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## **Bosnia and Herzegovina is beginning the struggle for gender equality in the media**

Abida Pehlic

*Bosnia and Herzegovina is a nation that still maintains dominant stereotypes about women stemming from its patriarchal tradition. Women are generally perceived as inferior to men and often viewed only as sex symbols. This kind of misrepresentation of women is amply demonstrated in the country's media.*

Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H) inherited the journalism patterns of state-owned media in the former socialist Republic of Yugoslavia that used to glorify the one-political party system in which women hardly played any role. A few years ago new media, especially online, started to mushroom in B&H.

Many B&H journalists, both male and female, do not show any sensitivity in their work regarding gender equality. In B&H women are seldom made central news subjects, especially in key focus areas such as politics, economics and government, which are reserved for men. Stereotyping and unbalanced reporting from a gender perspective contribute to unequal gender power relations.

It is evident when looking at a B&H newspaper or visiting a B&H web portal that women are often displayed as objects like singers, actresses or poorly dressed starlets in sexy poses. With this kind of gender portrayal, the B&H news media send a message to girls and women that they can only become successful in the entertainment business or that they can be, in the best cases, considered as “the more beautiful part of a couple.”

Due to this tradition, B&H journalists frequently place women in a passive frame, reinforcing the notion that it is very difficult for women even to think about being successful because of the media's influence. Newspaper policies usually do not favour the educated and intelligent women who have careers in the “typical men professions in B&H” and women find it difficult to take the step towards success because of the situation.

Politically, gender equality has never been high on the agenda in B&H. During the most recent election campaign held in September 2012, a web portal organized a beauty contest for women political candidates, whereas there has never been such a contest for male political candidates. This event can be interpreted as a statement that women can run for office (since it is a requirement in a democratic society), but they will only be considered as “decorations” and not as independent decision-making politicians. Even though there were quite a few female candidates in the last elections, they were hardly ever mentioned in the post-election news while the media was still covering the results.

### **Challenging media stereotypes**

The NGO “Novi put” has been working with vulnerable categories of women and girls and has realized that B&H media tends to marginalize their role in society. Generally B&H women have been largely invisible in the focus and content of the media. The implementation of the WACC-sponsored project “Promotion of Gender Ethical Journalism in Bosnia and Herzegovina” has enabled “Novi put” to increase media commitment to gender-ethical journalism and to the use of gender sensitive language in B&H media practice.

During the events organized as part of the project, which were attended by representatives of NGOs, the media and the general public, “Novi put” displayed media articles showing prejudices and stereotypes against women, sensationalism, and violation of the human rights of women and underage girls. This demonstrated the need finally to start applying gender ethical journalism in B&H.

Confronted by obvious facts resulted in a very positive reaction from all participants, who agreed that it was vital to improve the quality of cooperation between media and women’s NGOs and that both sides need to make efforts in order to overcome the issue in the media. They also stated the need to make the B&H public more sensitive to gender equality issues, since it was concluded that the media create prevailing images about the perception of women in B&H.

All media representatives who attended the events organized during the project’s implementation stated that they had never actually considered gender ethical reporting important, but prioritized other issues, given the extremely difficult political and economical situation in the country. They also stated that the global trend in the media is also one that lacks gender sensitivity.

Participation of NGO and media representatives at the events organized by “Novi put” resulted in creating a platform for future cooperation. “Novi put” has also succeeded in getting the media as a partner and tool for getting across messages on gender equality and will continue along with other NGOs with strategic use of the media as a tool for advancing gender equality. The events were also used to identify ways in which the B&H media could contribute to the promotion of NGO activities, advocacy and raising awareness. The B&H media now has an opportunity to use expertise and the findings of women NGOs in reporting about the topics the NGOs have been dealing with.

This project has also increased the interest of participating media in women’s NGOs and reporting about their work. The general conclusion was that the biggest problem is a lack of an active editing policy and media attempts to gain high ratings and circulation at the expense of gender-sensitive journalism. Not only has “Novi put” succeeded in getting the media to promote gender equality, but it will continue bringing gender justice to the public’s attention through more projects, since the activities have mostly had positive impacts on participants and stakeholders, especially regarding treatment of trafficked persons, victims of domestic violence and abused children.

The project has had significant impact on gender equality issues. Reporting on non-governmental organizations dealing with gender issues has increased in B&H media. “Novi put” had more than 50 media stories during the project implementation period and in 2013 the media showed increased interest in all “Novi put” activities including detailed analysis of the issues involved. Media coverage has assisted “Novi put” to raise awareness about child pornography and paedophilia and also tackled the widespread issue of domestic violence in the country.

