

Original Article

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Three Decades of Feminist Resistance in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Perspectives of Activists from Local NGOs

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Summary

This article examines the work of women's non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) from the perspective of feminist activists. It emphasises the essential role of feminist activism in promoting gender equality and challenging systemic oppression. The influence of professionalisation within feminist activism and NGOs is evaluated, highlighting both successes and controversies. Findings from qualitative research, based on in-depth interviews with feminist activists, identify key characteristics of women's NGOs in BiH and the challenges faced by those representing marginalised groups. Despite ongoing difficulties within the complex post-war ethnocratic context, these organisations remain vital in advancing gender equality, demonstrating resilience, collaboration, and specialised expertise that have earned them some institutional recognition. However, issues such as lack of cooperation across different identities, limited institutional awareness, and low participation from women outside these organisations – particularly younger women – persist. Gaps in intersectional strategies and the growing influence of anti-gender movements require further comprehensive research.

Keywords: Feminist Activism, Women's NGOs, Intersectionality, State and Institutions, Bosnia and Herzegovina

1. Introduction

Feminist activism and organising play a vital role in promoting gender equality and opposing patriarchal oppression (Martin, 1990, p. 184). To fully grasp feminist activism, it is essential to analyse the opposition it faces within both formal politics and wider society (Alonso *et al.*, 2023, p. 2). This article examines the achievements and challenges, both internal and external, of women's organisations and

activities in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) over the past thirty years. While previous research has explored women's roles, activism, and the interaction between gender, nationalism, and violence in war and post-war BiH, this study concentrates on analysing contemporary feminist activism and organisation. It also aims to highlight the ongoing efforts and challenges faced by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) representing marginalised women, emphasising their perspectives to offer new insights into the evolving landscape of feminist activism in BiH.

1.1. Importance of Women's Organising and Feminist Activism

Women have long been excluded from formal politics, yet they have organised in many countries worldwide to challenge subordination and advocate for change, primarily through activism in civil society (Weldon, 2012, p. 36). Motivations for women's activism include securing rights, meeting responsibilities, restoring relationships, and strengthening communities (Faver, 2001). Their involvement is influenced by personal and broader contexts, often deepening their understanding of feminism (Milić, 2004, pp. 76, 78).

Although civil society can reinforce male privilege, it is also vital for promoting pluralism, offering alternatives to dominant narratives, and supporting progress towards feminist objectives (Phillips, 2002, pp. 76-77). Women's organisations facilitate greater participation of women (Swank and Fahs, 2017, p. 4). For example, due to limited access to formal politics in conflicted and post-conflict societies, women often engage in grassroots organisations within the civil society sector (Pierson and Thomson, 2018, p. 106). However, as feminism advances, opposition, including from conservative women's groups and organisations, also tends to increase (Chafetz and Dworkin, 1987, p. 56).

Feminist activists employ both direct actions to influence legislation and indirect strategies to shape public perceptions (Weldon, 2012, p. 132). Solidarity and collective identity enable women to transform personal experiences into broader awareness (Guenther, 2009, p. 342), fostering a sense of group commonality that facilitates recruitment of other women (Montoya, 2021, p. 3). While awareness of diversity within women's movements has long been present (Townsend-Bell, 2014, p. 255; Lépinard, 2014, p. 879), the development of Black feminism and third-wave feminism has promoted inclusive representation and localisation of activism, addressing issues of sexuality and a wider range of identities (Thomas and Davies, 2005, p. 715; Snyder, 2008, p. 187). The development of intersectionality, in particular, has heightened awareness of the importance of recognising diverse intra-group experiences and of critically examining the privileges associated with some women's experiences while excluding others (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1242). It reveals the multidimensionality of people's experiences already marginalised by oppressive

systems such as patriarchy, racism, ableism, ageism, colonialism and imperialism (Petričušić, 2024, p. 81).

As Anthias (2012) noted, intersectionality is not just about listing differences or competing to identify which differences are most significant. Instead, it emphasises the importance of recognising the differences and divisions that are related to power, hierarchy, and context (Anthias, 2012, pp. 5-6). This approach also involves women's organisations examining exclusionary practices (Evans and Lépinard, 2020, p. 9; Muñoz-Puig, 2024, p. 1137). Through intersectionality, marginalised women can organise, recognise, analyse, and address the overlapping layers of marginality and discrimination that impact their lives, while also envisioning and creating new social relationships (Chun *et al.*, 2013, p. 918). Furthermore, intersectionality can act as a collective identity for progressive social movements, serve as a foundation for coalition-building among organisations, or function as an organisational strategy and repertoire (Evans and Lépinard, 2020, p. 6).

Feminist activism, although yielding uneven results, has played a crucial role in shaping laws, social norms, and gender roles (Swank and Fahs, 2017, p. 2). While modern democratic states, influenced by international standards, have recognised feminist demands, they have yet to fully eliminate the persistent barriers faced by women (Reverter-Bañón, 2006, p. 4; Goetz and Jenkins, 2016, p. 4). Nonetheless, states remain key actors by creating opportunities and guiding the policymaking agenda, thus affecting how feminist issues are framed and addressed (Goetz and Jenkins, 2016, p. 28; Ahrens and Meier, 2020, p. 67). The interaction between feminists and the state is a complex and evolving network of interdependent relations, sometimes cooperative and sometimes oppositional (Jaggar, 2005, p. 16).

