis for determining the amount of compensation instead of salary is the average salary of a woman-mother earned in the period of six months before the start of maternity leave.</p> <p>The Law on the Protection of Families with Children, the HNC states that the percentage of compensation will be determined by a decision of the Government.</p>	<p>Financial assistance to a woman-mother who is not employed in regard to the childbirth and child-care-is provided to the mother who takes care of the child directly, provided that the total income per household member does not exceed the amount of 15% of the average salary.</p> <p>Financial assistance to a woman-mother who is not employed is determined in the amount of 40%</p>

		<p>According to the Decision on determining the percentage of compensation instead of salary for an employed woman-mother during her absence from work due to pregnancy, childbirth and childcare, a woman is entitled to compensation in the amount of 40% of the average salary she earned in the period of six months before the start of maternity leave. If a woman-mother has not been employed for at least six months, then she receives compensation in the amount of 20% of the average net salary earned in the previous year in FBiH.</p>	<p>of the average salary earned in the previous year in the Federation of BiH.</p>
	WEST HERZEGOVINA CANTON	<p>According to the Law on the Protection of Families with Children of the West Herzegovina Canton, employed mothers are entitled to compensation instead of the salary in the</p>	<p>A woman-mother who is not employed is entitled to financial support for a period of six months, counting from the date of giving birth, in the monthly amount of BAM 250.</p>

		amount of 70% of their average salary in the period of nine months before childbirth. The determined amount of compensation cannot be higher than the average salary in FBiH.	
	TUZLA CANTON	Salary compensation is determined in the amount of 90% of the average salary of the beneficiary in the period of six months before taking maternity leave, or in the amount of 55% of the average salary earned in the same period, if it is more favourable for the beneficiary, provided that the salary compensation cannot be higher than the average salary.	Financial assistance is determined in the monthly amount of 15% of the average salary.

	POSAVINA CANTON	Salary compensation for a woman-mother, in accordance with this Law, is paid for twelve months in the amount of 80% of the average net salary for which the person was registered for compulsory health insurance with the Health Insurance Institute of the Posavina Canton and for which all relevant taxes and contributions were duly paid, in the last six months preceding the departure for maternity leave, in accordance with labour regulations.	The maternity benefit is paid monthly in the amount of BAM 300 for each new-born child.
Republika Srpska		The employer in Republika Srpska pays the compensation for the first month	Maternity allowance is granted in the amount of BAM 405.

		<p>of maternity leave for which he/she is entitled to a refund in the amount of 100% of gross salary, and for the other 11 months, the compensation is paid by the Public Fund for Child Protection of RS. The amount of compensation is determined by the Labour Law of Republika Srpska and is equal to the amount of the average net salary earned by the mother in the period of 18 months before the start of maternity leave. If she has not received a salary for all 18 months, the lowest salary for each month for which she has not received a salary shall</p>	
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		be taken into account for the calculation of the average salary. In this way, protection is provided to women who have not been employed during all the months before the start of maternity leave.	
BD BiH		In BD BiH, a woman is entitled to maternity allowance at the expense of the District budget in the amount of the average salary she earned in the period of 12 months before the start of the maternity leave. If she did not receive a salary for all 12 months, the amount of compensation shall include the average salary that the maternity	The maternity benefit is paid for a period of 12 months for each newborn child in the family, and for twins for 18 months and amounts to 50% of the average monthly net salary in the District, determined according to the latest published data from the Finance Directorate of Brčko District of BiH

		would have received if she had worked in the same workplace with the same employer.	
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Reconciliation of private and work life

Paternity leave and parental leave are rights regulated by the labour laws of BD BiH, FBiH and RS, and the Law on Labour in Institutions of BiH. However, these laws do not use this terminology, but the term *maternity* leave is used for parental leave, which could be misleading for users of this right. Maternity leave includes the right of both parents to one year of leave following the birth of their child. Paternity leave as a separate right is not regulated, but the possibility of using five or seven working days (depending on the applicable labour law) in the event of the birth of the child is left. However, this period represents the total number of days that can be used during the year for other situations such as marriage or death of a family member.

In 2022, Sarajevo Open Centre published a research¹⁶⁰ with the aim of determining administrative and legislative obstacles to the use of paternity leave. We wanted to determine whether fathers use “maternity leave”, to what extent and whether there are stereotypes that prevent fathers from using this right. The research also served to formulate recommendations both with regard to the development of public policies and with regard to amendments to applicable labour laws. Almost 60% of fathers did not know that there was a possibility of using maternity leave, which indicates the need to inform the public about the rights guaranteed by law. Therefore, Sarajevo Open Centre conducted a campaign on the right to use maternity leave for fathers, but for the full effect, it is necessary to involve the competent authorities at all levels in the promotion – entity ministries of labour and social policy, cantonal ministries responsible for labour and social policy issues, and municipal services/centres for social work.

¹⁶⁰ Dizdar, A. and Hasanbegović, D, *Father on Maternity Leave: Research on Legislative and Administrative Barriers to the Use of Maternity Leave in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, Sarajevo: Sarajevo Open Centre, 2022

Challenges in practice

After the campaign, men came to Sarajevo Open Centre with personal examples that reflect the **challenges in practice** when using maternity leave.

In the first case, it was a man whose employer denied him this opportunity. In consultation with us, the father persisted in his request and ultimately exercised the right to use maternity leave.

Another man who approached Sarajevo Open Centre encountered a problem in communicating with institutions. Namely, the employer approved the use of maternity leave, but the problem arose when he had to submit the necessary documentation to the municipal service. The municipal service referred him to the gynaecologist of the child's mother to give him a certificate that the mother has finished using maternity leave. However, the mother did not use the leave since she is an independent entrepreneur, and it was not possible to issue a certificate. Due to the lack of one paper from the doctor, the father was denied the right to use the leave. In this way, discrimination on the basis of gender was carried out, but also a violation of the Labour Law of FBiH, which does not at all bind the right of the father to use maternity leave to the mother's right, but exclusively to the fact of the birth of the child. After the complaint sent by SOC to the municipal service, the father was granted the use of maternity leave and the realization of maternity benefits.

One of the detected problems is the language used. In addition to the law, which recognizes only maternity leave, it is necessary to change the forms that are filled in for the purpose of applying for compensation instead of salary during the use of maternity leave. Therefore, SOC sent an initiative to all municipalities in the Sarajevo Canton and several municipalities in other cantons to use gender-sensitive language. The municipalities of Centar,¹⁶¹ Novi Grad¹⁶² and Novo Sarajevo changed the forms by adding the word *father* or replacing the term woman-mother *with* the word *parent*.

When sending inquiries to municipal services in BiH, we received a

¹⁶¹ <https://www.centar.ba/upload/documents/obraci/SOC-29.pdf>

¹⁶² <https://www.novigradsarajevo.ba/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Zahtjev-za-ostvarivanje-prava-na-naknadu-umjesto-place-zaposlenom-roditelju.pdf>

response from one of the municipalities that they do not have recorded cases of fathers using maternity leave because fathers can use leave only in the “case of the death of the mother, if the mother leaves the child or if she cannot use maternity leave for other justified reasons”. After addressing the line cantonal ministry, we received confirmation of the above interpretation. It is clear that this is a case of ignorance pertaining to the Labour Law of the FBiH, and it is necessary to inform the officials of municipal services who decide on the requests of citizens. Therefore, we sent a request to the FBiH Ministry of Labour and Social Policy to send all cantons and municipalities an instruction on how to act in cases of exercising the right to maternity benefits of employed and unemployed parents.

