

# (Un)doing Feminisms Their Own Way: The Activism of Marginalised Women's Organisations in Local Communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines women's activism and feminism in Bosnia and Herzegovina, focusing on marginalised women's groups and organisations that are often excluded from academic research and international donor interests. The theoretical section presents the main characteristics of the development of women's organisations in post-war BIH, addressing the problem of NGO-isation of activism and feminism, which marginalises groups of women and organisations that do not belong to prominent liberal feminist organisations that pursue gender mainstreaming. Qualitative research based on in-depth interviews and analysis shows that these organisations mostly focus on the local level to meet diverse, specific, and sometimes urgent needs of women (e.g., Roma women, rural women, impoverished as well as women in small local communities) facing particular challenges while doing so. Although most of them do not clearly profess a feminist identity, they are aware of the patriarchal context, especially in their local communities, and their interpretations are mostly in line with the feminist ethics of care. However, the lack of organisational capacity, sustainable funding, and a clear feminist agenda in their work undermine their critical potential to be triggers for social change.

Key words: women's activism, marginalised groups of women, feminism/feminisms, local context, Bosnia and Herzegovina

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Female activists and women's groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BIH) have achieved much over distinct periods in the last three decades. Their results have been well-documented. During the 1992–1995 war, they helped people in need regardless of their ethnic and religious identity. They also challenged the imposition of ethnonationalism with its closed identity politics through mutual encounters when possible (Thomasson, 2006: 26–31). After the war, many women's groups registered and formed NGOs, some of which professionalised and developed rapidly with the assistance of international humanitarian organisations (Popov-Momčilović, 2013: 142). Until today, they work to "eliminate women's discrimination from the legal, political, economic and cultural aspects of life" in BIH (Mulalić, 2011: 45). They have played an important role in promoting the national adoption and implementation of international conventions on gender equality (Rošul-Gajić, 2016: 146). Despite these achievements, the professionalisation of women's NGOs and their pursuit of gender mainstreaming framed within a neoliberal agenda has led to neglecting the needs and voices of women's groups that do not promote the same ideas.

This article will bring new insights and nuance regarding women's activism in civil society in the country by focusing on marginalised women's groups that often operate in geographical areas far from urban centres. Due to the complicated political system and constant inter-ethnic tensions rooted in the patriarchal concept of ethnic belonging, "research and activism focused on anything *but* ethnonationalism often has difficulty being heard or deemed credible" (Pierson et al., 2016: 606). In such unfavourable settings, specific women's groups, e.g., those from rural areas, are often left out of academic research because they are perceived as irrelevant or reproducing patriarchal norms (Helms, 2010: 18). The theoretical framework will first explain the problem of the NGO-isation of civil society in BIH, including women's organisations and feminism. In 2019, we conducted qualitative research in cooperation with women's organisations to strengthen their capacities and explore the challenges they face in their local communities. Based on this research, we will analyse the activities of these groups and how they interpret their own work, achievements, and challenges. In this endeavour, we will also discuss whether and how they are doing or undoing feminism.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: NGOISATION OF WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS AND FEMINISM IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

After the end of the war in 1995, civil society organisations (CSOs) were rapidly established and developed in BIH with international assistance, which was much more present in BIH compared to other post-socialist countries due to the war and post-war state building. This development was based on the overall presumption "that civil society development should be central to the democratization and peace-building process" (Chandler, 1998: 79). Such an approach boosted the emergence of professional non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Only 10% of the CSOs active in 2009 had existed before 1992 (Howard, 2011: 101). According to women activists, in the post-war period, "NGOs were springing up like mushrooms after the rain" (Helms, 2014: 21). Civil society was essential for women, whose possibilities to access the public arena were very limited in the period immediately after the war (Thomasson, 2006: 19), for after the end of the outright conflict, the "patriarchal structure of privilege and control" continued and the Dayton peace agreement "affirmed patriarchal nationalism as [the] dominant ideology" (Cockburn, 2013: 27). In an effort to counter this situation, international agencies recognised women activists as agents of ethnic reconciliation, which resulted in the creation of various forms of women's groups and the emergence of a nascent feminist scene (Helms, 2014: 22). Activism in civil society organisations provided a sphere for women to become vocal and to address their varied needs. It was often perceived by activists as a sphere of freedom, while often being overlooked by the BIH male-dominated public sphere (Popov-Momčinović, 2013: 118).

Civil society as a platform for activist work was therefore often its initial basis and the default and, at the same, time limiting framework of action. A different theoretical understanding of the term "activism" (Martin, 2007; Svirsky, 2010) implies activities and social practices undertaken by those with less power to challenge the conventional structure, produce social change, and achieve social justice. For activism to challenge and change the social structure, it needs as much freedom in its social practices as possible. In this context, it is significant that researchers note that NGOs may "not be as free as they first appear to be" (Simmons, 2007: 174).

The problems and "diseases" that characterise civil society in post-socialist countries, especially BIH, have led to a donor-driven approach and "projectitis disease" (Jalali, 2013: 60), sometimes called "projectomania" (Simmons, 2007: 174), as well as the NGO-isation of civil society and feminism (Einhorn and Sever, 2005: 29). Researchers of the BIH context enumerate various negative features such as, "the ignorance of the situation on the ground" (Simmons, 2007: 174); ad-

justing to donors' priorities rather than responding to those of grantees (Cockburn, Stakic-Domuz and Hubic, 2001: 97); growing competition among NGOs for receiving funds and elitism (Popov-Momčinović, 2013: 118); and, as in other post-conflict settings, overwhelming women's organisations through the bureaucratisation of aid programmes (Chaney, 2016: 285). This contributed to a negative perception of NGOs in society, mistrust toward organisations working on the improvement of human rights (Puljek-Shank and Verkoren, 2017: 192), and citizens' perception of activism as a form of donor-driven "parallel system of CSOs" (Meyer, Moder and Neumayr, 2017: 18). The professionalisation led to the emergence of a new, civic-oriented NGO elite, located mostly in urban centres of the country, including professional women's organisations, whose members are educated, middle-class women making careers out of their civil-society building activities (Ghodsee, 2004: 743). Projectisation and "managerial conservatism" are an obstacle to broader political involvement (Jalali, 2013: 61), contributing to the cynical perception of civil society among citizens and the lack of interest in what they do (Ždralović, 2011: 200).