1.2. Evolving Professionalism and the Role of Women's NGOs: Growth and Obstacles

In recent decades, women's organising has become more professionalised, characterised by formal structures and procedures (Maier, 2008, pp. 83-84). Some critics argue that professional organisations, often aligned with the state, risk losing independence and prioritise their members' careers (Borland, 2010, p. 249). Research suggests that this professionalisation, particularly in addressing sexual violence, has decreased political activism in favour of individual coping strategies (Guenther, 2009, p. 350). On the other hand, feminist groups in the West have shown resilience, continuing to thrive even as the women's movement has declined (Martin, 1990, p. 183). Despite concerns about a bureaucratic drift, some scholars recognise that grassroots activists can be exclusionary towards those unable to fully commit (Strobel, 1995, p. 148; Borland, 2010, p. 249). Moreover, Weldon (2006, p. 57) demonstrates that organisational procedures enable deliberation, and without the

established norms for activism, the dominant group can easily ignore marginalised groups.

Furthermore, the shift from authoritarianism to democracy in many countries has provided an opportunity for the expression of gender equality issues and facilitated feminist professional organising (Sloat, 2005, p. 437). This transition has also generated momentum for LGBT+ rights activism and professional organising (O'Dwyer, 2018). The 1995 Beijing Conference, in particular, was a pivotal moment by introducing gender mainstreaming and raising awareness of gender issues and feminist professionalism within global development and human rights (Hawkesworth, 2012, p. 237). The research on implementation of gender mainstreaming in national contexts indicates that collaborating with women's organisations is more effective for promoting gender equality than relying solely on administrative efforts (Weldon, 2012, p. 40; McBride and Mazur, 2012, pp. 9-10).

Furthermore, in many parts of the world, there has been a notable rise in the number of NGOs dedicated to promoting gender equality. This growth has been driven by neoliberal policies and changes in international relations (Alvarez, 1999, p. 181). Gender researchers were among the first to recognise the phenomenon of NGO-isation of civil society and the women's movements, tracing its development from Latin America to East Germany (Heideman, 2017, p. 346). For instance, many NGOs in the Global South now oversee projects aimed at women's empowerment, focusing on providing access to various resources. These programmes depict women as agents of change rather than passive recipients and support their organisational efforts to challenge subordination (Al Hakim *et al.*, 2022, p. 2).

However, critics have pointed out significant flaws in the bureaucratic systems of NGOs. A major issue is their heavy reliance on project-based funding, which not only creates inequalities between funders and organisations but also causes a disconnect from the communities they aim to serve (Mercer, 2002, p. 14; Ghodsee, 2004, p. 738). This growing trend has led to the emergence of elite feminist and queer activists who often see transnational exchanges as more empowering than local ones (Liinason, 2020, p. 103). Moreover, the ongoing bureaucratisation and professionalisation within NGOs discourage individuals from engaging with these organisations and supporting the cause (Korolczuk, 2013, p. 955). Concerns are also raised that the professionalisation of women's NGOs has limited internal democracy and turned women into clients of other women, thereby reproducing class inequalities (Jaggar, 2005, p. 12).

On the other hand, while women's NGOs may have limited agendas shaped by colonial ideologies, they are still vital spaces for negotiating feminist ideas (Bernal and Grewal, 2014, pp. 13, 15). Many professionals within these organisations consider their work a part of a broader women's movement that encompasses diverse

perspectives (Alvarez, 1999, p. 186). Despite facing challenges, women's NGOs from the Global South have been essential in amplifying the voices of marginalised groups in global development (Narayanaswamy, 2014).

Scholars continue to debate how professionalisation influences social movements, with differing opinions on whether women's NGOs support or hinder activism, emphasising the need for context-specific analysis (Heideman, 2017, p. 349). For instance, their focus on individual agency and empowerment, along with limited engagement with socioeconomic, political, and structural factors, has resulted only in moderate progress in the Global South (Al Hakim *et al.*, 2022, p. 17). Additionally, in post-socialist countries, women's NGOs emerged to fill the void left by the collapse of socialist states and the reduction of public services, often reinforcing traditional gender roles by mainly portraying women as caregivers (Einhorn and Sever, 2003). The idea of women's emancipation during the socialist era made feminism seem like an enforced form of public engagement; however, the rise of masculinism and the marginalisation of women during transition sparked renewed feminist activism (Goldfarb, 1997, pp. 238, 252). Simultaneously, LGBT+ activism has grown, strengthened through closer links to external allies and transnational networks (O'Dwyer, 2018, p. 894).

Despite some progress, weak democratic participation renders the advancement of gender equality vulnerable to local opposition and anti-feminism (Kováts, 2021, p. 83). Unlike earlier conservative anti-feminist movements, contemporary opponents frame feminist and LGBT+ initiatives as "gender ideology" imposed by foreign elites, the EU, and the "LGBT lobby", portraying these efforts as threats to national identity and heterosexual family (Korolczuk and Graff, 2018, pp. 810-812). Anti-gender movements have emerged as a new global and interconnected anti-feminist project, shaped by local factors that influence their discourses and activities (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018, p. 14).

1.3. Ethnonational Patriarchy During the War in BiH

The socialist regime in Yugoslavia made notable progress in gender equality; however, its limitations led some women in academia to question the effectiveness of socialist emancipation of women (Zaharijević, 2017, p. 265), while "BiH was largely untouched by these activities" (Helms, 2013, p. 51). In the 1980s, a rise in patriarchal ethnonationalism contributed to the Yugoslav wars, which disproportionately affected women, who became marginalised in political life and overrepresented among victims of war-related violence (Papić, 2012, p. 184). The brutality of the war was especially evident in the multiethnic and multireligious context of BiH, where Orthodox Serbs, Bosniak Muslims, and Catholic Croats clashed (Cockburn, 2013, p. 27). The campaigns of "ethnic cleansing" and the sexual violence used

strategically to demoralise opponents drew international feminist attention to the gendered aspects of war and ethnonationalism, as well as women's victimhood and agency (*ibid.*; Helms, 2013, pp. 13, 27).

