

WORKSHOP FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS: POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS FOR ACHIEVING GENDER EQUALITY IN BULGARIA



INTRODUCTION

This analysis is prepared as a result of the **Workshop for Women's Rights** organized by the Bulgarian Fund for Women with the support of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and held on March 9th and 10th 2018 in Sofia. The goal of the Workshop was to 1) identify trends: in the situation of women in Bulgaria; in exercising their rights; and in applying the gender equality principle by the institutions, as well as 2) to analyze the needs of the organizations working on these topics in terms of improving the status and increasing the level of equality of the target groups they are working with.

Representatives of 20 non-governmental organizations from all over the country, grantees of the Bulgarian Fund for Women, working on women's issues, gender equality or involved in projects targeting specific target groups of women and girls, participated in different discussion forums, worked in groups and individually for two days. The participants shared their experience, presented initiatives and projects and tried to create a vision, on one hand - for the future state of their target groups as a result of their work, and on the other, for the future development of their organizations.

Furthermore, the priorities of the gender equality policy at national and local level were also discussed especially in terms of defining what its practical and strategic goals should be. The individual work on evaluating municipalities' progress in achieving gender equality through the analysis of their political and administrative structures, mechanisms and resources and their interaction with NGOs in decision-making in this area gave impetus to the participants to comment on how they could start or build upon their existing cooperation on gender equality with local authorities. Working in small groups by areas of interaction that were identified during the discussions allowed the participants to consider building partnerships between their organizations. Thus, identifying common issues and common approaches to solving them, by implementing joint or similar activities would contribute to improving the quality of life in the municipalities where they work.

As a result, the participants outlined what they consider to be the most current problems of girls and women in Bulgaria and their possible solutions; they discussed who should be the addressees of NGO activities in order to improve the situation of their target group.

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In general terms, the problems identified by the participants can be divided into two main types - pertaining to the public and to the private spheres. The first may include problems related to women's position in society, in the economy, in terms of employment, education and health. It should be noted there were participants from both the capital and several big regional cities but for the most part they were from smaller towns and villages, which also determines certain specifics of the problems they consider important in regard to the situation and position of women and girls.

First of all, the participants believe that the issue of poverty, especially **female poverty** and especially female poverty in small towns and villages, is not being addressed in the public domain at all. There is a **strong economic dependence of women**, even those who work, on income-earning men in the family - spouses, partners, fathers. **This economic dependence can lead to social isolation or violence in the family, especially when women are either unemployed, or housewives, or without education, or do not seek work due to family reasons.** The proportion of these women is quite high in some towns and villages, and often they are not looking for a job, respectively - are not registered as unemployed and are not included in employment statistics because they look after dependent family members - young children who do not attend kindergarten due to lack of funds to pay fees, adults and children with disabilities, elderly and dependent parents, etc. The lack of accessible and quality services for dependents is widespread, especially in the big cities, creating an unregulated, gray market of services in this sector, which also employs predominantly women. A serious problem is that homemakers/discouraged unemployed women or women/girls who do not seek jobs for family and personal reasons do not have health insurance. This economic and social exclusion is the cause of their **low self-esteem and self-evaluation**, and a serious obstacle to seeking any individual realization outside the home.

Setting up a small business in the field of services is an acceptable alternative to female unemployment. However, women, especially in small towns and villages, have no confidence that they can develop entrepreneurial skills and start their own business initiatives. **There are no adequate measures to promote female entrepreneurship - there are no training courses, including motivational ones, no free counseling services in this area, no specific financial instruments available to women.** In general, there are also no targeted employment programs for young girls with no or with little education.

Low self-esteem is often dictated by the fact that many girls leave school early. **Lack of safety** for girls on their way to and from school is a serious reason for them to drop out of the education system, especially those from the Roma community. The interaction of NGOs with local authorities and parents in some small municipalities that provide and pay guaranteed and safe transportation to and from school for all children was pointed out as a good practice. Dropping out of school is a phenomenon that provokes the so-called secondary illiteracy, and quite a number of women have never attended school in the first place, so that the **literacy issue** becomes more and more visible.

Many of the participants pointed out that girls are their special target group: they are a vulnerable group because nobody is concerned with developing their skills to protect their own dignity, or with motivating them to build a successful life for themselves in a competitive environment. **Girls in families with low social status experience a lack of skills to set goals and have a plan or alternatives for personal development.** The most vulnerable in this respect are girls who have not had adequate role models in their immediate living environment, especially those who grew up in institutions, with deviant behavior, etc., who very often become victims of trafficking and sexual exploitation.

A specific health problem was emphasized: **women with disabilities often have difficulty in accessing adequate health services, especially gynecological ones**, due to the nature of their health status and the lack of locally prepared, or ready to assist them specialists.