On the other hand, women's organisations and, especially, women's networks are perceived as not purely donor-oriented and more persistent in pursuing their demands as a result of a genuine conviction in contrast to networks that cease to exist when the projects that created them end (Žeravčić, 2016: 6). Women's organisations to some extent escape the negative perception of civil society in the population because they provide various services to people in need. Women activists are often driven by positive self-stereotyping of moral superiority, humanitarianism, and interests in others' wellbeing (Helms, 2014: 28). However, such essentialisation of women and women activists as peaceful and benevolent actually "mask[s] profoundly patriarchal gender ideologies" (Helms, 2013: 238).

As in other post-socialist countries, "Western feminists and women's organizations also jumped on the aid bandwagon" (Ghodsee, 2004: 730), and came to embrace a Western, primarily liberal feminist agenda. In post-Yugoslav countries, "the processes of institution building, which assumed the implementation of international normative agendas for gender equality, fed the liberal feminist interpretative and strategic repertoires" (Siročić, 2019: 2). In BIH, this approach strengthened with the adoption of the Law on Gender Equality (LGE) in 2003 and the establishment of institutional mechanisms for gender equality. In that period, women's organisations in BIH that had already built their capacities and become recognised for providing direct services to women and helping them to exercise their legal rights after the war ended (Thomasson, 2006: 14), accepted gender mainstreaming as a general tool for combating the marginalisation of women. They collaborate with institutional mechanisms for gender mainstreaming (gender equality agencies and commis-

sions) in developing gender equality action plans, monitor the implementation of the LGE and other gender equality laws, provide expertise, and raise awareness on the issue (Rošul-Gajić, 2016: 150, 151).

Gender mainstreaming is a widely adopted concept, policy, and strategy that requires sensitivity to diversity and implies awareness. In the last decade, various tools and methods for implementing this strategy have been intensively developed (for example, by the European Institute for Gender Equality). However, while according to some authors (Antonijević and Kosana, 2017), this strategy has powerful transformative potential, for others, it is a bureaucratic tool framed by a liberal feminist agenda with the potential to undermine activism (Zaharijević, 2015: 97). Moreover, Western multilateral institutions (particularly in Bosnia and other post-conflict societies) have not sufficiently considered how gender mainstreaming projects can create or maintain unequal gendered power relations (True, 2003:384). This is because they further marginalise women's organisations that have no resources to pursue gender mainstreaming, or engage in local community activism and provision of services. As learned by Helms, "being a women's organization [in Bosnia] could mean anything from helping women fulfil traditional roles as wives and mothers to pursuing feminist advocacy for the realization of women's rights and the breakdown of patriarchal ideologies and practices" (2014: 23). This has led to the perception among members of professional women's organisations, that many organisations, especially those from smaller towns and rural areas, whose members are less educated, are simply reproducing patriarchal norms by organising activities such as knitting, making jams and pots (Popov-Momčinović, 2013: 176). In addition, international organisations did not support monoethnic women's organisations in promoting interethnic cooperation in post-conflict BIH society (Helms, 2013: 238) and organisations that gather religious women did not have a chance to obtain international funds for their projects (since religion is closely connected to ethnicity), no matter how important they were for their local communities (Spahić-Šiljak, 2008: 199). This furthered the fragmentation in women's civil society scene (Spahić-Šiljak, 2018: 366).

Nevertheless, the main currents of separation in the women's civil scene fall along the lines of theoretical differences. Feminism has never been unified, and the feminist scene always brings together varied and often divergent points of view and ideas. Feminism "doesn't offer a consistent worldview" and "has never been a fixed configuration of beliefs" (Snitow, 2020: 180-181). At the same time, various feminist approaches address the same issues from significantly different ideological positions. For example, the starting point of liberal feminism is the claim that "all human beings universally share important attributes, including both a capacity for moral reasoning and a desire to contribute to and be included in the political and

economic life of the community" (West, 2019: 2). For these reasons, much of the activist efforts framed by liberal feminism focus on women's political participation and economic position. This does not mean that these two issues are not important for other feminist orientations, but their arguments and approaches are different, with occasional and sporadic overlaps. Liberal feminists believe that, considering that they "constitute about half of the population in every country, women should also be half of elected and appointed leaders" (Hughes and Paxton, 2019: 35). On the other hand, cultural feminists start from another set of arguments, that is, from the belief that "women's presence is expected to change politics or society in some way" (Hughes and Paxton, 2019: 35). In terms of economic rights, liberal feminists see the development of female entrepreneurship as a powerful strategy for women's economic empowerment, while cultural feminists focus on the transformative potential of female characteristics in the development and management of entrepreneurship. While liberal feminism is driven by the ideas of the universality of human rights and equality of human beings, cultural feminism, also known as feminism of difference or relational feminism (West, 2019: 5, Turnier, 1996: 1279), focuses on female experiences and does not necessarily advocate for important societal changes in order to liberate women (Ghodsee, 2004: 728).