Organisations such as *Medica Zenica* and *Vive žene* in Tuzla emerged during the war to support Bosniak women refugees affected by wartime sexual violence, with backing from Western feminist groups (Cockburn, 2013, p. 27; Helms, 2013, p. 26). Regardless of their ethnicity, women played an essential role during the war by providing humanitarian aid and supporting community survival but were largely excluded from peace negotiations (Spahić Šiljak, 2014). This exclusion and marginalisation persisted after the war, as ethnonational elites continued to use traditional gender roles to promote nationalist agendas (Deiana, 2016, p. 105).

The Dayton Agreement established a state with two ethnically defined entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, regarded as the homeland of Bosniaks and Croats, and the Republika Srpska, created to satisfy Serb nationalist ambitions (Cockburn, 2013, p. 27). Because both entities claimed the strategically vital Brčko area, the dispute was resolved through international arbitration, resulting in its designation in 1999 as a self-governing district under the sovereignty of BiH but belonging to neither entity exclusively (Lilić, 2009, pp. 338, 340). The political system prioritises the rights of Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs in their respective entities, thereby reinforcing the power relations formed during the war (Porobić Isaković and Mlinarević, 2019, p. 174). Patriarchal values dominate, with women's roles predominantly defined by reproduction and cultural transmission (Helms, 2013, p. 73). The suffering of women, primarily through wartime rape, has intensified ethnic divisions and worsened existing interethnic tensions due to the established hierarchy of victimhood (Berry, 2017, p. 833).

1.4. From Ruins to Renewal: How Women's NGOs Flourish in Post-war BiH

To challenge negative trends, women began organising mainly within NGOs after the war, and although not all identified as feminists, most sought gender equality (Helms, 2014, p. 22). Many organisations provided essential services that were often considered aligned with traditional gender roles, while some activists chose to avoid the label of feminism to avoid backlash (Popov-Momčinović, 2013, p. 159). Additionally, organisations supporting survivors of sexual violence often kept their efforts discreet, partly because many war veterans, initially celebrated as heroes, had become perpetrators of domestic violence (Helms, 2013, p. 155).

Women's mobilisation to support themselves ultimately strengthened feminist awareness (Mlinarević and Kosović, 2011, p. 132). Helms (2014, p. 22) notes that although women's NGOs can impede social change, they have also contributed to the emergence of a feminist movement in BiH. EU accession prospects and exter-

nal funding motivated the adoption of liberal feminist practices, especially after the 2003 Law on Gender Equality and the creation of gender equality mechanisms at various levels of government (Siročić, 2019, p. 2).

These institutional changes provided a framework and incentives for professional LGBT+ organising, supporting advocacy for stronger anti-discrimination laws and awareness campaigns to combat a homophobic social climate marked by violent incidents (Swimelar, 2019, p. 771). The Sarajevo Open Center (SOC) has become a leading advocate for gender equality and LGBT+ rights, establishing institutional partnerships and contributing to research on gender equality, LGBT+ issues, feminist activism, and women's political participation (Čaušević, 2015; Gavrić and Zagorac, 2015). In 2016, SOC helped create the Tuzla Open Centre (TOC), which promotes LGBT+ rights in the Tuzla Canton through the Kvirhana festival, media initiatives, and public roundtables, as well as collaborating with local institutions and women's NGO shelters to protect LGBT+ victims of domestic violence (Adilović *et al.*, 2025, pp. 65-66).

Feminist advocacy has played a crucial role in increasing the presence of gender equality in political agendas and promoting relevant policies (Rošul-Gajić, 2016, p. 146). It has also contributed to increasing women's political participation and improving their economic status by providing educational opportunities and services (Spahić Šiljak, 2014, p. 35). However, challenges remain because the consociational system often overlooks human rights outside an ethnonational context, affecting women and LGBT+ communities (Pierson and Thomson, 2018, p. 104; Swimelar, 2019, p. 785). Equality laws – including the Istanbul Convention, which was ratified in BiH without opposition, unlike in many post-socialist states – have largely been ignored or manipulated by ethnonational elites in the context of EU accession (Popov-Momčinović and Ždralović, 2024, p. 107). Recognising the role of religion in sustaining patriarchal oppression, obstructing law enforcement, and being misused within anti-gender narratives, the TPO Foundation, under the leadership of prominent feminist theologian Zilka Spahić Šiljak, has initiated programmes that integrate feminist religious perspectives into broader gender equality efforts (Spahić Šiljak and Anić, 2023, pp. 543-545).

Poverty and corruption intensify the difficulties faced by many women, especially wartime survivors (Simic, 2017, p. 322). Ethnic tensions, unequal support for women survivors of wartime gender-based violence across entities, and legal and institutional divides have hindered effective collective action (Berry, 2017, p. 840). In response, thirteen women's organisations from both entities initiated an effort – expanded in 2015 – to propose December 8 as a Day of Remembrance of women killed in the war, as part of the 16 Days of Activism campaign. However, the authorities dismissed the initiative, and activists continue to observe it unofficially (Ždralović, 2021, pp. 321-322).

In addition, feminist activism in BiH, along with the processes of democratisation and state-building, has been strongly influenced by international intervention and Western donors, making the movement vulnerable to corrupt ethnonationalist political elites and local contestations of gender equality as “foreign imposition” (Björkdahl, 2012, p. 287). In such an unfavourable setting, exacerbated by poor economy and institutional dysfunctionality, the voices of marginalised women, such as those from rural areas, with disabilities, Roma, and LBT women, are often ignored (Žarković, 2017). Urban-based liberal feminist women’s organisations have established strong links with donors, while those with limited capacities and operating in smaller towns and remote regions receive less attention (Popov-Momčinović, 2020, p. 241). Nevertheless, women’s organisations remain the most welcoming spaces for women’s participation, offering greater freedom and opportunities to express feminist concerns and to collaborate (Irvine, 2013, p. 24; Popov-Momčinović, 2013, p. 118).

