WOMEN'S PEACE ACTIVISM

WORKSHOP-Way forward?

REPORT

INTRODUCTION As part of the on-going activities of the initiative Women Organizing for Peace in Syria and Bosnia, with the aim of providing information and support on how to act against nationalist politics of division, a workshop was organized on March 25 and 26 where the participants considered the context inside which women's organizations in Bosnia and Herzegovina act, as well as possible strategies for overcoming the problems faced by women's organizations, activists, and initiatives.

The workshop was created around three mutually connected units:

- o **Terminology,** or the phrases we use to explain our everyday actions or the context inside which we act, as organizations or as individuals, their meaning and how it influences our possibilities act;
- o **Context,** or the external and internal environment of women's non-government organizations and activists with the goal of defining a clear image of the environment in which we act;
- o **Options for action,** or possible strategies of organization.

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

I TERMINOLOGY In the first part of the workshop, participants worked in groups on terms which we often use in our discussion in the manner which elaborates the context in which we act. However, there is a certain level of understanding between us that the terms we use do not hold the same meaning for each of us, and that we often encounter fundamental mutual misunderstandings.

After this exercise, participants agreed that it is necessary to continue working on defining the terms we use and clarifying what we actually mean when we use certain words. The words **values** and **feminism** were especially highlighted during discussion.

The terms we worked on this time were: fascism, social justice, depolitization/politization, mobilization, influence, political space, solidarity, elitism, and connectedness, social and political strength.

Term	Group elaboration	Comments
Fascism	We are seeing the fascistization of society in B&H today. We define fascism as follows: • Absolute intolerance toward other and different • Suffocation of freedom of speech and opinion • Normalization of violence within the everyday • Isolation (informational and cultural) • Bureaucratization of totalitarianism and pervasive domination of national identity • Racism • Patriarchy – reference to invented traditions • Clergy defining social values **How to act?** – a new Constitution through: • Cooperation • Solidarity • Forming a syndicate of women's rights defenders • Facing the present (educational system) • Building a parallel system	"Too strong a word even for our social system because it encompasses a form of *eliminating the enemy*." "If *building a parallel system* refers to a political system, creating an antifascist front is an acceptable action. We can also work on changing the existing system, not necessarily on building a parallel one." "I disagree: part of what is listed in the definition better describes dictatorship than fascism. Fascism, to me, is a term from World War II, and I believe it to be too strong a word for our present context. "
Social justice	In B&H, social justice is an abstract term. It means nothing because everyone interprets it differently. Different categories develop and claim rights and justice in different manners. It could be defined as: The demand for a socially responsible state that has the task of building a socially responsible society. **How to act?** – We cannot do anything until we deconstruct the idea that we are living in fascism.	"I agree, but we need to define *socially responsible society*." "In the context of BiH, social justice also requires facing our military past, not only through criminal persecution of war criminals, but also through criminal persecution of war profiteers and seizure of assets gained during the war (the funds from the sale of said assets could be directed toward a victim reparation fund)." "I agree that everyone interprets social justice differently – but how do we, or how should we interpret it as female?"

Depolitization/ politization	Politics: individual and collective care and acting in the public interest; Depolitization: absence of formally political, individual, and group action in the public interest – everything is determined by so-called ethnopolitics whose goal is sheer survival, and not the public interest; Politization (as a need): demystification of the term "politics" as everything "bad, dirty, corrupt" and the affirmation of politics as a relation of action and responsibility toward the community, the public interest, oneself.	"I agree, but would like to add: elections." "I don't understand." "I believe we can act in this field by insisting on politization of areas such as education, healthcare, economy… (everything that is depoliticized today), and through our actions highlight the necessity of depoliticizing the *ethnic.*"
Mobilization	An alliance of several actors with identical or similar interests, with the goal of cooperative action and achieving greater influence both at the local and state levels.	"Cooperation and resources." "Encouragement, understanding, conversation, and support. " "From the aspect of feminist organizations, it is important to work on the mobilization of WOMEN (workers, women victims of the war, etc.) in the sense of political awakening." "Mobilization encompasses community values and depolitization." "I'm lacking an understanding of whom we're mobilizing, why, and in what way. "
Influence	Organizations acquire influence through the incitement of citizens to action. Influence is realized through creation of positive changes in the community and the process of decision-making through communication and support for decision-makers through various tools, but has a limited scope. Influence is not possible without cooperation and would be more productive at the local level.	"Organized citizens can achieve influence if they feel connected to the cause" "And where are individuals and their influence? " "We don't face (oppose) other (retrograde) influences; instead, we fall back and give