These examples from practice show that, although there are rights guaranteed by law, they are not always available and parents must be additionally engaged and familiarized with the law to exercise their rights.

Care economy

According to all indicators of the labour market, women are at a disadvantage compared to men and the difference has remained quite stable over time. The difference between men and women is much more pronounced when looking at the rates of activity and employment.¹⁶³ The rate of activity of women is 38.0%, as opposed to the rate for men, which is 60.6%. Women make up 37.9% of employed persons, and 51.3% of unemployed persons at the level of BiH, according to the Labour Force Survey from the second quarter (April-June) 2024. The main reason for this is the care of children and the elderly, i.e. the care economy, which is the most significant burden on women.

Many working-age women are inactive, i.e. outside the labour force due to increased activities in the following domains:

¹⁶³ UN Women (2023), Baseline Study on the Care Economy in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Overview of key features, policies, and program options. Sarajevo, Bosna i Hercegovina, p. 16. (Retrieved from: <https://eca.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2023/05/baseline-study-on-care-economy-overview-of-key-denominators-policy-and-programming-options>)

- housework,
- childcare and education,
- care for the elderly,
- care for people with disabilities.

The Employment Strategy in FBiH 2023-2030¹⁶⁴ recognizes women as a significant part of the inactive population and envisages a number of active employment measures, but also notes poor coordination between active (adult education, incentives or other incentives for employment) and passive employment policies (unemployment benefits) as well as the lack of a strategy for the work activation of women who are inactive due to child care.¹⁶⁵

The research of the Agency for Gender Equality of BiH entitled “Impact of gender division of family and household tasks on the professional life of employed women in Bosnia and Herzegovina”, which was done by surveying 500 employed women from all over BiH, aged 18 to 65, who live with partners,¹⁶⁶ showed that employed women have double working hours: one at work, the other after work at home. Almost 53% of the surveyed employed women had to significantly reduce their sleep time for a longer period of time at least once in their lives due to household chores, according to the survey. Many of them are exposed to prolonged stress; at work, due to lack of sleep, they are distracted and lose concentration, leading to omissions that reduce their productivity and chances of advancement. The mental health of women, burdened with a long working day on two fronts, is seriously endangered in this situation.

164 Official Gazette of the Federation of BiH, no.: 94/2023

165 Lucid Linx (2024), Gender Equality Index in Bosnia and Herzegovina 2023. UN Women - United Nations Organisation for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. (Retrieved from: https://bhas.gov.ba/data/Publikacije/Metodologije/IndeksRodneRavnopravnosti_BS.pdf), p. 26.

166 Hasanagić, Snježana; Papović, Maja (2020), Impact of gender division of family and household tasks on the professional life of employed women in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Sarajevo: Agency for Gender Equality of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Retrieved from: <https://arsbih.gov.ba/project/istrazivanje-uticaj-rodne-podjele-porodicnih-i-kucanskih-poslova-naprofesionalni-zivot-zaposlenih-zena-u-bosni-i-hercegovini>)

The key to the problem is the division of household chores among partners, based on social stereotypes about the division of family chores into “male” and “female”. The survey of the Agency for Gender Equality of BiH shows that in more than 93% of families, women, although employed outside the home, perform all or most of the daily household chores. In less than 6% of surveyed families, partners perform these tasks equally, while in only three out of 500 cases most routine household tasks are more often performed by a man.¹⁶⁷ The survey shows that 17% of women had to terminate their employment due to child care, and 15% of them changed jobs due to parental obligations.¹⁶⁸

Regarding the contributions of partners/fathers, research has shown that these are occasional larger tasks related to the maintenance of the apartment, such as painting, and small household repairs such as replacing the bulb or fuse, as well as jobs related to car maintenance. In 46% of the surveyed families, none of the partners used parental/maternity leave. Among the parents who did, in 94% of cases, a woman was on maternity leave, while only 3.5% of fathers exercised this legal right.¹⁶⁹

The results of the research done for the **Gender Equality Barometer in BiH** show a division of labour that is mostly in line with the prevailing patriarchal ideas about what ‘women’s work’ consists of versus ‘men’s work’. Wives/mothers are mainly responsible for cooking, preparing and reheating food, washing dishes, doing laundry, ironing and cleaning. Fathers/husbands are mainly responsible for wood/coal, vehicle maintenance, as well as minor repairs and maintenance. Women in focus groups state that they spend a minimum of 2-3 hours a day doing household chores. Along with the care of children, this number comes to a total of 6-7 hours of work per day, which places BiH among the countries where women spend the most time doing unpaid work.¹⁷⁰

167 Hasanagić, Snježana; Papović, Maja (2020), *ibid.*, p. 16.

168 *Ibid.*, p. 34

169 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

170 Spahić Šiljak, Zilka; Đipa, Dino (2024), *Gender Equality Barometer in Bosnia and Herzegovina*. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Agency for Gender Equality of BiH, Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees of Bosnia and Herzegovina, p. 31, 32. (Retrieved from: <https://www.undp.org/bs/bosnia-herzegovina/publications/barometar-rodne-ravnopravnosti-u-bosni-i-hercegovini>)

The baseline study on the care economy in Bosnia and Herzegovina prepared by **UN Women in BiH** lists certain statistical indicators related to the care sector:

- Women participate at least 2.5 times more in unpaid domestic work and care than men
- Women and girls from socially vulnerable groups are more involved in this type of care
- In 2018, the International Labour Organization estimated that the global participation of women in care work will grow from 206 to 358 million by 2030, in line with trends of socio-demographic changes
- In BiH, the care economy makes approx. 120,000 jobs / 14.86% of total employment: education, health, home care, social work
- Complex, inadequate care systems in BiH
- High unemployment rates for women and inactivity in the labour market
- The education system does not provide sufficient support to children with developmental difficulties/disabilities
- Traditionally, social culture does not have developed empathy for the needs of care and care providers

The study showed that women spend an average of 6:32 hours a day on care activities, while men spend 3:31 hours. The study, by analysing the collected data, found that **unpaid work** is a key factor in women's participation in the labour market and the quality of employment, as well as that it significantly affects working conditions. It is typically underestimated and invisible and is taken 'for granted'.

Among other research methods, a qualitative survey of 929 respondents from Bosnia and Herzegovina found that there is a culturally rooted opinion that care is primarily a woman's responsibility. These are some of the considerations of gender roles and norms:

- girls are more taught to prepare food (54.6%),
- clean house (67.78%),
- wash clothes (52.72%),
- consider it normal under any circumstances for women to take care of children and the elderly (48.74%).