Women’s organisations in BiH have established durable networks to promote cooperation and tackle issues such as gender-based violence and human trafficking (Popov-Momčinović, 2020, pp. 246-248). Sarajevo-based CURE Foundation, a prominent feminist organisation, coordinates the Women’s Network (*Ženska mreža BiH*), comprising over 50 organisations across various regions, to encourage exchange and raise public awareness (*ibid.*, pp. 246-247). CURE Foundation also supports NGOs that represent marginalised women by helping to identify their needs (Žarković, 2017; Malkić and Bošnjak, 2019) and to evaluate their capacity to qualify for funding (Ždralović and Popov-Momčinović, 2019).

2. Data and Methods

My research employs a qualitative approach to examine feminist activism and resistance in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina. It emphasises the importance of amplifying women’s voices and fostering dialogue between researchers and participants (Bryman, 2012, p. 411). The research question investigates how feminist activists in professional women’s NGOs in BiH assess their own and others’ organisational efforts towards gender equality, as well as the challenges they face in the process.

I used purposive sampling to gather diverse and intersectional viewpoints from both parts of BiH. Participants included feminist activists from professional women’s NGOs based in Sarajevo, Tuzla, and Zenica (Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina), as well as Banja Luka and Bijeljina (Republika Srpska). I also included a lesbian activist from Sarajevo, a Roma activist from a professional women’s organisation, and an activist from a women’s NGO in a small local community facing poverty. Although most organisations in the sample carry out various tasks and activities, their primary focus is on awareness-raising, followed by advocacy and

lobbying, representing the rights of marginalised groups, providing safe houses, and finally offering legal aid and working on transitional justice. This approach allowed me to capture a wide range of perspectives. A limitation of this research is the exclusion of the Brčko District, given its unique administrative status and autonomous governance, as the focus was on feminist activism in BiH's two entities. Nevertheless, women's NGOs in Brčko, such as the Association of Active Women "Gender" Brčko, which in 2025 announced an initiative to draft a new law strengthening protections against gender-based violence (Realno.ba, 2025), demonstrate that activism there is an important part of the broader landscape and merits inclusion in future studies.

Between spring and autumn 2023, I conducted in-person and Zoom interviews with 15 feminist activists from professional NGOs. The interviews were semi-structured, averaging 60 minutes each. All sessions were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed verbatim, with their identities anonymised using pseudonyms.

I employed a combined inductive-deductive thematic analysis, which involved three stages: immersion, coding, and theme development. After completing the transcription, I printed each transcript and carefully reviewed them. During this phase, I made detailed notes in the margins to record my initial impressions and insights.

Next, I coded the transcripts using the qualitative analysis software Quirkos. I coded 1061 interview excerpts relevant to the research question, then renamed and grouped similar concepts. To ensure coding reliability, I reviewed the codes one month after the initial coding session, resulting in 124 labels that were further grouped into categories. I also maintained an audit trail of coding decisions and reflexive memos. As a result, four themes emerged: sustainability and capacity of women's organisations; women's organisations as drivers of social change; marginalised groups and intersectional challenges; and challenges and obstacles to women's organisations' work.

3. Results

3.1 Quiet Defiance: The Unbreakable Persistence of Women's NGOs in BiH

During interviews with my interlocutors, several key characteristics of women's organisations frequently emerge. The trait which is most commonly highlighted is perseverance, emphasised by activists from different organisations, including those representing marginalised groups. Generally, this trait is discussed in relation to both their own and other women's organisations in BiH.

For example, a pioneer of feminist activism, from the organisation that operates a safe house in Republika Srpska, emphasises the importance of women's

NGOs in addressing many challenges women, and society as a whole, faced during and after the war. She also emphasises the vital role of women's NGOs in facilitating ongoing professional and activist engagement: "Having a women's NGO keeps you active and promotes both professionalism and activism" (Mara, 7 March 2023).

Perseverance is especially vital given the hostile environment, shifting donor policies, and ongoing political and other pressures that persist to this day:

It's encouraging that we, as women's organisations, have managed to stay active despite being undermined from all sides (Merima, 22 September 2023).

It's great that we persist; it gives us hope that not everything is bleak and that some of us will succeed in something in the coming year (Smilja, 10 May 2023).

Feminist activists who supported women victims of gender-based violence during the war are still recognised for their perseverance, including those who became involved later, such as an activist from a Sarajevo organisation who admires the resilience of women who helped rape survivors and remain active today despite setbacks.

A lesbian activist from a Sarajevo-based LGBT+ organisation highlights the determination of *Kvart* from Prijedor, which advocates for LGBT+ rights in the challenging environment of Republika Srpska. With few organisations nationwide dedicated to these rights, the persistence of those still active is vital. For Roma women, establishing their own organisations is essential as they face discrimination both from society and within their communities, often from Roma men who deny women any leadership roles and vilify feminist efforts. A feminist from a small, impoverished community expresses unwavering commitment to the organisation's mission despite setbacks, stating that without women's NGOs, life would be akin to the Middle Ages.

