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**Women's peacebuilding civil society organisations and  
empowerment**  
**A case study of Bosnia and Herzegovina**

Master's thesis

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Prague, August, 1, 2022

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## References

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## **Abstract**

Women are underrepresented in politics and rarely included in official peace processes, therefore, they often mobilise in civil society. Moreover, the political empowerment of women continues to be understudied. The thesis looks into how women's peacebuilding civil society organisations engage in the political empowerment of women. To find answers to the research question, five women's peacebuilding civil society organisations based in Bosnia and Herzegovina were analysed through a conceptual framework of political empowerment. The organisations share the ideas of pacifism and gender equality. The research concludes that they engage in all dimensions of the conceptual framework but most significantly aim at increasing women's agency. The organisations provide women with a safe space to use their voices, share experiences, and create momentum. All the studied organisations fight gender-based violence and provide legal assistance to women. Membership in different networks and initiatives was identified as an important asset. The activities aiming at political empowerment and not directly stating the objective of peacebuilding can be perceived as such due to the positive link between gender equality and sustainable peace.

## Abstrakt

Ženy jsou v politice nedostatečně zastoupeny a málokdy se účastní oficiálních mírových procesů, proto se často mobilizují v občanské společnosti. Politický *empowerment* žen je navíc stále nedostatečně prostudován. Práce se zabývá tím, jak organizace občanské společnosti pro budování míru ovlivňují politický *empowerment* žen. Pro zodpovězení výzkumné otázky bylo analyzováno pět organizací občanské společnosti pro budování míru žen z Bosny a Hercegoviny s pomocí konceptu politického *empowermentu*. Organizace sdílejí myšlenky pacifismu a genderové rovnosti. Výzkum došel k závěru, že se angažují ve všech dimenzích koncepčního rámce, ale nejvýrazněji se zaměřují na posílení *agency*. Organizace poskytují ženám bezpečný prostor pro sdílení zkušeností a nalézání hlasu. Všechny zkoumané organizace také bojují proti genderově podmíněnému násilí a poskytují ženám právní pomoc. Členství v různých sítích a iniciativách bylo identifikováno jako důležitý prvek. I když organizace neuvádí, že cílem projektů na politický *empowerment* žen je přispět k budování míru, stále tak projekt může být vnímán díky pozitivní vazbě mezi genderovou rovností a udržitelným mírem.

## **Keywords**

Peacebuilding, women's organisations, political empowerment, Bosnia and Herzegovina

## **Klíčová slova**

Budování míru, ženské organizace, politický empowerment, Bosna a Hercegovina

## **Title**

Women's peacebuilding civil society organisations and empowerment: A case study of Bosnia and Herzegovina

## **Název práce**

Ženské organizace občanské společnosti pro budování míru a empowerment: Případová studie Bosny a Hercegoviny

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# Acronyms and abbreviations

BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
EU	European Union
FBiH	Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GDI	Gender Development Index
GII	Gender Inequality Index
GGGI	Global Gender Gap Index
HDI	Human Development Index
ICTY	International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IHDI	Inequality Human Development Index
IPU	Inter-Parliamentary Union
JNA	Yugoslav National Army
LGBTQIA	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender/Transsexual, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Allied/Asexual/Aromantic/Agender
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

OSCE	Organization for Security Co-operation in Europe
RS	Republika Srpska
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USSR	Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics
VAW	Violence against Women
WEF	World Economic Forum
WHO	World Health Organization
WPS Agenda	Women, Peace and Security Agenda

# 1 Introduction

The 1995 UN World Conference on Women in Beijing represents the first time the international community addressed the unique experiences of women in conflicts (Arostegui, 2013, p. 536). Five years later, in 2000, the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security recognized the importance of including women in peace processes (UNSC, 2000). However, more two decades later, women continue to be underrepresented in official peace processes (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). According to the Council on Foreign Relations (n.d.), women between the years 1992 and 2019 globally represented, on average, only 13 percent of negotiators and 6 percent of mediators and signatories in major peace processes. Furthermore, international peace processes are focused on the formal sphere and little attention is given to informal, local spaces where women often organise themselves (Castillejo, 2016, p. 4). Higher levels of gender equality have been linked to more peaceful societies (e.g., Caprioli, 2005; Klugman, Nagel and Viollaz, 2021), which suggests that gender equality can be perceived as one of the objectives of peacebuilding, as well as progress toward sustainable peace.

The objective of the thesis is to explore how women's peacebuilding organisations can politically empower women and, therefore, add to the progress on gender equality. Gender inequalities persist and scholarship on women's political empowerment is incomplete (Alexander, Bolzendahl and Jalalzai, 2016, p. 432). Also, both gender equality and peacebuilding are incorporated in the UN Sustainable Development Agenda 2030 as Sustainable Development Goals 5 and 16 (UN, n.d.b; UN, n.d.c), which together with other international commitments signifies recognition of an existing gap as well as a motivation to progress in these areas.

The thesis is structured as follows: chapter 2 begins with a definition of the research problem, research question, research objective, and research methodology. The next chapter, chapter 3, is a literature review covering the academic context of the topic, which is followed by chapter 4, in which the conceptual framework is defined. After political empowerment is conceptualized, chapter 5 provides a brief overview of the conflict and the situation of women in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Finally, chapter 6 is dedicated to empirical research. Chapter 7 presents an analysis of the collected data and chapter 8 summarizes the findings.

## 2 Research design

### 2.1 Research problem and research objective

There is a prevailing research gap on the political empowerment of women. In 2015 only nineteen percent of the results of research on political empowerment dealt with the empowerment of women (Alexander, Bolzendahl and Jalalzai, 2016, p. 433). Also, according to the WEF 2021 report, political empowerment with only twenty-two percent closed remains one of the largest gender equality gaps (World Economic Forum, 2021, p. 5).

Women often mobilise themselves in civil society and externally influence the peace processes they are often excluded from (Castillejo, 2016, p. 2). As women face more challenges in entering formal politics, civil society can serve as an alternative path for women to become active in the political sphere (ibid., p. 5). The objective of the thesis is to help to close the gap in scholarship on women's political empowerment by looking at how women's peacebuilding organisations in Bosnia and Herzegovina politically empower women.

The research question is: *How do women's peacebuilding civil society organisations engage in the political empowerment of women?*

### 2.2 Methodology

The research methodology is a instrumental case study. There is unfortunately no clear definition of the case study methodology among scholars (Lamont, 2019, p. 148), however, according to Gerring's (2004, p. 342) critical analysis, many of the existing definitions are flawed. Gerring (ibid.) defines a case study as "an intensive study of a single unit with an aim to generalize across a larger set of units". The case can be complex or simple (Stake, 2008, p. 135). Instrumental case studies allow researchers to broaden theoretical knowledge, the case serves as an instrument for working with the theory (Kořan, 2019, p. 99). Moreover, the role of the case is to help the researcher and the readers to provide an insight into the research problem (Stake, 2008, p. 137).

The case of the research is Bosnia and Herzegovina and Bosnian women's peacebuilding organisations. Bosnia and Herzegovina experienced a violent conflict in

the 1990s and has since witnessed a rise in women's peacebuilding CSOs (Rošul-Gajić, 2016). One of the reasons for choosing Bosnia and Herzegovina as the empirical case was the accessibility of empirical data. Furthermore, it has been over twenty-five years since the signature of the Dayton Peace Agreement and Bosnia and Herzegovina, therefore, provides a suitable case to study as the studied women's peacebuilding organisations have been operating for many years, and have many accomplishments and experience.

Women's conflict resolution and peacebuilding NGOs represent one of the categories of civil society organisations based on Paffenholz's classification (2015, p. 109). The thesis focuses on five women's organisations that engage in peacebuilding and focus on achieving gender equality. All the organisations are grassroots movements based in Bosnia and Herzegovina led by women and primarily focused on women's issues. Some of these organisations (the *Fondacija CURE*, the *Centar Ženskih Prava*) are based in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and some (the *Budućnost*, the *Forum Žena*, the *Fondacija Lara*) are in the Republika Srpska, however, all of them are based in areas that were directly impacted by the war; the capital city Sarajevo, the Drina valley, the northern part of the country and the city of Zenica (Berry, 2019, p. 119; Gezo, 2016; Wikipedia, 2016). All of the civil society organisations are members of the *Ženska Mreža BiH* (in English *Women's Network BiH*) which is "an informal group of civil society organizations and individuals who represent and work on women's rights and encourage gender equality that promotes anti-discrimination, freedom of decision-making, equality, non-violence, and anti-militarism, through acceptance of feminist values of action – peace, solidarity, trust, fellowship, equality and diversity" (Ženska Mreža BiH, 2014). Also, all five of the organisations are active in an initiative called *Mir sa ženskim licem* (in English *Peace with a woman's face*) which looks at the post-war period of peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina through a women's lens (Fondacija Lara, n.d.b; Inicijativa Mir sa ženskim licem, 2019, p. 134). As indicated in the previous paragraph, all the studied organisations have websites with enough of information and resources, which enabled conducting the research.

### 2.2.1 Methods

To conduct the research, qualitative methods were used, and qualitative research is, as Hyett, Kenny, and Dickson-Swift state (2014, p. 2), naturally multimethod. The first method was a comprehensive literature review. Snyder (2019, p. 333) writes that a literature review should be a synthesis of existing literature on the researched topic.

The first objective of the review was to synthesise literature on the role of women in peace processes, peacebuilding, and women's CSOs. The literature review method was used to conceptualize the political empowerment as well.

The second used data collection method was document-based research. Lamont (2015, pp. 97-99) describes it as using both primary and secondary source documents, including using media among other secondary sources to get empirical data. It is important to be cautious about the used resource. For the research, primarily policy and strategic documents of the organisations were analysed, however, not all the CSOs had such a resource publicly published. Other analysed documents were catalogs of the organisations' projects, reports, and annual reports. A limitation of document-based research can be restricted access to documents or the fact that documents often include a limited amount of information without a contextual background (ibid., 2015, p. 99).

Last data collection method was internet-based research. There is a rich amount of information to be found on the organisations' websites. Moreover, the majority of the studied CSOs has an active social media presence. Therefore, both sources were utilized with caution to provide empirical data. Especially, the websites provided useful information about the organisations' approach to gender equality, political empowerment, and peacebuilding. The studied CSOs also publish detailed information about the projects they engage in. However, as Kořan (2019, p. 111) points out, it is necessary to approach sources critically and to be aware of their context.

Yin (2002, p. 109) acknowledges that case study analysis can be difficult because strategies and techniques are insufficiently defined. The "general analytic strategy" of the thesis, as Yin (ibid., p. 115) addresses it, is a description of cases. The applied analytical technique is pattern-matching, which is relevant for a descriptive case study (ibid., p 116). As Almutairi et al. (2014, p. 240) summarise; the pattern-matching technique "identify and compare the patterns evident in the data against one or several hypothesized patterns that the analyst has developed through familiarity with the field". To answer the research question, collected data were applied to the predefined conceptual framework of political empowerment.

### 2.2.2 Limitations

The thesis operates with the term "gender" approached narrowly through the gendered binary; masculine and feminine. It is a limitation of the thesis due to the scope and the availability of data.



The main limitation of conducting the research was the language barrier. The author does not speak Bosnian or Serbian and relied on using English. In some cases, there was not an English version available, and Google translate was used to translate the information from the CSOs' websites. Even though Google translate provides an increasingly accurate translation service (Aiken, 2019), some nuances could have been missed.

The thesis primarily works with data provided by the studied CSOs, which might not be always objective and critical about their work. However, the goal of the thesis is to find how peacebuilding CSOs engage in political empowerment and given their long-term expertise, the organisations do supposedly predominantly employ projects that stem from their experience and good practices.