Childcare

UNICEF monitors key indicators related to the situation of children and women in different countries in 2022. According to the 2012 cross-field study, the percentage of children aged 36-59 months attending an early education program was only 13% in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Some more recent approximations, such as those by Manojlović from 2019¹⁷¹, state that this is 17% and that about 50% of children in this country attend a mandatory 150-hour preschool program in the year before starting school.¹⁷²

According to UNICEF, only 44% of children aged 3 to 6 go to kindergarten in BiH.¹⁷³

According to the findings of the UN Women quantitative study, childcare is a significant activity and primarily an activity that women engage in at any time of the day. Mothers who work full-time have stated that they have a lot of problems organising the day due to the working hours that last from nine to five.¹⁷⁴

An additional point of analysis was the use of care services. Interestingly, 68.6% of respondents who have children did not use childcare facilities or home care services for their children (babysitting services, nannies, etc.). One of the possible reasons for such poor use of childcare services is their availability throughout the country. Both primary and secondary data from this research show that in most places across the country, kindergartens are not available or, if available, it is really difficult to get accommodation in a public kindergarten.¹⁷⁵

More on the topic of care for the elderly and people with disabilities, as well as previously exposed information on the care economy is available in the UN Women survey.

The OSCE Mission to BiH research entitled “Discrimination in Bosnia and

171 Manojlović, Marija (20.05.2019), Preschool education in Bosnia and Herzegovina - Right or privilege (Retrieved from: <https://diskriminacija.ba teme/ before%C5%A1kolsko-obrazovanje-u-bosni-i-hercegovini-pravo-ili-privilege>)

172 UN Women (2023), *ibid.*, p. 32.

173 See more at: <https://www.unicef.org/bih/pri%C4%8De/vrti%C4%87i-za-sve>

174 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

175 *Ibid.*, p. 36-37.

Herzegovina - Public Perceptions, Attitudes, and Experiences” found that discrimination on the basis of gender is present among respondents in BiH. For example, 36.9% of respondents expressed the belief that **women are better suited to taking care of the family than to working outside the home**, and 34.2% stated that men are better political leaders than women.

These numbers show that the people of BiH view the position of men and women in society differently, and many support the **traditional division of social roles by gender**, thus limiting women in what they can or cannot do. When these figures are analysed based on gender, it is found that men are more proponents of “traditional” roles based on gender. For example, 45.5% of men, but only 18.3% of women surveyed, stated that men are better political leaders than women. Furthermore, women reported that they were more likely to experience gender-based discrimination than men.¹⁷⁶ 10.4% of men and 22.8% of women stated that they experienced discrimination due to their gender.

Action guidelines

- For an overview of the most important policy proposals and methods of program planning in the areas of child care, the elderly, persons with disabilities and domestic work, we recommend the **Baseline Study on Care Economy in Bosnia and Herzegovina**, published by UN Women (p. 63-72)
- Harmonize the applicable labour laws with the EU Directive on the reconciliation of private and work life by introducing the concept of parental leave as the right of both parents, whereby two months will be mandatory and non-transferable to the other parent, and through the introduction of the concept of paternity leave as the right of the father to use 10 days of leave in the event of the birth of a child.
- Enable fathers to use maternity leave regardless of the working status of the mother.
- Conduct regular campaigns to promote the right to use paternity leave.
- Use gender-neutral language in maternity benefit forms, for both employed and unemployed parents

¹⁷⁶ OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina (2023), Discrimination in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Public Perceptions, Attitudes, and Experiences, p. 43. (Retrieved from: <https://www.osce.org/hbs/mission-to-bosnia-and-herzegovina/448855>)

SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

Normative and legal framework

There is no single law, program or strategy covering the field of sexual and reproductive health in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Issues of sexual and reproductive rights at the level of the entities, cantons and Brčko District are not regulated as a separate legislative unit, i.e. they are contained in laws adopted in the fields of health, social protection, family relations, criminal and misdemeanour legislation. After the Strategy for the Improvement of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights of the Federation of BiH ceased to have effect in 2019, no new strategy has been adopted. In Republika Srpska, the Strategy for the Improvement of Sexual and Reproductive Health (2019–2029) is in force.

Period poverty

The beginning of the conversation on the topic of menstrual poverty was an initiative to abolish the sales tax on goods for hygienic use such as baby diapers, diaper pads, adult diapers, sanitary napkins, tampons and similar sanitary items. On this occasion, we referred to the European Parliament Resolution of 15 January 2019 on gender equality and taxation policies in the EU (2018/2095 (INI)), which, although not binding on BiH, is an important document whose recommendations should be followed as a country striving for EU integration. The resolution notes that *gender-based prejudice occurs when the scope of tax legislation overlaps with the field of gender relations, norms and economic behaviour*, notes that *VAT contains gender-based prejudice due to women's consumption patterns, which differ from men's consumption patterns because women buy more products and services to improve health, education and nutrition*. Also, all Member States are invited to *abolish the so-called "care and tampon tax", take advantage of the flexibility introduced by the VAT Directive and apply a VAT exemption or rate of 0% on these basic products*. *Reducing the price due to the VAT exemption on these products would be immeasurably beneficial for young women and women with low incomes, and Member States are invited to foresee additional stocks of feminine hygiene supplies in certain (public) spaces such as schools, universities, etc.*

Unfortunately, the proposals of Sarajevo Open Centre, but also of the citizens who supported the initiative, were not adopted. However, at that time, there was no relevant data on women's access to menstrual supplies in BiH, the amounts they spend, stereotypes and prejudices surrounding this topic. In 2024, the TPO Foundation published the first research entitled "*How Much Does It Cost and How Much Does It Hurt?*" *Social decoding of menstruation at universities in Bosnia and Herzegovina*. As the name suggests, research is focused on women from universities in BiH, and research on this topic is currently underway among the general population. Research has shown that price plays an important role in product selection, which means that unemployed women, i.e. women who have low incomes, are at a higher risk of period poverty.¹⁷⁷ 73.10% of female students have a budget of less than BAM 500, over 50% of female students spend BAM 5-10 on menstrual products during the month, while 36.91% spend more than BAM 10. 36.19% of female students spend BAM 5-10 per month on painkillers, and 17.88% spend over BAM 10.¹⁷⁸ This means that women are exposed to an annual cost of a minimum of BAM 120 just because of their biology. As many as 52.76% of female teachers fear that someone will see them when they dispose of sanitary pads. 47.44% of female teachers are afraid that they will not notice bleeding, while among female students this percentage is 54.36%.¹⁷⁹ Teachers and students are aware of the stigma that menstruation carries with them in our society, and 61.52% of respondents stated that they do not say that they have menstruation because they are afraid that they will be characterized as nervous, emotional (42.40%) and cranky (28.18%).¹⁸⁰ It is also interesting that a number of respondents are prone to superstition, primarily female students, who believe that menstrual blood can be dangerous if it is used in magical rituals (41.49% of female students),¹⁸¹ and as the most common example of which they have heard from others, they cite the use of menstrual blood to seduce a man.¹⁸² Most female students believe that menstrual products should be available at colleges.

177 Spahić Šiljak, Z., Kovačević, J., Vujković Šakanović, A., Džananović, N. i Kulić, I. 2024. *How much does it cost and how much does it hurt? Social decoding of menstruation at universities in Bosnia and Herzegovina*. Sarajevo: TPO Foundation.