		them space "
		"How to achieve influence? "
		"Who/what are we influencing?"
Political space	Everyday action (on the street, at home, at work, in the organization, in an academic institution); There is a misguided assumption that political space is exclusively «party» space; My personal political.	"Every public and private space can be political space" "How to *occupy* political space?"
Solidarity	Support (financial, scientific, etc.), true empathy, understanding and acceptance of differences, tolerance. The concept of solidarity is ideologically important for a wider social movement. Living in solidarity – from declarative to practical.	"Implies consciousness of different real positions and different socio/economical positions in society and gender relations" "Not only support and empathy, but also active cooperation." "For me, solidarity as a value has a far greater societal meaning and weight than in the context of relations between individual activists or organizations. In this *individualized* sense, I use it rarely"
Elitism	Financial, geographical, organizational, personal, thematic elitism. Personal elitism has «morphed» into organizational elitism. Elitism of the "great" over the small – exclusion. **How to act?** – live values (knowledge, skills, cooperation). Transformation into elitism of capacity.	"Elite as avant-garde yes, elite as exclusion no" "Are we confusing expertise, competence, specialization with elitism?" "I don't understand?"
Connectedness	Represents the collective action around the same interests, functional topics, collective	"Connectedness only exists on the basis of

	goal. Implies support, and is realized at the levels of groups, individuals, projects, and information exchange. Connectedness is relevant to BiH and our activity. There is a connectedness, it is intermittent and fragmented, which is not necessarily bad, but there is no universal connectedness around a unified goal.	individual values."
Social and political strength	Social and political strength represents the ability to influence all levels (from local communities to the highest decision-making levels), as well as the participation in setting the social values. Social and political strength is a relevant concept for BiH and our activity. It is currently insufficient.	"Who creates social values? " "Political and social strength are two separate things "

II   CONTEXT During the second part of the workshop, we dealt with context, or the external and internal environment in which women's non-government organizations and individuals act. The group which discussed the internal environment took guidance from the SWOT analysis that we built during the workshop with women activists from Northern Ireland, held on February 9 and 10, 2015 (SWOT analysis and report from that workshop are available here). The group that worked on the external environment considered different elements that make up the external context, such as the Dayton Agreement, the international community, political, economic and social environments, as well as possible external catalysts and obstacles.

Internal environment
In the previously carried out SWOT analysis, it was stated that the women's movement is the strongest part of a civilian society. The group that worked on the internal environment did not concur with this, nor with the thought that a women's *movement* exists in BiH. The group debated whether the movement exists as such, if *yes,* how do we define it, and if *not,* what do we use instead of this term (the existence or non-existence of a movement greatly influences the internal environment and ambiance inside which women's organizations act).

The group agreed that there are no collective values in women's organizations on the basis of which we perform all our activities and initiatives, and often returned to these *collective values* as the root of all problems in and between women's organizations during their discussion. A need was established within women's organization for the definition of universal values that will replace all the values that are currently a staple of our society – religious, national, ethnic values. It logically follows that *feminism* would be this universal value for women's organizations and activists; however, there is an awareness that not all women's organizations and their members consider themselves feminists.

The group further discussed what individual and organizational values should be based on, and determined a need for the deconstruction and demystification of the concept of *political space* and *politics,* because deliberation of these concepts is often based on assumptions and prejudice that politics only belong to political parties, and neglects the fact that politics are our everyday existence. Closely related to the absence of collective values is the lack of consensus in the context of how the state should be organized and the Constitution revised; also mentioned was a disagreement regarding the condemnation of war crimes.

In the context of a lack of consensus, the group spoke about different women's initiatives for Constitutional changes. It was stated that there is not enough mutual trust, or maybe even belief in their own convictions, in order to open certain discussions that would create this final vision of what kind of society we want. Members of Initiatives for Constitutional Changes said that, within this initiatives, it was easy to achieve a consensus on economic and social rights, health insurance, use of gender-sensitive language, and gender equality – but the topic of what the Constitution should do, i.e., what kind of state we want was never raised. The lack of space for discussing this topic is a hindrance for creation of a women's movement.