## 3 Literature review

The following chapter focuses on how the topic of gender in peace processes and the role of women's civil society organisations and peacebuilding is covered in academic literature. Firstly, the main arguments why it is crucial to include women in peacebuilding are presented, followed by the literature on the role of women's civil society organisations (CSOs) in peacebuilding. The provided literature review enabled mapping of the current research and finding the gaps within which eventually led to the definition of the research problem.

The research is multidisciplinary. Most of the reviewed literature belongs to the fields of security studies, gender studies, and peace and conflict studies. There is, also, a growing body of literature that focuses directly on the role of gender in peace processes. Even though the more general term "gender" is used and was used to find relevant academic sources, the thesis focuses primarily on women.

### 3.1 Women and peace processes

The 1995 UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, which resulted in a key global policy document, the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action, was a historical moment for women (UN Women, n.d.b). The Conference was the first time when the international community discussed specific women's experiences of wars. The chapter on Women and Armed Conflict in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action represents, therefore, an important turning point. (Arostegui, 2013, p. 536-537). In 2000, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1325, which was the start of what is now recognized as the Women, Peace and Security Agenda. Among other objectives, Resolution 1325 called for incorporating the gender perspective and increased representation and participation of women at all levels during the conflict resolution and peace processes (UNSC, 2000, p. 2). The Women, Peace and Security Agenda is a binding document for all UN members and represents a legal framework for promoting gender equality in peace processes (ibid.). However, although it has been more than twenty years ago, the progress is slow (O'Reilly, Súilleabháin and Paffenholz, 2015, p. 2). There are still numerous gaps in the implementation of the Resolution and the participation of women in peace processes remains limited (Arostegui, 2013, p. 537; Criado-Perez, 2020, p. 294; Höghammar et al., 2016). For

instance, between 2015 and 2019, women represented, on average, 14 percent of negotiators, 11 percent of mediators, and only 7 percent of signatories (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). Women are powerful agents, but men usually dominate the formal peacebuilding roles and women's roles in peace processes tend to get unrecognized (Munro 2000, p. 2). Also, the available gender-segregated data are scant which as Criado-Perez (2020, pp. 293-294) argues, attests to the existing gap.

One strategy to promote gender equality in peacebuilding is gender mainstreaming, which was prioritised by the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (Moser & Moser, 2005, p. 11). Gender mainstreaming is defined by the United Nations Economic and Social Council (1997, p. 2) as “the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels.” Gender mainstreaming has faced political and institutional challenges and as a concept is under-developed (Caglar, 2013, p. 337; Daly, 2005, p. 433). Although the gender-mainstreaming strategy has sparked an institutional change, new bodies within organisations were created and new policies and processes were implemented, which is not enough to achieve gender equality (Caglar, 2013, p. 336; Moser & Moser, 2005, p. 19). Moser and Moser (2005, p. 19) point out in their review that the evidence on the implementation of the gender mainstreaming policies and procedures is mixed. Moser and Moser (*ibid.*, pp. 19-20) conclude that to move forward, it is necessary to implement gender mainstreaming transparently and to develop more robust evaluation methods.

The available evidence suggests that there is a link between gender equality and conflict. Caprioli's (2005) well-known research found that there is an interconnectedness between gender inequalities and intrastate conflict; states with higher levels of gender inequality are more likely to encounter an intrastate conflict than states with less gender inequality. Similarly, recent research by the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security (Klugman, Nagel and Viollaz, 2021) concludes that lower levels of gender inequalities in education, financial inclusion, political participation, and employment and lower rates of intimate partner violence and adolescent fertility correlate with lower levels of violence. Gizelis (2011) found a correlation between the social status of women and the effectiveness of post-conflict reconstruction; the higher the status is the more effective the post-conflict reconstruction. The OECD (2020b, p. 1) agrees with the interlinkages between gender equality and peacebuilding and highlights the notion of fragility. According to the Organisation (*ibid.*), gender equality, conflict, and fragility are linked. The OECD (2020a, p. 15) defines fragility as “the combination of exposure to risk and insufficient

coping capacity of the state, systems and/or communities to manage, absorb or mitigate those risks”. Inequalities are perpetuating fragility, but fragility, on the other hand, can lead to inequalities, violence, or poverty (OECD 2020a, p. 15; OECD, 2020b, p. 1). Therefore, striving for greater gender equality can be considered an important peacebuilding activity.

Conflict and post-conflict periods represent unique opportunities for women to challenge unequal structures and advance women’s rights (Arostegui, 2013, p. 535). However, the simplifying portrayal and perception of women as victims that need to be protected, trained, and educated can be a burden to achieving a societal transformation (Bedigen, 2021, pp. 465-466; Ramnarain, 2014 p. 677). Women take up various roles during the conflict including those reinforcing violence, they are not only conflict’s passive victims (Arostegui, 2013, p. 535). For instance, in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, some women were calling for more violence than extreme male nationalists (Helms, 2003, p. 21). Women are also peacebuilders, politicians, and activists (Arostegui, 2013, p. 535; Bedigen, 2021, p. 464). Furthermore, conflict can even expand the existing women’s roles and create new ones (Arostegui, 2013, p. 533). On the other hand, during wars, the stereotypical gender roles get often further enhanced (Munro, 2000, p. 3) and wars like any other crisis exacerbate existing gender inequalities (ibid., p. 2).

It is important to mention that not all women experience conflict in the same way, but their experience is usually different from the one of men. For instance, women are more likely to die from indirect consequences of conflicts such as displacement, social turmoil, violations of human rights, economic issues, or diseases. Men usually die from direct consequences of violence. (O’Reilly, Súilleabháin and Paffenholz, 2015, p. 5). Also, during conflict and in post-conflict periods, sexual and domestic violence increases which represents another threat to women’s safety (ibid.). According to research, gender-based violence increases towards the end of the war with a more significant increase if the partner comes back from combat (Porter, 2016, p. 212-213). Gender-based violence can refer to “sexual, physical, mental and economic harm directed at an individual based on their gender, (gender-based violence) is rooted in gender inequality, the abuse of power and harmful norms” (UNHCR, 2021).

Women are often portrayed as naturally nurturing, caring, and empathetic (O’Reilly, Súilleabháin and Paffenholz, 2015, pp. 9-10). However, these assumptions are problematic and not accurate. They stem from an essentialist approach to gender and neglect structural discrimination (Ramnarain, 2014, p. 677). Cambridge Dictionary

(n.d.) defines essentialism as “the belief that groups of people, such as men and women, have different basic characteristics that cannot be changed”. This stereotypical characteristic of women does not automatically apply to each one of them (O’Reilly, Súilleabháin and Paffenholz, 2015, p. 10). According to Ramnarain (2014, p. 677), this approach to women’s roles in peacebuilding can lead to neglecting the structural inequalities that had caused the conflict in the first place. The essentialist approach to women is, therefore, not accurate, however, women do tend to take up roles of peacebuilders more often than men (Helms, 2003, p. 22). According to Helms (ibid.), the complex nexus of foreign donors, regional and international feminist movements, local nationalists, and the established perception of gender roles, which provides women and men with different possibilities, can also have an impact.

It is also important to mention the role of masculinities; gender roles assigned to men. Masculinities can be described as “various ways of being and acting, values and expectations associated with being and becoming a man in a given society, location and temporal space” (OECD, 2019, p. 9). The perception of masculinity as emphasizing men’s dominance and power over other men or women perpetuates negative behaviors for both (Namy, 2015, p. 206). However, masculinities are not fixed and can be transformed (Lundgren et al., 2013). Moreover, men’s experiences of conflicts are complex too. Although men are usually the perpetrators of violence, they can also be its victims (OECD, 2019, p. 9). According to the OECD’s (ibid., p. 10) analysis, men, and boys, therefore, should be included in a discussion on gender roles but not at the expense of promoting women’s empowerment and gender equality. Addressing the harmful masculinities is beneficial for all.

There is overwhelming evidence for the notion that the participation of women in peace processes is significant to accomplishing a successful outcome. For instance, when women participate in a peace process, there are bigger chances that an agreement would be achieved in a shorter amount of time. Moreover, the peace agreement would also be more likely to last longer and be more sustainable. (O’Reilly, Súilleabháin and Paffenholz, 2015, p. 1; Krause, Krause and Bränfors, 2018). However, for the effective inclusion of women in peace processes, women need to be heard and have a real agency to influence the process. A symbolic seat at the table is not enough. (Adjei, 2019, p. 134).

Among other arguments why including women in peace processes is effective for lasting peace, is the obvious fact that women represent half of the population. If the goal is to build sustainable peace, including women is, therefore, critical, and logical.

Women's unique experiences and perspectives are necessary as well as it is necessary to have them represented. (Arostegui, 2013, p. 535; Criado-Perez, 2020, pp. 289-290). As Castillejo (2016, p. 1) points out, women tend to focus on topics very important to peacebuilding and that men often overlook such as the inclusivity or plurality of citizens' voices. Also, women in peacebuilding can positively influence the state of women's rights and gender equality (ibid., p. 2).

Women mobilize in civil society to influence peace processes externally if they cannot participate in the formal processes (Castillejo, 2016, p. 2). According to Castillejo (ibid.), such women's leadership in peacebuilding can have many forms, for instance, lobbying during peace negotiations to influence the results or adopting a brokering role. Women's groups are more likely to influence the peace process than women as individuals (O'Reilly, Súilleabháin and Paffenholz, 2015, p. 32). Moreover, a collaboration of female signatories and women's civil society organisations can have a positive influence on the peace process (Krause, Krause and Bränfors, 2018). The UN Women (Castillo Diaz and Tordjman, 2010, p. 4) study has also concluded that organised participation of women's groups in a peace process is linked to an agreement that is more sensitive to gender.

### 3.2 Peacebuilding and women's civil society organisations

Paffenholz (2015, p. 108) describes civil society as "an arena of voluntary, collective actions of institutional nature around shared interests, purposes, and values" which are not the state, market, or family. The United Nations (n.d.a) then define a civil society organisation (CSO) to be "any non-profit, voluntary citizens' group which is organized on a local, national or international level". Moreover, "(...) civil society organisations perform a variety of services and humanitarian functions, bring citizens' concerns to Governments, monitor policies, and encourage political participation at the community level" (ibid.). Paffenholz (2015, pp. 108-109) categorizes civil society actors into ten categories: special interest groups, faith-based organisations, traditional and community groups, researchers and research institutions, humanitarian service delivery organisations, advocacy organisations, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding NGOs, social/political movements, business associations, and lastly, networks.

There is no clear definition of what peacebuilding is. The Agenda for peace (1992, p. 5), a crucial UN report that made peacebuilding a priority of the international agenda, defines post-conflict peacebuilding as an "action to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid relapse

into conflict”. According to Adjei (2019, p. 136), “peacebuilding involves long-term efforts to reconstruct, reconcile and restore post-conflict communities”. Johan Galtung (1976), who was the first to use the term “peacebuilding”, makes a distinction between the notions of “peacebuilding”, “peacekeeping” and “peacemaking”. However, the differences between these concepts are not always clear among scholars. For instance, Rigual (2018, p. 145) argues that the concept of peacebuilding overlaps with other concepts such as conflict prevention, peacekeeping, or state-building.

Women’s conflict resolution and peacebuilding NGOs represent one of the categories of civil society organisations based on the classification provided by Paffenholz (2015, p. 109). Paffenholz (ibid., p. 110) further specifies how civil society actors can contribute to peacebuilding. According to the scholar (ibid.), it is through protection, advocacy, facilitation, monitoring, socialisation, social cohesion, and service delivery. Socialization can be understood as the promotion of peaceful values and bonding within a specific group, social cohesion, on the other hand, refers to intergroup bonding (ibid., pp. 111-112).