178 Ibid., p. 40.

179 Ibid., p. 16.

180 Ibid., p. 31.

181 Ibid., p. 32

182 Ibid., p. 32-33

Access to sexual and reproductive health services and family planning

According to the findings and conclusions of the Institution of Human Rights Ombudsman of BiH, a systematic and comprehensive approach to family planning is lacking in BiH.¹⁸³

Contraception

The inclusion of contraceptives on positive lists of medicinal products in Bosnia and Herzegovina continues to be slow and ineffective. No canton in the Federation of BiH covers the costs of reimbursement of oral contraceptives that are on the B list of medicinal products of compulsory health insurance of the Federation of BiH – they cannot be financed by means of compulsory health insurance.¹⁸⁴ Contraceptives in BiH can be found on the essential lists of medicinal products only in Republika Srpska and Canton 10, while in other parts of the country, users must pay the full price for all contraceptives. In Republika Srpska, the Health Insurance Fund may fully or partially finance contraceptives from the essential list, while in the case of Canton 10, the Health Insurance Institute allocates 50% of funds for the said medicinal product.¹⁸⁵

There is no systemic education on contraceptive methods in BiH, there is a very low level of information, counselling and availability of contraceptive means/methods.¹⁸⁶

Sterilization and vasectomy

For the purposes of writing this report, SOC sent requests for access to information to health institutions (15 of them, seven in FBiH, one in BD

183 Institution of Human Rights Ombudsman of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2021), Human Rights in the Field of Sexual and Reproductive Health in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Final Report). Sarajevo: Institution of Human Rights Ombudsman of Bosnia and Herzegovina, United Nations Population Fund of BiH (UNFPA), proMENTE Social Research (Retrieved from: https://ba.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/ljudska_prava_u_oblasti_seksualnog_i_reproduktivnog_zdravlja_u_bih.pdf)

184 In the Federation of BiH, an oral contraceptive ATC: G03AA12, generic name drospirenone + ethinylestradiol, is available in the form of film-coated tablets.

185 Institution of Human Rights Ombudsman of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2021), Human Rights in the Field of Sexual and Reproductive Health in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Final Report). Ibid., p. 10 and 11

186 Institution of Human Rights Ombudsman of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2021), *ibid.*, p. 18.

BiH, seven in RS).¹⁸⁷ Eight health institutions responded to the sterilization and vasectomy inquiries as permanent methods of contraception, and seven did not respond to the SOC inquiry.

Gradiška Hospital responded that it does not perform sterilization or vasectomy procedures, without explaining the reasons – whether because patients do not request these procedures, or because they do not have the capacity to provide these services (staff, equipment, professional skills, etc.). Konjic General Hospital said that it had no sterilization requirements in the period 2022–2024.

In the Zenica Cantonal Hospital, tubal **sterilization** is performed as a method of contraception, i.e. the hospital states that Pomeroy's operation is the most popular sterilization operation for women. In the period 2022-2024, 88 sterilization procedures were performed at the Department of Gynaecology and Obstetrics of the hospital. According to the information that SOC received from the hospital, sterilization is a method of choice in older couples who are sure that they will no longer and do not want to have children. "In women under 35 years of age, sterilization procedure can be performed if their life would be endangered by pregnancy or childbirth (most often after a third caesarean section or complicated last pregnancy) and in women who have confirmed medical knowledge that they will give birth to a child with severe congenital physical or mental disabilities," the hospital said. They also emphasize that the patient's desire is a prerequisite for sterilization so that a consenting marital or extramarital partner is not required to perform sterilization.

At the Clinic for Gynaecology and Obstetrics UCC Tuzla, sterilization in women is done due to medical indications (health risk of pregnancy,¹⁸⁸ genetic factors,¹⁸⁹ complications in previous pregnancies,¹⁹⁰ inoperable

187 University Clinical Center Sarajevo, University Clinical Center Tuzla, University Clinical Hospital Mostar, Cantonal Hospital "Dr. Safet Mujić" Mostar, Cantonal Hospital Zenica, Konjic General Hospital, General Hospital "Prim dr. Abdulah Nakaš, Health Center Brčko, University Clinical Center of Republika Srpska, University Hospital Foča, Hospital "Sveti Vračevi" Bijeljina, Hospital "St. Apostle Luka" Doboј, Gradiška Hospital, East Sarajevo Hospital, General Hospital Nevesinje

188 If a new pregnancy would significantly endanger a woman's life or health due to pre-existing health conditions (e.g. heart disease, kidney disease, severe hypertension)

189 If there is a risk of transmitting hereditary diseases to the offspring

190 Such as repeated caesarean sections, eclampsia, or severe postpartum depression

problems with the uterus or ovaries¹⁹¹), and social and personal indications, which includes situations when a woman does not want more children, if other methods of contraception cause contraindications or are ineffective, if material resources are limited and if further pregnancy would significantly affect the quality of life, when a woman does not want children (in this situation, the Clinic points out that sterilization under the age of 45 is not recommended, which is not explained in more detail). In the period 2022-2024, 63 sterilization procedures were performed at this clinic, covered by mandatory health insurance. The question remains whether women who apply and are below 45 years of age, have not given birth, are not at genetic or health risk if they become pregnant, etc. are allowed to be sterilized.

General Hospital “Prim. Dr. Abdulah Nakaš” Sarajevo provided the following information: “Sterilization as a method of definitive i.e. irreversible contraception is performed in our institution. It is a surgical ‘ligation’ of the fallopian tubes, which is performed by various surgical techniques. This procedure is not particularly common, and has been performed only a few times in the last two years; because patients very seldom request this procedure. The service is fully covered by the Health Insurance Institute. According to the Law in force in the FBiH (since 1977, taken over from Yugoslavia and in force in Croatia), and regulates the issue of sterilization, in order to perform this procedure, it is necessary for the female patient to be 35 years old, that she already has child/children or exceptionally if it is believed that pregnancy would endanger the life or health of the patient. Although only the patient’s signed consent, which was previously informed in detail, is legally sufficient, in practice, the consent of the partner is also obtained.” From this answer, it is evident that the hospital does not respect the patient’s right to privacy and independent decision-making regarding her the body and health, and the law governing the procedure is violated by requesting the consent of the partner.

In the period 2022-2024, 12 sterilizations and no vasectomies were performed at the University Clinical Center of Republika Srpska. Sterilization procedure is usually performed after the fourth or fifth caesarean section at the explicit written request of the female patient. If it is sterilization that is not part of the caesarean section surgery, i.e. laparoscopic

191 Such as some types of tumors, endometriosis, or chronic pelvic pain

salpingectomy, such a service is charged according to the commercial price list of UCC RS and amounts to BAM 2,000. In all cases where sterilization was performed, these were mothers who had given birth more than three times.

As for the **vasectomy**, one vasectomy was performed at the Urology Clinic of the Clinical Center University of Sarajevo in the period 2022-2024, and the costs were covered from the funds of compulsory health insurance. When performing a vasectomy, medical staff is guided by the principles of medical ethics and guidelines of the European Association of Urology and the American Urological Association. There are no specific procedures or legal regulations at the level of FBiH. The CCUS Urology Clinic states that there are no absolute contraindications for vasectomy. Relative contraindications may be: “absence of born children, <30 years of age, severe illness, no current relationship/relationship, scrotal pain”. Preoperative counselling includes alternative methods of contraception, complications and the rate of treatment failure, and the need for postoperative sperm analysis at least three months after the procedure. Signed informed consent must be obtained prior to surgery. The case is presented preoperatively at the Clinic’s expert council.

