



**FEMINIST TIME TRAVEL THROUGH  
BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA**

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We express our sincere gratitude to the women who shared their personal stories for the purposes of this publication, thereby contributing to its content.

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# **Feminist Time Travel Through Bosnia and Herzegovina**

Sarajevo, 2024

## Reviews of the Publication “Feminist Time Travel Through Bosnia and Herzegovina”

This publication brings together 21 deeply personal stories of women activists who share their journeys of activism, feminism, and their visions of Bosnian society. These narratives, though seemingly straightforward, invite profound reflection on the lived experiences of these remarkable women. They reveal the challenges they have faced in their relentless fight for visibility and recognition of the women’s movement. Each story is a testament to the struggles, achievements, and unwavering dedication of women who have broken stereotypes, challenged societal norms, and fostered meaningful change in their communities.

Through their voices, these women illuminate the realities of building women’s organizations, mobilizing local communities, and navigating the complexities of activism. Their commitment and resilience inspire collective action for the betterment of society and the advancement of women’s activism. They remind us that the power of unity lies at the heart of progress.

The publication offers a rich exploration of the obstacles these women encountered on their paths to breaking prejudices, advocating for equality, and building a more just and peaceful society. It delivers a strong message, urging women to connect, support, and uplift one another while demanding “conscious and incorruptible women in the political arena” (Mersida Mešetović).

“Only through active participation and collaboration can we overcome challenges and build a democratic society where everyone has equal opportunities and a voice,” reflects Aida Feraget, emphasizing that “silence and inaction have never led to positive change.”

“The women’s movement should not be treated as a mere project but as a continuous effort and commitment. We can achieve more and better,” asserts Esma Drken-  
da.

The narrators also critically examine past mistakes, such as the tendency to exhaust themselves in proving inequality or working in isolation without leveraging collective strength. “It is crucial to recognize the most impactful initiatives and support them consistently and unitedly, one by one, giving them visibility and pushing them toward realization with determined focus,” notes Amira Avdić.

Dubravka Kovačević advocates for prioritizing significant issues, remarking, “We cannot work on 50 goals simultaneously.” She also highlights a tendency to align

with donor-driven priorities at the expense of core objectives. In contrast, Neira Raković calls for greater decisiveness, courage, and unity, particularly in advocacy efforts.

The narrators emphasize the importance of investing in the education of young women and continuously rejuvenating the activist movement to drive sustainable change. They see feminism not only as a struggle for gender equality but also as an essential framework for societal transformation. “Feminism is vital, as is widespread education about it, especially among young people, as misconceptions and prejudices about feminism and feminists still persist,” explains Nikolić.

The themes highlighted in the stories invite dialogue, the exchange of experiences, and a call to activists to share their own stories, thereby contributing to the visibility of women’s activist actions.

The publication serves as an important and valuable resource for documenting narratives and encourages others to share their stories and reflect by asking themselves:

“When was the last time I paused and thought about the stories I tell about myself, my own life, and the values I hold...?”

M.Sc. Ranka Katalinski

**“Feminist Time Travel Through Bosnia and Herzegovina”** represents a significant contribution to documenting the struggles and efforts of women in building a society rooted in equality – a society where every woman can fully realize her rights, aspirations, and dreams. This book captures the ongoing fight for women’s human rights, presenting stories of women who live and work among us, actively shaping a better and more just society today.

The book offers an opportunity to reflect on the current struggle for women’s rights, while each story serves as a powerful reminder of the women who fought before us for the freedoms we now enjoy. Through vignettes from the lives of activists from various regions of Bosnia and Herzegovina, highlighting women with diverse experiences, opportunities, and circumstances, the author has masterfully documented inspiring tales of solidarity, friendship, and unity. These women have built strong bonds while confronting numerous challenges.

The narratives explore the fight for greater representation and amplification of women’s voices in public and political life, battles within their families and communities against imposed gender roles and stereotypes, advocacy for the improved status of women with disabilities, and the importance of economic empowerment. Additionally, they shed light on struggles against violence, war, injustice, and inequality – battles fought on behalf of all disenfranchised and marginalized women in our society.

This compelling collection celebrates the resilience and determination of women as agents of change, illuminating their vital contributions to the ongoing pursuit of equality and justice.

Each story offers a unique perspective, vividly portraying the reality of these women, a reality marked by selfless dedication to supporting others and resisting injustice within patriarchal structures and the broader social context. Though diverse, these narratives reveal how deeply interconnected they are, illustrating how women from different generations have joined forces to build support networks. These networks, continually evolving, remain the backbone of the women’s movement in Bosnia and Herzegovina today.

For these women, solidarity and the fight against patriarchy are not mere words but driving forces propelling them forward. Through friendships, learning, and collaboration, they create a community that offers support and safety to women whose voices have been silenced, who are disenfranchised, and who are denied the opportunity to fully exercise their rights.

The stories, however, do not shy away from the challenges, hardships, and obstacles these women have faced, and continue to face. Discrimination, violence,

inequality, and injustice; lack of support and understanding; and the rise of anti-gender movements are just some of the barriers they confront in their narratives. This book is not merely a collection of stories; it is a source of inspiration and motivation for both the current and future generations. It reminds us that heroines live all around us, often even among us. It is a call to action, an urgent appeal to foster solidarity, challenge patriarchy, and champion feminist values in our society.

“Feminist Time Travel Through Bosnia and Herzegovina” provides a deeper understanding of the women’s movement in the country, reminding us that feminism is far more than a fight for women’s rights. It is a movement rooted in solidarity, unity, and resistance – one that continues to inspire new generations to persist in building a more just society for all.

This is a story of the courage and resilience of women who have shared their lives with us, serving as an inspiration for current and future generations of activists. Women like Nikolina, Vlasta, Jovana, Besima, Nada, Esma, Ifeta, Neira, Daliborka, Aida, Ifeta, Ana, Dina, Anela, Adisa, Mersida, Roksanda, Varja, Dubravka, Amira, and Lenka, along with many others mentioned in their stories, deserve our deepest gratitude and respect.

We owe them thanks for all they have taught us, for all they have built and continue to build, for the lessons on life values, solidarity, and perseverance, for their contribution to the freedoms we enjoy today, and for the motivation to ensure that current and future generations of activists follow in their footsteps.

Maida Zagorac

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# Abbreviations

- AFŽ** – *Women's Antifascist Front (Antifašistički front žena)*
- CEDAW** – *The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*
- CŽR** – *Civilian War Victims (Civilne žrtve rata)*
- HDZ BiH** - *Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina*
- KUD** – *Cultural and Artistic Society (Kulturno-umjetničko društvo)*
- LGBTIQ+** – *Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, queer, intersex, androgynous/agender/asexual/aromantic*
- NATO** – *North Atlantic Treaty Organization*
- NDI** – *The National Democratic Institute*
- NGO** – *Nongovernmental Organization*
- OCD** – *Civil Society Organizations (Organizacije civilnog društva)*
- ODIHR** – *Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights*
- OS BiH** – *Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Oružane snage Bosne i Hercegovine)*
- PR** – *Public Relations*
- RK** – *Handball Club (Rukometni klub)*
- SDP** – *Social Democratic Party*
- SSRNJ** – *Socialist Alliance of Working People of Yugoslavia (Socijalistički savez radnog naroda Jugoslavije)*
- UŽ** – *Women's Association (Udruženje žena)*
- UN** – *United Nations*
- ZAVNOBiH** – *State Antifascist Council for the National Liberation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Zemaljsko antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Bosne i Hercegovine)*

# INTRODUCTION

On September 26, 1945, the daily newspaper *Sarajevski dnevnik* published a news story about a shortage of apples in Zenica. A councilwoman from the Women's Antifascist Front (AFŽ), founded in December 1942, explained that this occurred because "women are celebrating the victory of their hard-earned right – their right to vote in elections and their equality with men – by making apple pies, welcoming guests, and celebrating together." This news can be found in the digitized edition of *Sarajevski dnevnik* in the Mediacentar Sarajevo archive.