There have been many new women’s NGOs created in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina, including local and grass-root NGOs, which played an important role in peacebuilding after the end of the war (Helms, 2003, p. 15; Mulalić, 2011, p. 42). Women are more likely to engage in peacebuilding efforts also because of their gendered position in society (Helms, 2003, p. 18). The shared identity of being a woman can be useful in finding a consensus; however, it can also be a hinder as it can keep women away from the formal political world (ibid., p. 24). Mulalić (2011, p. 40) finds that women’s NGOs in Bosnia-Herzegovina played an important role in establishing of gender equality framework in the country. Even though women’s civil society organisations in Bosnia and Herzegovina achieved important gains in terms of e.g., progress in human rights, tolerance, promotion of civic education or peacebuilding, other civil society objectives, such as control of political power, did not show an involvement of women’s organisations (ibid., p. 40).

Helms (2003, p. 15) points out that there is a paradox in the dominant representation of women as agents of peacebuilding because the essentialist constructions of women can exclude them from formal political power. The essentialist approach to gender, such as seeing women as nurturers, caretakers, and peacebuilders, can lead to limiting women’s potential and consequentially hinder progress in gender equality. Essentialist portrayals of women, often linked to motherhood, reinforce the patriarchal values; domestic roles do not allow women to enter the male political

sphere. Helms also mentions that some Bosnian women's NGOs adopt the essentialist perception of women and use the association of women as mothers and homemakers that stay out of politics. The political world in Bosnia and Herzegovina is perceived as corrupt and this approach can allow women to gain authority and achieve political goals through indirect power; the gender essentialism can, therefore, be used strategically. If women's organisations frame their activities as humanitarian and only talk to women, the organisations can be perceived as less threatening. Using gender essentialism strategically can mobilize women and lead to progress in gender equality as well. (Helms, 2003, pp. 15-24).

In Pupavac's (2005, p. 391) assessment of international gender policies in Bosnia and Herzegovina, she argues that even though international policy-making claims aiming at encouraging women to be active in civil society and there is a strong presence of women in NGOs in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it did not lead to women's greater political representation. The international empowerment initiatives translate into top-down approaches on the ground, which only a few urban elites benefit from (ibid., p. 403). Feminist and gender equality insights suggest putting more focus on state-centered peacebuilding with locally driven and inclusive empowerment initiatives (Rigual, 2018, p. 154). It is worth noting that women's NGOs, similarly, to other local NGOs, are often dependent on the international community for their survival and it can translate into too much time spent on grant applications and too much focus on the implementation of international programmes (Pupavac, 2005, p. 397). On the other hand, if the local NGO identifies itself as a "women's organisation", it can be helpful to obtain funding from international donors (Helms, 2003, p. 21).



## 4 Conceptual framework

As the goal of my research is to find, how women's peacebuilding civil society organisations engage in the political empowerment of women, it is necessary to operationalize the concept of "political empowerment". The broader concepts of gender equality, gender equity, and empowerment are also addressed within the chapter.

The conceptualization of "political empowerment" is based primarily on the conceptualization by Sundström, Paxton, Wang and Lindberg (2015). Their (ibid.) conceptualization functionally divided political empowerment into three subthemes; choice, agency, and participation, which allowed a detailed operationalization of the framework for the collected empirical data suitable for the thesis.

Because of the scope of the thesis and the availability of data, the thesis operates with a binary approach to gender. According to the World Health Organization (2019): "Gender refers to the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed. This includes norms, behaviors, and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl, or boy, as well as relationships with each other. As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time."

### 4.1 Gender equality, gender equity and empowerment

Gender equality can be defined as "the absence of discrimination on the basis of a person's sex" (WHO, 2002). Gender equity is then defined by the World Health Organization (ibid.) as "the fairness and justice in distribution of benefits and responsibilities between women and men" with the recognition of differences between the two genders. Gender equity can be, therefore, similarly to women's empowerment, perceived as the means to achieve gender equality.

The United Nations recognizes empowerment as "increasing the personal, political, social and economic strength of individuals and communities" (UNICEF, 2017, p. 1). Empowerment can include different approaches such as awareness-raising, working on a person's self-confidence, easier access to and control over resources, and transformation of discriminating structures perpetuating inequality (ibid.). The

UNICEF (ibid.) definition emphasizes that women and girls must as well have the agency to make choices and decide for themselves.

The research focuses primarily on political empowerment. Political empowerment stays to be one of the largest gender equality gaps (World Economic Forum, 2021, p. 5), and political empowerment of women is under-researched (Alexander, Bolzendahl and Jalalzai, 2016, p. 433). Furthermore, given the scope of the thesis, the research problem had to be defined accordingly. Therefore, political empowerment constitutes a sufficiently narrow focus. Finally, the close link between civic society and politics indicates enough available data.

However, there are existing interlinkages between achieving greater equality in the social, economic, and political spheres, which as Caprioli (2005, p. 174) points out, should be, therefore, addressed together. For instance, Goltz, Buche and Pathak (2015, p. 605) claim that: “women’s political leadership may contribute to women’s entrepreneurship by removing existing constraints on the economic behavior of women”. Their (ibid.) statement is supported by the quantitative analysis they conducted that showed a positive link between women’s political leadership with women’s entry into entrepreneurship. Research conducted by Dahlum, Knutsen and Mechkova (2022) supports a linkage between women’s political empowerment and the economic growth of a country. This implies an existing spillover effect between different areas of empowerment.

## 4.2 Political empowerment

Women are underrepresented in politics. For example, in 2020 only 25,2 members of national parliaments were women even though they represent about half of the world’s population (IPU, 2020). Due to its scope, this thesis will not go into detail about what challenges women need to face to become politicians, however, there are various obstacles for women to overcome. Lovenduski (2002, p. 212) writes about the three most significant categories of challenges; social, constitutional, and political. Social obstacles can be fewer resources, or more caregiving responsibilities, which leaves women with less time for other activities (ibid.). UN Women (2019) talks about capacity gaps signifying, that women are less likely to have the education, relevant contacts, and sufficient financial resources to become powerful politicians. A constitutional obstacle to overcome is, for instance, the type of electoral system (Lovenduski, 2002, pp. 212-213). Lastly, an example of a political barrier to women entering politics given by Lovenduski (ibid.) can be the political party, which women

decided to run for; political parties often fail to nominate women. Similarly, according to Shvedova (2005, pp. 33-34) women face three kinds of barriers. The first two types of obstacles; political, and socio-economic, are overlapping with Lovenduski's assessment. The third category, ideological and psychological obstacles, are a result of socialization and the traditional division of gender roles in society (Shvedova, 2005, p. 44). Moreover, women also face further expectations to prove that they deserve their position in politics (Lovenduski, 2002, p. 217).

Political empowerment of women is necessary to progress as a society (Sundström et al., 2015, p. 3). Women's political empowerment is connected to higher levels of gender equality as it challenges the existing discriminating structures (Asiedu et al., 2018, p. 2). As the literature review showed, evidence suggests that societies with higher levels of gender equality are more likely to live in peace (e.g., Caprioli, 2005; Klugman, Nagel and Viollaz, 2021; Regan and Paskeviciute, 2003). The linkages between political empowerment of women and positive outcomes for democracy and development are also recognized (e.g., Dieleman and Andersson, 2016, p. 1).

There is, however, not a unified definition of women's political empowerment among scholars and how to achieve it (Alexander, Bolzendahl and Jalalzai; 2016, p. 432). A study by researchers from the University of Kansas (Asiedu et al., 2018, p. 33) suggests that to politically empower women, it is necessary to provide women with relevant education and increase the political effectiveness of female politicians. However, Longwe (2000, p. 25) critically assesses that it is not the level of education or lack of confidence that stops women from engaging in politics. Women do not "lack" anything, it is mostly the structural challenges that hinder women's involvement in politics (ibid., 2000, p. 24). Longwe (ibid., p. 26) blames it on the socialisation of girls and boys into their assigned gender roles and the opposition of men.

Sundström, Paxton, Wang and Lindberg (2015, p. 4) define political empowerment as "a process of increasing capacity for women, leading to greater choice, agency, and participation in societal decision-making". Their (ibid.) conceptualization of political empowerment, therefore, stands on the three pillars, which also represent three main areas of academic work on empowerment; choice, agency, and participation. The thesis's conceptual framework is based on Sundström et al. (ibid.) and is grounded in these three notions. Sundström et al. (2015, p. 8) stress that political empowerment is a process. Moreover, according to Alexander, Bolzendahl and Jalalzai (2016, p. 437) measuring women's empowerment should

consider individual opportunities and capacities, community-based factors and broader context.

Firstly, the aspect of choice is, according to the conceptual framework provided by Sundström et al. (2015), critical. As Kabeer (1999, p. 2) points out, one possibility of how to see power is as the ability to make choices and choice implies having alternatives. “Disempowerment” means being denied the ability to make strategic choices (ibid.). Being able to make many choices signifies that the person is powerful, however, it does not necessarily mean that they are empowered because they might have never been disempowered (ibid.). For women to be empowered, they should not only be able to exercise choices, but more importantly, they should also be able to decide about critical aspects of their lives (ibid., p. 3). The critical choices are not only those linked to legal frameworks, the choices stemming from informal culture are also important and need to be taken into account (Sundström et al., 2017, p. 5). Also, being able to move freely is another important aspect of political empowerment (Malhotra, Schuler and Boender, 2002, p. 20). Women can be limited by customs, cultural barriers, and/or legal restrictions (ibid.). Moreover, it is important to look at the control of resources by women including the freedom from forced labor and the ability to participate in the job market (ibid.). “Resources” can be material resources or can more broadly signify anything acquired by different social relationships (Kabeer, 1999, p. 3). The control over resources suggests the linkage between economic and political empowerment as it is important for women’s independence to have financial resources on their own. Longwe (2000, p. 30) criticises the notion that women are empowered through access to resources and emphasizes that it is a matter of increased control over rather than increased access to resources because the control is what gives women real power. Access to justice, a non-discriminatory legal framework, and being treated as equals is also critical for women’s empowerment as women need to have rights and exact them (Sundström et al., 2015., p. 6). According to Pospieszna’s (2014, pp. 1254-1255) political empowerment mechanism, there are three types of empowerment; material, mental and legal, that reinforce each other and lead to political empowerment. Material empowerment, which Pospieszna (ibid.) describes as the opportunity to participate in projects and training overlaps with the dimension of choice defined by Sundström et al. (2015, pp. 4-6). Similarly, Pospieszna’s (2014, pp. 1254-1255) aspect of legal empowerment, demonstrated by the appropriate legal framework in force, would pertain to the dimension of choice.

Agency is the second aspect of political empowerment according to the conceptualization by Sundström et al. (2015). Agency represents “the ability to define

one's goals and act upon them" (Kabeer, 2002, p. 3), women need to be the active agents of change in the process of political empowerment (Malhotra, Schuler and Boender, 2002, p. 7). To have an agency, women need to have a voice to discuss their grievances freely when they participate in public political debates (Charmes and Wieringa, 2003, p. 426). According to Kabeer (2002, p. 3), the agency is often operationalized in social science academic literature as "decision making". Also, without freely talking about their political opinions, women cannot make any demands for a change. Access to information and media, as well as being in the media and engaging in journalism so that women's issues are given space is also critical for women's political empowerment (Van Zoonen, 1998, p. 34, as cited in Sundström et al., 2015, p. 7). Material empowerment in the Pospieszna's (2014, pp. 1254-1255) definition leads to mental empowerment of women, which signifies the mental support and strength women acquire by participating in different kinds of empowering projects. Mental empowerment should then be supported by legal empowerment as women are encouraged to demand their rights (ibid.). Mental empowerment coincides with the dimension of agency.

