

# Promjena – “Change” in Bosnia and Herzegovina

*A collaboration between cfd – the feminist Peace Organisation, PWAG – PeaceWomen across the globe, and KOFF – the Swiss platform for peacebuilding, aims to jointly contribute to the implementation process of the current Swiss National Action Plan on the UN Security Council Resolution 1325. Thematically, we focus on the question of women’s participation in political and peace processes for effective conflict prevention, and especially on the socio-economic conditions that need to be met to enable said participation. We do this with specific attention to care-work and how it interacts with participation in peace processes. Our research is based on interviews we are conducting with Swiss civil society organizations and their partners in Switzerland and abroad.*

In January 2021, Leandra Bias (project lead) interviewed Ivona Erdeljic, Program Director at Amica Educa (BiH), and Lea Breitner, Program Officer Eastern and Southern Europe at cfd. From 2018 until 2020, Amica Educa was supported by cfd in running a project addressing poverty-affected middle-aged women in Zivinice, Bosnia and Herzegovina. For three years, Amica Educa organized workshops, roundtables and coaching to enhance women’s participation in rural communities and increase services regarding mental health and economic independence.

## **What was the idea behind Promjena? Who participated in the project?**

Promjena was mainly addressing isolated women in rural areas with strong economic dependency on their husbands, psychosocial needs, and gender-specific vulnerabilities. This for instance concerns their family circumstances – many of them live with their elderly and often war-disabled in-laws - and the resulting questions around their care-work, sexual and gender-based violence, and (war) trauma.

## **What was your goal? What was your understanding of women participation?**

Our goal was to achieve increased and empowered women participation in the community. On the one hand we wanted to increase women representation in the local government. Most positions on communal and local level are occupied by men, which affects local policy and decision-making. On the other hand, we aimed to foster social participation. This means to be included in the community, for example at discussions, cultural events or as part of an association.

## **What kind of activities were developed?**

Firstly, we offered psychosocial support and psycho-educative services, bilaterally and in peer-groups. Secondly, we organized craftsmanship and business workshops. And finally, we carried out advocacy campaigns at the authorities’ level.

## **What kind of change did you achieve?**

Change came in many ways. There was a measurable increase in social participation. The women became aware of the word “patriarchy” and its implications for their lives. We created a space to talk and listen about budgeting, household chores, raising the children, mental health, communication with friends and others, trauma healing, the women’s bodies, and a lot more. We also discussed the significance of a woman’s participation through care-work in keeping the household up and running. The women learned how valuable their work and their personal needs are. They started up their own income-generating businesses, began equally distributing housework obligations to their children, regardless of their gender, and left violent marriages. However, even though Amica Educa has been engaging in other projects in the region of Zivinice for years, we were not prepared for the challenges we were to face with the project.

## **What were the challenges? Why did you decide to bring this project to an end?**

The numbers of participants never came close to what

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we had wished for. That is why the project was finally terminated. There were too little women willing and able to participate. The barriers originating in their precarious living situations were too high: the women feared to lose their reputation, were met with negative reactions from their families, and simply did not have the time which is needed when getting to know such a new format. The more precarious the living situation, the more difficult it is to commit oneself to such a project. We also did not reach our goal to increase women representation in the local council – there are now five women in the council, which is a success, but much less than anticipated. We realized at some point that the work for us women at Amica Educa became too much, with too little outcome.

## **What are your plans now?**

We want to use our energy for change, and since we experienced amazing results with the participants we did have, we decided to adapt the project to a new target group. We are currently developing and implementing a similar project with youths in Tuzla. Our aim is for the youths to learn about gender-roles and nonviolent communication and about how to advocate for these issues and other concerns of youngsters.

## **What is your recommendation for other actors, who are committed to women’s participation?**

You must remember that there are many barriers to women participation. They are tasked with the care of elderly in-laws, raising the children, cooking, agriculture and much more, all while experiencing isolation and a

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lack of mobility. The workshops need to be timed accordingly, e.g., during the weekends, while supporting women in transportation and child-care. And even then, they might face harassment from their own community, and their daily care-work remains undone. Participation takes a lot of time and resources from the women. Also, public participation needs a vocabulary, you must learn certain unwritten laws. When you study or do an apprenticeship, you get all this en passant, but women who are confined at home do not learn this. With Promjena, we really had to start from scratch.

In this interview, it became clear how difficult it is for women in precarious living situations to engage and participate in the public sphere. Their impact on the communities through care-work remains largely unseen, though builds a significant foundation for public participation and therefore for felt security and peace, too. Promjena shows how diverse the barriers to women participation are and how difficult it is to achieve a change in social norms.