There were no patients who needed a vasectomy at the University Clinical Center Tuzla, Konjic General Hospital and the Zenica Cantonal Hospital in the period 2022-2024.

Abortion

On-demand abortion in Bosnia and Herzegovina can be performed until the 10th week of pregnancy, according to entity laws on conditions and procedure for termination of pregnancy. After this period, this procedure requires the consent of the health institution commission (medically indicated termination of pregnancy). However, a research pertaining to the abortion regulations, availability and practices conducted by Sarajevo Open Centre in 2023 shows that access to abortion services is limited and inconsistent in a number of ways – starting from the non-recognition of these services by strategic documents that shape policies in the field of sexual and reproductive health, through incomplete statistics, to the practical challenges of accessing this right, such as the capacities of health institutions and staff, service prices,

the availability of medical abortion, anaesthesia, etc.¹⁹² The research also reflects the experiences of 163 women collected through an online questionnaire, which are mostly negative and show a lack of communication, incomplete information about the procedure, and degrading attitudes towards female patients. A major problem is the insufficient number of medical staff in certain health institutions / cantons / cities (gynaecologists, anaesthesiologists), and the existing staff who refuse to perform these health services for personal/moral reasons (so-called conscientious objection).

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, there are now at least ten organizations and other initiatives that want to influence women's decisions on abortion, and with the help of domestic budgets and the support of large international conservative organizations, reduce the possibilities or completely ban abortion.¹⁹³ The research that SOC did in cooperation with BIRN/ Detektor analyses the actions of these actors, their ways of communication and financing. These are individuals, formal and informal groups, organizations and foundations that oppose the possibility of abortion on demand, and some of them advocate a ban through a change in the law. In addition, they seek to influence the attitude towards abortion in decision makers or the general public through the organization of public events, campaigns, protests or communication on social networks. This communication is full of misinformation and the manipulation strategies they use can be demotivating to the decision to terminate an unwanted pregnancy.

These groups generally convey misinformation or claims that scare pregnant women or society because of the most extreme, negative consequences on women's health that could arise, which represent that they occur in a far greater number of cases than practice shows, such as infertility, higher chances of breast or cervical cancer, and mental disabilities. This is reflected in the manipulative interpretation of the results of

192 More on the availability of abortion in BiH: Hasanbegović Vukas, Delila (2023), *Research on the Regulation, Availability and Practice of Abortion in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, Sarajevo: Sarajevo Open Centre (Retrieved from: <https://soc.ba/istrazivanjeoregulacijidostupnostiipraksiabortusaubosnihercegovini/>)

193 Husarić Omerović, Azra (2024), *Advocating the Prohibition and Opposition to Abortion in Bosnia and Herzegovina – Organizations, Initiatives and Individuals*, Sarajevo: Sarajevo Open Centre (Retrieved from: <https://soc.ba/zagovaranje-zabrane-i-protivljenje-abortusu-u-bosni-i-hercegovini-organizacije-inicijative-i-pojedinci/>)

existing research and scientific studies¹⁹⁴, where it is argued, for example, that most women regret terminating pregnancy or that women who keep the pregnancy mostly over time are happy that they have done so.

Childbirth, prenatal and postnatal care

For the purpose of writing this report, SOC sent requests for access to information to health institutions (15 of them, seven in FBiH, one in BD BiH, seven in RS)¹⁹⁵ and institutions for gender equality and human rights protection – Centre for Gender Equity and Equality of RS, Gender Center of FBiH and the Institution of Human Rights Ombudsman of BiH. The questions were raised about whether these institutions received and how they addressed the issues of discrimination/inequality/violation of human rights of new mothers in terms of access to health care, i.e. the treatment of women during childbirth and postpartum care in the period 2020-2024.

Gender centres have not received cases on these issues of human rights violations in the stated period. The Institution of Human Rights Ombudsman of BiH states through its annual activity reports that it had cases concerning the violation of the rights of a pregnant woman arising from health insurance (complications in pregnancy due to foetal diseases, recommendations of treatment in a specialized institution in another country) and complaints about dissatisfaction during and manner of treatment of the pregnant woman who deceased.¹⁹⁶

On the other hand, we asked health institutions whether in the period 2022-2024 there were complaints from patients about the treatment during childbirths, as well as about the quality of prenatal and postnatal care services and what the reasons were. Of the 15 health institutions contacted, only five responded to the SOC inquiry on this topic. While

¹⁹⁴ More at: <https://libela.org/genderfacts/analiza-beckog-instituta-imabe-ne-moze-se-smatrati-znanstveno-relevantnom-u-medunarodnim-okvirima/>

¹⁹⁵ University Clinical Center Sarajevo, University Clinical Center Tuzla, University Clinical Hospital Mostar, Cantonal Hospital “Dr. Safet Mujić” Mostar, Cantonal Hospital Zenica, Konjic General Hospital, General Hospital “Prim dr. Abdulah Nakaš, Health Center Brčko, University Clinical Center of Republika Srpska, University Hospital Foča, Hospital “Sveti Vračevi” Bijeljina, Hospital “St. Apostle Luka” Doboј, Gradiška Hospital, East Sarajevo Hospital, General Hospital Nevesinje

¹⁹⁶ See more in the institution’s annual activity reports: <https://www.ombudsmen.gov.ba/Dokumenti.aspx?id=27&type=1&lang=BS>

there were no complaints about the three health institutions, CCU Tuzla replied that there were no complaints about the treatment during child-births and the quality of care in the prenatal and postnatal period, but the complaints were related to the conditions of accommodation – lack of bedding, nightgowns, slippers, inadequate arrangement and appearance of toilets. Sarajevo General Hospital did not respond clearly and specifically to how many and what types of objections and complaints the patients sent, but with a generalized message that all complaints are discussed in detail, all procedures at the Department of Gynaecology and Obstetrics are in accordance with the rules of the profession, and they treat patients professionally and humanely.

About 50% of childbirths in BiH involve corruption consisting of giving money or expensive gifts to medical staff, according to a survey published in 2021 by the Baby Steps Association from Sarajevo.¹⁹⁷ The research shows that very poor conditions are present in hospitals/clinics (maternity hospitals) in BiH, that there is great dissatisfaction among patients, the rights of new mothers are violated, and violent practices have been recorded, both verbal and through the birth methods themselves. Inequality and discrimination are created by the widespread practice of giving and receiving bribes, i.e. corruption. From 2,713 collected responses by new mothers, significant elements of the childbirth experience were analysed, indicating poor conditions in maternity hospitals. Some of them are: Fundal pressure / Kristeller manoeuvre (34.6%), episiotomy without consent (42.8%), etc. More examples of poor treatment are available in the research.

