

2018 OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting**Gordana Čomić (Serbia), Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia*****Working Session 15******Ensuring equal opportunity for women and men in all spheres in life, including through the implementation of the OSCE Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality on Wednesday, 19 September 2018, 3 to 6 pm.*****Introduction**

What does it mean to be a woman and involved in politics? How and why does it happen? Does politics choose me, as a female, or do I choose it?

In reality, women participating in politics is an innovation. While we have had an ‘in principle’ legal right to participate for three or four generations, in many contexts we are the first generation of women to say *“Yes, I want to be a politician. Politics is all about my life too. It shapes my life on daily basis and I want to say what I think of it. I am a person with free will and I want to exercise that will”*. While it sounds simple and easy, especially as female participation in politics is a legal right in most parts of the world, those who try to exercise this right in practice will often face the old truth that things are not as easy as they initially appear.

Women as agents of change

Being a female politician means being a power that makes a difference in society. It is not easy, it is very demanding all the time, but the feeling of success is glorious. Coming from a country in transition, from a society emerging after wars, war crimes and hatred among people, I know there is nothing stronger than a woman’s voice speaking clearly on behalf of herself and others. The participation of women in politics can represent a new chapter for societies, enabling new ideas to emerge and take root.

Politics as a whole has two main dimensions:

- 1) Space – through the decision-making process you can influence the physical space in which your nation exists. You build roads, bridges, buildings; you choose what kind of agriculture you will have and what sort of housing, irrigation, architecture etc. is developed. This is what people have done since the beginning of time – they change the space they live in, very often after they have harmed it or sought to repair it. Politics is in one way or another responsible for every change in space that is made within the

state. So what role do women have? We want to have an equal part in that decision-making process. We want to be asked, heard and listened to if someone, somewhere wishes to change our environment. We want to know how our space will look and why, how much it will cost and who will have to pay for it. We want to know because half of that space is ours, because we are half of human kind.

- 2) Social relations – politics changes the social relations that we accept as socially desirable. It gives and takes people's rights. Once upon a time slavery was common - politics changed that. There was also a time when people thought that women should not have the same rights as men, but we fought for the right to vote, to go to school, to have a job, to own private property, to be politicians. These changes occurred because of politics – people made a stand and took decisions that sought to change women's quality of life.

By learning from women who have gone before them, and sharing experiences with those with whom they work, female – and male – politicians can improve the quality of representation and service delivery experienced by the general citizen. My life in Serbia, my dialogue with women from Kosovo, my cooperation with women from Bosnia and Herzegovina and in the region of south east Europe as a whole, has been driven by the will to share. This drive to share which has, in my experience, been exerted in the first instance by females, helps shape the wider political discourse and change male politicians' behaviour. Without female politicians acting as agents for change, such significant developments may not have emerged.

ODIHR and OSCE structures are indispensable for this process not only for participating states, but for reshaping politics as a whole, as it should be, serving the common interest of the people revitalizing the principles of human rights as basic one in politics that shapes the space we live in and social relations that we want to have as desirable ones among men and women in every and each society.

Networking and working across party lines (Serbia case)

Since the 2012 elections, women in Serbia have introduced networking in the parliament. Keen to ensure that the parliamentary quota for women achieves more than just a female presence in parliament, wanting instead delivering tangible differences in political and public life, female members have worked together, across party lines, to answer the question "*We have a quota, now what?*". Female members have agreed that there are issues concerning women that are above party differences, and that a cooperative and consensual approach should be adopted if changes are to be delivered. This has led to the formation of the "Women's parliamentary network" which has seen all female MPs agree to work together on issues of common interest, including:

- Combating violence against women, domestic violence and fighting all violent processes in society
- Fighting for women's representation on every and all levels of government
- Supporting women's entrepreneurship
- Fostering health care for women with the focus on prevention and decreasing the number of women dying from breast and cervical cancer as curable forms of cancer, if detected on time
- Helping women at the local level organize and network, spreading the power of dialogue on the grassroots

To date this approach has been successful. We submit amendments together, we defend them with the same language, and we work with the executive as ruling coalition and opposition members. We do not give up the dialogue even when the political and public arena becomes heated – learning from our experience, we know what we owe the next generation of Serbian leaders the freedom to live without the problems created by previous generations.

OSCE Mission in Serbia, with support of ODIHR, has assisted Serbia in fulfilling commitments to achieving gender equality, including support to the women's party and political movement like Women Parliamentary Network or dialogue between women parliamentarians from Belgrade and Priština.

Women and age of populism, what can OSCE do?

Every reality is first an imagination, at the beginning, an idea to be transformed in life, on daily basis.

That is what political parties do, we, men and women politicians are dream builders and reality producers and to stay fit with ability to change and adapt, political parties must never stop building dreams and produce reality based on that dreams, if they stop doing it, they die. You can not survive as political party without ideas you carry on as offer and as a dream to voters.

Being a populist means that you are nightmare builder and in reality you produce disasters.

So, why people love populism than? Knowing from history what happens "after populism"?

It is sweet and seductive, it feeds low passion within people, it uses propaganda to make you sure that your dream is already fulfilled, you just need populists to show you how beautiful it is to negatively define everything and everybody else because than you will look better to everyone than you really are. Populism need enemies, fears, needs the perception that everything around you is in danger and that hatred, myths and will to fight is the only possible answer.

We, female politicians need ODIHR and OSCE structures in different countries to rebuild the dream of human rights and combat injustice, intolerance and populism in aim to change our societies for better and for good.