Alongside perseverance, many interlocutors highlight that women's organisations have developed significant expertise over the years, which institutions are beginning to recognise through collaborative efforts. This includes working together on gender action plans and participating in seminars organised by women's NGOs for institutional staff. The interlocutors note the various resources women's organisations possess, such as the ability to run SOS lines 24 hours a day for victims of domestic violence using their own capacities. A Roma feminist also stresses the importance of continuous professional development for organisational staff in her NGO.

Additionally, there is a focus on personal growth and empowerment through women's organisations. An activist who joined the organisation providing legal aid to women in 2001 shares her journey: "I had no idea what women's human rights entailed [...]. However, at the NGO, I began to understand" (Merima, 22 September 2023).

A particularly moving account comes from an activist born as a result of wartime rape. She explains that, without women's organisations, she would have felt lost and voiceless. She also emphasises the vital role of women's NGOs, such as *Medica Zenica*, in providing crucial information about mothers and their children. This support was essential in establishing her organisation, which advocates for children born as a result of wartime rape.

However, there are still many negative trends in organisational dynamics and capacities. Some women's organisations have dissolved, including well-known NGOs like *Žene ženama* from Sarajevo. An activist from a leading advocacy organisation in Sarajevo expresses deep sorrow over the closures, including *Viktorija99* in Jajce. Furthermore, a lack of sensitivity towards marginalised groups and their specific needs is most frequently mentioned, indicating a significant gap in inclusivity. Operational strain is evident, with numerous accounts indicating staff overload and inadequate capacity. Chronic shortages of human and financial resources, along with concerns about elitism within organisations, are also highlighted.

Additionally, donor-related challenges expose tensions and mismatched priorities that hinder progress, mainly by sidelining certain topics, neglecting urgent issues, and providing limited funding. One activist describes feeling overwhelmed by the endless paperwork and bureaucracy resulting from increasingly complex donor procedures. A pioneer of the movement highlights a significant funding gap, particularly for ongoing psychological support for women survivors of wartime rape that she assists at court trials. According to an activist working on economic empowerment, many EU projects primarily cover the salaries of EU staff, leaving less for essential activities. Moreover, a lack of gender perspective and sensitivity in the distribution of public budgets to civil society organisations is an ongoing problem, as indicated by the privileged position of male sport and veteran associations in municipal budgets. An activist from an organisation that provides a safe house in Republika Srpska mentions difficulties in securing premises, amid ongoing uncertainty regarding municipal space allocations. A young activist warns that a surge in anti-gender campaigns in Republika Srpska is increasing burnout, making it harder for feminist voices to be heard. Overall, their stories depict activists fighting uphill battles on multiple fronts.

On the other hand, when discussing organisational problems and resource constraints, many interviewees also highlight positive trends. Despite the closure of some organisations, new ones dedicated to gender equality continue to emerge, demonstrating the ongoing energy and importance of women's organising for representing gender issues. An activist from an organisation supporting children born of wartime rape describes the severe understaffing and longstanding neglect of these children's rights by the state. However, she considers the personal stories shared by

its members to be vital resources, alongside the solidarity from other women's organisations.

One challenge facing women's NGOs is the lack of young women joining their ranks, which could threaten their future activities. One interlocutor expresses concern that only a small number of women bear most of the workload, with the average age of feminist activists in BiH being around 50. Another explains that many young women join women's organisations mainly as a stepping stone to careers in state institutions, and also points out the issue of brain drain, as young activists often move on to international organisations like UN Women.

A young activist emphasises the need for women's organisations to tailor their messages to attract younger participants who are more oriented towards digital platforms and communication. Furthermore, she links generational issues to the elitism within women's NGOs and shares a troubling story about the poor treatment of young activists in some professional women's NGOs.

3.2. Negotiating Power and Compromise

To address numerous issues related to gender inequality, women's organisations undertake various activities and adopt different activist strategies. Most of my interlocutors consider women's NGOs as key drivers of legal progress in gender equality, particularly in combating gender-based violence, enhancing women's political representation, and implementing the Gender Equality Law (GEL), which also involves establishing gender equality mechanisms within the government and enacting other laws that promote gender equality. Without the efforts of women's NGOs, it remains uncertain whether and when these issues would be brought onto the political agenda in BiH.

They continue to lobby for legislative reforms, as many ambiguities remain, and advocate for improved implementation of existing laws. Recently, representatives of the organisation providing free legal aid highlighted the inclusion of the "person of trust" institution in the new Law on Protection from Domestic Violence and Violence against Women in the Federation of BiH, initiated by the organisation. Individuals from the so-called network of specialised helpers can act as persons of trust. This enables women to access justice, information, and support more easily when engaging with institutions. Conversely, an activist involved in drafting the social entrepreneurship law – also aimed at vulnerable women's groups – mentioned several issues with its implementation in Republika Srpska. Meanwhile, the Federation continues to face challenges in adopting the law.

Related to this, many of my interlocutors emphasise the importance of working with institutions to keep feminist issues on the agenda, a sentiment especially shared by activists from service-oriented organisations and those representing mar-

ginalised groups. For example, when addressing gender-based violence, an activist from an organisation that provides legal aid emphasises their focus on supporting victims rather than simply criticising the government or seeking self-promotion. She and her colleague share positive experiences from a feminist education programme for the judiciary that they organised, since many attendees recognised past errors in handling domestic violence cases and expressed sincere interest in further training.

Nonetheless, there are ongoing issues, such as the lack of sensitivity among institutions, their politicisation, and, in some cases, the misuse of women's NGOs for superficial cooperation aimed at enhancing the institutions' positive image. Furthermore, there is a capacity shortage within gender equality mechanisms. Due to institutional neglect of various issues, women's NGOs often concentrate on providing services and direct aid. Because of these persistent challenges, one of the movement's pioneers feels as if they were in constant negotiation with institutions. Given repeated mentions of various problems, some interlocutors express concern that such partnerships might unintentionally weaken the effectiveness of activism and the overall impact of women's NGOs, as highlighted by a young activist from Republika Srpska, a lesbian activist, and an activist working on economic empowerment.