Some of the participants in the discussion expressed the view, supported by the others as well, that **women's problems are not adequately reflected in the media or are being silenced**: they are “invisible” for the general public and to decision-makers at different levels; create a sense of isolation in women themselves, who experience such problems as something that happens to them on an individual level, or, on the contrary, reinforce their feeling that it is the right, “natural” order of things. **Stereotypes about traditional gender roles are becoming more widespread** among young people and make girls passive observers of life rather than active individuals with a position. This is the reason why the participants reported a low level of interest among girls and young women in their own rights. This creates conditions for strong public pressure from different stakeholder groups against women's rights, as well **as increased use of hate speech when it comes to individual aspects of women's rights** as it was pointed out in the course of the discussion numerous times.

A negative circumstance in this sense is the **lack of a community of those organizations and individuals who are interested in gender equality and women's rights issues**, and foster environment for the growth of informed young people. Such a community would contribute to filling the gap in advocacy training for women's and girls' rights, as well as provide “visibility” to their problems.

Among the problems in the private sphere, the first place hold domestic violence and gender-based violence that can be practiced in the family or outside of it. Repeatedly and insistently the participants stressed that **the lack of crisis centers** in the country is one of the most serious obstacles to providing timely and secure protection to the women and their children, who are victims of violence. Another field of work that would improve the prevention of this type of violence is working with the abusers, but such programs are missing in the country.

A problem whose roots we need to look for in the family environment, but which none of the less has extremely serious consequences for both the participants and the society as a whole **are the early pregnancies and marriages**. Although they often take place with the approval and support of parents, mainly in the Roma community, they do happen to girls from other communities in Bulgaria as well. The reasons are many, but according to the participants in the discussions among the most important ones is the **lack of sexual education in school**. This leads to low sexual culture among young people, the lack of knowledge and skills to use contraception, an increase in the number of therapeutic and spontaneous abortions. Very often **girls dropping out of school is a direct consequence of early marriages and births**. This predetermines their future lives. Because of low self-esteem and lack of social and other skills, they either remain isolated within the family, excluded from the social environment, or are oriented towards low paid employment, and self-restrict themselves in choosing a profession. Moreover, those girls who have dropped out of school due to pregnancy and childbirth but want to continue their education are experiencing serious difficulties. Returning to school and completing a certain degree is done solely thanks to the efforts made by individual teachers, often with the support of NGOs, but these are usually exceptions.

Many participants working with vulnerable groups have emphasized their observations that young people's relationships with their parents are often disturbed, as the latter continue to harbor **prejudice and traditional stereotypical attitudes**. Families are often a barrier for the realization of girls and young women, particularly in small towns and villages, and especially if they are from minority communities or with disabilities. Parents restrict their personal choices, including their daughters' personal relationships.

In the course of the discussions, many suggestions were made as to what could be changed with the efforts of the state, local authorities or civil society in terms of the sphere of activity of a particular organization. To summarize the issues and to focus and prioritize the proposals, **four working groups were set up: Working with and for Families and Parents; Empowering of and Working with Girls; Preventing and Combating Gender-Based Violence; Awareness, Advocacy and Women's Rights Support Networks**.

The proposals were grouped, targeting the state, the local authorities and the Bulgarian Fund for Women in view of its activities in support of the work of local NGOs and its role as organizer and initiator of national initiatives in support of women's rights.

Proposals to the state were focused on a number of areas including: changing legislation and regulations; introducing gender education / training; supporting gender equality policy by broadening public awareness on the topic; and cooperating and supporting NGOs, active in this field.

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- 1.** overview and update of legislation related to family support and encouraging measures for keeping children in the family;
- 2.** adopting of the Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (the so-called Istanbul Convention);
- 3.** raising public awareness about government policies for gender equality and equality of women;
- 4.** creating crisis centers in each region of the country with guaranteed state funding to provide protection and support to women and children, victims of domestic violence and gender-based violence;
- 5.** developing and funding of programs for working with the abusers;
- 6.** guaranteed funding of integrated services for families (jointly with the municipalities and through cross-payment under different programs);
- 7.** developing standards for providing care, as well as standards for funding such care;
- 8.** developing and ensuring state funding of specific measures for combating poverty among women;
- 9.** developing and ensuring state subsidizing of programs for developing women's entrepreneurship;
- 10.** reviewing the implementation and extending the scope of health insurance payments by the state for health-uninsured women;
- 11.** encouraging sharing the parenting leave and implementing a mandatory paternity leave;
- 12.** providing state subsidies to NGOs for activities different than services;
- 13.** implementing equality policies application training for civil servants;
- 14.** carrying out state-subsidized surveys based on up-to-date data on the state of gender equality and the situation of women and men in order to collect more information and amass knowledge on the subject;
- 15.** incorporating the study of the history and contemporary state of women's rights in the State Educational Requirements (SER) in civic education in secondary schools;
- 16.** supporting projects and programs in schools to build positive role models for girls and boys through social mentoring, volunteering, peer-to-peer work, etc;
- 17.** introduction of compulsory sexual education programs;
- 18.** wider public awareness of the UN Global Objectives on Sustainable Development, particularly in their gender mainstreaming and empowerment of women and girls;