Historical records and textbooks that detail the development of society provide numerous facts about women's struggles following 1945: literacy campaigns, employment opportunities, solidarity, and the pursuit of freedom. For instance, Boris Dežulović, in the *Agelast* podcast (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1D-FrdwKCGY8>, timestamp 1:04:00), uses the example of Sinj, which he describes as a traditionally patriarchal society where women were expected only to give birth and serve men. Yet, with the establishment of a local thread factory, women started working, earning wages, and riding bicycles. Eventually, they received uniforms consisting of pants and shirts, gained access to housing, took annual vacations, and traveled to the seaside. They could even live independently.

"They became emancipated, modern women with their own salaries who could go to the seaside in bikinis and live alone. But after the 1990s, war happened, and we returned to the Middle Ages. We went back to the church, priests, and men. Even for those who wanted to work, there were no jobs..."

Amid the apparent despair of the war and post-war period in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a women's movement began to take shape: volunteers in hospitals tending to the wounded, women leading anti-war demonstrations, those cooking for their communities or sewing clothes for growing children. After the war, women's activism evolved, giving rise to initiatives, gatherings, and connections aimed at addressing violence, fostering economic empowerment, and more.

This wave of activism brought about significant legal and societal changes: the Law on the Prohibition of Domestic Violence, the Law on Gender Equality, Bosnia and Herzegovina's signing of the Istanbul Convention, accession to CEDAW, the introduction of open candidate lists, and a mandatory 40% representation of the less-represented gender on those lists.

Numerous women's organizations and networks have since emerged, diligently working on the ground, pushing the boundaries of their power and influence, and striving to create a more equitable society.

Some future historical records and textbooks will offer their evaluation of the women's movement in Bosnia and Herzegovina after the first quarter of the 21st century, an assessment that must not be viewed in isolation from the broader social context and the distribution of political power. Until then, we present this publication, featuring contributions from around 20 activists connected to the CURE Foundation, many of whom participated in the three-day workshop *Feminist Time Travel*. Through this platform, they share their reflections on activism, feminism, and their insights into Bosnian society.

These activists, representing various life stages and diverse activist experiences, approached their contributions in different ways. Some wrote responses to questions, others engaged in conversations with the author, while a few reflected briefly on specific aspects of their activism. Some are “grouped” by age or type of activity, but the key is that their reflections and perspectives on the current moment in Bosnia and Herzegovina are preserved.

After all, challenges are ever-present, with new ones frequently emerging, making it invaluable to have documented ideas, proposals, and insights to guide the future.



## **Jovana Bojanić, Nikolina Gagić, and Vlasta Marković:**

### *Fighting for Ourselves, We Change the World*

Recognizing that the future lies with young people and that only young women can sustain the flame of women’s activism, the CURE Foundation selected Jovana Bojanić (Sokolac), Nikolina Gagić (Srebrenica), and Vlasta Marković (Tuzla) to share their expectations. These young activists, born during or shortly after the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, represent a new generation of change-makers.

As they themselves recount, all three grew into activism thanks to the influence of their mothers or the support of a civil society organization. They proudly identify as feminists and believe that all women should embrace feminism. However, they often find themselves explaining that granting rights to women does not mean taking them away from others and that feminism has never waged wars.

Jovana shares that during her upbringing and education, she faced various challenges stemming from the fact that she came from a “non-traditional” family. Today, however, she is an activist and part of the women’s movement in Bosnia and Herzegovina. She participates in street actions, ranging from March 8th marches to peace walks advocating for global harmony.

“I am incredibly grateful for my education at the Gymnasium in Sokolac. I was immature, often absent-minded and indifferent, but rebellious – at odds with myself, my surroundings, and my divided family. Activism transformed me into

someone who refuses to turn a blind eye to injustice. I began to break away from the traditional patriarchal way of life in 2010 when I met Jadranka Miličević from the CURE Foundation,” Jovana recounts. That meeting introduced her to a new world filled with the PitchWise Festival, seminars, workshops, and activist projects – all of which, she says, served as healing and a balm for her wounds.

“Many activists and feminists brought energy into my life that helped me become aware of myself as a person, love myself, reconcile with my mother, learn to love, forgive myself, and understand the importance of working on my traumas and fears. They taught me that our wombs are inexhaustible sources of life,” says Jovana.

Vlasta Marković, a pedagogue-psychologist and peacebuilder from Tuzla, works with the Tuzla-based association *Prijateljice* (Friends). She first connected with them in the third grade of elementary school when, following her parents’ divorce, she was referred to the association by her school for socialization purposes. In 2008, she joined the project “Rest from War and Peacebuilding” as a participant. A decade later, she became a project coordinator, overseeing initiatives including a peace camp that annually gathers around 60 high school students from across Bosnia and Herzegovina.

“I have an overwhelming need to ensure that something as senseless as war never happens again, and I feel immense happiness when I see that the young people who participate in our camps return home aware of how evil war truly is. I am incredibly grateful to work with young people, to discuss equality and tolerance – they grasp these concepts much faster than adults. We have such remarkable young people; they are emotionally intelligent, they break stereotypes, they know a lot about rights... they truly restore hope, and that is my guiding idea. At the same time, in my community, I belong to all sides and to none, so my story shows others that coexistence is possible,” Vlasta shares.

She explains that she comes from a mixed-nationality family, and, during Ramadan, she performs prayers and fasts, while on significant Orthodox dates, she attends church. This occasionally confuses people, but they’ve come to understand that it is entirely possible to live that way.

“During the Census, I identified myself as Bosnian and Herzegovinian – I belong to the entire territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and I always act as an ambassador of BiH, wherever I am. In Tuzla, I have never felt rejected, which is one of the advantages of living in Tuzla,” says Vlasta. She believes that the most enriching experiences come from conversations with people and exchanging ideas, which often inspires her to research more about the topics she hears about.

“I also learn a lot from our director at the association *Prijateljice* because she has

worked extensively with women from Podrinje, especially Srebrenica, since the war. She is a true treasure trove of knowledge and experience. In terms of peace-building, I think I matured the most during the bombing of Serbia – many people around me were rejoicing, but I had a friend in Serbia, and I knew I couldn't be happy while she was afraid. I also understood that after a war, there are no real winners," Vlasta shares.

Nikolina Gagić, born in Srebrenica after the war in 1997, holds a master's degree in Gender Studies from Iceland. She reflects on how volunteerism and activism surrounded her even before she fully understood what they meant.