Several civil society organizations have decided to dedicate 2022 Women's Day to the topic of safe childbirth.¹⁹⁸ In order to learn more about the experiences of women who gave birth throughout BiH, activists created a questionnaire for women who gave birth in one of the BiH health institutions. Over 400 women sent their questionnaire answers. The results showed a very small number of positive experiences, and on the other hand, negative experiences prevailed, which led some of the women to a situation where they no longer want to give birth or have

197 Baby steps (2021), Fight against corruption in maternity hospitals, Sarajevo: Baby Steps Association (Retrieved from: <https://www.babysteps.ba/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/PUBLIKACIJA-FINAL.pdf?fbclid=IwAR22NkliYiT1xWAS-JxtJz0WnppWsJbPiK1q8r5c6Tew7qrtUjZsymidHn24>)

198 More at: <https://catbih.ba/osmomartovski-mars-siguran-porodaj-je-politicko-pitanje/>

doubts about it. Given that there is often a lack of basic care resources in healthcare institutions, a campaign for the collection of hygiene products for UCC Banja Luka was also launched.¹⁹⁹

Another important issue is the labour companion. Health institutions do not inform pregnant women/new mothers about labour companion options and are often selectively allowed or not allowed at all. The problem observed by the Baby Steps Association is that labour companion matter is not regulated at any level of public health and it is left to maternity hospitals to define this through their internal procedures so that many health institutions do not allow accompaniment at all. Through a survey²⁰⁰ of 702 mothers (2020, 2021, 2022), the Baby Steps Association found that 93% of mothers did not have a labour companion, with 34.96% of mothers not knowing that they could ask for a labour companion, while 26.77% of mothers stated that they were told that this was not the practice of the maternity hospital.

In the latest report on BiH's progress in joining the European Union, in the chapter dealing with health care, the European Commission states that BiH should address inequalities in access to health care. The Commissions point out that poor conditions in hospitals and maternity hospitals need to be improved and the violence during labour procedures should be eliminated.²⁰¹

In the fall of 2023, UNFPA in BiH started researching the perception and experiences at childbirth in BiH in several cities in cooperation with the Agency for Gender Equality of BiH. The period covered by the survey is 2023-2024, and the data were collected through an online questionnaire. The research is not finished at the moment, but it will be very important to gain insights into women's experiences and childbirth practices.

199 Unkić, Hilma (08.03.2022), Corruption deeply rooted in BiH maternity hospitals.

Diskriminacija.ba (Retrieved from: <https://diskriminacija.ba teme/korupcija-duboko-ukorijenjena-u-bh-porodili%C5%A1tima>)

200 Baby Steps (2022), Enabling labour companions during childbirth in maternity hospitals in BiH. Sarajevo: Baby Steps Association (Retrieved from: <https://www.babysteps.ba/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/publikacija-pratnja-na-porodu-2022.pdf>)

201 Report available here: <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2024/Bosnia%20and%20Herzegovina%20Report%202024.pdf>

Availability of HPV vaccines

There has been some progress compared to the previous reporting period. Republika Srpska has started the process of vaccination against HPV with a nine-valent vaccine available for ages 11 to 15, and in the period from March 2023 to November 2024, 2,728 children were vaccinated, of which 1,965 girls and 763 boys. For this age group, vaccination is free of charge, while a commercial vaccine is available to other citizens, which was received by a total of 519 people by November 2024.²⁰² The devastatingly low percentage of vaccinated children (7.1%)²⁰³ indicates the need for better promotion of the importance of HPV vaccination and public awareness.²⁰⁴

Vaccination in the Sarajevo Canton began in 2022. Free quadri-valent vaccines were originally provided for children aged 11 years.²⁰⁵ Given that there was not a sufficient number of interested parents of children from 11 years of age, vaccination was allowed for girls from 11 to 26 years of age.²⁰⁶ At the beginning of September 2024, the Public Health Institute of CS submitted certain quantities of a nine-valent HPV vaccine to the PI Health Center of Sarajevo Canton. Vaccination is free for 8th grade girls.

In 2023, vaccination also began in the Bosnia-Podrinje Canton, where 150 doses were provided, i.e. a number of doses sufficient for 75 girls from the sixth to the ninth grade, with the possibility of expanding the age group to women up to 25 years, depending on the availability of vaccines.²⁰⁷

202 Federalna.ba. Retrieved from: <https://federalna.ba/u-rs-u-vakcinu-protiv-hpv-a-do-sada-primilo-2728-djece-eyeob> (19.12.2024)

203 The stated percentage was obtained using data on the number of children attending grades 6-9

204 Ba.n1info.com. Retrieved from: <https://n1info.ba/vijesti/osnovne-skole-u-rs-ostale-bez-112-odjeljenja-u-proteklih-pet-godina/> (19.12.2024)

205 UNFPA. *The implementation of the HPV vaccination program begins in the Sarajevo Canton*. Retrieved from: <https://ba.unfpa.org/bs/news/u-kantonu-sarajevo-po%C4%8Dinje-implementacija-programa-hpv-vakcinacije?page=14> (19.12.2024)

206 Klix.ba. Retrieved from: <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/u-domovima-zdravlja-na-ilidzi-novom-gradu-i-centru-pocela-vakcinacija-protiv-hpv-a/231230056> (19.12.2024)

207 Klix.ba. Retrieved from: <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/vakcinacija-protiv-hpv-virusa-pocela-i-u-gorazdu-za-sada-se-prijavilo-50-djevojica/231117140> (19.12.2024)

Action guidelines

- Abolish the tax on hygiene products to avoid tax discrimination.
- Ensure access to menstrual hygiene products in all public institutions in BiH.
- Include contraceptives on the essential lists of medicinal products of all administrative and territorial units in BiH, especially of all cantons in FBiH, and expand the supply of contraceptives on the BiH market.
- Plan and implement education on modern methods of contraception within health institutions of all levels of health care, and within and outside formal education using the resources of non-governmental organizations and professional associations of health workers in the field of sexual and reproductive health.
- Unify prices/tariffs for abortion in entities, districts and cantons, so that abortion is available to women on equal terms in all areas of BiH.
- Provide abortion services in all health institutions that register to perform these health services, with the mandatory use of appropriate anaesthesia.
- Include additional measures to oblige health professionals that if a particular doctor refuses to provide the service in a particular institution they have to enable the provision of the service by another doctor, i.e. in another health institution.
- Ensure regular, systematic, comprehensive collection, processing, analysis and publication of statistical data on performed abortions in BiH, classified according to key indicators (type and method of abortion, etc.).
- In all parts of BiH, equally ensure the availability of medical (non-surgical) abortion, which would include the registration and import of adequate medicines (so-called abortion pills).
- Regarding rights during labour (childbirth), recommendations have been developed in the aforementioned publications of the Baby Steps Association regarding the fight against corruption in maternity hospitals, enabling labour companions and improving all segments of quality of care related to pregnancy and labour (childbirth).²⁰⁸
- Ensure equal and timely access to cervical cancer prevention

208 Recommendations can be found in publications on the association's website.

and treatment services, including the availability of HPV vaccination programs under equal conditions and throughout the territory of BiH (include HPV vaccine in mandatory immunization programs in BiH).

POLITICAL LIFE AND DECISION-MAKING

Normative and legal framework

The Law on Gender Equality of BiH has not yet been implemented in the part related to the equal representation of both sexes in political life and in decision-making positions. **CEDAW** recommendation for amending the Election Law of BiH was not implemented in such a way that the quota for women candidates on electoral lists was increased from 40% to 50%, as well as that a minimum quota of 40% was introduced in the Law on the Council of Ministers of BiH.