These debates are rooted in differences regarding moral reasoning. Based on the model of ethics of care developed in the works of Carol Gilligan (1977, 2018), cultural feminism "simply affirms that traditional feminine qualities, such as nurturance and empathy, were beneficial qualities that had been unfairly devalued by society" (Lucas, 2015: 499). The model of ethics of care is crucial for further understanding the specific motives and directions of ecofeminism and women's peace activism. Although they emphasise the specifics of women's experiences, the interpretations vary regarding the role of socialisation, gender differences in character and the biological specifics of women.

On the other hand, criticism of the universalisation of the female experience, and often the essentialisation of female characteristics, opened the door for the analysis of the intersections between gender identity and other grounds for exclusion (Ždralović, 2020: 49). The feminist theory of intersectionality points out that, "intersections of sexism, racism, and colonialism operate through the segregation framework to produce and consolidate gendered and raced inequities" (Haleigh and Kilty, 2020: 192). These approaches are often intertwined, united, and developed through debates. However, as some research shows (for example, Connolly, 2004), the ideal of ethics of care has been a key way of encouraging action in local communities. Still, other factors concerning regarding approaches, orientations, and strategies in activism on women's civil scene should be considered, such as

the circumstances of local communities and the nature of support from local authorities.

These differences have led to a division in women's civil society scene in the BIH context, because women's organisations do not belong to the mainstream organisations, and the gathering of less educated women is perceived as non-feminist, or rather non-liberal-feminist (Popov-Momčinović, 2013: 176). However, Walsh noticed that women initially stuck to familiar and comfortable fields such as knitting and "it took time for women to escape this comfort zone and take on less traditional endeavors", especially recognising their own economic potential to make a profit and be commercially oriented (2000: 6). Furthermore, many micro-credit schemes aimed at incentivising women to start their own businesses in both urban and rural areas are also part of the economic neoliberal dismantling and restructuring of socialist states (Ghodsee, 2004: 747), operating within the same agenda set by foreign donors.

What is certain is that the neoliberal feminist agenda of the professionalised women's organisations, as well as of international donors, has marginalised the voices of different women's groups (Spahić-Šiljak, 2018: 366). A Western understanding of feminism accepted in Bosnian women's civil society scene often neglects the struggles of women with different backgrounds and characteristics (race/ethnicity, religion, class, social background, level of education). Their problems and voices are often overlooked in research conducted for the purposes of mainstream organisations, and by NGOs themselves (Grødeland, 2008: 912). Various forms of assistance provided by women's organisations, from well-established to less developed ones, are perceived differently by these organisations, which causes mixed feelings (Popov-Momčinović, 2020: 240, 241). What is sure is that we cannot simply summarise different points of view and different forms of activism. Still, we should gain a deeper understanding of how and why they are shaped and how this is connected to local and global power hierarchies (Blagojević, 2009: 40).

Our research is therefore oriented to explaining the activities of such marginalised women's groups and providing space for their voices to be heard. The term "marginalised" in this paper does not only refer to women's organisations addressing the needs of multiple marginalised and vulnerable groups of women (EIGE, 2016). It also denotes women's groups and organisations that are marginalised within society and civil society in terms of public attention, including media coverage of their activities and the support they receive from both international actors and local authorities. Their capacities, attitudes, and perceptions of the role of civil society and the goals and aims of their organisations further complicate their marginalisation.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

Our research aims to obtain intimate knowledge of a particular slice of reality (Anselm & Corbin, 1990), that is to say, local contexts and activities of marginalised groups of women and their organisations. The research is framed within a feminist epistemology that avoids the dichotomy between the knower and the known, and between the “neutral” subject of the research and its “passive” object (Strega, 2005: 203). It includes an interpretivist strategy in opposition to the positivist canon that aims to produce objective and neutral knowledge that excludes feelings and interpretations. It invokes constant reflexivity with its “tensions” regarding how to “know and represent the narratives, experiences, or lives of others” (Doucet and Mauthner, 2006: 40-41), and how to interpret specific contexts and social processes with their power relations.

The research was conducted in cooperation with two women’s organisations based in Sarajevo. Both organisations have a clear feminist agenda and have worked over the last years on the empowerment of marginalised groups of women and their organisations, namely those of Roma women (*Romkinja* from Bijeljina, *Romani Čej* from Prnjavor), women’s organisations from small local communities (*Viktorija* from Pale, *Zvjezdangrad* from Vareš, *Grahovo* female citizens’ association from Bosansko Grahovo) and from rural settings (women’s associations *Jadar* from Konjević Polje and *Pašinke* from Hajdarevići). Within the broader project “Women’s Rights Agenda for Positive Change”, through research and knowledge transfer, we tried to provide assessments of selected women’s organisations. On the other hand, this was also an opportunity for overt observation, connecting with activists, and planning our research. Despite the limitation of the study, generalisations can be drawn as the research aims to gain deeper knowledge about processes, relationships, and patterns rather than simply access the number of people who exhibit a particular characteristic (Gobo, 2006: 423).

There are two primary research questions in this paper. First, how do the analysed organisations orient their work in relation to characteristics of local communities in order to intersect with the specific marginalised groups of women they represent or include? Second, what kinds of feminism could be identified in their activism and reflection? To answer this, we used a qualitative methodology consisting of semi-structured in-depth interviews with presidents of marginalised women’s organisations that lasted more than an hour. Most interviews were conducted face-to-face in the local communities of the activists. Two interviews were conducted in Sarajevo, where the interviewees attended seminars, and one was conducted via Skype. In two cases of organisations from Vareš and Konjević Polje, other mem-

bers in addition to the president were also present and these two interviews took the form of group discussions.