"I'm not exactly sure how old I was when I realized that reconciliation is what our country needed. I think it started with reconciliation, even though I wasn't in conflict with anyone. My mother was deeply involved in it, and there were times when I didn't understand why, but I would help her or simply be present during the activities. When the time came, I began working on my own with my friends, still with my mother's support. Sometimes, I resisted the desire to engage in activism because I didn't want to go through the challenges my mother faced – it was often a thankless job. But people and unity are more important, especially when I see the progress we've achieved here while the world seems to be moving backward. I wish I could be everywhere, at every protest and in every fight being waged," Nikolina shares.

All three see feminism to change the world for the better.

"Feminism exists and will continue to exist as long as even one woman is alive and striving for her own victories. By fighting for ourselves, we change the world. Moreover, it's important to remember that feminism has never waged wars, and that's why we need more women's circles infused with 'femi-doping' to stifle any war-mongering rhetoric and ideas, from the home to the streets," says Jovana.

Vlasta, on the other hand, regrets that feminism is not more visible in Bosnia and Herzegovina and believes it lacks prominence because society as a whole values men more highly.

"In our own homes, girls are the ones making sandwiches for their brothers, not the other way around, or even mutually. And I, when I go to a car mechanic, call the fathers of my friends. Once, when my mother was in the hospital, I found the phone numbers and names of the doctors, but I asked my brother to speak to them because I knew they would take him more seriously or respect him more. Today, things are better than they used to be, but they're still far from good," says Vlasta.

Nikolina is concerned about how the term "feminism" has become a threat or something negative.

“I’m not one to seek inequality at every turn, but I think that here, as well as in many places around the world lately, the struggle of feminists is a fight against inequality and for proving that feminism is not hatred toward men, but simply a fight for equal starting positions. Many women don’t perceive the effects of rigid patriarchal norms as inequality but as something to be accepted. In this context, it’s crucial that more parents today value their daughters’ education and career readiness before marriage because the femicide rate – at least what we can see – is staggering,” says Nikolina. She notes that violence is often justified by religion and tradition and that it is tolerated under these pretexts.

Each of these three young women identifies different threats to the development of a democratic society and greater respect for human rights.

“The greatest obstacle is the constant saber-rattling and threats of war. It triggers PTSD, even in young people born after the war, as a transgenerational trauma. On top of that, every day we hear talk of vital national interests while forests are burning, and governments are buying expensive cars. We hear stories about national rights while people can’t afford to buy bread... Politics must change,” concludes Vlasta.

For Jovana, the main issue is the lack of understanding among neighbors.

“The biggest obstacles to achieving peace and harmony are misunderstandings between people, and this could be overcome through the exchange of positive experiences and practices, especially in local communities,” says Jovana.

Nicolina, on the other hand, is concerned about the lack of respect and tolerance, which results in everyone feeling like a minority in some way.

“We cling to values formed during or immediately after the war, and they shape our behavior, consciously or unconsciously. This has fueled and sustained the patriarchal norms in which we grew up and which shaped our opinions. Now we have minorities defined by gender, sexual orientation, clothing, makeup, or music preferences, and all these minorities are marginalized. We’ve invented the ‘radicalization of equality,’ where, if we advocate for LGBTQ+ rights, everyone will supposedly turn gay; if we fight for a woman’s right to choose, they’ll all suddenly be having abortions nonstop; or if we criticize the influence of religious communities, everyone will abandon religion... and none of this is true. We’re surrounded by molds for everything – war, nation, religion, victim, perpetrator, woman, mother, lesbian, goth (someone who finds beauty in cemeteries, blood, skulls, horror movies – ed. note). We hate the West because we think the West hates us. Many people on this peninsula believe this and reject everything Western as being against our traditions. But our traditions don’t involve confining women to their homes, creating enemies out of neighbors, or hating someone for being different,” explains Nikolina.

Vlasta envisions a future where the women's movement in Bosnia and Herzegovina focuses more on preventing femicide and violence against women.

“I believe that’s where everything begins. We need to empower women, free them from constraints, and develop systemic mechanisms to address violence and strengthen their rights. I’ve long thought how beneficial it would be to have psychologists in every clinic, someone people can turn to. This would empower young women who don’t even realize they’re victims of violence, who don’t understand that their partner has no right to forbid them from wearing certain clothes or going somewhere. We must teach girls that even their fathers have no right to hit them and that they shouldn’t accept anything they don’t want because only then will they know how to set boundaries with men as they grow older,” Vlasta explains.

However, she acknowledges that the women’s movement is “exhausted,” with only a small number of women actively involved and burdened by financial insecurity. Still, she sees it as a space where young activists and new generations of women can begin their journey toward securing rights and freedoms.

“Perhaps I won’t live to see the changes sparked by the steppingstones laid by earlier activists, but it’s important that the movement continues. It’s not easy – Republika Srpska adopted the Defamation Law, and it’s likely to be passed in the Federation too, alongside legislation on foreign agents. Women often bear the brunt of these challenges. We see how much violence exists, which explains why many women are hesitant to speak out. Even my mother worries for me; she always frets when I go to protests or wear a keffiyeh, despite being a fighter herself. She raised me as a single mother, the first in our family to graduate from university and become a doctor. She did it all so I could do what I do today. I even appropriated her car for our organization’s needs, and I’m deeply grateful. I know she’s proud of me, even when she worries,” Vlasta concludes.

Jovana believes that fostering awareness and understanding among citizens in Bosnia and Herzegovina should start with small groups.

“People with different needs can work together to build a healthy society,” Jovana says, adding that the mirror of a healthy society is the peaceful sleep of a fulfilled individual and the freedom of choice for every woman.





## **Besima Borić:**

### *Results Have Been Achieved in Many Areas*

Besima Borić is a politician, social democrat, committed leftist, and activist. She is a retired professor of her native language and literature with a long teaching career in elementary and high schools. Besima has served as a councilor in the Vogošća Municipal Council, a representative in the Sarajevo Canton Assembly, a member of the House of Representatives of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and a minister in the Sarajevo Canton Government from 2001 to 2002. Twenty years ago, she founded the first women's association in Vogošća, *Korak više* ("A Step Forward"). From 2002 to 2006, she coordinated the Gender Equality Task Force under the Stability Pact for BiH (GTF BiH). Through her work, she developed a model of cooperation with civil society organizations and trade unions in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the region. Besima frequently writes about social democracy, social policy, gender equality, and the contributions of women to State Antifascist Council for the National Liberation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (ZAVNOBiH). She is a highly regarded figure in activist circles, always ready to lend her support.

### **CURE: How did you get into politics, and how did it all start?**

**BORIĆ:** I started quite early, even in my youth. I was always drawn to social work. Back in the former state, I entered politics in 1968, joining the League of Communists. When I was elected president of the Municipal Organization of the Socialist Alliance of Working People (SSRNJ) in Vogošća in 1986, I began taking politics more seriously. I always found it challenging yet fulfilling to have a little

power in my hands to influence improving citizens' lives and shaping decisions. After the war, it felt entirely natural for me to engage politically because I understood that we faced many problems and that we all needed to join forces to normalize relations, mend broken ties, and build bridges.