Representation in government bodies and decision-making positions

According to the Agency for Statistics, women are on average represented by 25%. In the 2022 General Elections, one woman was elected to the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina for the first time. In the House of Representatives of the Parliamentary Assembly of BiH, women are represented by 17%, in the House of Representatives of the Parliament of FBiH by 28%, and 19% of women were elected to the National Assembly of RS, while in cantonal assemblies they are represented by 31%. Two women and eight men (20%) were appointed to the Council of Ministers of BiH, four women and 12 men (25%) were appointed to the Government of the FBiH, while five women and 11 men (31.25%) were appointed to the Government of RS.²⁰⁹

In the Local Elections in 2024, there were 42.09% of women candidates, while only 7.51% of women were candidates for the position of mayor.²¹⁰ A total of 25,703 persons applied for municipal/city councils, of which 42.61% were women. Only 210 women were listed as list leaders, or 13%.²¹¹ Eight women (5.63%) were elected to the position of mayor out of a total of 142 persons who will hold this office in the following term.²¹² Among the candidates for municipal/city councils,

209 Agency for Statistics, *Women and Men in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, (Sarajevo, 2023).

Retrieved from: https://bhas.gov.ba/data/Publikacije/Bilteni/2024/FAM_00_2023_TB_1_BS.pdf (19. 12. 2024)

210 Istinomjer.ba, *Representation of women in Local Elections in 2024*. Retrieved from: <https://istinomjer.ba/zastupljenost-zena-na-lokalnim-izborima-2024-godine/> (19. 12. 2024).

211 Ibid.

212 Central Election Commission. Election Indicator (Sarajevo, 2024). Retrieved from:

723 (22.76%) women out of a total of 3,177 municipal/city councillors were elected.²¹³ When asked how many penalties were imposed on political entities for spreading hate speech on the basis of gender, sexual orientation and/or gender identity, the Central Election Commission responded that they had not received any report and that no sanctions had been imposed on this basis. However, information is available in the media about the imposition of a fine on SNSD candidates for using homophobic hate speech. Milorad Dodik received a fine of BAM 5,000, while Ljubo Ninković was fined BAM 7,000.²¹⁴

Action guidelines

- Implement the recommendation of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, which indicates the need to amend the Election Law in such a way that the quota for women candidates on electoral lists is increased from 40% to 50%.
- Amend the Election Law so that, in the case of a representation of one sex in a percentage less than 40%, compensatory mandates are assigned to candidates of the less represented sex from the political party's compensatory list.
- Amend the Law on the Council of Ministers, laws on governments and ministerial appointments of entities and cantons so that, in a way that ensures the participation of constituent peoples, they also ensure the participation of 40% of women in these bodies.
- Political parties must include the principle of gender equality in their programming platforms, include women in party bodies, and work on the promotion of their candidates during election campaigns.

https://www.izbori.ba/Documents/2024/zbirna_statistika_2024.pdf (20. 1. 2024).

213 Ibid.

214 Oslobođenje.ba. *Dodik fined for insulting the LGBT population at a pre-election rally*. Retrieved from: <https://www.oslobodjenje.ba/vijesti/bih/dodik-kaznjen-zbog-vrijedanja-lgbt-populacije-na-predizbornom-skupu-986763/> (23. 1. 2025).

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Normative and legal framework

The Brčko District of BiH has amended the Criminal Code by introducing new criminal offenses: **genital mutilation of female genital organs, forced sterilization, stalking, psychological violence, sexual harassment and forced marriage.**

The previous definition of rape has been changed and now **rape** is defined **as sexual intercourse without the consent of another person.** The statute of limitations for crimes against sexual integrity, marriage, and family committed against children starts from the day the victim reaches adulthood. The perpetrator of a criminal offense to the detriment of the sexual integrity of the child shall be imposed a security measure prohibiting the full performance of a profession, activity or duty, in the performance of which direct contact with children is made. **The Criminal Code of the Brčko District of BiH becomes the first law in BiH that defines the concept of consent as the existence of the will to engage in sexual intercourse, and its absence is a condition for the existence of the criminal offence of rape.**

The group of protected grounds within the criminal offense of “public provocation and incitement to violence and hatred” has been expanded and now includes gender, sexual orientation and gender identity. In this way, LGBTI persons, but also other persons who, due to any personal characteristic, are victims of hate speech, enjoy protection. Although the Istanbul Convention does not explicitly mention hate speech, it nevertheless imposes an obligation on Member States to take all legislative and other measures to prevent all forms of violence, without discrimination on any grounds, including sex, gender, gender identity and sexual orientation.

The Criminal Code of FBiH is still not harmonized with the Istanbul Convention. The Draft Law on Amendments to the Criminal Code of FBiH and the Law on Protection against Domestic Violence of FBiH was drafted. At the time of writing the report, both laws were on the

agenda of the session of the House of Representatives of the FBiH Parliament, but were withdrawn due to too many amendments. According to the text of the Proposal, which is available to the public, it can be concluded that the law is largely harmonized with the Istanbul Convention, but still contains problematic provisions. Article 222 provides for a prison sentence of three to fifteen years for the death of a family member that occurred as a result of domestic violence, which is in direct conflict with the new point in Article 166, which provides for a prison sentence of at least ten years or a long-term prison sentence for the murder of a family member or close person. The definition of the criminal offence of rape as sexual intercourse without consent is also a novelty, but nevertheless a milder punishment is envisaged for the perpetrator who was mistaken about the existence of consent, which contradicts the very definition of consent and opens up space for different interpretations. Furthermore, the Proposal stipulates that culture, customs, tradition, religion and honour cannot be taken as mitigating circumstances when determining the punishment for criminal offences, which include, among other things, criminal offences against sexual freedom and morality. It is neglected that the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator is most often taken as a mitigating circumstance although the Istanbul Convention explicitly provides that the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim should be treated as an aggravating circumstance.

In Republika Srpska, the adoption of the Law on Protection against Domestic Violence and Violence against Women was suspended due to the reactions of conservative organizations that claim that this endangers the traditional family, and the Draft Law on Amendments to the Criminal Code of RS was adopted, which deletes the concept of “gender identity” from all articles.