We interviewed thirteen (13) activists, and – since we had personal contact with many activists – we contacted them by sending them an e-mail with a quotation and interview consent form. Before the interview, they received these documents in print and an oral explanation of the consent form. The researchers explained to them that the identity of the organisations would be visible in the research. The respondents agreed to be quoted directly in the text but we additionally used pseudonyms for quotes. The interviews were fully transcribed verbatim, and deductive thematic analysis was conducted based on the research questions. The organisation from Pale represents a negative (cf. critical) case, which “allows for the generalization based on the presence or absence of a particular pattern defining some phenomenon” (Vučković Juroš, 2011: 169). The members of this organisation and its president have a high level of education and during the interview did not mention any urgent needs or problems that they need to address in their local community.

Power relations are of paramount importance in interviews (Sediman, 2006: 99). We established reciprocity and equity by being aware throughout the process of the unequal position of the interviewees due to their marginalisation. Therefore, they were interviewed in an environment where they felt comfortable (at their premises in their communities and in a café they chose while attending the conference in Sarajevo). They were also provided with space to tell their stories (especially in the case of Roma women and rural women) and were not limited to answering only the given questions (Seidman, 2006: 104).

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1. The local context and relations with local governments

Civil society organisations in BIH, “regardless of whether they engage in social welfare service delivery or democratisation efforts – at some point have to deal with government officials – either at national, regional, or local level” (Grødeland, 2008: 912). Larger and more prominent women’s organisations are located in urban centres and work at various levels (international, regional, state, and local). On the other hand, the analysed organisations are primarily oriented to their local communities. Therefore, the local situation poses a significant challenge in their work, imposing boundaries on their activities, but also motivating them to be more engaged in solving diverse issues.

The interlocutors highlighted various problems and challenges concerning the local context they work in and their interpretations varied. However, as expect-

ed, women from underdeveloped local communities stressed difficulties such as lack of infrastructure and employment opportunities, as well as challenges they face as women's organisations, especially in terms of chances to organise events and provide services to women and other groups of people in need. Women's organisations informally play a vital role in the social protection systems of local communities, and an ethics of care frames their activities. Activists show a commitment to the well-being of others, and solidarity and care are central ideas in their understanding of the community. Still, marginalised women's organisations cannot independently build inclusive communities, but require support from and partnership with local authorities. However, the research cannot conclude that the local authorities provided the required response to these needs.

In addition, two interviewed activists working in impoverished areas especially problematised the behaviour of local politicians. One of them works in a small town, very distant from urban centres, and the other in a rural area. Both are facing challenges of daily survival and problems of the women they work with/for. One interviewee referred to the general behaviour of elected politicians at the local level (local councillors), and their lack of awareness in solving the daily problems of citizens, especially women:

*Local politicians are small and uneducated people, he doesn't know how to express himself, he doesn't know how to help himself, [...] and they just raise their hands, local councillors, they don't even know what to vote for [...] When I told them I didn't have lighting and he told me what do you want you didn't have [it] even before the war, and I want to go forward and he takes me back [...]. (Lejla)*

Such insights are discouraging for the women and show that local authorities are hardly ready to fulfil their formal obligations and to provide the required socially responsible, empathetic, gender-sensitive, and contextualised response to citizens' problems. Another activist from an impoverished local community especially stressed the unstable political situation at the local level due to the recurring changes of mayors and the local council majority. She also mentioned the empty promises of the elected local mayor, who participated in some events hosted by this organisation but without any concrete results.

*Everything is possible, they declaratively support. [...] However, when concrete things need to be resolved, a victim needs to be taken care of [...] it's harder. (Dina)*

In contrast, one activist working in a rural area that belongs to a local community with a better economic situation had a different perception of their local community

and elected politicians, who were depicted as supportive, participating in events hosted by the organisation and providing financial support. They especially highlighted the premises they received from the municipality and other forms of support.

*[...] we have good cooperation with the municipality. We had one project, and they [local officials] supported us financially. Then this round table they came to and listened to us. Even the President of the assembly said that we should raise any of our problems – he is there, he will be on our side, he will support us [...]. We got a room upstairs that we can use for five years, with the possibility of renewal. (Mirela)*

An activist working with Roma women and coming from a developed local community also depicted the situation and cooperation with the local government in a more positive light. She and her organisation cooperate with the mayor and committee for national minorities. In this case, the overall tendency of some developed local communities to accept local action plans targeting Roma people led to the inclusion of the activist in the decision-making processes in her local community. It is therefore complicated to explain whether this cooperation results from the consciousness and sensitivity of local politicians regarding the position of Roma women, or simply because a Roma women's organisation became involved without the issues of Roma women being at the centre of resolving the problem. In any case, we suppose that in developed local communities it is easier to provide financial and other resources for such activities:

*[...] I have been involved [in the creation of the local development strategy]. They are looking for data about the status of Roma women, how it is done, there has been one dialogue organised two days ago where I was able to raise the issue of Roma women [...] since they really work a little more with the Roma and in the community [...] They are really consulting with us as far as Roma are concerned. (Selma)*

It should be taken into account that marginalised women's organisations focus on local communities and depend on local authorities' support. In addition, mutual connections are stronger and communication is more direct in small communities than in larger urban centres. This affects how female activists perceive and describe cooperation with local authorities. So, for example, some activists justify the lack of support with an unfavourable socioeconomic situation in the state/society or do not critically evaluate existing forms of cooperation. Some described problems with the premises they received from the municipality, such as a leaky roof or insufficient heating. Nevertheless, one interlocutor particularly praised their mayor,

portraying him as a patriarchal father who tries to take care of and help others as much as he can in unfavourable conditions where, according to the activists, the unemployment rate is very high for both men and women and it is difficult for a women's association to make a difference in their community.