**CURE: What was crucial for your political and activist development?**

**BORIĆ:** I realized long ago that only through coordinated action and mutual respect between politics and civil society can we truly understand the core of the problems and offer meaningful solutions. This belief has guided me throughout my life. My focus has always been on human rights, especially women's rights, social policy, gender equality, the fight against violence, and workers' rights. Some might say these are typical "women's issues," but I argue that these are deeply challenging areas, which is precisely why I chose to engage in them. I approached these issues with the same passion whether I was working in legislative or executive roles, whether in power or opposition. It has always brought me joy to make a positive difference in people's lives.

**CURE: What would you highlight as the focus of your current work? You are a member of the Social Democratic Party (SDP), but you are also highly regarded and welcomed in activist circles.**

**BORIĆ:** When you accumulate a lot of experience and knowledge, as I have over the years, it becomes natural to reflect on the impact of your efforts. I find myself questioning why some initiatives haven't produced the results I anticipated and, more importantly, what needs to be improved or changed to achieve better outcomes. Unfortunately, we haven't developed effective mechanisms for transferring knowledge, we lack successful mentorship programs, and fewer and fewer people are willing to listen to others' experiences and advice. Additionally, I am uninterested in empty rhetoric or boasting about past achievements. My focus is on improving solutions, both within my party and in broader efforts. I am particularly dedicated to encouraging women to speak up, to protest, and to voice their opinions without fear. Through my own example, I strive to demonstrate that it is possible, and necessary, to maintain an active and engaged approach to addressing challenges. This applies, of course, to women who have chosen to seriously engage in politics, civil society, trade unions, and similar fields.

**CURE: From the perspective of your experience, how do you view the position of women in Bosnian society over the past fifty years?**

**BORIĆ:** Fifty years is an extensive period during which the position of women has generally improved significantly, especially in terms of creating the conditions for enabling and strengthening women's roles in political and social life. Historically, this has always been the result of women's struggles. Women organized through the Antifascist Women's Front (AFŽ) during World War II and afterward laid the foundations for a better quality of life. They became essential contributors to all spheres of societal development, though, as is still the case today, their numbers were never sufficient. Over the past two decades, however, retraditionalization has forced us to fight once again for our place in the sun. By drafting laws, raising issues that particularly concern us, and exploring potential new working models,

we have managed to bring the position of women into relatively solid frameworks. That said, if we were to measure progress by the number of women in parliaments and executive bodies, or their presence and visibility, we couldn't say we are satisfied or that we are in a significantly better position than during the time of the former state. However, our voices are being heard.

**CURE: You served as the Minister of Labor and Social Welfare in the Sarajevo Canton Government from 2000 to 2002. Could you describe your work and the political climate at that time, and compare it to the current situation?**

**BORIĆ:** That period stands out as one of my proudest achievements. Mandates were limited to only two years, yet when I reflect on everything I accomplished, even I find it hard to believe how much was done. It was a transformative time, as social democracy, represented by the Alliance for Change, came to power for the first time after years of right-wing dominance. My portfolio included social policy, labor, and addressing the needs of displaced persons and returnees, areas that were heavily burdened with unresolved issues. Many of these challenges persisted due to a lack of political will and misplaced priorities. I approached my role with determination, analyzing what could realistically be achieved and prioritizing issues that required immediate attention. I worked tirelessly, driven by a strong sense of responsibility, and encouraged my team to do the same. Among the accomplishments I am most proud of, I advanced the rights of individuals with disabilities, mothers, and children through the drafting of a new Law on Social Protection, Protection of Civilian Victims of War, and Families with Children. For the first time, this law recognized victims of violence as beneficiaries of social protection – a groundbreaking inclusion that had not even been addressed in federal legislation at the time. I also spearheaded the creation of the first-ever Protocol between the Sarajevo Canton Government and Civil Society Organizations for the accommodation of victims of violence in safe houses and the provision of funding for their shelter. This was an unprecedented initiative in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Additionally, I actively facilitated the return of displaced persons both to and from Sarajevo by designing joint projects in collaboration with local communities and authorities in Republika Srpska. Furthermore, I introduced a new, inclusive approach to governance, emphasizing collaboration with civil society organizations. I insisted on involving representatives of these organizations, unions, and associations in the drafting of regulations and laws and ensured their participation in public debates. This practice of consultation and partnership with civil society was not common at the time, and I take pride in having established it as a standard. Reflecting on those two years, I am deeply gratified by the positive changes we initiated. It was a period of intense, purpose-driven work aimed at addressing systemic issues and creating a more inclusive, equitable society. The political climate today is different in many ways, but the lessons and practices from that time remain relevant and vital for tackling the challenges we face now.

**CURE: How did this experience change you, or what did you learn from it?**

**BORIĆ:** This experience was incredibly valuable to me. It made me realize that holding a position of power offers significant opportunities – if you are genuinely committed to solving problems rather than merely describing them or dismissing them as impossible to address. I also came to understand the importance of collab-

oration and coordinated efforts among all stakeholders who can and should take responsibility to help. However, fostering this cooperation wasn't always straightforward. Both civil society organizations and unions were often wary of engaging with politicians, fearing they might lose their independence or be co-opted. The most rewarding part of this experience was meeting people from all walks of life, especially those directly impacted by the policies and solutions we were implementing. Connecting with people on a personal level brought a sense of trust that is essential for effective work. It taught me the value of listening, engaging, and building relationships grounded in mutual respect and understanding. These lessons have remained fundamental to my approach ever since.

**CURE: How has politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina changed over the past 25 years? I'm not referring only to the Social Democratic Party (SDP) but to political engagement and responsibility in general.**

**BORIĆ:** Politics is an incredibly complex and demanding arena. Unfortunately, many people now approach it as a means for personal gain and self-promotion. It seems to me that in the past, there was a greater focus on the common good, on making substantial changes, and improving conditions for life and development than there is today. Over time, people have lost trust in politicians, having waited for years for things to improve. Today, sadly, it feels like everyone wants to meddle in everything, offering opinions and interference without accountability. There's a great deal of wasted effort on mutual accusations, proving who is smarter, and similar unproductive behaviors. I'm afraid that now there is too much emphasis on differences and opposing views, which have become an obstacle to Bosnia and Herzegovina's overall development. To some extent, we are also victims of global events and interests.

**CURE: Women are becoming increasingly absent from politics, or their voices are not being heard – how do you explain this?**

**BORIĆ:** This is a phenomenon for which I don't have a fully satisfactory explanation. For too long, we've been fixated on numbers – how many women are in politics and why there aren't more – without fundamentally addressing the reasons why there *should* be more women involved, even though those reasons are numerous. Moreover, we haven't worked closely with men or enlisted them as allies. Instead, I'd say many men have come to view us as competition and have devised strategies to push back against us, though there are commendable exceptions. Another issue is that women often seem unaware of their own worth and importance. Due to a lack of self-confidence, they tend to stay in the background. They clearly see what happens to women who are more prominent, visible, or hold opinions contrary to the majority. Such women are usually isolated and vulnerable. Unfortunately, many women still feel indebted to male leaders for being placed in certain positions and therefore adopt a submissive stance.