Aside from the lack of a consensus on key matters between and within women's organizations, the need for a consensus was raised as a question – must there always be a consensus, or is it sometimes sufficient that we understand and support one another, without necessarily agreeing?

Also defined as a problem was a lack of faith in the activism of other organizations, which is closely related to the financial dependency on donors who set the topics and discourse, and who, in a way, shape the activism of women's organizations. Economic dependency, i.e., dependence on donors, impedes the possibility of forming a women's movement, because the organizations are direct competitors.

The group also discussed the problems, i.e., the gap between activism as such and professional work within non-government organizations, where it was said that the civilian sector has, in a certain way, become a business sector with a large number of employees, which again contributes to the elitism between organizations. However, it was stated that project activities can also be an advantage because organizations, through these donations, build their capacities.

Asked *if an external opportunity were to appear which required the mobilization of women's organizations and their collective stance – which conditions are required for this to happen,* the group identified the need for a vision, belief, and trust between organizations and activists, abilities and capacities, and inclusiveness and field work, i.e., knowledge of the situation in the field.

The group also discussed whether one such scenario would require the so-called national key. Most of the group believed that, if women's non-government organizations were to determine a collective goal and strategy, the national key would be rendered irrelevant. However, there were also participants in the group who believed that, with regard to the fact that the national key defines everything in our society, it would be difficult to leave something like it out, as it could lead to mistrust.

External environment
The group that worked on the external environment defined today's BiH society as patriarchal, retrograde, misogynous, currently facing even historical revisionism. The general state in society was characterized as apathy, hopelessness, lack of possibilities, pessimism, with a special emphasis placed on the obvious feminization of poverty, which could also, in a way, be a potential catalyst. The group believes these negative occurrences in society could act as catalysts because, currently in our society, catastrophes were the only catalysts for mobilization and activation of society. Donor funds were also defined as a possible catalyst as they enable action.
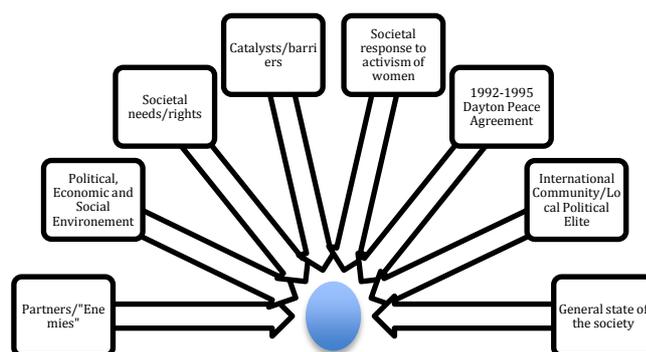
One of the things related to the general state of society is the question of administrative division which disables action, but is also related to political/ethnic identities. Administrative division and ethnic identity are currently politicized in BiH and should be depoliticized, while everyday life should be politicized.

As potential opposition, the group stated that, in a way, everyone is opposed to women's activism. Of course, there are also partners, but not structural partners. There are individuals that act within certain structures (political parties, universities, etc.), which

can, as such, be considered as partners, but they act independently. In the context of structural changes, women's organizations have no partners. As definite opposition, the group specified clero-nationalists, the administration or bureaucratization of society, and political structures. Partners can also be found in women's groups from other countries, as well as in "advanced social movements" in BiH, e.g., the ecological, socialist, and anti-fascist movement, the LGBT community, animal rights movements, etc.

Opposition/obstacles can also be those women in politics who vote against women's interests, which provides an alibi for patriarchy.

In the question of social attitudes toward women's peace activism, the group believes that said activism is marginalized, isolated, and treated by the society with cynicism and lack of support, with a tendency of exclusion.

The international community is also an obstacle, in a way. Its support is declarative, but at times, it can be very hostile on the question of change.

Political corruption and violence as a form of rule is also prevalent in BiH. Citizens do not have the ability to receive feedback and non-government organization, just like the citizens, can only establish dialogue with the political elite in short intervals when they have the power of setting thr terms and "blackmailing" as a form of dialogue framework, as was the case immediately following the unrest in 2014, when politicians still feared the citizens. Only in this context is there a dialogue with politics, and only then can political responsibility be seen.