Lastly, the political empowerment of women is, according to the definition by Sundström, Paxton, Wang and Lindberg (2015, p. 7), linked to the levels of women's participation in politics. Sundström, Paxton, Wang and Lindberg (ibid.) argue that the argument for women's participation is based on the feminist concept of descriptive representation. Pitkin (1967) defined four kinds of representation, one of which is descriptive representation. According to Pitkin (ibid.), descriptive representation focuses on "who" is represented by "whom" (Kurebwa, 2015, p. 59). Even though the argument can be perceived as a simplification as "women" are not one homogenous group, they do share some specific experiences and interests that are distinct from men's and would be therefore more likely represented by other women (Philips, 1994, pp. 72-73). Research suggests, that more women in politics mean more focus on women's rights and issues more specific to women such as gender-based violence (Asiedu et al., 2018; Criado-Perez, 2019, pp. 265-266; Taylor-Robinson and Heath, 2003). The participation aspect of women's political empowerment is also included in the international legislative framework, such as the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, or the sustainable development Agenda 2030 (Sundström et al., 2015, pp. 7-8). The target 5.5 of the Sustainable Development Goals is to "ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life" (UN, n.d.b). The progress in reaching the target would be measured by the proportion of seats in national

parliaments and local governments that are held by women and the proportion of women in managerial positions (ibid.). A different method of measuring women's political empowerment in the area of participation could be looking at the engagement of women in political campaigning or protests (Hashemi, Schuler and Riley, 1996, p. 638).

Alexander, Bolzendahl and Jalalzai (2016) conceptualized women's political empowerment as a transformative process that can focus on three areas; firstly, elites in positions of political authority; secondly, civil society actors who challenge the system through informal channels; and thirdly, citizens participating in the formal channels of influence. The second category, civil society actors challenging the system through informal action, is relevant to the thesis. Within this category, empowerment can mean, for instance, engagement in demonstrations, boycotts, petitions, or becoming a member of a politically active NGO. According to Alexander, Bolzendahl and Jalalzai, literature also suggests that these forms of engagement can represent the most effective ways to gain influence for women. The scholars also point out that these forms of engagement can work as a stepping stone for further engagement or moving towards formal circles. The third category, citizens active in formal channels, is also relevant. One of the commonly evaluated aspects of political empowerment within this category is the extent of interest, knowledge, and engagement of women in politics. Research suggests that political empowerment in terms of political motivations can be indicated by women thinking they would be as capable as men in politics, can identify and support policies they align with the most, and make political claims relevant to their achievements, security, and resources. (Alexander, Bolzendahl and Jalalzai, 2016, pp. 433-435).

# 5 Gender equality and women's empowerment in Bosnia and Herzegovina

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the principal moments of the infamous conflict that took place in today's Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s. After the provided overview of the war, the adopted international and national legal gender equality frameworks are presented. Finally, the last part of the chapter discusses the state of gender equality in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

## 5.1 A brief overview of the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina

The 1990s represented transformative years for Europe. The Eastern bloc and the Soviet Union went through revolutions and transformed into republics that wanted to adhere to democratic principles. However, the intense and brutal wars in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s have left the international community in shock.

After Josip Tito died in 1980, a model of collective leadership was supposed to replace Tito's role as a charismatic leader of ethnically diverse Yugoslavia (Žagar, 2009, p. 459). However, this system struggled to face the complex challenges in the second half of the 1980s (ibid.). Slobodan Milošević, the Serbian leader, tried to seize the opportunity to capture power through centralization of the current system and fomenting ethnic nationalism among Serbs (Berry, 2018, p. 114; Žagar, 2009, p. 459). After the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, the party that ruled Yugoslavia for 45 years but also represented a valuable bond for the country, dissolved in 1990, the system was further paralyzed (Tempest, 1990; Žagar, 2009, p. 459). At the same time, democratization was spreading across the country, which exacerbated the political crisis (ibid., Ó Tuathail and O'Loughlin, 2009, p. 1046; Rabrenovic, 1997, p. 97).

Tensions and calls for autonomy led Croatia and Slovenia to declare independence in June 1991, to which the Serbs responded (Berry, 2019, p. 116). In Croatia, the tensions escalated into a war between the Croatian independent forces and the Yugoslav National Army (JNA) (ibid.). Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) and Bosnian

Croats expressed a desire to quit Yugoslavia in 1992; the result of an independence referendum was more than 99 percent of votes in favor (CSCE, 1992, p. 19). The turnout of 63.4 percent of eligible voters excluded the Bosnian Serbs who boycotted the referendum (ibid.). Subsequently, Bosnia and Herzegovina declared independence on March 3, 1992 (Berry, 2019, p. 116). After the European Community and the United States recognized Bosnia and Herzegovina as an independent state in April 1992, Serbian forces supported by the government in Belgrade launched an attack to capture as much of the Serb-populated territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina for Serbia (ibid., p. 117; Dobbins et al., 2013, p. 94). Because the population was not homogenous, Bosnia and Herzegovina faced a complicated situation. Before the war, Bosniaks represented about 43.7 percent of Bosnia and Herzegovina's population, Serbs 31.3 percent, and Croats 17.3 percent (CSCE, 1992, p. 2). Ethnic cleansing has become infamously associated with the conflict (Ó Tuathail and O'Loughlin, 2009).

The territory of the capital city Sarajevo was under siege and shelled for the period of the conflict's duration, which caused the highest death tolls in the whole war (Berry, 2018, pp. 119-120; BBC, 2016). Two other regions that were also facing very high levels of violence were the strategically important Krajina region surrounding the city of Banja Luka, and the Drina Valley region in the northeast of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Berry, 2019, p. 119). The Krajina region was inhabited mostly by Bosniaks but represented a strategically important geographical region for the Serbs because it connected Serbia to the Serb-controlled areas of Bosnia; the Drina Valley is bordering Serbia (ibid.; Ó Tuathail and O'Loughlin, 2009, p. 1046).

The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina finally ended in 1995 with the General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which became known as the Dayton Peace Agreement signed by representatives of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of Croatia, and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, p. 5). The Dayton Accords, which under Annex 4 included the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina, created a co-federation of the Bosnian Serb republic Republika Srpska and the Bosniak-Croat Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina with a central government binding the two entities together (General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, p. 3). The system of governance created by the Dayton Accords is very complicated (Akyol, 2019).

The Bosnian war is infamous for the atrocities conducted while it lasted including crimes against humanity, genocide, and crimes perpetrated against civilians



and places of worship (Ó Tuathail and O'Loughlin, 2009). To deal with the war crimes conducted in the 1990s in the Balkans, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) had been created with a mandate lasting from 1993 to 2017 (United Nations, n.d.d). The population of Bosnia and Herzegovina before the war was about 4.3 million, the war caused approximately 100,000 casualties out of which 90 percent were men (Ball, Tabeau and Verwimp, 2007, p. 28; Cutts, 1999, p. 1). In terms of ethnicities, about 65 percent of the casualties were Bosniaks, 26 percent Serbs, and 8 percent Croats (Ball, Tabeau and Verwimp, 2007, p. 29). There were about 900,000 refugees and 1.3 million IDPs after the war ended (Cutts, 1999, p. 1).

The international community has played its role in the conflict. Žagar (2009, p. 457) argues that insufficiently developed strategies for conflict prevention, management, or conflict resolution, lack of coordination of the international community, and cooperation within, were also factors in the conflict's escalation. Furthermore, the deployed UN peacekeeping mission has failed to protect the civilians, which illustrates the events in Srebrenica (Bellamy et al., 2010, p. 117). The peacekeeping operation in Bosnia was among the too ambitious peace operations conducted by the UN at the end of the 20th century without having an appropriate mandate, information, political support and will, resources and guidance (Bellamy et al., 2010, pp. 119-120).

More than twenty-five years after the Dayton Peace Agreement, Bosnia and Herzegovina remains dysfunctional and very fragile, the central government is weak, and the three ethnic groups share a mistrust of each other (Radosavljevic, 2022). According to Akyol (2019), it is not a surprise, as the governance system is one of the most complicated in the world. Just a few months before submitting this thesis, in the autumn of 2021, Bosnia and Herzegovina got the world's attention as the Bosnian Serb nationalist leader, Milorad Dodik, was threatening to withdraw from state-level institutions, including the army (Borger, 2021). The Bosnian Serb assembly voted to pull out from the institutions in December, however, in June 2022, the withdrawal was postponed due to fear of international backlash (Radosavljevic, 2022). Dodik, one of the three leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina representing the Bosnian Serbs, has been a long-term advocate for the separation of Republika Srpska from Bosnia and Herzegovina (DW, 2022).

### 5.1.1 Women and the war

The OSCE research concludes that around 64 percent of women in Bosnia and Herzegovina are, as of 2019, directly affected by the war (OSCE, 2019, p. 44). The

conflict impacted women in various ways. Some women lost their property, had it severely damaged, or were taken away by the armed forces, some women had a partner or a family member who actively participated in the fighting, some women could not work during the war, and some had to flee their home out which 24 percent of women could not come back after the conflict ended (ibid., p. 43). Some women became less financially independent due to job loss, unemployment, and lack of services in the years that followed the war (ibid., p. 45). Women, who were directly affected by the conflict, often encountered violence, including gender-specific human rights abuses both during and after the conflict (ibid., p. 44, Rošul-Gajić, 2016, p. 146). Moreover, the international personnel often behaved disrespectfully toward women (Rošul-Gajić, 2016, p. 147).

During the war, sexualized violence, including mass rape, or forced impregnations, was widely used as a tactic and a systematic weapon of demoralization (Akyol, 2019; Berry, 2018, pp. 127-128; Skjelsbæk, 2006, p. 373). During the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina, sexual abuses were common and committed by all sides of the conflict, however, Bosniak women were the most numerous victims of such crimes, and members of the Serbian armed forces were the main perpetrators (Amnesty International, 1993, p. 5-6). Rape is a very humiliating crime and carries traumatic social consequences for the victim, often a woman, which make it harder to come to terms with the emotional and physical effects (Amnesty International, 1993, p. 2). Berry (2018, p. 129) argues that the international reaction to the atrocities after the war ended created an image of a woman without any agency that is waiting to be saved. Furthermore, Akyol (2019) points out that survivors of sexualized violence still deal with stigma and lack sufficient legal protection, especially after the ICTY was dissolved. The consequences of suffering such a traumatic experience last very long, often for the rest of the survivor's life (OSCE, 2019, p. 15). Violence against women remained common even after the war ended. Most of the violence was committed by intimate partners (ibid., p. 45). The OSCE study discovers, that women whose partners fought in the conflict, still experience partner violence twice as high as women in relationships in which the partner did not directly participate in combat (OSCE, 2019, p. IX).

After the war ended, no woman took part in the peace negotiations, nor was she among the signatories of the Dayton Accords (Akyol, 2019). The war did provide women in Bosnia with some gains such as a facilitated mobilization at the grass-root level, however, due to various factors such as the political settlement, the role that the international actors played, and patriarchal norms in Bosnia and Herzegovina, many of

the gains were rather short-lived (Berry, 2018, p. 5). Also, as Berry (2018, p. 17) further argues, even though the war led to many new community civil society organisations critical for informal political participation, the war did not lead to an increase in the representation of women in formal political spaces. Many of the newly created women's organisations started to work on putting violation of women's human rights on the agenda (Rošul-Gajić, 2016, p. 146).

## 5.2 The state of gender equality in Bosnia and Herzegovina

The following paragraphs focus on the state of gender equality in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Even though there is a gender equality framework in place, women continue to face many challenges in different areas of their lives. Gender equality indices and an overview of the state of gender equality and political empowerment provide a summary of women's situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

### 5.2.1 Gender equality framework in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia and Herzegovina ratified international gender equality commitments as well as adopted legislative documents on the national level. The following paragraphs provide a brief overview of the main legal documents that influence the state of gender equality in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Women's civil society organisation in Bosnia and Herzegovina played a critical role in establishing the legal framework (Mulalić, 2011, p. 53).