An interviewed activist from a small but developed local community spoke of the symbolic support of the municipality but did not problematise it. She mentioned the problem of uneven allocation of the local budget, yet not from the perspective of equal distribution between male and female organisations, but the generally small support to local NGOs that is, in addition, not justified considering the activities performed:

*We didn't even have high expectations. We wanted to come together, travel together, share knowledge and experiences, help each other. Now, we do not have excessive expectations, given the current situation in the country and in our municipality [...] We just do not have much financial support, it is all symbolic, but that does not bother us – we work, we organise it as best we can. (Vesna)*

It is difficult to provide a general explanation of the differences in the attitudes of the interviewed activists when it comes to their perception of the support from the local governments. Some differences can be explained by the local contexts and their experiences with the local government. Although we assume that the general level of development provides some explanations of the attitudes mentioned above<sup>1</sup>, and better-developed local communities may provide a more suitable framework for women's associations and engagement, this is not a direct linear correlation, especially concerning specific marginalised groups of women (Ždralović and Popov-Momčinović, 2019: 11). For example, in the case of Roma organisations, although the local communities where they work are considered developed, the Roma population lives in closed communities, very often without basic infrastructure. This represents a considerable barrier to the entire group as well as an incentive for their organisations to direct their activities to solving these problems. However, the interviewed activists seemed to be satisfied by having gained some kind of attention and support from the local government. Roma women are one of the most vulnerable groups in BIH society and any recognition and appreciation by their local government tends to be perceived positively. There are also differences among developed local communities that are part of our sample because only one in the sample was a larger city.

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<sup>1</sup> Municipal development indexes in BIH categorise them as developed, medium developed, underdeveloped and severely underdeveloped local communities based on human resources, economic and infrastructure indicators.

An activist from a developed but small and ethnically homogenous community seemed to be satisfied with being able to perform various activities for young women. In this case, a high level of education and employment status seemed to influence their satisfaction. An activist from a rural area belonging to a developed local community, despite being satisfied with the level of support from the local government, mentioned various obstacles in organising events due to the patriarchal context of the local community, where women are overwhelmed with work and home and do not receive support from family members, which results in lack of motivation and a low level of participation in the activities organised by them. Where rural communities belong to an underdeveloped municipality, the situation is much worse for women compared to the general municipal level. The activists from such communities stressed the missing basic infrastructure (such as regular bus lines between their village and the municipality), inaccessibility of other facilities (such as kindergartens) and problems in satisfying everyday needs (such as going to the hairdresser). Without basic infrastructure, it is difficult for them to organise activities such as selling agricultural products, and this seemed to foster their criticism. In the case of two medium-sized, severely underdeveloped towns, the activists responded differently to our questions concerning the level of support from the local government. We may say that extreme poverty produces opposing attitudes in this case: either criticism of the local government for not solving important and urgent problems of women or appreciation of the local authorities for providing any support in an unfavourable situation.

On the other hand, local authorities and the media have both a social responsibility and a formal obligation, according to the Law on Gender Equality of BiH, to actively inform, promote gender equality and raise awareness in their communities. Not only do they not initiate and implement these activities on their own initiative, but they are also missing the opportunity to actively support and engage in the activities of women's organisations. Support to these organisations is not only of interest for the CSOs but stronger and more significant support and, ultimately, partnership, can also profile the socially responsible activities of local authorities. In the end, this can be expected to affect the well-being of the communities and their citizens.

## 4.2. (Un)doing feminism? Activities of marginalised women's organisations and activists' reflections

In assessing the potential of this cooperation, the specifics of local organisations should also be taken into account, including a critical re-examination of the feminist foundations of the activist work. Although the analysed women's organisations perform a wide range of activities, interpreting their work requires taking into account the framework of these activities, which does not often allow much potential to promote gender policies and women's rights. Some of the analysed groups organise diverse activities while admitting a lack of focus in their work:

*We are still wandering. We have no focus of action. [...] Maybe that's bad, maybe not. Maybe we'd better try something and see. At first, we didn't want to say what we would do... (Elma)*

Another organisation that also performs diverse activities still focuses on providing various forms of support to women as well as other marginalised groups in society. This organisation has undertaken to meet all of these needs because their municipality is severely underdeveloped and lacks basic infrastructure and facilities for social and health care. As an activist said,

*[...] the needs are huge, it is difficult to set priorities, but women need adequate health care, roads, and employment. (Dina)*

The focus of the analysed women's groups from rural areas is predominantly on the economic empowerment of rural women, such as skill trainings and micro-credit schemes, mutual support in selling their products, and organising bazaars. However, due to the lack of infrastructure and access to fundamental human rights, they often identify other problems, such as the political participation of women and the lack of knowledge of their rights among them. For example, one activist said that all those human rights declarations should be brought to the villages, for the women who have no Internet or computers and are not acquainted with their rights. In one part, her observations can be interpreted, indirectly and quite broadly, from the perspective of socio-legal research that examines "legal consciousness" (Ewick and Silbey, 1998: 35).

Activists also organise joint trips because it is a luxury for women from rural areas to leave their own village. While focusing on one problem (such as economic empowerment), women from rural areas recognise other forms of marginalisation. Even "prosaic" activities, like taking a trip and staying in a hotel for two days, are political issues for them because they expand their personal choices and possi-

bilities. However, during the interview, an activist said that all those grand stories about women's rights being organised in luxury hotels and seminars by large women's organisations were "hollow" and that, in contrast to "seminar activism", they do concrete activities. This kind of argumentation, where human rights issues seem to be perceived as something less necessary or even too abstract, shows a lack of awareness about what they claim to be the main agenda of their work.

The work of Roma women focuses on their position, but due to the disadvantaged position of the entire Roma population, they also provide some services to Roma men. Both Roma women's organisations respond when they recognise an urgent need or a problem for a Roma community as a whole since the deprivation of Roma women cannot always be singled out from the deprivation of the entire Roma population. Besides, one Roma women's organisation provides services to non-Roma women because there are no other specialised women's organisations in this or neighbouring local communities.