The Dayton Agreement, which was considered an obstacle until now, imposes itself as a possibility if it were to be interpreted through a feminist view. Currently, we experience the interpretation of today's politicians.

Discussion of group presentations

Some participants argued that, in the context of a feminist interpretation of the Dayton Agreement, "feminist interpretation" was a problem, believing it should instead be "women's interpretation", because not all women declare themselves as feminists. Others, however, were of the opinion that women's interpretation has no ideological basis. Women's interpretation implies a wide spectrum of stances and does not exclude clero-fascist, nationalist, and misogynous perspectives, and therefore it is necessary to establish certain standards from which interpretation begins. It was emphasized that the practice of terminology was very important because we reached the question of what feminist values mean for us, not only what they are in general, but what they are to us, because it was evident we did not understand each other. We do not know enough about who does what, which value is important to whom, and how we do it personally. We are still searching for a consensus on something which we ourselves do not understand.

Other comments were related to structural partners, where the question was raised of what are *advanced social movements*? Who in BiH deals with peace? Can this initiative raise this question because it is evident that women's organizations have not made a significant step thus far. Most commonly, effort is put into workshops, after which – nothing. Can organizations that deal with peace and reconciliation come together, and can we find partners among these organizations.

Feminism was also discussed, as well as its significance in today's BiH society. Some participants were of the opinion the word feminism alone is demonized in BiH, through media, families, school programs, and that feminists of both genders were seen to be the

greatest traitors to social hierarchy. In this context, it is important to reintroduce the word feminism, and everything it carries, into all social pores, and return its true meaning.

In the context of catalysts mentioned by the group, it was discussed whether they were, in a certain manner, defensive, while not a lot was said on what women's organization and activists can actively do for the preparation for some upcoming changes or social mobilization, i.e., which catalysts can be predicted. In the group discussing the external environment, no agreement was reached on the current position of BiH. Some believed that BiH was already in a state of social catastrophe (as a catalyst), and that we should become aware that we live in something that is either fascism or system failure, and that there is no time for prevention, but rather that we are in a reactionary time right now.

III   OPTIONS FOR ACTION After we discussed the context in which we act, and worked on elaborating some of the terms we use, we considered various action options. Participants were offered 4 possible options for action, as well as the possibility of creating other options. In the end, participants considered the following options in groups: non-institutional action, strengthening equality policies inside existing political parties through work with both women and men, and forming a women's coalition/party.

Non-institutional action
This option was very hard to present as a clear strategy. The group set the destruction of the system of values based on ethno-nationalism as a goal of this type of action. Non-institutional action should be built on predefined set of basic principles from which there must be no deviation. However, with the goal of changing the system, it would be advantageous to create functional coalitions with, for example, the ecologists, the LGBT community, etc. The basic principles of one such group must have an ideological basis and direction in order to fully understand which compromises could be made when forming a coalition.

The group considered what the focus of action for such a group would be, and where a wider support could be found, concluding that one such question was the demand for a socially responsible state that pays attention to the needs of its citizens. As the basic principles which they could not renounce, the group stated: gender equality, anti-racism, NO to ethno-nationalism.

Asked who would make up the base for one such option, the conclusion was that the base would be all of those not motivated by ethno-nationalism. Discussing the need for making such a social movement, the importance of working in local communities was emphasized because, on the topic of social changes, women's organizations mostly act at the state level, while the local community is neglected.

Questioning ethno-nationalism is a dangerous area, especially in local communities, but at the same time, local communities are the key to everything.

Considering this option, the group touched upon civil initiative, such as the plenary sessions, and spoke about why they failed. From the personal experiences participants of workshop who were also present at the plenary sessions, stated that political speech was avoided at these sessions. Everyone demanded social justice, but no one wanted to change the structure of the state on the basis of which social justice could be created.

This form of non-institutional action must be long-lasting and mindful of global events, e.g., a global rise of ethno-nationalism, increase of fundamentalism on a global level, awakening of neo-fascism, but also that there are tendencies toward the reawakening of socialism based on old principles.

Through the feminist interpretation of the Dayton Agreement, support for demolishing the state structure based on ethno-nationalist principles can be found.