3.3. Between Solidarity and Silence: The Complex Terrain of Cooperation and Intersectionality

To foster positive change, women's NGOs highlight the importance of cooperation and networking. Solidarity is highly valued, along with mutual support and encouragement. Collaboration among women's NGOs working in specific sectors, such as gender-based violence, is generally regarded as successful. Cross-ethnic cooperation is considered essential and has origins in the immediate post-war period, with women's NGOs leading the initiatives to promote it. An activist from an organisation operating a safe house in Republika Srpska recalls that her NGO organised meetings between local Serbian women, Bosniak women returnees, and local authorities after the war, which, although initially unwelcome, ultimately contributed to a more peaceful local community.

Nevertheless, many challenges remain, and cross-ethnic cooperation faces numerous obstacles within the complex political landscape. Exclusionary attitudes along ethnic lines are mostly linked to women's organisations representing war-time victims, especially concerning their leaders. Some of my informants note that, to avoid backlash from ethnonationalist parties, many women's NGOs strategically steer clear of cross-ethnic and cross-entity collaboration, which is sometimes viewed as unnecessary, given that many laws related to gender equality fall under

the jurisdiction of lower levels of government (entities and cantons). While some interlocutors note the lack of cooperation between organisations across entities, others mention mutual encouragement and support.

Some interlocutors interpret the lack of cross-ethnic cooperation as pragmatic strategies aimed at achievable outcomes. However, there are concerns that this avoidance results in organisational isolation and a narrowing of activities to the local level. Particularism in feminist activism is often problematised, as well as the avoidance of risks and the ignoring of specific issues. For example, one of the movement's pioneers emphasises the complexity of enacting change in BiH, where raising constitutional questions can provoke backlash due to ongoing trauma from the war. This climate often leads to caution and the avoidance of bold collaborative actions, though incremental improvements occur over time. A lesbian activist from Sarajevo observes that the increasing authoritarian tendencies and anti-gender rhetoric of the government in Republika Srpska are creating parallel realities and jeopardising further cross-entity cooperation.

Therefore, most interlocutors recognise the need to strengthen cooperation, particularly networking, as exemplified by the organisation of children born of war-time rape. Its initiatives engage women's NGOs nationwide, other civil society actors, professional organisations, and associations of former war camp detainees, and are valued by other activists in this research. The following account of an activist offers a recent example of the importance of cross-ethnic and cross-entity collaboration:

I want to emphasise that the amendments¹ to the law on the protection of civilian war victims, submitted by the association Forgotten Children of War, were endorsed by 45 organisations [...]. By submitting these amendments, we have shown that, despite our diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, we stand united in the field of human rights, where equality prevails (Belma, 7 November 2023).

She also states that the organisation has effectively fostered international exchanges, such as partnerships with Ukrainian feminist activists following the Russian invasion, demonstrating a more inclusive approach to networking and collaboration.

In contrast, three interlocutors strongly criticise the absence of solidarity and cooperation, linking this issue to other problems, particularly the situation of women in precarious conditions, rural areas, and impoverished communities. These interlocutors note that urgent concerns such as poverty and economic hardship are largely ignored by most urban-based women's NGOs. Although many of these or-

¹ The amendments were adopted first in Brčko district in July 2022, then in the Federation of BiH in August 2023.

rganisations' representatives acknowledge the difficulties faced by marginalised women's groups and the importance of supporting them during interviews, they often cite limited resources as a barrier to sustained assistance. However, the necessity of examining or addressing their own privileges is often overlooked, revealing a lack of intersectional approach.

For example, an activist focused on economic empowerment emphasises the need for genuine inclusion of marginalised women, criticising tokenism and superficial involvement: "I want to include a woman from the countryside and a woman with a disability in our activities, not just take photos of her in a wheelchair as if that alone demonstrated our support" (Dušanka, 10 March 2023). Other interviewees raise concerns about the Women's Network (*Ženska mreža BiH*), which unites organisations with varied priorities and perspectives. Some of these groups harbour exclusionary attitudes toward LGBT+ rights. For instance, a young activist recounts how an activist from a professional women's organisation asked her: "What is the purpose of an LGBT flag at the March 8th rally?" and advised her not to stir things up (Bojana, 27 April 2023). Similarly, a feminist from a women's NGO working in impoverished local communities claims that, as a feminist organisation, they support LGBT+ rights, whereas some urban-based women's groups avoid taking a clear stance.

3.4. Echoes of the Unseen: Amplifying Marginalised Women's Voices

When it comes to NGOs representing marginalised groups, the limited number of LGBT+ organisations is a significant concern. Additionally, due to issues in securing fundamental rights, there is neglect of specific gender identities:

Within LGBTIQ activism, we are still grappling with fundamental issues such as legislation and the fight against violence. As a result, we often struggle to address the specifics of the diverse LGBTIQ identities. There is criticism within the community regarding the lack of focus on trans rights and the visibility of trans people. Additionally, other identities, such as gender-variant people, non-binary individuals, and asexual people, are often overlooked (Amra, 17 March 2023).

LGBT+ organisations work to improve daily life for LGBT+ individuals by collaborating with institutions, but progress has been inconsistent. According to a lesbian activist, advances have been most evident in the Sarajevo Canton, where cooperation with institutions is stronger. However, in regions without active LGBT+ advocacy, there are significant gaps in institutional knowledge and sensitivity. As a result, LGBT people in urban centres like Sarajevo and Tuzla – where organisations have greater influence – are in a somewhat better position than those elsewhere.