Bosnia and Herzegovina adopted all significant international legal documents that relate to gender equality and women's empowerment, many are also incorporated into the Bosnian legislation (Pospieszna, 2014, p. 1256). The Dayton Peace Agreement (General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, p. 75) undertakes Bosnia and Herzegovina to implement among other human rights agreements the 1979 UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Bosnia and Herzegovina also committed to adhering to the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995), the UN Resolution 1325, or the UN Agenda 2030 which includes SDG 5; Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls (SDG: Knowledge Platform, 2019; UN Women, n.d.c; UN Women, 2021a, p. 28). Bosnia and Herzegovina was also one of the first countries to ratify the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, known also as the Istanbul convention (UN Women, 2021a, p. 28). Among other major international legislation that Bosnia and Herzegovina ratified are the EU Framework Strategy for Gender

Equality, the EU Convention on the Political Rights of Women, and the EU Declaration on Achieving True Gender Equality (Pospieszna, 2014, p. 1256).

Bosnia And Herzegovina made efforts to directly focus on the implementation of individual international legal documents. For instance, to implement the UN Agenda on Women, Peace, and Security, there is, as of 2022, the Action Plan for the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in place (2018-2022) (USAID, 2019, p. 8). In the past, the Framework Strategy for the Implementation of the Istanbul Convention in Bosnia and Herzegovina for the period 2015-2018 was in effect (UN Women, 2021a, p. 28).

The Law on Gender Equality in Bosnia and Herzegovina adopted in 2003 and amended in 2009 is its main legal document on gender equality (USAID, 2019, p. 8). The Law on Gender Equality “shall regulate, promote and protect gender equality, guarantee equal and equal treatment of all persons regardless of gender in public and private sphere of society, and regulate protection from discrimination on grounds of gender” and shall guarantee gender equality in all areas of society “including but not limited to education, economy, employment and labour, social and health protection, sport, culture, public life and media” (Law on Gender Equality in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2010, p.1). The law specifically prohibits any discrimination on the basis of gender and sexual orientation (*ibid.*). In terms of gender equality in public life, according to the Law, both women and men should be represented by at least 40 percent in state and local self-government bodies (*ibid.*, p. 5).

To monitor the state of gender equality and coordinate the implementation of the Law, the Law on Gender Equality has established the Agency for Gender Equality at the state level and Gender Centres at the entity level; the Gender Center of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Gender Center of the Republika Srpska (*ibid.*, 6-7). Next to these institutions, also other institutional mechanisms exist such as the Commission for Gender Equality of the Parliamentary Assembly of BiH at the state level, and similarly the Commissions and Committees for Gender Equality at the entity level (ARS BIH, n.d.). Furthermore, committees exist within municipal assemblies at the local level (*ibid.*).

The Law on Gender Equality also introduced the Gender Action Plan of BiH; “a strategy that defines programmatic goals for the realisation of gender equality in all spheres of social life and labour, in public and private sphere” (Law on Gender Equality in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2010, p. 3). As of 2022, the Gender Action Plan 2018-

2022 is in force (Gender Action Plan of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2018-2022, 2018). The current Gender Action Plan has three strategic goals: firstly, “Development, Implementation and Monitoring of the Programme of Measures for the Advancement of Gender Equality within Governmental Institutions”; secondly, “Establishing and Strengthening the System, Mechanisms and Instruments for the Achievement of Gender Equality”; and lastly, “Establishing and Strengthening Cooperation and Partnership” (ibid., p. 3). Local units adopt and implement their own local gender action plans in accordance with the Law on Gender Equality and the Gender Action Plan (UN Women, 2021a, p. 32).

The USAID report (2019, p. 8) mentions that some of other important laws that regulate the issue of gender equality are, for instance, the BiH Law on Prohibition of Discrimination, the Election Law of BiH, and the Laws on Protection from Domestic Violence of Federation of BiH, the Republika Srpska, and the Brcko District of BiH.

### 5.2.2 The state of gender equality in Bosnia and Herzegovina

The United Nations SDG 5 tracker concludes that there is still a lot of space for progress to achieve gender equality in Bosnia and Herzegovina (UN Women, n.d.a). However, they acknowledge that globally there is a lot of missing data or insufficient methodologies for regular monitoring of progress in gender equality (ibid.). In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, over 60 percent of data to determine its “country score” is missing, out of those that exist almost 14 percent signify “high performance”, similarly 13.9 percent of data account for medium performance and 11.5 percent of data account for low performance on the route to accomplishing SDG 5, gender equality (ibid.).

The UNDP Gender Development Index (GDI), the Human Development Index (HDI) with a gender lens focuses on three dimensions of human development; health, education, and command over economic resources, and is defined as a ratio of the female to the male HDI (ibid., p. 5). The HDI value for Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2019 was 0.780, which put Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 73rd position out of 189 countries (ibid., p. 2). According to the Inequality Human Development Index (IHDI), which is the HDI discounted for inequalities, Bosnia and Herzegovina’s IHDI value in 2019 was 0.667 (ibid., p. 5). The 2019 HDI value for women in Bosnia and Herzegovina was 0.753, and the HDI value for men was 0.803, which resulted in the GDI value of 0.937 (ibid., p. 5). The UNDP also measures the Gender Inequality Index (GII), according to which, in 2019 Bosnia and Herzegovina had a GII value of 0.149, positioning Bosnia and Herzegovina as 38 out of 162 countries in 2019 (ibid., p. 6). The GII index reflects inequalities between genders in the sphere of reproductive

health, empowerment, and economic activity and its value can be perceived as the loss in human development caused by gender inequality in the three tracked dimensions (ibid., p. 6). The lower the GII is, the lower the gender inequality (UNDP, n.d.).

Another relevant index for measuring gender equality, the Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI), which was introduced by the World Economic Forum in 2006, tracks progress in economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment (World Economic Forum, 2021, p. 5). The GGGI Index, based on fourteen indicators, gives a value between 0 and 1; the closer the value is to one, the closer the country is to gender parity (ibid., p. 8). According to the WEF GGGI, Bosnia and Herzegovina ranked with a value of 0,713 as 76th country out of 156 in 2021 (ibid., p. 10). However, in terms of political empowerment, Bosnia and Herzegovina ranked 45th with a 0.302 score, which is, however, the worst score Bosnia and Herzegovina had showing how big gender disparities exist within this sphere (ibid., p. 19; ibid., p. 129). Compared to the year 2020, Bosnia and Herzegovina gained 0.001 points, however, scored seven places worse (ibid., p. 19).

### 5.2.3 The main challenges to gender equality in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Violence against women (VAW) is spread in Bosnia and Herzegovina's both entities, FBiH and RS, most commonly in the form of intimate partner violence (OSCE, 2019, p. 25). The OSCE (2019, p. III) research concluded that 48 percent of women in Bosnia and Herzegovina since the age of 15 experienced abuse such as stalking, non-partner violence, sexual harassment, and intimate partner violence. Cultural and patriarchal norms in Bosnia and Herzegovina often hinder reporting of misconduct, which is likely why the number is below the EU average (ibid., p. IV). According to the study, 59 percent of women believe that most of their friends think that "a good wife should obey her husband even if she disagrees" (ibid. p. XI). However, the younger generation of women is more critical of these opinions (ibid., p. IV).

Even though the legal framework to protect women from violence exists, the laws are not well implemented, and there is a lot to be done, particularly in the protection of survivors (ibid., p. 13). There are various women's NGOs that help survivors of sexualized violence, however, not all women are aware of the existence of such services (ibid., p. V). Specialized services for victims of gender-based violence are also often underfunded (UN Women, 2021a, p. 12). The Amnesty International (2017, p. 4) report emphasises, that even though there is progress, the pace of

prosecutions remains slow, and the Bosnian authorities do not do enough to ensure that all victims of sexualized violence are compensated.

In terms of economic empowerment, women in Bosnia and Herzegovina face, according to UN Women (2021a, p. 11), gender-based discrimination in the labor market and sexual harassment at work. There are not enough accessible care services that would help free women from the burden of unpaid work, there is a persisting pay gap and rural women are more vulnerable to poverty due to a lack of access and control over resources such as property, land, finances, skills, education, or access to information. Occupational segregation, for instance in education, is one of the challenges to be overcome linked to the pertaining gender stereotypes influencing women's and men's lives. (UN Women, 2021a, p. 11).

Covid-19 has also influenced the state of gender equality in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The measures taken by the government were put in place without a proper gender analysis or adopting a gender lens, nor did they sufficiently consider the most vulnerable members of the society, which eventually led to exacerbating the already existing inequalities, including gender inequality (UN Women, 2021a, p. 30).

#### 5.2.4 Political empowerment of women in Bosnia and Herzegovina

According to the USAID Gender Analysis for Bosnia and Herzegovina from 2019, there was no direct discrimination against women enshrined in the legislation. However, most laws remain gender-blind, which is supported by the findings of the analysis conducted by the UN Women in 2021 (2021a, p. 28). Roma women and girls continue to face indirect discrimination (USAID, 2019, p. 1). The USAID (ibid.) report further argues that women's positions in political parties are usually not influential. Also, the Council of Europe highlights the stereotypes women in politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina have to endure (Council of Europe, 2019, p. 17). In 2018, only 16 percent of party lists had a woman as a leader, a candidate most likely to obtain a seat in the parliament (ibid.).

There is a quota of minimum representation of women to be 40 percent in place, and even though it is not being fulfilled, it has, increased the number of women political candidates and politicians (Pupavac, 2005, p. 394). However, women in Bosnia and Herzegovina continue to be underrepresented in national politics. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (Parline, n.d.a; Parline, n.d.b), as of May 2022, women represented 26,19% of MPs in Bosnia and Herzegovina's lower chamber, the House of Representatives, and 20% in the upper chamber, the House of Peoples. This suggests

that the Law on Gender Equality that is supposed to ensure a minimum of 40 percent of women at all levels of government is not robustly applied (USAID, 2019, p. 1).

Report of the UN Women (2021a, p. 11) on the state of gender equality in Bosnia and Herzegovina points out, similarly to the report by the Council of Europe (2019, p. 17), that some of the most significant challenges to achieving gender equality in political empowerment of women in Bosnia and Herzegovina is caused by the traditional gender roles of men and women. Based on the traditional perception of what men and women should be that is still widely spread in the country, men are more suited to be in leadership positions (*ibid.*). Subsequently, the report (*ibid.*) states the political environment is hostile and discriminating against women including the presence of gender-based violence in the political sphere is another obstacle. As the report of the Council of Europe (2019, p. 6-7) mentions, such violence against women in politics can have psychological, physical, economic, and sexual characteristics. Such violence in politics impacts women's willingness to participate in politics at various stages (*ibid.*). Even women active in civil society organisations face gendered threats, especially if they focus on women's or LGBTQIA issues (UN Women, 2021a, p. 13). Women are also excluded from important decision-making processes, lack financial resources, and there are not enough care services available (*ibid.*, p. 11.). Another major challenge that women face in political empowerment, according to the report (*ibid.*), is the biased portrayal of women in the media reinforcing the stereotypes.