No law provides for femicide as a separate criminal offence, nor is there any indication that it will be included in existing criminal legislation despite the efforts of civil society organizations. The number of women killed shows that the existing provisions are not sufficient to adequately punish the perpetrators who committed femicide. Although there are no official state statistics on the number of women killed, NGOs report and media reports show that 60 women were killed over a period of five years.²¹⁵

215 ba.N1info.com. *More than 60 women killed in just over five years in BiH: What ate we*

Unfortunately, crisis centres for rape victims have not yet been established, although their establishment was announced in 2021 in three cities in BiH: Sarajevo, Mostar and Tuzla.²¹⁶

Institutional mechanisms for combating domestic violence

In November 2024, the Agency for Gender Equality of BiH launched a campaign called “Loudly against violence”, supported by women politicians from BiH.²¹⁷ In cooperation with the UNDP, the “Gender Equality Seal” initiative is being implemented, which aims to empower women within institutions. In 2023, an Advisory Board for the Protection of Women Human Rights Defenders in BiH was established, consisting of representatives of the Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees of BiH, the Agency for Gender Equality of BiH, the Institution of Human Rights Ombudsman of BiH, the Regulatory Agency for Communications of BiH, the Ministry of Justice of BiH and the Foundation of Local Democracy in front of civil society organizations – human rights defenders and the Women’s Association “MOST” Višegrad as an alternate member. For the first time, the Gender Equality Index was established, which was accepted in EU countries as an instrument for measuring the achieved gender equality in several areas – work, money, knowledge, time, power, health, and includes two additional domains: intersecting inequality and violence against women. The previous BiH Equality Index measured the level of progress in the areas of knowledge and power, and this year it was expanded with the “time” domain.²¹⁸

The Gender Center of FBiH coordinated the process of drafting the Strategy for the Prevention and Fight against Domestic Violence 2024-2027, which was adopted by the FBiH Parliament in June 2024.²¹⁹ The strategy seeks to contribute to the fulfilment of the obligations assumed

waiting for? Retrieved from: <https://n1info.ba/vijesti/vise-od-60-ubijenih-zena-za-nesto-vise-od-pet-godina-u-bih-sta-se-ceka/> (20. 12. 2024).

216 Agency for Gender Equality of BiH. Retrieved from: <https://arsbih.gov.ba/potpisani-sporazumi-za-otvaranje-kriznih-centara-za-zrtve-silovanja-i-seksualnog-nasilja/> (20. 12. 2024).

217 Agency for Gender Equality of BiH. Retrieved from: <https://arsbih.gov.ba/izjave-politicarki-u-kampanji-glasno-protiv-nasilja/> (19. 12. 2024).

218 Agency for Gender Equality of BiH. Retrieved from: <https://arsbih.gov.ba/predstavljen-indeks-rodne-ravnopravnosti-bih-2023/> (20. 12. 2024).

219 Gender Center of FBiH. Retrieved from: <https://www.gcfbih.gov.ba/usvojena-strategija-za-prevenciju-i-borbu-protiv-nasilja-u-porodici/> (20. 12. 2024).

by the Istanbul Convention, i.e. the implementation of the so-called “four P’s” conventions (*prevention, protection, prosecution, policies*). The result of the adoption of the Strategy is also a campaign launched by the FBiH Ministry of Internal Affairs entitled “Do not turn your head, dial that number!”, with the aim of raising awareness of violence against women and domestic violence and encouraging citizens to be part of the support system.²²⁰

The Gender Center of Republika Srpska should “monitor and coordinate activities on the implementation of the Law on Gender Equality in BiH, collect initiatives to change legislation from the aspects of genders, cooperate with domestic and international non-governmental organizations, monitor the compliance of laws and other acts, policies, strategies, plans and programs related to the entity level, with domestic and international standards for gender equality...” The events in RS have shown that this body does not perform the tasks for which it was established, so there were no reactions when the concept of gender identity was deleted from the Criminal Code of RS or reactions to the decision of the Constitutional Court determining that the name “Gender Center” is not in accordance with the Constitution of RS. We recall that the Gender Center once took the position²²¹ that “the concept of sex includes gender as a sociological and culturally conditioned difference between males and females and refers to all roles and traits that are not conditioned or determined solely by natural or biological factors, but are rather the product of norms, practices, customs and traditions and are changeable over time.”²²²

Position and work of safe houses

There were no significant changes in the status and functioning of safe houses compared to the previous reporting period. Safe houses are still

220 Gender Center of FBiH. Retrieved from: <https://www.gcfbih.gov.ba/ne-okreci-glavu-okreni-broj-odrzana-konferencija-u-cilju-podizanja-svijesti-o-nasilju-u-porodici/> (20. 12. 2024).

221 Get involved in gender equality – Manual for the application of the principle of gender equity and equality in the local community, Gender Center – Center for Gender Equity and Equality of Republika Srpska, p. 34, available at: https://www.vladars.net/sr-SP-Cyrl/Vlada/centri/gendercentarrs/Documents/Prirucnik%20Ukljuci%20se%20u%20ravno-pravnost%20polova_173274534.pdf

222 Article 9 (a) of the Law on Gender Equality - consolidated text, Official Gazette of BiH, 32/10, available at: https://arsbih.gov.ba/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/ZoRS_32_10_B.pdf

financed in the manner prescribed by law, which means that funds they receive from the budget are neither timely nor adequate, which requires additional, donor financing.

The first safe house for LGBTIQ+ victims of domestic violence was established in Sarajevo, managed by the “Wings of Hope /orig. Krila nade/” Foundation. Currently, it is not financed from the budget, but exclusively from donor funds, which represents discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity.²²³

Action guidelines

- Amend the law on protection against domestic violence in BD BiH in such a way that domestic violence is treated as a criminal offence and not as a misdemeanour.
- Provide financial resources for safe houses in BiH.
- Harmonize criminal codes in BiH with the Istanbul Convention in order to adequately define cases of sexual violence, sexual harassment, psychological violence, femicide and other crimes motivated by the gender and sex of the victim.

²²³Free Europe. Retrieved from: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/sigurna-kuca-lgbt-bos-na-/32920697.html>. (23.12.2024)

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ABOUT SARAJEVO OPEN CENTRE

Sarajevo Open Centre (SOC) works to improve human rights, especially the position and human rights of LGBTI persons and women in Bosnia and Herzegovina, by interpreting, presenting and representing the authentic experiences of persons who suffer human rights violations and inequality, and advocating for legal, political, economic, social and cultural changes in all areas of life.

Here we will highlight only some achievements related to the equality of LGBTI persons and women. In addition to psychosocial and legal counselling, we continued to run the only LGBTI media in the country – the portal www.lgbti.ba. We organized trainings: for police, prosecutors' offices and courts, focusing on the topics of hate crime, hate speech and the application of anti-discrimination law; for medical professionals and health care workers, focusing on trans-specific and trans-inclusive gender adaptation; for the LGBTIQ community.

We worked intensively on creating a local institutional network of support for LGBTI persons in the Sarajevo Canton, improving the regulation of biomedically assisted fertilization in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the rights of female workers regarding discrimination on the basis of gender and maternity leave, the introduction of gender-sensitive language in parliaments and universities, the adoption and implementation of cantonal gender action plans, but also raising awareness of gender-based violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Over the past years, several of our legislative and *policy* initiatives have entered the government or parliamentary procedure. Our advocacy focus has been directed on issues regarding the policies for equality of women and LGBTI persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina, on issues of reproductive rights of women and men, parenting in the context of reconciliation of the private and business segment of life, freedom of assembly of LGBTI persons and improvement of the institutional framework for protection against violence and discrimination, and we intend to continue working on issues concerning transgender persons, intersex persons, same-sex partnerships, their social inclusion, but also the position of LGBTI persons in education, health, work and employment. Over the past years, we have carried out media campaigns reaching over a million BiH citizens, and we also organized the LGBTI film festival *Merlinka*, which from 2021 became the local festival *Kvirhana*, in cooperation with Tuzla Open Centre.

More about our work can be found at www.soc.ba.

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