*[...] as we were the only association that provides such services, a lawyer from Vaša prava<sup>2</sup> came and gave free legal aid [weekly]. [...] Men and women come to us. A neighbour came to us about a property line. It's not our focus, nor do I know anything about it. He came to me and told me his problem – something we don't do. And we make an appointment with a lawyer [...] we also work with other beneficiaries who are not only Roma. [...] So we are approached by other women regardless of religion and ethnicity. (Dragana)*

*[Roma organisation] has meals for children and in the evening, when there is some left, I offer some of my beneficiaries to take some for dinner. They use the shower – we have a bathroom where they can come take a shower, and we give them that help. We also have a washing machine so they can send the children to school clean [...] I received this project to do lighting in the Roma community. They told me that there would be hard work on this project with the municipality. But with the help of the women in my assembly and acquaintances, of course in the city administration, we have excellent cooperation, and it was somehow my greatest success that I managed to light three streets. [...] (Selma)*

Roma women's organisations are a striking example of integrating an intersectional approach into activities. The organisations themselves are at the intersection of at least two identities. However, other individual and collective identities, characteristics, and/or statuses (such as age, single parenthood, sexual orientation, etc.)

<sup>2</sup> *Vaša prava* (Your rights) is an NGO that offers "free legal information, legal counselling, and legal assistance services" (see more at: <https://help.unhcr.org/bosniaandherzegovina/where-to-seek-help/vasa-prava-bih/>).

can be added to the intersection. The respondents very often emphasised their own experiences of exclusion and multiple discrimination. Thus, their experience becomes the basis for sensitivity to diversity. As in the case of other marginalised women's groups, although knowledge about tools and methods is often lacking, significant elements of women's policies and gender mainstreaming can be recognised in their activities. The ethics of care has the potential to make up for the lack of knowledge about formal procedures.

One of the issues is whether these activities can be considered feminist, even though they are organised by women and for women (although, in some cases, their activities incorporate other beneficiaries). This question was not directly posed during the interviews, and only the Roma activist said that she is (became) a feminist and described how she became aware of this part of her identity and the importance of feminism in combating violence against women and all forms of marginalisation. While describing her feminism, she especially stressed her tolerance and acceptance of LGBT people and women that are not heterosexual or do not want to get married. Her story of how she "became" a feminist also shows how important it is to work to eliminate stereotypes in patriarchal local communities, and confirms the importance of women's networking, meetings, and formal and informal conversations. This is more of a personal story about discovering the importance of feminism, but in feminism, the personal has always been political. As an activist, therefore, she recognises the need to raise the consciousness of the beneficiaries of her organisation:

*[...] the first time I heard about feminism, I didn't realise what feminism was. I said I wouldn't be that. And then, while speaking with Jadranka<sup>3</sup>, I realised that I already was [...]. For example, I have members [...] who are real feminists [...] they started to speak a little about feminism, that they have no prejudices towards other people who live their lives [...]. Because it is imperative in feminism to be a person open towards everyone. [...] We plan to work further in that direction [with activities...]. And some woman may not want to get married at all, she wants to be alone and we have to work on that issue but slowly. Because now we are doing this violence more so that they [Roma women] become active about it [violence], because when they become active, then you can tell them this story as well. (Selma)*

Her interpretation of feminism, however, (at least to some extent) goes hand in hand with the media representation of feminism in BIH and a general patriarchal

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<sup>3</sup> Jadranka Miličević, president of the CURE Foundation, one of the most prominent feminist women's organisations in BIH.

mindset that equates feminism with LGBT rights, and women who are feminists as exclusively lesbians or unmarried women, which is especially present on social networks and comments on Internet portals (Buljubašić, 2019: 179). In our research, other interviewed activists (except two) did not refer to feminism while explaining their work. However, they were aware in one way or another of the patriarchal context of their local communities and society in general, and the prevailing values according to which gender equality is not ranked high on the list of issues that need to be urgently addressed (e.g., Babović et al., 2016: 31). During in-depth interviews it was interesting to recognise different kinds of feminism in the activities of organisations and the attitudes of activists.

Even when they do not declare themselves feminists, activists at least recognise gender stereotyping. Or, to put it another way, they do not name it but acknowledge the “feminine mystique” (Friedan, 2001) that defined the female identity in the roles of wife and mother. However, since they are activists from marginalised women’s organisations, they, like some theorists, also recognise that women’s experience is not homogeneous and unified. In their stories about the lives of women and girls in local communities, a key intersectional insight is recognised: “individuals often experience subordination at the intersection of their identities, rather than on the basis of one identity or another” (Green, 2020: 70). As stated above, elements of intersectional feminism can be identified not only for specific marginalised groups (such as Roma women) but also some other specific positions at the intersection of identities (such as age). For example, these elements were shown when an activist was describing the position of young women, the barriers they face during education and when they get married, and their lack of motivation and suppression of their potential due to a patriarchal upbringing:

*The problems of girls and young women [...] they have no company, no one to talk to. Especially the girls from the village - they come to school, only have one bus, it brings them [to school], and it takes them back [home]. In essence, I was left with a striking story of a girl who said that her life is no different from the life of her mother. (Elma)*

*It's usually this: let me finish high school and get married. And when I get married, someone has to take care of me. And everything's ok, I'm comfortable. (Mirela)*

Critical positions toward patriarchal society are also possible motivations to work in women’s organisations, where the patriarchal structure of society imposes various visible and invisible barriers to women’s motivation to do something, including being engaged in civil society.