Furthermore, politicians from right-wing parties often oppose LGBT+ rights to gain votes. Some politicians from so-called progressive parties approach these

issues as steps towards the EU, without genuinely engaging with minority rights. However, an activist says that over time, LGBT+ rights have become more recognised in society. Some institutions, such as the state-level gender equality mechanism, now recognise them as part of their responsibilities. She adds that other women's NGOs are generally supportive of LGBT+ rights or, at the very least, not confrontational.

Regarding Roma feminist activism, due to the numerous issues faced by Roma women and the Roma community as a whole, grassroots efforts and direct aid and services are a regular part of their work, including saving people's lives. They organise medical check-ups for women and, as recounted, provided substantial aid to Roma communities during the COVID-19 crisis when institutions completely neglected them. Additionally, economic empowerment is prioritised to address discrimination against Roma women, but initiatives such as the Women's Cooperative *Better Future* struggle with limited funding.

Reflecting on her organisation's increasing cooperation with police and social work centres, a Roma feminist emphasises the importance of maintaining these partnerships. She calls for regular training of new police recruits, who often lack awareness of the particular challenges faced by Roma women victims of domestic violence. "[t]here are younger newcomers in the police force, and we must start the training process all over again" (Berina, 8 November 2023). Among the successes, she recounts that, with the support of the gender equality mechanism at the state level, they gained entry into some institutions for national minorities that had previously been occupied solely by Roma men.

A feminist from a small, impoverished community faces many challenges. Her organisation was criticised by a local police officer due to a rise in domestic violence reports (!). While trying to educate schoolchildren about gender-based violence, she found that officials were unaware Bosnia and Herzegovina had ratified the Istanbul Convention. Despite these obstacles, the group perseveres and has been holding workshops in schools, even under pressure from religious teachers. The organisation is vital in tackling women's issues locally, providing services like childcare due to lack of public facilities. It also supports disadvantaged nearby areas, where women's organising is limited. She notes this is mainly due to strong patriarchal pressures that discourage women from participating or visiting the organisation's events for fear of stigma.

3.5. Small Sparks in a Tough Terrain: Long-Standing Ethnonationalism and New Anti-Gender Threats

My interlocutors express dissatisfaction with the outcomes of their work, citing various constraints on their activities. Although some progress has been made in

improving laws, cooperation with institutions, and raising awareness – particularly regarding gender-based violence and its treatment – many feel these changes are minimal and the process exhausting, with achievements often being undermined. The previously discussed experiences of organisations representing Roma women and LGBT+ people also show limited progress and numerous constraints.

A key factor influencing this perception is the deeply entrenched ethnonational power structures that obstruct feminist activism and gender equality. The unfavourable political climate, alongside political and ethnic divisions and pressures against feminist efforts, is often cited as a significant barrier to progress. Additionally, some interlocutors observe that ethnonational rhetoric has grown more intense, particularly in Republika Srpska, making their work more difficult. These and similar reports from other informants frequently connect this to the global rise of the far-right and the erosion of women's rights, as well as influences from various authoritarian countries in BiH.

Moreover, regressive societal attitudes, particularly among young people, and women's conservatism contribute to these challenges. The negative influence of religion, frequently mentioned during interviews, fuels these conservative views. Furthermore, the limited participation of women in activism worsens the issue, along with the minimal impact and contribution of women politicians. Some participants highlight the disconnection between their organisations' feminist goals and projects and the realities of women in BiH, who have internalised patriarchy and consequently neglect their rights and continue the cycle of oppression. One informant emphasises that women in BiH juggle numerous responsibilities that drain their energy. As a result, when they have free time, they prefer to relax rather than address these urgent issues. Additionally, an aide who assists victims of violence in her local community through the Network of Women Helpers (*Mreža pomagačica*) shares the story of a woman who suffered marital rape for ten years. She emphasises that many women are unaware that any act they do not consent to is considered a criminal offence. As one interlocutor pointedly remarks: "We [feminist activists] find ourselves isolated within our circle of like-minded individuals, and that is where it all ends" (Merima, 22 October 2023).

Although progress has been made in addressing gender-based violence, conservative values – particularly the emphasis on preserving family unity at all costs – continue to undermine these advances. One interlocutor notes that many women experiencing domestic violence endure suffering for years to avoid breaking up their families, often seeking help or pressing charges only when their children become adults. A lesbian activist further observes that regressive societal attitudes, especially homophobic ones, have eased only marginally, with protection of the "traditional family" remaining a dominant value, reinforced by institutional dysfunction.

Moreover, two activists highlight that government support for so-called pro-family conservative organisations illustrates how regressive political and social environments mutually reinforce one another.

The rise of anti-gender groups, especially in the Republika Srpska entity, is particularly troubling. A lesbian activist points out that the situation there is concerning due to hate speech by some government officials against LGBT+ people, as well as the potential bans proposed by anti-gender organisations in the entity. An activist from a women's NGO in Republika Srpska expresses her frustration and concerns, especially because the entity government supports anti-gender organisations:

It was truly tragic for me to realise, after these attacks, that everything we had accomplished in nearly 20 years could be undone overnight [...], erased by a sudden political whim (Smilja, 10 May 2023).