## 6 Women's peacebuilding CSOs in Bosnia and Herzegovina

In this chapter, the work of five women's civil society organisations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and what they do to advance political empowerment and peacebuilding, is studied. The five organisations are: the *Budućnost*, the *Centar Ženskih Prava*, the *Fondacija CURE*, the *Fondacija Lara*, and the *Forum Žena*. These five women's organisations have been chosen based on their profile to be both women's and peacebuilding local and grass-root civil society organisations pursuing to create progress in gender equality through empowerment, including the political empowerment, of women. The *Centar Ženskih Prava* and the *Fondacija CURE* are based in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the *Budućnost*, the *Fondacija Lara*, and the *Forum Žena*, are primarily active in the Republika Srpska. All organisations belong to the *Ženska mreža BiH* (in English the *Women's network BiH*) and participate in an initiative called *Mir sa ženskim licem* (in English *Peace with a woman's face*), which approaches peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina from a woman's perspective (Fondacija Lara, n.d.b; Inicijativa Mir sa ženskim licem, 2019, p. 134; Ženska Mreža BiH, 2014). Four of the organisations have been established in the 1990s, the *Fondacija CURE* has been established in 2005. All of the organisations are well-recognized women's CSOs with many years of experience. Another reason for choosing these five organisations was a functioning website with enough resources. Information from these sources allowed me to conduct an analysis and answer my research question. In the next chapter, each organisation and its work relevant to peacebuilding and political empowerment is introduced.

### 6.1 Budućnost

The citizen's association *Budućnost* (also *Budućnost Modriča*, in English *the Future*) is based in the city of Modriča in the Republika Srpska in the north of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Budućnost, n.d.b). The organisation was founded by women in 1996 to help women in vulnerable situations and to promote and protect women's rights (Budućnost, n.d.a). The goal of the organisation is to support women to be “educated, independent, economically empowered” and “not suffer violence” (Budućnost, n.d.a).

Even though Modriča is a small town, the organisation has earned recognition for its work across the country (Peace Insight, 2019). The *Budućnost* is active in participating in networks. For example, the network *Sigurna Mreža* (in English the *Safe Network*) fighting gender-based and domestic violence (Budućnost, 2019, Sigurna Mreža, n.d.a), or for instance, the *Mir sa ženskim licem* peacebuilding initiative.

The most important goal of the organisation *Budućnost* is to strengthen civil society in Bosnia and Herzegovina, including its political culture, and to focus on peace activities at both state and regional levels (Peace Insight, 2019). To positively impact civil society in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the organisation spreads civic values and education, including knowledge about relevant legislation, and contributes to the prevention of violence against women and children (ibid). The CSO states its mission to be; “through affirmative action, (the organisation) supports and encourages the building of a democratic society and is committed to realizing the rights and interests of all marginalized groups, especially women and children” (Budućnost, n.d.b). The organisation *Budućnost* claims that it is proud of its work in removing ethnic barriers between women in local communities, which also contributes to peacebuilding (Peace Insight, 2019).

A memorable example of a peacebuilding project that the organisation implemented is a project called “Sigurnost na ženski način” (in English “Safety the Women’s Way”), whose goal was to continuously monitor the implementation of the National Action Plan 1325 (Peace Insight, 2019; Budućnost, 2017). Moreover, one of the organisation’s projects under the *Mir sa ženskim licem* initiative was naming streets after important and influential women from Modriča to appreciate and recognize their impact on society (Budućnost, 2022a).

The organisation *Budućnost* devotes a large part of its work to fighting gender-based violence and provides, among other services such as online legal assistance, and a shelter for women and children (Budućnost, n.d.a). The organisation points out that the traditional patriarchal values rooted in the society often stop women from reporting the violence and fighting for themselves (ibid.). The *Budućnost* focuses not only on women but also on men and their position in Bosnian society. It has conducted research, which served as a base to subsequently open and run a men’s center for perpetrators of domestic violence in 2010 (Budućnost, n.d.a).

The organisation also engages in projects that aim at the economic empowerment of women. An example of such a project is a roundtable to discuss

protection from gender-based violence with a focus on the economic empowerment of survivors (Budućnost, 2022b). Furthermore, the organisation also implemented a project with the goal of reducing the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic through the economic empowerment of women (Budućnost, 2022c). The organisation also focuses on projects intending to fight corruption (Budućnost, 2018).

## 6.2 Centar Ženskih Prava

The *Centar Ženskih Prava* (in English the *Center of Women's Rights*) is an advocacy organisation based in the city of Zenica in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was established in 1996 under its original name the *Centar za Pravnu Pomoć Ženama* (in English the *Center of Legal Assistance for Women*). (Centar Ženskih Prava, n.d.). The organisation is dedicated to women's rights, to the "enhancement of the position of women and children", and to advocating for gender justice (ibid.; ZenicaInfo, 2020). To achieve that, the *Centar Ženskih Prava* focuses especially on providing legal assistance to women and other marginalized groups, including civilian war victims (ibid.). The organisation is also involved in several networks active in legal assistance to women, such as the *Sigurna mreža*, *BiH Network of Legal Providers*, or for example, the *Support Network for Victims* (Centar Ženskih Prava, 2019, p. 13). Moreover, the *Centar* is active in the peacebuilding initiative *Mir sa ženskim licem* (Centar Ženskih Prava, 2019, p. 13).

The *Centar Ženskih Prava* sets out four strategic goals for their work: firstly, to protect women from all forms of violence; secondly, to combat discrimination and promote equality; thirdly, to educate the public on the violations of women's rights; and finally, to develop a capacity to protect the rights of those who are vulnerable and advocate for them (Centar Ženskih Prava, n.d.). The vision of the *Centar* is "that Bosnia and Herzegovina will become a democratic society that fosters the culture of nonviolence and peace, based on the principles of human rights and gender equality" (Centar Ženskih Prava, 2019, p. 2). Also, the *Centar* writes in its annual report that women's stories represent an important resource to change policies. Furthermore, sharing stories is not only helpful for women, it can also help and inspire the work of women's organisations. (Centar Ženskih Prava, 2019, p. 3).

The work of the *Centar Ženskih Prava* is based on free legal assistance, which the organisation started to provide to women impacted by the war in the 1990s to provide assistance and support to women regarding women's rights in the post-war period (Centar Ženskih Prava, 2019, p. 2). The organisation makes sure that women

know about their rights and that they have equal access to rights as men (Šunjić, 2022). According to the organisation, providing legal aid allows the *Centar Ženskih Prava* to map the needs of women in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Sigurna Mreža. n.d.b).

The CSO fights against policies with discriminatory traits, implements educational programs focused on themes such as human rights, discrimination, gender-based violence, and gender equality, and focuses on research. The *Centar* is recognized for publicly protesting against human rights violations, especially focusing on women's rights. (Šunjić, 2022).

One of the organisation's goals is to educate women so that they have the capabilities to address and fight any backward tendencies (Sigurna Mreža. n.d.b). The different educational programmes, which the *Centar* organises, focus on three main areas; empowerment and women's self-esteem with a goal for women to take the initiative, recognize their value, strength, as well as weakness; establish programmes for future human rights lawyers; and cooperate with educational institutions which can mean, for instance, education of teachers (Centar Ženskih Prava, 2017). Another example of a training objective is training to strengthen individuals and/or organisations to "create a network of support providers in local communities" that will help to protect women's rights and access to justice (Centar Ženskih Prava, 2021). The *Centar Ženskih Prava* significantly focuses in its educational activities such as seminars, training, or workshops, on addressing stereotypes, including stereotypes about the LGBTQI+ community (Šunjić, 2022).

### 6.3 Fondacija CURE

The organisation *Fondacija CURE* (in English *the CURE Foundation*) was established in 2005 and is based in Bosnia and Herzegovina's capital city, Sarajevo (Anna Lindh Foundation, n.d.; Fondacija CURE, n.d.d). The *Fondacija CURE* describes itself as a feminist-activist organisation that focuses on women and girls, especially those that belong to marginalized groups, and strives to achieve a "society without patriarchal norms, in which violence and discrimination are not tolerated and where women are recognized as responsible initiators and bearers of positive social change" (Fondacija CURE, n.d.c). The *Fondacija CURE* engages in women's empowerment by creating a space in which women are "strong, fearless, capable and united" (ibid.). The organisation is an active participant in numerous national and international networks and initiatives that engage in the promotion of gender equality which the organisation sees as vital (Anna Lindh Foundation, n.d.; Fondacija CURE, n.d.e).

According to the organisation, even though “we (women) never choose war ourselves”<sup>1</sup>, however, it is also women who are more impacted by the war and post-war periods (Fondacija CURE, n.d.f). Also, according to the *Fondacija CURE*, all feminists in the Western Balkans are embedded in the ideas of solidarity and peacebuilding (ibid.).

The organisation’s commitment to gender equality is reflected in organising “public protests against violence, discrimination, violations of the law and basic human rights”, as well as performances condemning violence (Fondacija CURE, n.d.c). For instance, on *International Women’s Day* in 2022, the *Fondacija CURE* organised a march in Sarajevo with special attention to the increasing promotion of values of militarism within the society in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Fondacija CURE, n.d.a). The organisation is committed to pacifism and “in order to prevent conflict, encourage(s) the active participation of women in peacebuilding”<sup>2</sup> (ibid.).

The *Fondacija CURE* engages in several other annual events relevant to peacebuilding and political empowerment. One of such public events is the annual international campaign of the UN *16 days of activism* lasting sixteen days between *International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women* on November 25 and *International Human Rights Day* on December 10 against gender-based violence (UN Women, 2021b). The focus of the campaign, in which the *Fondacija CURE* and other Bosnian women’s organisations such as the *Centar Ženskih Prava* engage, changes (Centar Ženskih Prava, 2019, p. 7; Fondacija CURE, n.d.b). From 2011 to 2014 the international theme of the campaign was “From Peace in the Home to Peace in the World” focusing on the interlinkages between gender-based violence and conflict (Fondacija CURE, n.d.b). The *Fondacija CURE* is an organiser of the *PitchWise Festival*, an annual event that brings together peace activists, feminists, women’s rights defenders, theorists, and artists (Fondacija CURE, n.d.f). The Festival is a space for women to network, and to share experiences of the war and post-war reconciliation and peacebuilding processes (ibid.). The *Fondacija CURE* views it as a “political action” (ibid.). The Festival promotes positive change through the combination of activism and

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from Bosnian using Google translate. (Original text: “(...) iako same nikada ne biramo rat”)

<sup>2</sup> Translated from Bosnian using Google translate. (Original text: “(...) u cilju prevencije sukoba, prije svega podsticanjem aktivnog učešća žena u izgradnji mira”)

engaged art; for instance, the programme of the Festival in 2022 includes creative workshops or exhibitions as well as lectures and discussions (ibid.).

The *Fondacija CURE* aims to achieve its goal of gender equality through educational, research, and artistic-cultural programs (Fondacija CURE, n.d.c). Especially educational workshops for young women, rural women, and women politicians are at the core of the organisation's work (Anna Lindh Foundation, n.d.). One project that the *Fondacija CURE* was implementing at the time of writing the thesis (spring and summer 2022) is "Women Human Rights Advocates", a project that wants to strengthen the capacity of other organisations to promote and protect women's rights, including providing the organisations in recommendations to improve women's positions in institutions at the local level (Fondacija CURE, n.d.i). Another project, "Speak up against violence", want to educate ten young women from five local women's organisations on the prevention of gender-based violence, so that they can become peer educators (Fondacija CURE, n.d.h). The project aims to emphasise a zero-tolerance approach to violence among young people (ibid.). Before the 2018 general elections, the *Fondacija CURE* together with other women's organisations participated in a campaign "Remove the Fake Face of Politics" in which pro bono legal aid was offered to women candidates (Mujić, 2019, p. 36). Also, women, political candidates had the opportunity to undergo training to help them with their political participation, such as training about their rights or training on how to create a public image (ibid.). Other projects focus, for instance, on the economic empowerment of women (Fondacija CURE, n.d.j), or advocacy for local gender-sensitive policies (Fondacija CURE, n.d.g).