Since the training workshops that were held as part of the project, some media have increasingly used gender sensitive language in their articles. After the workshops, media started analyzing the issue of gender ethical journalism in a more detailed fashion. One article that dealt with the issue used parts of the “Novi put” leaflet that was designed for the purpose of the project.

Even though the general impact was very good, given overall gender-related attitudes, the project only “scratched the surface” so to say. It is necessary to continue working on this issue but on a larger scale, involving also relevant institutions such as the Regulatory Agency

for Communication, the Gender Centre, media owners as key policy makers, and NGO representatives and other relevant stakeholders in order to achieve a long-term impact. Many journalists also recommended that it is also important to target young journalists and students of journalism.

Nevertheless, there are still many prejudices about women and their role in B&H society and some politicians tend to make discriminatory statements about women politicians. A B&H radio station, one of the project beneficiaries, published a reaction to the B&H Women Network and also emphasized the need for gender equality.

### **Complex political and social background**

The [Socialist Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina](#) was one of [Yugoslavia](#)'s six federal provinces. Bosnia and Herzegovina is located in South-eastern Europe, on the Balkan Peninsula inhabited by Bosniacs (Muslims), Serbs (Orthodox) and Croats (Catholics). It was carved out of the former Yugoslavia and became an independent state on 3 March 1992 after Yugoslavia started to fall apart. In the period from 1992 through 1995 B&H experienced a brutal war, in which all three ethnicities were sworn enemies fighting against each other. Besides total physical destruction of the country, the war resulted in more than 100.000 killed, mostly Bosnian Muslims, and hundreds of thousands of displaced persons and refugees.

The [Dayton Agreement](#) ended the [Bosnian war](#) in 1995. Under this agreement, the two entities – Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (mostly inhabited by Muslims and Croats) and the Republika Srpska (mostly inhabited with Serbs) formed a single state. The war adversely impacted the social and economic landscape for the estimated four million people of all three ethnicities who nowadays call B&H home.

Political and ethnical tensions in B&H have never ceased, even though the war stopped almost 18 years ago and in some parts of the country, especially in Herzegovina region, they are getting worse. The war impact is still present and many media still support a division of the country along ethnic lines. Moreover, there are still some B&H media who deny the femicide, genocide and ethnic cleansing that occurred during the 1992-95 war in B&H. All three ethnicities ended up having their “own” mainstream media, both print and electronic, and many web portals, whose editorial policy is completely different when it comes to political and economic life of B&H.

Mary Ann Hennessey, Council of Europe Head of Office in B&H stated in April 2012 that “in B&H irresponsible media have been spreading unscrupulous propaganda for 20 years. This is the moment to think about our prejudices, the words and the responsibility that we bear for what we say. Bosnia and Herzegovina is a country that is officially committed to compliance with the standards of the Council of Europe, human rights and legal system, and the media should follow these standards.”<sup>1</sup>

According to the Freedom House Report on B&H media, press status is partly free.<sup>2</sup> The report says that political parties and leaders in B&H exert considerable pressure on the media. According to the survey B&H was in 95th place out of 197 countries. The report said that the pressures on the media have been increasing over the years so they have eventually been placed at the service of political parties.

However, despite the fact that many B&H media outlets have completely different political views, they all have had one thing in common – a lack of a policy on gender equality. It is still necessary to initiate positive changes in terms of challenging stereotypes in gender portrayal in news, establishing partnerships between media and NGOs aimed at improving gender equality, and raising awareness about the need for proper reflection on women's needs and concerns in media.

The project funded and supported by WACC enabled “Novi put” to start the discussion regarding gender ethical journalism in B&H and to begin to increase media commitment to it. “Novi put”, as one of leading B&H NGOs for prevention of human trafficking and gender-

based violence, will continue its efforts to promote gender equality and gender ethical journalism in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

**Notes**

1. <http://www.vijesti.ba/vijesti/bih/80807-Hennessey-Mediji-moraju-postovati-ljudska-prava-pravni-poredak.html>
2. <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2012/bosnia-and-herzegovina>

Abida Pehlic is one of the founders and the President of the Association “Novi put” which works on prevention and combating of trafficking in human beings, domestic violence, child pornography and promotion of gender equality. “Novi put” also provides assistance to potential and actual victims of the aforementioned phenomena. Mrs. Pehlic has gained rich experience while working with many international organizations (UN, EUPM, OSCE, OHR) on the human rights issues.