The political activity of one such option must build functional coalitions with other options familiar with our values, who will, when the time comes, when a new catalyst appears (e.g., civil unrest), carry those protests and offer some form of organization and collective platform built by these various groups with their principles of action, but in agreement on the minimum of values, the minimum of mutual understanding which would be the cornerstone for a social movement that would change society. The group did not define what these values would be, but mentioned anti-nationalism, feminism, and anti-racism.

Comments on the presentation
The question of *functional coalitions* was raised, where one of the comments was that there are functional coalitions even now, such as the Women's Network which reacts to certain issues where a minimum of consensus was reached. There is also a Peace Network. However, a minimum consensus does not bring about structural changes, it brings about reaction.

In an opposing statement, it was said that there is not a single functional coalition in BiH today, and that existing network functions on the principle of cooperation on certain issues, where functional coalitions were never built precisely because of the lack of defined principles, and who we are, what we are, and why we are. It is very important to know what it is we are, what we will not give up, but also what it is we can work on efficiently together for the good of the community.

Forming a women's coalition/party
The conclusion of this group is that a women's party should not be formed, but that it is completely possible to form a women's coalition and have that coalition act politically and participate in the elections. The group discussing this option considered that a well-defined base and the mobilization of said base was very important, and that the existence of a critical base in local communities was a necessity.

It was stated that women's organization and activists have become inert, that they no longer go out into the streets, that we no longer demand our rights, and that this should be worked on in the sense of activating women.

The group was of the opinion that a women's coalition, were it to be formed, cannot deal with all issues and that priorities should be set because, if it were to take too wide a stance, it would have neither the resources nor the capacities required. Geographically, the coalition would encompass all of BiH. The coalition would not be ideologically committed, or in the case that it did have an ideological commitment, said commitment must be carefully considered and discussed in order to not lead to exclusion.

The advantage of this option is that it would overcome the fragmentation of women's organizations, unite the resources and capacities, and that, as such, we could win the fight to gain the status of a political and socially recognized power. The challenges of the option are administrative and political division, where a lot of effort would have to be

put into overcoming this obstacle. Natural allies for this option are women and men, syndicates, NGOs, universities. Opposition could also be women, religious communities, and political structures.

This is also a long-term process.

Comments on the presentation
Membership in a coalition without ideology is reduced only to a coalition of women without a clear goal since members could have a totally different vison of society. An ideological base is necessary for the efficient and effective operation of the coalition.

Ideology should be a part of the coalition, but must be meticulously considered.

There have been different attempts during all of these years which failed, among other reasons, because of inadequate prep work. The forming of the coalition requires very good preparation.

Strengthening the policies of equality within the existing parties through work with women, as well as with men
During the discussion, the group identified as one of the current problems the fact that the existing parties have neither clear policies nor programs for gender equality. The goal of such an approach would be the establishment of a gender equality platform, with equal chances for both women and men in political parties, which would serve both women and men as a tool for the division of power in the decision making process on all levels and regarding information, resources, rewards, mobilization, etc.

In order to have such an initiative prepared properly, it is necessary to map women and men in political parties, their membership and participation of women in the bodies of the parties, how they are positioned on candidate lists or positioned on different levels of authority, both the legislative and the executive. It is also necessary to map women and men in NGOs who have an interest in supervising the implementation of the platform in political parties.

The target groups of this option of action are, of course, both women and men in political parties. Both Entities and the Brčko District of Bosnia and Herzegovina are to be included in this activity. This initiative would be governed by the principles of equality, gender equality, and feminism.

The advantages of this initiative are the fact that the legislation, as well as certain research and practices already exist and could be used in the development of this platform. Such an approach will establish foundations for equal participation of women and men in the informing, decision-making, and governing, i.e., it shall divide power between women and men. Party hierarchy and existing structures of power represent challenges to this approach, where support for the equal participation of women is more declarative than real. Furthermore, lack of will and interest of women could represent challenges as well.

The weaknesses of this approach are patriarchal and engrained attitudes and stances on these issues both within the membership and the leadership. The provisions of the Law on Gender Equality and the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination are not integrated, or are not sufficiently integrated, within key documents of parties.

Natural partners or allies are women forums in political parties, women in politics in general, NGOs, institutional mechanisms for gender equality, and the media, while opposition was identified as the decision makers and the media.

Comments on the presentation
It appears that the time has come for this kind of action. The activists cooperating with parties have noticed a great interest where gender equality is concerned. This approach should serve as a support for women in politics.