**CURE: How do political parties treat women within their ranks? Do they provide enough space for women to act, and are their initiatives embraced?**

**BORIĆ:** Our experience in the Social Democratic Party (SDP), one of the oldest political parties, stands out. Through great and long-standing efforts, we managed

to embed gender equality into our political platform and Statute, continually improving these documents over the years. Unfortunately, this progress is not always visible in practice. A different experience is seen in the “new” parties, which have come into existence at a time when these frameworks – such as quotas – were already established. They didn’t need to expend energy creating these foundations, and parity in their thinking and operations was already ensured. Then there’s a third group of parties that, by “peeking over the fence” at others, incorporated some aspects of gender equality into their documents. However, in practice, they remain far from truly valuing women’s participation. I must highlight the Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (HDZ BiH), which, as a right-leaning party, has addressed gender representation much better than many others, including left-wing parties. They give women importance and high-ranking positions, but only in terms of numbers and almost always to the same women. That, however, is a topic worthy of separate analysis. Many parties, under various pretexts, have avoided establishing dedicated women’s bodies within their structures. Experience shows that many men in these parties view women’s forums as spaces where women should conduct “their” activities, avoiding involvement in the party’s broader political affairs. Unfortunately, many women have accepted this arrangement because it’s easier, fostering the illusion that they are significant players.

**CURE: Are you a feminist, and what does that mean to you?**

**BORIĆ:** Yes, I am a feminist, and I have never denied it. For me, feminism is not just about fighting for gender equality between men and women. It’s a comprehensive movement aimed at transforming this planet into a place where both men and women can live under fair conditions – free from discrimination and domination.

**CURE: How do you view women’s activism in Bosnia and Herzegovina overall?**

**BORIĆ:** Women’s activism in Bosnia and Herzegovina has gone through distinct phases, yielding significant results. We cannot deny the successes achieved in various areas, including political rights, social issues, combating discrimination, human rights in general, as well as in legislation and the establishment of institutional frameworks. There have been instances of successful collaboration between women from the NGO sector and women politicians, resulting in positive outcomes. However, there have also been periods when such cooperation fell short. Whenever broader coalitions were formed, the outcomes were clear, such as progress in the fight for quotas, their preservation, and efforts to combat violence. Unfortunately, there were also times when heightened political influence and narrow, entity-based interests led to divisions. It is evident that far more collective and coordinated work is needed, alongside unified and strong advocacy targeting authorities, to effectively and efficiently improve living conditions for everyone.

**CURE: What do you see as the greatest threat to the development of a free and democratic society in Bosnia and Herzegovina?**

**BORIĆ:** The biggest danger, in my opinion, is the deep intolerance fueled by politicians and, following their lead, many others who persist in convincing people that coexistence is impossible and that this country has no future. Those who think

differently lack the strength or the strategy to mobilize the positive forces within our society. Another critical threat is the lethargy that has gripped us as a nation. Instead of standing up and fighting for change, we've begun to surrender and leave the country. Young people are leaving in droves, and those who remain are losing faith that anything can truly change.

**CURE: Is there a secret from politics you'd like to share with activists to help them work more effectively or achieve faster progress?**

**BORIĆ:** My advice is simple: never give up! It may be painful and at times seem impossible, but perseverance is the key to success and longevity. Politics is a harsh arena for women, filled with traps designed to make you quit. But if you have your convictions and believe in your cause, quitting is not an option. Of course, we've been taught at various seminars how to recognize these traps and how to deal with them, so it's important to put that knowledge into practice. Also, don't spread yourself too thin – focus on the topics you understand deeply and feel passionate about. We don't need to be stubborn; instead, we should work on fostering dialogue. Respect will only come if we stick to our principles but remain open to changing our stance when presented with convincing arguments. For anyone unwilling to embrace this approach, politics is not the right path – it's neither a game nor a pastime. The key lies in being responsible for what we say and do!

**CURE: As we prepare this publication, you are currently facing a defamation lawsuit filed by a fellow party member. How do you explain this? Could such a situation have occurred in the SDP of the early 2000s? Would someone with a restraining order against their spouse have ever been considered for a ministerial position back then?**

**BORIĆ:** It's hard to imagine something like this happening in the SDP of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the early 2000s. Back then, the party upheld its dignity and the reputation of its members. In recent years, however, certain individuals have joined the SDP, bringing with them "values" that have never aligned with social democracy. Unfortunately, some of these individuals have ascended to positions of power, making themselves "important" in their own eyes and in the eyes of others – particularly those who are mediocre or, dare I say, marginal figures, eager to bypass all norms to secure a spot on the party list, a position, or some trivial privilege, such as getting their spouse a job, advancing their child's education, or obtaining a degree. These individuals rarely think about learning, achieving something meaningful, or heeding the cries of party members and citizens longing for a return to true social democratic values. They offer no innovative or progressive political ideas. Today, such people are the most desirable because they are easily manipulated. There was a time when being a minister was an honor. Today, it's reduced to a transactional exercise, nearly privatized and monopolized by a select few. Thus, someone with two court-issued restraining orders for domestic violence can become a minister, while I, who stand firmly on my political, moral, and activist principles, end up in court accused of defamation. Meanwhile, men and women in the SDP remain silent, hoping to secure benefits for themselves.



## **Nada Marković:**

### *Everyone Should Contribute to Society*

Nada Marković, from the village of Repovac near Bratunac, founded the Women's Association Maja Kravica in Kravica in 2001. She later established Bosnia and Herzegovina's first women-led agricultural cooperative, the General Agricultural Cooperative *Žena (Woman)*. Since then, she has been dedicated to empowering women in all aspects of their lives. The cooperative, registered as a social enterprise, brings together around 30 women cooperatives, including members of marginalized groups such as rural women, survivors of domestic violence, war victims, women with disabilities, and others.

Before the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Nada worked at the Kaolin factory in Bratunac. She experienced the war in Kravica but was displaced in 1992, returning in 1998. Now retired, Nada remains an unwavering activist. Her driving force and inspiration are her grandchildren, Dunja and Lazar.

### **CURE: How did you get into activism, and how did it all begin?**

**MARKOVIĆ:** I've always been a person of action, striving to make the world a better place for my friends, family, neighbors, and community. I believe activism is something you're born with, not something you become. Many people associate me with my grandmother Mileva, my mother's mother, who was part of the Anti-fascist Front of Women (AFŽ). In November 2000, the Women's Association Forum Bratunac organized a workshop for women in Kravica, led by Stanojka Tešić,

who was a symbol of feminism in our municipality at that time. Unfortunately, I couldn't attend, but the local teacher from Kravica, Jelika Jovanović Bela, did. Later, she invited me for coffee and told me about the idea of women's organizing, suggesting we should establish our own association. She insisted that I take the leadership position, and that's how it happened. We founded the Women's Association Maja Kravica in February 2001. The beginnings were challenging, particularly in an ethnically homogenous area like Kravica and in the divided society of Bosnia and Herzegovina. I can freely say that during those early years, we were vilified, called traitors, and targeted, but such comments only strengthened our resolve to move forward. Our greatest strength came from the results of our work. For example, we proudly introduced the first fixed telephone line in Kravica after the war, effectively opening up our village to the world. From then on, we made an effort to listen to the needs of all the women in the village. That's why our activism was visible and recognized. Looking back now, I think the activist in me was always there, but perhaps I didn't have the motivation or support to express my ideas earlier.