*Women are busy. They are busy with the family, because that is life in the countryside after all. They are busy having cattle. They have a family, so there is always someone else [to look after] like the mother-in-law. They are busy, they don't have time for themselves, and so how can they do this [...] I will return to that small environment again. It's easy when a man fails. Okay, it didn't work [...]. But when a woman fails, then it is a total collapse. That's why I say that a woman has to work 100% harder, to be just a perfectionist in everything in order to succeed. (Mirela)*

Cultural feminism has influenced the approach of activists to the ethics of care and ecofeminism. Ad hoc activities, such as an environmental issue mentioned by the activist, show that women recognise the interconnectedness of various problems and their rights (in this case, the right to clean air and access to natural resources) with other forms of oppression<sup>4</sup>:

*[...] we protested due to illegal logging [...]. They cut down our forests. We as a women's organisation, are mostly all mothers. If this goes on like this, this logging, this landslide [...] well, this is all going to be built over. Our children will have nowhere to live. And that is the first and basic reason. It's not just a woman's thing. It is a matter of the future for all of us. We all need to question ourselves about this. (Elma)*

In addition, for some women, socialisation and mutual support are still the primary motivation for activism. Nevertheless, through these activities they manage to criticise patriarchal social structures. Meetings and workshops are often opportunities to start conversations about important social topics. The same pattern was observed in interviews: conversations about violence against women were spontaneously initiated at the workshops. As a safe space for some women, this was an opportunity to talk about problems in their private lives that are taboo subjects in their local community.

Activists from a Roma women's organisation (among other things) working on the problems of domestic violence against women highlighted that many Roma women are not aware of their rights, but at least approach the organisation and

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<sup>4</sup> Many women from rural areas were on the frontline in defending natural resources, especially rivers, in campaigns against building mini-hydropower plants. The brave women from Kruščica were noticed worldwide for their struggle and persistence while facing police and other brutality and intimidation (Midžić, 2020: 71). The interviewed activists did not face direct physical brutality as the women from Kruščica, but their social media profiles were hacked after they started the campaign to protect the forest.

speak about the violence they are exposed to. They also face prejudices in their communities, and some of them have become empowered to oppose them:

*We have a lot of Roma women who we know suffer violence but do not want to report it to anyone. They come to talk. We provide them with information, but until they decide, I can't do anything about it. And I wouldn't want to lose [their] confidence. I can report it, but I don't want to lose my beneficiary's trust. We have a situation where women come to us when they are driven out into the street, when they are beaten and when they run away. And they couldn't get the kids out, they just ran away. And then the [social welfare] centre or people condemn her: she is a bad mother, she left the children [...] (Dragana)*

When we analyse the problems that organisations focus on and how they deal with them, the position of liberal feminism was unavoidable in one part of activist work. We recognised liberal feminism primarily in two types of activities.

First, we can find elements of liberal feminism only partially and indirectly in developing women's entrepreneurship and to the extent that this development is motivated by women's economic empowerment policies. However, this empowerment does not go beyond traditional female roles (for example, sewing, making jams, making soap, etc.). Sometimes even a part of these efforts is directed toward humanitarian work rather than making a profit. On the other hand, they often transfer their roles as "persons who take care" of the family and home to their activist engagement. Moreover, in some activities, such as eco-feminism, they recognise their role as mothers as the identity basis of their activist struggle.

Second, we recognise elements of liberal feminism in activities that address issues of women's political participation. For example, an activist mentioned the problems of underrepresentation of women in politics, and the fact that female candidates on the party lists are not supported and are put on the list only to comply with the law on gender quotas, which is similar to the perceptions of women from prominent and outspoken feminist organisations. However, we perceived that she avoided using the word feminism during our talk, although she participated in various seminars organised by prominent women's organisations. She also questioned the problem of lack of solidarity among women in politics, and other issues that are often raised in social discourse, such as whether women should vote for men. Such labels are often raised within society in the prevailing discourse that feminism is a form of separation of men and women, a reason for women to avoid being called a feminist. She recognised how men in politics abuse these images and how many women reproduce these patterns to the detriment of women:

*I mean women didn't essentially want to support women and that's kind of unfortunate. And when we had one workshop and we were just talking about it and one young woman asked a question if she has to vote for a woman just because she's a woman. Well, of course you don't have to, but again, I think that there are 40% women on every election list, so at least one woman meets some of the criteria to be able to vote for her. Of course, you can also vote for men, not that we will vote only for women, if someone is of good quality, men should also be supported, but men are all somehow wiser to throw women a bone and then they pass [get elected] and we do nothing. (Vesna)*

Although the majority of interviewed women do not declare themselves feminists, they are pursuing women's goals and putting issues on the agenda with the capacities they have at their disposal in their activities that vary from combating domestic violence, providing social and health care, organising trips and gatherings, helping in satisfying basic needs of women and children and selling products made by women. Here we can also ask what is "true" feminism, what are the fundamental criteria and who will decide? (Offen, 1988: 129). Considering that many activists in BIH, except the most prominent, avoid calling themselves and their organisations feminist (Popov-Momčinović, 2013: 155), one can speak not only of a lack of consciousness, but also of their desire to avoid a social stigma, as in other parts of the world (Kanner and Anderson, 2010: 3).

## 5. CONCLUSION

This paper has analysed the activism of marginalised women's groups and organisations, often working in geographic areas isolated from urban centres. Feminists in all post-Yugoslav states and Europe generally tend to favour gender mainstreaming and incorporate gender equality policies and programmes at all levels and stages. Women activists from prominent civil society organisations from BIH have been furthering those policies. The general orientation in favour of integrating a gender perspective that is present in the feminist literature and dominant in international policies is often not characteristic of marginalised women's associations. Instead, they use approaches that indicate awareness of intersectional identities.