An interlocutor from the Federation observes that the backlash in Republika Srpska highlights the fragility of progress, as negative trends tend to spread more quickly than positive ones. Some informants also point out that certain right-wing politicians in the Federation of BiH frequently employ anti-LGBT rhetoric.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Women's organising within NGOs has become a significant global phenomenon that has gained momentum in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina, where international actors have played significant roles in supporting civil society initiatives, including those aimed at promoting women's participation in democratisation and peacebuilding processes (Björkdahl, 2012, p. 291; Helms, 2014, p. 21). Yet a central question remains: can NGOs, operating in complex relationships with state institutions, drive substantial social change (Jaggar, 2005, p. 16)? This challenge is especially acute in BiH, where the political system prioritises ethnic representation of the three constituent peoples – Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs – often marginalising other groups and identities (Swimelar, 2019, p. 785). Post-war political and social dynamics have further entrenched ethnonational power structures, shaping the environment in which women's NGOs operate, while the strong international presence has been criticised for fostering donor dependency and imposing external agendas that may not fully align with local feminist priorities (Porobić Isaković and Mlinarević, 2019, p. 174).

Despite the difficult environment, feminist activists involved in my research see the establishment and maintenance of NGOs focused on gender equality as a significant achievement. They also note the persistent tension between feminist goals and the realities of operating in a society marked by ethnic divisions and deeply ingrained patriarchal values, often internalised by many women. Anti-feminist

currents, similar to those in other non-Western countries, are embedded within political and social structures that impede progress towards gender equality (Babu and Joseph, 2025, p. 2). However, women's NGOs in BiH have played a crucial role in bringing gender issues to the forefront, supporting women, promoting cross-ethnic cooperation, and fostering reconciliation, laying the groundwork for future activism and feminist awareness (Mlinarević and Kosović, 2011, p. 132). Contemporary activists and pioneering figures who are still active reflect on these early efforts, acknowledging the bravery needed to navigate a landscape shaped by ethnocratic power, post-war opposition, and ongoing challenges, all while striving for legislative change.

Activists concur that without women's NGOs, critical gender equality concerns would largely go unaddressed. Previous research has highlighted these organisations' crucial role in bringing gender issues on the political agenda and in legislation (Helms, 2013; Popov-Momčinović, 2013; Spahić Šiljak, 2014; Rošul-Gajić, 2016). My research shows that feminist activists continue to push for legal reforms by actively engaging with institutions to raise awareness and enhance law enforcement. They have built substantial knowledge and resources, promoting interethnic cooperation, mutual support, and encouragement as a response to systems intended to divide and exert political pressure. Although there have been some advances, insensitivity to gender issues remains, and reports of positive gestures indicate a lack of systematic institutional approach.

NGOs representing marginalised women's groups raise their voices, but progress is slow. The scarce number of LGBT+ organisations, and lack of those focused on lesbian or trans identities, leave these groups underserved, with institutional neglect most evident in areas lacking LGBT+ activism. In Republika Srpska, the situation is dire, as the government promotes anti-LGBT+ rhetoric and exerts pressure. Roma women's NGOs tackle deep-rooted inequalities, including Roma men's political privileges in minority representation, while concentrating on survival and essential services. They face funding gaps, and institutional recognition remains limited despite occasional support. Economic hardships and inadequate institutional support in impoverished areas further burden local women's NGOs. The experiences of women who suffered wartime sexual violence highlight how post-war political and institutional environments continue to reinforce gender inequalities. A relatively new organisation, founded by children born of rape, has gained prominence by amplifying key voices, advocating for legislative change, and promoting collaboration to raise awareness of war-related and post-war gender violence.

My findings corroborate previous research by highlighting the ongoing need for marginalised women to organise in order to define and address their own in-

terests, as well as underscoring the importance of women's rights organisations in developing new repertoires of inclusion (Weldon, 2006, p. 56; Lépinard, 2014, pp. 888, 899). It highlights the necessity for inclusive, intersectional, and well-funded strategies among women's NGOs, feminist activists, donors, and institutions. Amid overwhelming work, numerous issues facing women in society, organisational capacity challenges, and donors' volatility, striving for solidarity among women in a system intended to divide also contributes to the limited intersectional approach. As highlighted in other research, emphasising the commonalities among women can inspire mobilisation; however, this alone is not enough to foster long-term solidarity and commitment (Montoya, 2021, p. 3). A troubling issue revealed in my research is that some women's NGOs may be engaging in exclusionary practices towards certain marginalised groups. Furthermore, poverty and economic inequalities that significantly impact women's lives are not being adequately addressed, and expressed support to women's NGOs working in impoverished areas reflects a condescending and patronising attitude, problematised in other research on intersectionality in the feminist movement (Muñoz-Puig, 2024, p. 1140). While "doing intersectionality" is challenging and missteps should not necessarily be interpreted as non-existent, or only partial, commitment (Townsend-Bell, 2014, p. 140), further research is needed to address representation and the intersectional matrices of subordination and privileges in society, policies, and women's organisations in BiH.

Feminist activists in BiH acknowledge key challenges within NGOs, such as fragmentation, limited social foundation, and heavy reliance on donor funding, as noted in earlier studies (Ghodsee, 2004; Sloat, 2005; Korolczuk, 2013). My research reveals ongoing issues faced by women's NGOs in BiH, including elitism, limited capacity, and low participation among younger women, which jeopardise their sustainability. Other research suggests that the younger generation of feminist activists in BiH and the region is dissatisfied with organisational activism (Siročić, 2019, p. 7). Despite durable networks linking women's NGOs, barriers remain, including the avoidance of sensitive issues and difficulties in cross-entity cooperation, due to complex political and administrative hurdles and organisational overload. These obstacles highlight the urgent need for enhanced inter-organisational collaboration, especially as anti-gender activism grows stronger, particularly in Republika Srpska, where it is supported by the entity government (Dizdar *et al.*, 2025, p. 55). Therefore, it is vital to preserve feminist solidarity, encourage cooperation among women's NGOs nationwide, and develop new resistance strategies.

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