**CURE: What is the current focus of your work, or what will it be in the upcoming period?**

**MARKOVIĆ:** The focus remains on the economic empowerment of rural women. I believe that an economically independent woman is capable of fighting for all her guaranteed rights. In the upcoming period, our plan is to continue our work and to respond to the needs of rural women, whatever they may be. I anticipate these needs will likely involve economic and social protection, healthcare, and enriching the social life in communities that people are leaving. On a personal level, my focus for the near future is strengthening and empowering the Agricultural Cooperative Žena (Women). I see the cooperative as a key tool for achieving economic empowerment.

**CURE: How do you operate today? How many women or households are involved, and can you introduce the cooperative?**

**MARKOVIĆ:** The cooperative was founded by five women from the Bratunac municipality. Currently, we have 33 women cooperators, and we own a cold storage facility for fruit, two refrigerated vans, and equipment for event rentals and organization, including dishes, tables, chairs, and tents. In addition to purchasing and freezing fruit, the cooperative also offers catering services, with food prepared using traditional recipes. Since the founding of the Women's Association Maja, we recognized the need to bring women's creations, products, and skills to the market. Previously, women sold their goods and preserves mainly at fairs or through informal networks. The establishment of the cooperative resolved a significant challenge of market placement for many women across the Podrinje region who were not competitive in today's market. We were part of the team that developed the Law on Social Enterprises, which was adopted in Republika Srpska in November 2022. Our cooperative holds the status of a social enterprise, which allows us to engage various societal groups and increase our social involvement in the agricultural sector. We serve as an example of a sustainable model that links the non-profit and profit sectors.



**CURE: What is your guiding principle, your vision, or your goal?**

**MARKOVIĆ:** An economically stable woman!

**CURE: How much does this relate to feminism and, if it does, how do you understand feminism today?**

**MARKOVIĆ:** Feminism is the freedom for a woman to do what she wants and to pursue what she believes she has talent for. Feminism is also about empathy and understanding for others – their views, aspirations, and thoughts. In patriarchal societies like ours, the economy plays a significant role in decision-making, both at the state level and within the family. That’s why I firmly believe that women’s economic stability and independence are the keys to advancing feminism. After all, we live in a capitalist system, and anyone who isn’t economically recognized will lack the opportunity to fight for their other rights. Alongside this framework, it’s essential to promote empathy so that we don’t succumb to greed.

**CURE: How did you learn – what were your sources, and what was most valuable to you as a source of knowledge?**

**MARKOVIĆ:** In the beginning, I learned from women who were already active in the NGO sector, with my Bela and Stanojka Tešić playing a significant role. I made an effort to expand my knowledge through various trainings, courses, and workshops. Later, I focused on learning from the women I collaborate with and whose interests I represent. The most valuable knowledge I gained came from observing people who improve their lives through self-organization, utilizing available resources, and making the most of what they have. This is something I try to incorporate into my work because we cannot and should not expect the state or government institutions to solve our problems – we must address them ourselves with self-sustaining ideas. I believe the most useful knowledge I’ve acquired is about sustainability. Everyone should contribute to this society as much as they can and in the ways they know best.

**CURE: How has activism changed you, from your upbringing to the person you are today?**

**MARKOVIĆ:** I am the eldest daughter of my parents, the mother of two daughters, and the grandmother of a little girl and boy. What I learned from my parents, I strive to pass on to my daughters, hoping they will carry it forward. My parents believed in me, supported me, and encouraged my work and life, even before I officially became involved in activism. It was this unconditional support from my parents that taught me every woman deserves support, and today I make every effort to support others and show that persistence and goodwill can lead to positive change. Activism has given me opportunities and tools to change my community and its rules, and I believe I have used them well. Through my efforts, I have proven that a woman, even without a formal degree, can have a successful career and leave a meaningful legacy. I remember after the war, while looking for a job, I often heard comments about how difficult it would be for me to find employment without proper education. Today, I see myself as a capable executive director and president of an association. I manage two legal entities, and I’ve helped many women improve their lives through my work. I’ve also built friendships across Bosnia and Herzegovina and around the world. I am not alone, and that is vital for

facing both the good and bad that life brings. Social capital is a true wealth.

**CURE: Can you share a particular experience, whether positive or negative, that has marked you or taught you something significant?**

**MARKOVIĆ:** The greatest obstacle I've faced has been nationalism and intolerance. These challenges, however, have strengthened me and motivated me to work even harder and act on multiple fronts. I overcame them by adopting a broader perspective and achieving results that, after 23 years of work, are neither small nor insignificant. Recently, I've become increasingly concerned about the absence of youth in activism. In small communities, activism lacks successors, and this signals to me that we may have pushed them aside or overlooked their visions for the future.

**CURE: In your opinion, what should be the main focus of the women's movement in Bosnia and Herzegovina?**

**MARKOVIĆ:** It seems to me that the women's movement in BiH today is divided along entity lines, and the absurdity is that we now have ethnically homogenous Women's organizations – this is segregation, something we should have fought against with all available means. At some point, we allowed activities to align with the interests of political parties and religious organizations, which is highly dangerous and threatens to undermine the very essence of the non-governmental sector. Sometimes, I feel it might be too late for change, but perhaps it isn't, and I hold hope that future generations will emerge for whom names, surnames, religious symbols, and imaginary borders will not be barriers to progress. The positive aspect of the women's movement is that we are an indispensable stabilizing force in the country – we maintain social peace, promote positive stories and ideas, and counteract the self-serving nature of political structures. Without the influence of the women's movement, the position of women would be much worse.

**CURE: What do you think has been the biggest mistake in the work of the women's movement in Bosnia and Herzegovina?**

**MARKOVIĆ:** There have been several mistakes, most of which stem from the financial dependence of the non-governmental sector on donors, political parties, religious structures, and similar entities. One major shortcoming is that we failed to secure sustainability for our activities and greater influence on decision-making within Bosnia and Herzegovina's governing structures. Meanwhile, political parties register as NGOs and immediately integrate into state structures and budgets. We are now in a situation where donors are leaving, funds are diminishing, and we have not secured alternative financing sources. As a result, organizations are shutting down or aligning themselves with political or religious institutions, causing the movement to lose its continuity. Another significant mistake is the absence of defined principles for the women's movement in Bosnia and Herzegovina, principles that all women's organizations could adhere to.

**CURE: What do you see as the biggest threat to the development of democracy, freedom, and women's rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina?**

**MARKOVIĆ:** Corruption, gullibility, and low economic standards are the greatest threats.



## **Esmā Drkenda:**

### *We Can Do More and Better*

Esmā Drkenda served as the president of the Women's Association *Seka* in Goražde until May 2024. From 2007 to mid-2024, she was the coordinator of the Center for Education, Therapy, and Democratic Development *Kuća Seka (Seka House)*. She is the recipient of the City of Goražde's *Golden Plaque* for her continuous, long-standing work in the non-governmental sector and her outstanding actions in the field of promoting gender equality.

In 1983, Esmā completed voluntary military service for women in Belgrade. She participated in five youth work brigades and earned three *Udarnička Badges* for exceptional contributions. A member of the League of Communists, she used her position to challenge dogmatism and prejudices.