19. informing society and aiding international and national campaigns supporting women's rights.
 20. developing and adopting standards for working with the media on gender equality issues and on opposing hate speech, especially sexist hate speech.
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Proposals to the local government have been linked to several key themes, such as family support and combating poverty, but also include encouraging local authorities to implement gender equality policies and build institutional capacity in this area:

1. accountability for the implementation of state policies for gender equality and equality of women at local level;
 2. developing local policies and involving stakeholders, institutions, NGOs, and others to the implementation of local policies for gender equality;
 3. building up local expertise on the gender equality and equality of women topics through trainings of civil servants, co-organizing events with NGOs, etc.
 4. creating local councils/commissions for domestic violence and gender based violence prevention;
 5. developing and applying specific measures for combating women's poverty at a local level;
 6. conducting surveys on the problems of women in general and of young women and girls in particular, in order to address them locally;
 7. Promoting and supporting local role models;
 8. Performing activity analysis and updating the support for families at the local level, particularly those in difficulty, and especially in terms of providing funds / services to include young children in day care (crèches) and kindergartens, ensuring safety, particularly for girls, on the way to and from school, etc.;
 9. Involving local leaders in the NGOs' agenda and supporting local organizations working on family, gender, and gender equality issues as well as on working with parents to overcome stereotypes;
 10. including NGO representatives in local decision-making processes on topics related to empowering women and gender equality.
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The proposals to the Bulgarian Fund for Women were quite varied, basically they can be summarized as publicly formulating specific initiatives for gender equality, as well as presenting and defending them in the public domain at national level:

1. advocacy at national and international level of women's rights and gender equality;
2. working with the media and training journalists to adequately reflect the issues of gender equality and equality of women;
3. creating conditions for networking of organizations engaged in women's rights and conducting a national event at least once a year;
4. organizing and conducting more networking events for exchanging experience, capacity building and co-ordination of joint activities.;

- 5.** providing access to more trainers on women's rights, to trainings in advocacy, on how to participate in the local government; training of trainers on the gender equality topic;
- 6.** promoting the projects funded by the BFW, including a Good Practices Guide;
- 7.** preparing a Good Practices Guide for Girl and Women's Empowerment;
- 8.** financing mentoring programs for girls about their rights, including motivational trainings for building up confidence;
- 9.** raising awareness among young people, using different channels, to encourage them making informed choices;
- 10.** creating and distributing a bulletin with practices and projects from the different regions of Bulgaria;
- 11.** support for conducting research on the topic of women's rights;
- 12.** attracting donors to fund projects of NGOs working in the field of women's rights.

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To encourage achieving gender equality and empowering girls and women is not only a matter of legislation and of specific policies on local and national level but of a holistic approach that encompasses all areas of life, all stakeholders, all levels of the state administration and which included measures such as raising awareness and prevention, formal school education and training of specialists, targeted and long-term support of the non-governmental sector, etc.

Overcoming the barriers hindering the full development of women and girls in Bulgaria, solving the specific problems mentioned in this analysis and achieving real gender equality will not only bring concrete political, economic and social benefits for the Bulgarian state but will also lead to positive changes at the level of personality, family, community, society.

A positive discourse between non-governmental organizations, local authorities, institutions, business and all stakeholders on gender equality would ensure the successful and effective development and implementation of policies and concrete measures to empower women and girls, as well as the smart, sustainable and inclusive economic growth in Bulgaria. In this process, it is extremely important to include vulnerable groups of women and girls, listening to their voice and understanding their gender-specific problems and needs.

Even though there is legislation in Bulgaria aimed at achieving and guaranteeing gender equality (Law on Protection against Discrimination, Law on Protection against Domestic Violence, Gender Equality Act, etc.), as well as various strategic and operational documents (National Strategy for Promoting the Equality of Women and Men, National Program for Prevention and Protection against Domestic Violence, National Program for Prevention and Combating Trafficking in Human Beings, etc.), we need to remember that a lot more effort is required, and at all levels, in order to achieve real equality between women and men. This analysis, without claiming exhaustiveness, is part of these efforts. It points out the specific problems of women and girls in Bulgaria and suggests possible solutions, identified by experts, for overcoming them.

Bulgarian Fund for Women

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ABOUT BULGARIAN FUND FOR WOMEN

The Bulgarian Fund for women is the only foundation in Bulgaria that supports local non-governmental organizations working for the rights of women and girls achieving real gender equality in all areas of life. BFW's vision is for a world free of violence, discrimination and inequalities, where each girl or woman has the conditions to achieve her full potential, has equal opportunities and access to resources and is free to make informed choices about her own life and body. The mission of BFW is to develop both the women's movement and the philanthropy for women's rights by grant-making at national and international level and investing the resources for achieving gender equality.

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