The organisation provides women with a safe space to share their experiences, including experiences of the war (e.g., Durkalić, 2015; Fondacija CURE, n.d.k). A project implemented in 2020, "Žene i izgradnja mira u Bosni i Hercegovini" (in English "*Women and peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina*") aimed at highlighting the necessity of including women in peace processes, in both Bosnia and Herzegovina and internationally (Fondacija CURE, 2020, pp. 18-19). To achieve that, women, who positively influenced their communities, needed to be heard to show to the world and themselves, that they are activists (ibid.). The *Fondacija CURE* also aims at improving women's image in the media through its visibility in the media space (Anna Lindh Foundation, n.d.).

## 6.4 Fondacija Lara

The women's organisation *Fondacija Lara* (in English the *Lara Foundation*) is an NGO established in 1998 in the city of Bijeljina in the Republika Srpska (*Fondacija Lara*, n.d.d). The main goal of the organisation is fighting gender-based violence and empowering women politically and economically (*ibid.*). The mission of the organisation is to “advocate for a society in which women are protected from violence, economically independent and equally involved in decision-making processes”<sup>3</sup> (*Fondacija Lara*, n.d.b). According to the statutes of the organisation, one of the goals of the *Fondacija Lara* is “promoting the role of women in strengthening cooperation between different ethnic groups in BiH as well ways to create long-term peace and stability in BiH and the region”<sup>4</sup> (*Fondacija Lara*, n.d.g, p. 2). The *Fondacija Lara* is active also in other networks and initiatives, for instance, together with the *Fondacija Udržene žene*, has launched an initiative “Sa Zakonima na Ti” for better legal protection of victims of domestic violence (*Fondacija Lara*, n.d.h), or is part of the *RING network* combatting human trafficking (*Fondacija Lara*, n.d.a). The *Fondacija Lara* stands, together with the organisation *HO Horizonti*, behind an initiative called *Mir sa ženskom licem* (in English *Peace with a woman's face*) (*Fondacija Lara*, n.d.c).

An example of a project, which the *Fondacija Lara* did on the political empowerment of women, is a conference on the participation of women in politics (*Fondacija Lara*, 2014a). The conference brought together women who discussed their experiences and ideas about how to increase women's political participation (*ibid.*).

The *Fondacija Lara* works also on women's economical empowerment (*Fondacija Lara*, n.d.d). The *Fondacija Lara* states that one of its areas of work is to tell women about their possibilities on the job market and provide them with access to information, such as information about their rights, state programmes, and plans, which can be difficult for women to access (*Fondacija Lara*, n.d.d). The organisation, for instance, held training for women about the UN Resolution 1325 within a project called

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<sup>3</sup> Translated from Bosnian using Google translate. (Original text: “Fondacija „Lara“ se zalaže za društvo u kojem je žena zaštićena od nasilja, ekonomski samostalna i ravnopravno uključena u procese odlučivanja.”)

<sup>4</sup> Translated from Bosnian using Google translate. (Original text: „Promociji uloge žene u jačanju saradnje između različitih etničkih grupa u BiH kao načina za stvaranje dugoročnog mira i stabilnosti u BiH i u region.“)

“Economic Stability of Women as a contribution to Peacebuilding” implemented by the *TPO Foundation* (TPO Fondacija, 2016). Women, who participated in the training, learned not only about the Resolution, but also more about peacebuilding in general, how to lead a respectful dialogue, and why it is crucial to include a gender perspective (ibid). The overarching goal was to look at how growing a business can be beneficial for peacebuilding in a local community (ibid).

The *Fondacija Lara* focuses a lot of its work, like the other organisations, on gender-based violence and especially domestic violence. The CSO offers different kinds of services to survivors of domestic violence, for instance, it runs a safe house and provides legal and psychosocial services for survivors (Fondacija Lara, n.d.d; Fondacija Lara, n.d.e). Furthermore, the *Fondacija Lara* works through projects and initiatives on improving the legal framework, strengthening capacities, and raising awareness about the situation of gender-based and domestic violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Fondacija Lara, n.d.f; Fondacija Lara, n.d.h). Also, the *Fondacija Lara* works on prevention through education (Fondacija Lara, 2021b).

Milkica Milojević (2014) mentions on its website the link between having peace at home and having peace “in the world” and how this connection can reflect the role of women in peacebuilding. According to Milojević (2014), peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina is about how people live (ibid.) Also, the work on gender-based violence is linked to peacebuilding as many survivors of gender-based violence conducted during the war still have not got justice (Fondacija Lara, 2021c). There is also a lot of stigmatization surrounding the topic (ibid.).

#### 6.4.1 Mir sa ženskim licem

The initiative *Mir sa ženskim licem* was originally founded in 2013 by the *Fondacija Lara* and *HO Horizonti* financially supported by the Swedish organisation *Kvinna till Kvinna* (Fondacija Lara, 2014b). The peace initiative brought together various women’s organisations from Bosnia and Herzegovina that engage in peacebuilding. All of the analysed organisations are members of the initiative. (Inicijativa Mir sa ženskim licem, 2019, p. 134).

The goal of the initiative is to politically empower women across the country so that they can become peace activists and promote reconciliation in society (Mir sa ženskim licem/Peace with Women’s Face, n.d.). As the initiative states on its Facebook page (ibid.), empowered women activists are necessary so that they can spread on both personal and public levels why it is crucial to face the past. The activists are then able



to engage with other people active in civil society, or politicians, in various workshops, and further spread the importance of peace (ibid.). The initiative organises mainly activities to memorise “women’s suffering” such as going on the streets to commemorate women killed during the war, publishing stories about women who died, naming streets after impactful women, or organising an exhibition to share women’s stories (Budućnost, 2022a; Inicijativa Mir sa ženskim licem, 2019, p. 134; Fondacija Lara, 2016).

The policy document of the initiative (Letić et al., 2016, p.4) suggests that there are four key areas for women active in peacebuilding; those are: “the culture of memory and truth-telling, reparations, institutional reform and integrated security”. In these areas, women are beneficiaries as well as leaders of the peace processes (ibid.).

In 2014, the initiative organised “Ženski Caravan Mira” (in English “*Women’s Caravan of Peace*”) to contribute to the culture of remembrance (Fondacija Lara, 2014b). The goal of another campaign of the initiative named “100 žena 100 Ulica po Ženama” (in English “*100 Women – 100 Streets for Women*”), during which streets were named after impactful women, was not only to remember these important women but also to bring gender perspective in the public space (Fondacija Lara, 2021a). Another project of the initiative wants to include women in the debate about the war by establishing the *Day of Remembrance of Women’s Victims in the War in Bosnia and Herzegovina* on December 8 (Fondacija Lara, 2020). On that day, women and their experiences of the war would be commemorated through symbolic actions (Fondacija Lara, 2016). This can, according to the initiative (Fondacija Lara, 2020), validate women’s experiences and also contribute to shaping the collective memory.

The initiative conducts research to guide its activities. The peacebuilding project “Platform of women’s priorities in transitional justice policies in BiH”, represented a process to define women’s priorities in transitional justice and help to define the approach of the initiative (Fondacija Lara, 2016; Inicijativa Mir sa ženskim licem, 2019). The project included meetings of workshops and consultative meetings with 65 women of different ethnicity, education, and age from eleven different cities of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Inicijativa Mir sa ženskim licem, 2019, p. 4). During the workshop, participants engaged in an interactive dialogue, which was a safe space to open the difficult topics, and provided information about women’s needs and wishes (Inicijativa Mir sa ženskim licem, 2019, p. 4-5). For some participants it was the first time they heard stories of others (Inicijativa Mir sa ženskim licem, 2016). The project showed that the participants wanted to be active in public and political life to achieve

change (Inicijativa Mir sa ženskim licem, 2019, p. 11). However, to do that, networking and creating connections among women in the society was necessary, women needed to be empowered to be more involved in the political and social processes of peacebuilding (Inicijativa Mir sa ženskim licem, 2016).

An important project of the peace initiative was an exhibition with more than thirty various and unique women's stories of the war (Fondacija Lara, n.d.c). The *Fondacija Lara* states that these examples of different women's experiences show that women are not only war victims determined by their gender, but also active members of society that can incite a positive change (Fondacija Lara, n.d.b; Fondacija Lara, n.d.c; Inicijativa Mir sa ženskim licem, 2019, p. 3). The women that share their stories have very different experiences; some of them are war returnees, war widows, refugees, some of them were raped or encountered other forms of direct violence (Inicijativa Mir sa ženskim licem, 2019, p. 5). The women who shared their stories have "turned their disempowerment into victories" (Inicijativa Mir sa ženskim licem, 2019, p. 4). Furthermore, the exhibition also challenges the often men-centric perception of the conflict (Fondacija CURE, 2020, p. 28; Inicijativa Mir sa ženskim licem, 2019, pp. 3-9). Another goal of the exhibition is to inspire other women, and, as the peace initiative writes, personal stories can bring up feelings of empathy and subsequently more trust in society (Inicijativa Mir sa ženskim licem, 2019, pp. 4-5). Finally, the exhibition includes a piece of advice about how can women engage in peacebuilding (Inicijativa Mir sa ženskim licem, 2019, p. 5).

Even though the initiative focuses primarily on women, it is its only focus. For instance, the initiative honoured victims of the conflict in Konjic so that they are not forgotten as the ultimate goal of the *Mir sa ženskim licem* is that the war will never happen again (Fondacija Lara, 2017).

## 6.5 Forum Žena

The *Forum Žena* (in English the *Forum of a Woman*) is a non-governmental women's and girls' organisation founded in 1999 in Bratunac, a city in Republika Srpska in the Drina Valley (Forum Žena, n.d.a). The organisation engages in women's rights advocacy through media and different institutions and works directly with people through education and workshops, campaigns, or round table events (ibid.). As the organisation claims on its website, pacifism has been its guiding principle since the beginning and the core values of the *Forum Žena* are activism, empowerment, gender equality, and nonviolence (ibid.). Similar to the other studied organisations, The *Forum*

*Žena* is active in various networks, including regional and local informal networks (ibid., pp. 5-9). The regional and local informal networks include NGOs, politicians, and institutions (ibid., p. 8).

The organisation notes in its strategic plan (ibid., p. 11) that for community building through educating youth about feminist principles, assurance of peace policy is critical. To achieve that, the *Forum Žena*'s action plan was to organise workshops on communication skills, lectures on important social topics such as racism and social prejudices, or visiting and talking to young people in different areas of the country (ibid., p. 14). The organisation also participated in a summer peace camp for young people (ibid., p. 11). Another goal of the organisation is to motivate young people to engage in public life (ibid.). The concrete steps to achieve progress in this direction are workshops on different skills including communication skills, public forums, or for instance, participation in the "16 days of activism" campaign (ibid., p. 14). The organisation sees violence as a mechanism of patriarchal control over women and as "a social and political problem that reflects inequalities in power relations, in family and society" (Forum Žena, n.d.).

In terms of empowerment, the organisation claims to "collect and record personal experiences and experiences of women and girls in the social and political context so that they become aware of the individual and collective position of women and girls in society" (Forum Žena, n.d.a). Moreover, the *Forum Žena* supports political empowerment of women. It states that "through our activism, we recognized the importance of the equal involvement of women and girls in political parties and civil society organizations", encouraging women to be active in civil society and get involved into political parties, has been a goal of the organisation since 2000 (ibid.; Forum Žena, n.d.f, p 5). To raise awareness about the political empowerment of women, the organisation, for instance, organises seminars and participates in campaigns (Forum Žena, n.d.f, p. 10).