Born in 1964 in Goražde, Esmā graduated from the Faculty of Political Sciences in Sarajevo, specializing in Defense and Security. Before the Bosnian War, she worked as a mechanical technician at *RO Pobjeda Goražde*. During the war, she served as a member of the intervention platoon of the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina, an assistant commander of the Special Combat Unit of the Goražde Police and held various other roles. Following the signing of the Dayton Agreement, she continued her service as a second lieutenant/captain, holding a non-commissioned officer rank until 2007.

“Despite my contributions and dedicated efforts, as well as my university degree, I was unable to regain my rank or secure an officer position simply because I was a woman and refused to conform to the demands of certain male officers in decision-making roles. I sought help through women’s organizations in Goražde and women in politics, wrote complaints, appealed to the Ministry of Defense, and addressed military courts, but nothing helped me reclaim what was taken from me or establish equal treatment for women compared to men, who often easily achieved rights they didn’t even merit,” Esma recounts. As a result of the stress she endured, Esma developed PTSD, and she later suffered a stroke that left her temporarily immobile. However, after attending a psycho-educational retreat for women and children at *Kuća Seka* on Brač Island, she embraced activism with a renewed awareness of her lifelong calling, even if she hadn’t previously recognized it. In 2007, Esma retired and founded the Women’s Association *Seka Goražde*, establishing the Center for Therapy, Education, and Recreation for Women and Children *Kuća Seka*.

**CURE: When you look back now, how did your activism begin?**

**DRKENDA:** Perhaps it all started with my rebellion against my parents and the question: why do I have to wash the dishes while my brother plays carefree? Why can’t I play football because “that’s only for boys”? Why am I labeled a tomboy if I ride a bike, and why can I only roller skate occasionally? As I grew older, I often reacted in specific ways and believed in my own initiatives, which were backed by arguments, as I fought for a fairer treatment of women in society. Protesting became second nature to me – sometimes even doing it alone if necessary – to draw attention to issues that negatively impacted women’s rights, gender equality, and related topics. Perhaps my decision to serve a voluntary military term for women was also a reflection of my resistance to traditional upbringing and its deeply ingrained division of male and female roles.

**CURE: What is currently the focus of your work, or what will it be in the future?**

**DRKENDA:** Considering that my mission with the Women’s Association *Seka Goražde* has ended (After Esma retired following a leadership change, the Women’s Association *Seka* was dissolved – ed. note), I need to find a new way to continue my activism. I often reflect on whether the Women’s Association *Seka*, as it was, simply did not align with certain “currents” in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Some might wonder why I didn’t fight to preserve the Association, but that’s another side of the story. Now I know I need to find a new way to stay active. I’ve been given the opportunity to write a book that will be a blend of biography, documentary, and historical novel based on real events. Additionally, I’m ready to share my experiences with others and remain engaged in the Women’s movement.

**CURE: Are you a feminist, and how do you understand feminism?**

**DRKENDA:** Yes, I am a feminist, and feminism is my guiding principle – though

not in a rigid or aggressive way. To me, feminism is a fight for Women's human rights and a dignified life for all people, regardless of any differences that may exist. What's important is acceptance and unity, so we can work together towards a shared goal, agreed upon on an equal footing.

**CURE: How did you learn, from what sources, and what was the most valuable source of knowledge for you?**

**DRKENDA:** I learned from the experiences of other women, through various educational programs organized by the Women's Association *Seka*, as well as those hosted by other women's organizations. I tried to participate in the activities of Women in Black from Belgrade – it was always important for me to be part of their initiatives that draw attention to the crimes committed and emphasize the need not to harm anyone who, by chance, belongs to the nation from which certain individuals committed crimes. I also learned a great deal from the expert leadership of the *Kuća Seka* in Goražde, as well as from reading books, watching films, and similar activities. However, I believe the most significant factor in my activism is my character – a sense of justice, a certain kind of courage, defiance, and persistence in achieving my goals.

**CURE: How has activism changed you as a woman, from your upbringing at home to who you are today?**

**DRKENDA:** My engagements and perspectives have evolved with new experiences. I now have the confidence and wisdom to choose my own path of action. The biggest change activism has brought me is in how I assess situations and viewpoints when selecting my method of action. I've learned not to rush in with my heart alone; instead, I take time to think things through and solidify my strategy to achieve the goals I set for myself.

**CURE: What are the biggest challenges you have faced, and how have you overcome them?**

**DRKENDA:** I live in a small community where everyone knows each other, and there is a lot of negative tradition. For example, if you choose to support the LGBTIQ+ community in any way, many people, including family members, feel entitled to make negative comments. It used to affect me deeply, but now I simply tell them that human rights are not a buffet where you get to pick and choose what is acceptable and what isn't. At times, I've also faced political pressure and pressure from individuals who are considered "untouchable" – in small communities, being clear, honest, and direct often makes you a target. I believe that my credibility, built through my work, along with my honesty, persistence, willingness to help others, and contributions to the local community, have earned me the respect, love, and support of many ordinary people. That gives me strength.

**CURE: Can you share a particular experience – positive or negative – that marked you or taught you a lot?**

**DRKENDA:** A negative experience that ultimately turned out to be positive hap-

pened in 2014, during the protests, when I was one of the founders of the Plenum of Citizens of Goražde. Although our group developed a solid strategy, we faced intense pressure. People would approach us and say they wanted to join but were afraid because the authorities might send inspectors or retaliate in other ways. The local government in Goražde also pressured local media, with threats coming from political figures who warned media outlets that they would cut funding or withhold salaries if they published interviews with me. Not everyone caved to the pressure, though. At one point, I was even issued a misdemeanor charge – or at least it was announced on official government websites – but it was never enforced. This was an attempt to intimidate people and discourage them from joining us. The Plenum formulated demands that were reasonable and feasible, but they didn't suit the political elite. For several days, I stood outside the cantonal government building for an hour each day at a specific time until they finally invited me and those who had joined me to negotiate. Some of our demands were met, but many remained unfulfilled – such as abolishing the “golden parachute” and similar issues.

**CURE: How do you see the women's movement in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and what are its greatest strengths?**

**DRKENDA:** It's good that it exists – better to have any women's movement than none at all – but we need to connect more, show greater solidarity, reject jealousy and envy, and uphold the values that a women's movement should embody. The women's movement shouldn't be a project but rather continuous work and action. In any case – it's good, but we can do more and do better.

**CURE: In your opinion, what is perhaps the biggest mistake in the work of the women's movement in Bosnia and Herzegovina?**

**DRKENDA:** We operate sporadically and lack consistent, continuous work. Perhaps we're missing a systematic approach that would involve not only activists but also everyone motivated to support certain initiatives. We don't have a defined plan – or at least I'm not aware of one – that focuses on issues we identify as problems we must address, rather than simply following the topics dictated by donors. We need to be persistent in addressing these challenges.

**CURE: In your opinion, what should be the focus of the women's movement in Bosnia and Herzegovina?**

**DRKENDA:** First and foremost, it is crucial that the movement persists and continues to pass on ideas, experiences, and knowledge to younger generations. In other words, the sustainability of the women's movement should be the top priority. While this will be easier to achieve in larger cities, the strength of the movement lies in spreading women's ideas to rural areas across Bosnia and Herzegovina. A strategic plan is needed to define the issues and topics essential to the women's movement.