Our analysis shows that the women's organisations analysed here face specific challenges in the local communities. These challenges interact with the level of economic development of a particular area (especially in extremely impoverished local communities) and with the marginalisation of women they represent in the entire country regardless of the economic level of the local community they are targeting (the case of Roma organisations). Although there are slight differences,

especially regarding the relations and cooperation with local governments, local communities do not sufficiently support and recognise the importance of women's activism, and the support is often rather verbal and symbolic. This is in accordance with the research that underlines that better-off NGOs are more likely to attract the attention of local government institutions and to enter dialogue as equal partners, compared to marginalised NGOs that put forward a list of demands (Grødeland, 2008: 930).

Nevertheless, some interviewed activists depict cooperation with local government as good for various reasons. Being marginalised themselves and working for marginalised groups of women (often including other vulnerable groups due to the overall alarming situation in their local communities), they tend to appreciate any (including symbolic) support they succeed to receive from local authorities. Moreover, at least some of them seem to gloss over the problems and obstacles they face as women's organisations in their communities. They do so because of numerous problems that intersect at multiple levels, ranging from people's attitudes and prevailing patriarchal values, a high unemployment rate across the country, and adverse demographic trends such as population ageing and the emigration of young people. Activists from organisations based in rural areas and impoverished communities highlighted all of these problems, while activists from Roma organisations focused on the multiple marginalisation of Roma women, referring also to the extremely bad position of Roma men and children. In addressing women's needs not being met by the state, as well as the needs of various vulnerable groups of people in their local communities, they become committed and tied up in the ongoing struggle to organise a range of activities and provide services.

The activities of the analysed organisations vary depending on their focus (and sometimes lack of it), local contexts, resources and own perceptions of what should and could be done. The activities encompass economic empowerment of women in rural areas, provision of legal aid, organising various services such as medical care, combating violence against women, housing and education issues, trips and gatherings, and ad hoc protests for the protection of the environment. Extremely underdeveloped local communities face numerous problems that affect the entire population, which leads to under-resourced organisations being overwhelmed and overloaded with different activities.

The analysed organisations lack clear feminist perspectives in their activities. However, due to the numerous challenges they face at the local level, all interviewed activists are aware of persistent patriarchal structures that impose barriers on women and girls. The majority of them are aware of the lack of capacity to tackle these problems. Organisations whose members have a low level of education do not seem aware of the whole picture of discrimination against women they provide

services to. A lack of perspective and, in some cases, mistrust toward the women's rights agenda of prominent women's organisations and international donors further prevent them from stepping out from their own marginalised position and demotivates them from being more engaged in civil society. In one case, a Roma women's organisation participates in some gender mainstreaming processes in the local community. However, this does not change the prevailing way in which it operates. The organisation is overloaded with various problems and urgent needs and participation in the work of local mechanisms is another obligation on its long to-do list.

The organisations analysed here engage in various forms of women's activism that ring true with feminist ethics of care. Including voices from the margins in the feminist movement is important because, as Cockburn explains, the feminism developed in post-war BIH and supported by liberal women's NGOs is "intangible" to other women's groups (2013: 32). This is especially the case considering that prominent women's organisations committed to gender mainstreaming are located in urban centres, while organisations of Roma women, rural women, and women from small and impoverished local communities across the country struggle to meet the most basic needs.

To conclude, marginalised women's organisations question established patriarchal heteronormative approaches through their activism. Their persistent effort, directed by concern for the common good, creates social changes and is reflected in everyday life in the community. Nevertheless, a part of their activities, ideas and values is "stuck" in the framework of cultural feminism. The question of the emancipatory potential of this feminist orientation is certainly open for future theoretical and activist debates.

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## ETHICAL APPROVAL

The authors declare that they were not required to obtain institutional ethical approval, but they confirm that they respected good practices of ethical research.

## DATA ACCESS AND TRANSPARENCY

Selected analytic materials (Selected excerpts from interviews in BHS within the theme Local community – coded as “General situation in the local community”, “Position and needs of women in the local community”, and “Cooperation and support by local government”), are available in the online Supplement at the URL: <https://hrcak.srce.hr/ojs/index.php/rzs/libraryFiles/downloadPublic/305>

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## (Ne)prakticiranje feminizama na njihov način: Aktivizam marginaliziranih ženskih organizacija u lokalnim zajednicama u Bosni i Hercegovini

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### SAŽETAK

Članak se bavi ženskim aktivizmom i feminizmom u Bosni i Hercegovini, fokusirajući se na marginalizirane ženske skupine i organizacije koje su često izostavljene iz akademskih istraživanja i interesa međunarodnih donatora. U teorijskom dijelu prikazane su glavne značajke razvoja ženskih organizacija u poslijeratnoj BiH, fokusirajući se na problem NVOizacije aktivizma i feminizma, čime se marginaliziraju određene skupine žena i organizacije koje ne pripadaju istaknutim liberalnim feminističkim organizacijama koje streme rodno osviještenim politikama. Kvalitativno istraživanje temeljeno na dubinskim intervjuima i analiza pokazuju da su te organizacije uglavnom usredotočene na lokalnu razinu kako bi zadovoljile raznolike, specifične, katkad i hitne potrebe žena (npr. Romkinja, žena sa sela, iz siromašnih kao i malih lokalnih zajednica) i suočavaju se s posebnim izazovima u lokalnom kontekstu gdje uglavnom usmjeravaju svoj rad. Iako većina njih ne ispovijeda jasno feministički identitet, svjesne su patrijarhalnog konteksta, posebice u svojim lokalnim zajednicama, i njihove interpretacije su uglavnom u skladu s feminističkom etikom brige. Međutim nedostatak organizacijskih kapaciteta, održivog financiranja i jasne feminističke agende u radu potkopava njihov kritični potencijal da pokreće društvene promjene.

Ključne riječi: ženski aktivizam, marginalizirane skupine žena, feminizam/feminizmi, lokalni kontekst, Bosna i Hercegovina