The *Forum Žena* participated in a project, whose goal was to draw attention to the needs of marginalized women and enable them to participate in the decision-making processes at the local level; either through an elected representative or directly (Forum Žena, n.d.c). The goal of the project was to strengthen institutional capacities for gender equality (ibid.). This project also allows women to improve their position for active participation in peace processes (ibid.). Furthermore, the organisation engages in capacity building of young activists (Forum Žena, n.d.h) or provided a space to open the topic of war rape to reduce the stigmatization of survivors (Forum Žena,

n.d.g). Another relevant project of the organisation is an educational project for young women politicians that included also spreading awareness among and empowering rural women about them being important voters (Forum Žena, n.d.b). The project was implemented through workshops on different topics (ibid.). Moreover, the *Forum Žena* has helped women returnees to acquire skills for finding a job, and how to grant a grant (Forum Žena, n.d.e). Lastly, a relevant project mentioned on the website is a project aimed at ensuring the integration of gender equality and peacebuilding into local policies (Forum Žena, n.d.d).

# 7 Analysis

## 7.1 Choice

Based on the conceptual framework by Sundström et al. (2015), the aspect of choice represents not only the ability to make choices but also to have alternatives to choose from; women who have a choice can move freely and decide about critical aspects of their lives. Being able to participate in the job market also comes from having a choice as well as resources and, most importantly, controlling them. Choice can also mean having access to justice; having rights, but also being aware of them and being able to exact them. Having a choice can be, therefore, based on a legal framework, however, it also stems from cultural and social norms.

The studied organisations concentrate a lot on this aspect of empowerment in their activities. There is a clear focus on education, workshops, and the provision of training on different topics relevant to political empowerment. For instance, many educational activities and projects of the organisations focus on educating women about their rights.

Providing legal support and assistance, such as guidance on how to get a reparation as a war victim, provides women alternatives and increases the possibility of choice. Justice for survivors of war violence, including gender-based violence, is a peacebuilding activity linking politically empowering women and reconciliation. Some of the organisations, such as the *Fondacija Lara*, significantly focus on strengthening and improving the gender-based violence legal framework. The *Budućnost* directly claims to spread knowledge about legislation among women to prevent violence.

Economic empowerment is also a common theme of the educational projects of the organisations. It is recognized in the framework, that women need to be able to have and control their resources to become politically empowered. Many of the organisations mentioned projects that aim to economically empower women, increase women's financial independence and, therefore, provide women with financial resources over which they have control. For instance, the *Fondacija Lara* directly linked economic empowerment and peacebuilding in one of the projects it participated in intending to look at the role a growing business can play in peacebuilding. The

*Budućnost* implemented a project to economically empower survivors of gender-based violence.

The organisations recognize the norms in Bosnian society as patriarchal and hurtful to women. The studied women's CSOs challenge these norms and work on changing the discriminating environment.

## 7.2 Agency

Based on the defined conceptual framework (Sundström et al., 2015), the progress in the aspect of agency, or what is often recognized in social science literature as “decision-making”, can be reflected in different ways. Women to be active agents of change need a voice to discuss and actively participate in public debates, they also need to be able to freely express their political opinions to make demands for changes. Also, to have agency, women need access to information and media, in which they also should be adequately represented.

Agency is linked to choices and especially women being informed about the different choices they have and can make. Some of the educational activities of the organisations can be seen as both, presenting showing choices and providing agency. The educational activities also often represent a safe space where the participants can get inspired by one another and build their self-esteem. As the *Centar Ženskih Prava* mentions, educating women also enhances their capabilities to fight any backward ideas in the country such as supporting a war. Furthermore, the workshops bring together women from different ethnic backgrounds and provide a safe platform to open a dialogue, which is critical for peacebuilding. The workshops, seminars, and lectures can represent an important space to challenge harmful stereotypes and create momentum for a follow-up political action.

The initiative *Mir sa ženskim licem*, of which all the organisations are members, is based on the idea of cultivating the culture of remembrance and “memorisation” of women and their experiences during the war through sharing personal stories. One of the initiative's goals is to also show the war through a gender lens and to include women in the collective memory of the war. The peace initiative *Mir sa ženskim licem* wants to achieve the objective through the already mentioned sharing of stories, and symbolic actions such as establishing the *Day of Remembrance of Women's Victims in the War in Bosnia and Herzegovina*.

Providing a space for women to give them a voice to share their stories and listen to each other is a reoccurring theme among the studied organisations. This activity leads to validation, inspiration and empowerment of women, as well as peacebuilding through creating empathy and trust in society. The organisations approach women as agents of change and recognize the value of their experiences. According to the initiative, empowering women can lead to more women becoming peace activists themselves. For example, the annual event of the *Fondacija CURE*, the *PitchWise festival*, provides a space for women active in peacebuilding to not only share stories and empower each other through engaged art, but also to network.

Moreover, the stories of women are a very important resource of information for women as well as for the women's organisations. The activities of the initiative *Mir sa ženskim licem* are based on research and dialogue with women to find what is needed and desired. This considerate and participatory approach of the studied women's CSOs shapes the initiative's agenda.

The activities that focus on gender-based and domestic violence can also among choice provide women with agency to demand change. The *Forum Žena* conducted a project to open a discussion about war rape and contribute to its destigmatization. Also, the organisations, such as the *Forum Žena*, pay attention to women being visible in the media and improving their image in that space.

The women's organisations focus on the economic empowerment of women and some link it directly to peacebuilding. To illustrate the empowerment of women through the aspect of agency, the *Fondacija Lara*, for instance, provides women with access to information so that it is easier for women to find a job.

### 7.3 Participation

Sundström et al. (2015) included participation as a pillar of political empowerment. A clear indicator of progress in women's political participation is an increase of women in politics, including official peace negotiations and decision-making about post-conflict reconstruction. However, women's engagement in political campaigning or protests can also mean advancement.

The *Centar Ženskih Prava* and the *Fondacija CURE* claim to call for the participation of women when human rights are being violated in protests. The *Fondacija CURE* annually organises a march on March 8, *International Women's Day*, to get attention to an important topic linked to the theme of gender equality. For

example, in 2022 the march paid attention to militarism in society and showed the importance of women being agents of peace. The organisations also engage in different international events that pay attention to gender inequality, such as the UN campaign *16 days of activism*, which focused in the past on the linkages between gender-based violence and conflict.

To increase participation in formal politics, workshops and seminars on different skills are being organised. For instance, the *Fondacija CURE* participated in a project of providing women political candidates with pro bono legal assistance and training about creating a public image and their rights. Also, some of the projects focused on strengthening institutional capacities for gender equality, which would improve women's position to participate in peace processes. The organisations, such as the *Budućnost*, aim at civil society building and participation of women in the informal political spaces.

## 7.4 Peacebuilding and political empowerment

All the studied CSOs either state on their website or indirectly express through membership in the *Women's Network BiH* and the initiative *Mir sa ženskim licem* their commitment to peacebuilding. Similarly, all the organisations work toward gender equality and women's political empowerment. As Mulalić (2011, p. 44) writes, the women's CSOs in Bosnia and Herzegovina often started as humanitarian organisations created during or after the war, later transformed into peacebuilding organisations and have increasingly focused on improving the position of women in society.

The studied organisations engage in projects whose goal is to empower women and achieve progress in gender equality, however, only some of the projects directly stated that their goal is also to contribute to peacebuilding. On the other hand, based on the research on the interlinkages between gender equality and the state of peace, even projects that are not directly stated to be “peacebuilding projects” contribute to a more peaceful society if they aim at empowering women and achieving gender equality. A feminist approach to peacebuilding aims at addressing and overcoming patriarchal structures and recognizing women's needs (Rigual, 2018, pp. 152-167). Moreover, both gender equality and peacebuilding require a change in culture and attitudes and the ‘culture of reconciliation’ “which must be lived out in new practices and relationships at all levels” (2016, p. 220).



All the organisations focus on strengthening civil society and none of the CSOs approach women as victims. The organisations also emphasise working with youth and rural women, which is critical to achieving a change in society and not only among urban elites. Furthermore, the organisations do not focus solely on women, for instance, the CSO *Budućnost* runs a men's center for perpetrators of domestic violence.

The women's organisations focus on protecting women from gender-based violence. How Porter (2016, p. 213) mentions, in a culture of ongoing gender-based violence peacebuilding is difficult. From a feminist perspective, the ongoing presence of violence after a conflict officially ends (e.g., a peace agreement is signed), does not signify the end of conflict for women (ibid., p. 225). A link between gender-based violence in society and acceptance of violence is mentioned by the organisations. Moreover, based on Porter (ibid., p. 220); "changing cultural attitudes and practices that normalize violence is an imperative in peacebuilding and is necessary for reconciliation to thrive".

The CSOs are involved in various networks and initiatives with other women's organisations and they recognize it as a key factor to achieve a change. The networks focus on the areas of their work, which besides peacebuilding, are mostly fighting gender-based and domestic violence, or providing legal assistance to women. Projects focus not only on women but also on other women's organisations and strengthening their capacities in improving women's positions. The four key areas for women active in peacebuilding in the initiative *Mir sa ženskim licem* are "the culture of memory and truth-telling, reparations, institutional reform and integrated security" (Letić et al., 2016, p.4).

## 8 Conclusion

After the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina ended, many new women's organisations were established. The organisations often began as humanitarian and peacebuilding CSOs to later become invested in the position of women in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the question of gender equality. All of the studied organisations share the idea of pacifism and gender equality.

According to the gender equality indices, there is a space for progress. Bosnia and Herzegovina adopted an extensive gender equality legal framework, which existence was significantly influenced by women's civil society organisations. However, the legislature is not well implemented. Some of the main challenges that Bosnia and Herzegovina faces in terms of political empowerment are the patriarchal norms and traditional gender roles. Also, gender-based violence is present across society including the political sphere, women are excluded from decision-making, do not have sufficient resources, lack care services and face negative portrayal of women in the media.

The studied women's peacebuilding organisations focus on all three aspects of the political empowerment framework. Moreover, all the aspects of political empowerment are interlinked and reinforce each other. Most of the CSOs' activities focus on increasing women's agency. Similarly, political empowerment is linked to, other forms of empowerment, in the presented cases, particularly to economic empowerment. The different areas of empowerment are also interconnected. The organisations do not approach women as victims and focus on, among other goals, strengthening civil society. They also focus on youth and rural women, sometimes specifically on men and there is a clear positive role of networks and initiatives among the organisations and beyond. Furthermore, through providing the services to women for several years, the organisations apply the knowledge of what women want and need to their work.

In terms of choice, the organisations offer women training, educational workshops, or seminars so that women can learn about the choices they have and their rights, including for instance, how to obtain a reparation as a war victim. A common theme of the educational workshops was economic empowerment and increasing

women's financial independence in the light of political empowerment and peacebuilding. The organisations focus also on addressing the limiting and harming social norms.

Increasing women's agency is the most significant aspect of the peacebuilding work of the organisations linked to political empowerment. The organisations commonly provide a safe space for women to learn, but also to share stories beyond ethnic barriers and stereotypes, listen to each other, validate each other's experiences of the war, network, and commemorate important women. These activities give a gender lens to the conflict and can lead to inspiring women and women to become peace activists themselves. The peace initiative *Mir sa ženskim licem* focuses on the culture of remembering and through various activities wants to make sure that the experience of women will be an integral part of the common memory of the violent conflict. Furthermore, strengthening the dimension of choice positively influences agency.

The aspect of participation is also covered by the women's peacebuilding CSOs. The organisations motivate women to be active in politics and provide them with pro bono legal assistance and training. They are also active in protesting and campaigning to get attention to important topics linked to violence and gender equality.

Women's political empowerment strongly correlates with gender equality. Even if the organisation does not directly state that the goal of a project empowering women is to contribute to peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina, any activity that aims to politically empower women can be perceived as a peacebuilding project due to the positive link between gender equality and sustainable peace in societies. There is also a link between low levels of intimate partner violence and lower levels of violence, which is a problem that all the organisations pay attention to. Women whose partner fought in the war continue to experience partner violence more than women whose partner was not active in combat. The focus of the organisations to find justice for women who survived and fight gender-based violence is, therefore, linked to peacebuilding.

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