**CURE: What do you see as the greatest threats to democracy, freedom, and women’s rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina?**

**DRKENDA:** Prejudice – the misrepresentation of religion and traditions – male-dominated politics, the limited number of women in politics, and the resurgence of traditional roles, combined with the increasing influence of religion in the state, which pushes women back 50 or more years. Additionally, the number of Women’s organizations in Bosnia and Herzegovina is decreasing, and there is constant pressure on the non-governmental sector – with new obligations and laws being introduced that hinder the work of civil society organizations. The struggle for funding diminishes the efficiency of these organizations in advocating for a fairer and more dignified life for women. Moreover, there has never been less safety for women – on the streets, in the workplace, or even in their own homes, where they live with their families.



## **Ifeta Škoro Česir:**

### *Guardians of Patriarchy Are Very Persistent*

Ifeta **Česir Škoro** is the Executive Director of the Citizens' Initiative of Mostar, an organisation that, as she says, was accidentally born out of pure volunteerism and the enthusiasm of the citizens of Mostar who wanted to change the situation in the city and remind the local authorities in the City and Canton that they must act in the general interest of all citizens of Mostar.

“It started with the Law on the Protection of Families with Children, in 2004 or 2005 – we all came together, different political parties and various non-governmental organisations. It was unusual because it was right after the war in Mostar, a war that I’m not even sure has truly ended, considering that something always seems to be happening. But we managed to organise ourselves. We had the support of the National Democratic Institute (NDI), which was working with local communities at the time, including us in Mostar. Through our action for that law, we unintentionally united the city. Later, we had to register formally, and I was asked to become the director. That’s how the story began, and we did what mattered to us in the city,” recalls **Česir Škoro**. She also mentions that a film about their efforts, *Building Bridges*, was made and won the “Madeleine Albright” award in 2006.

**CURE: How did it all start? How did you get into activism?**

**ČESIR ŠKORO:** It feels like I was born an activist, like it’s written in my DNA,



because I've always fought for justice and tried to "fix the unfixable." Maybe I inherited that from my mother. During the war, she was the commander of a labour unit, though I didn't know that at the time. She used to tell us, her daughters, never to let anyone underestimate us and never to tell our husbands how much money we had. While that might not be a popular thing to say today, it's very important. On the other hand, my father would tell us to study so we wouldn't be "blind to the obvious." Looking back, I was born in 1956, a time when it wasn't common for girls to be sent to school. Yet my parents made sure that all six of us – brothers and sisters – were educated. That was their mission, and now I realise how remarkable that is. At the time, it seemed normal to me, but later, as I worked with women in the field, I met many – even younger than me – who were denied an education because their families put obstacles in their way. Before founding the Initiative, I was a member of various organisations and even served as the vice president of the Socialist Youth Alliance of the City of Mostar. I also became a member of the League of Communists at just 17 years old and participated in youth labour actions.

**CURE: How did those youth labour actions impact you, and what did you learn from them?**

**ČESIR ŠKORO:** It was an incredible, once-in-a-lifetime experience. It was an international labour action in Slovenia, Kozjansko '78, near the Sutla River, and we were housed in the Marija Broz Primary School, which I see as a kind of symbolism. Our brigade was called the Red Cross Brigade, and we came from 23 cities across the former Yugoslavia – from the Vardar River to Mount Triglav. There was even a girl from Kosovo in our group, and five of us were from Mostar. I was 21 years old, and that experience truly enriched me as a person.

We also had participants from Italy, Romania, and, I believe, Bulgaria. Fifty of us slept in a single room, and it was wonderful. We cooked national dishes, learned songs and languages from one another. The brigade commander was a Slovenian woman, and I made friends who are still in my life today. That was when I realised that we are all human and share something in common, no matter the differences that may divide us. Branka Bukovec from Novo Mesto was our brigade commander, and I'm still in contact with her. She has visited Mostar and Sarajevo – once for an opera premiere. Imagine, we managed to bring together people from 23 cities back then – and now it's hard to gather people even from three cities, let alone 23. That experience is something I carry with me forever, and it saddens me that such things no longer exist because everything has become so materialistic. People from Trieste and Romania even tried to find us through the radio during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and I only found out about it later.

**CURE: What is currently the focus of your work? What are you working on now?**

**ČESIR ŠKORO:** In recent years, we have done a lot of work, primarily with women and young people, especially in schools. Our visibility increased significantly when we joined the Women's Network of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Currently, we are working with women and young people from vulnerable groups, as well as anyone in need – marginalised individuals, members of national minorities, and people with disabilities. We are also working with children in kindergartens on a small project called "How to Reduce the Impact of Mosquitoes on Children,"

where we will plant mosquito-repellent plants and educate kindergarten staff on what attracts mosquitoes. We hope this will reduce the number of bites and protect the children. With young people, we are conducting dance activities aimed at reducing addictions, particularly gambling, as we have noticed that more women and young people are engaging in gambling. Additionally, we have a feminist tourism tour for the city of Mostar that has achieved excellent results and has been included in the programme of the Mostar City Tourist Board – which is no small achievement for us. For the third year, we have been working with the international organisation Kvinna till Kvinna on a project called “Invisible Women” in Mostar and Herzegovina – including Široki Brijeg, Ljubuški, Gacko, and Trebinje. This project highlights the roles of women whose achievements and contributions have been unjustly overlooked in the historiography of Mostar. These women played a key role in shaping the city’s cultural, social, economic, and political identity. These are unique stories. Sometimes, in a single day, we work with women from three cities, three cantons, or two entities, and for me, that is true social wealth. These projects have lasting value.

**CURE: What is your guiding principle, and what is your goal?**

**ĆESIR ŠKORO:** I love doing something useful. By profession, I am a graduate nurse – the first in the Herzegovina region – and I enjoy helping others. Even if I weren’t in the non-governmental sector, I would be doing something else meaningful. Sometimes I don’t have a precisely defined goal, but my goal is to help people, and I think that is more than enough.

**CURE: Are you a feminist, and generally – what do you think about feminism?**

**ĆESIR ŠKORO:** I am absolutely a feminist, and I believe my mother taught me feminism, even though she didn’t know it was feminism, when she told me I should be independent and always have my own goals – that’s pure feminism. Today, my feminism is reflected in advocating for and working towards making all opportunities accessible to everyone within the limits of our abilities and desires, as those two things often don’t align. It’s important to me that everyone has equal chances, regardless of whether they are a man or woman, a person with a disability, or someone in need. I think feminism is almost non-existent in Bosnia and Herzegovina, or at least it’s very limited. Some non-governmental organisations, and especially political parties, often claim to promote feminism, but they’re merely hiding behind the rhetoric. If feminism were truly present, there would be many more women in decision-making positions. Women are not incapable, but they are not given the opportunity to prove themselves and show what they can do and know. Those who step outside predefined boundaries are quickly removed – they are stopped by the infamous glass ceiling. If they seem close to breaking through it, they are pushed off a cliff, and no one is there to catch them at the bottom. That’s why I say feminism is lacking. There are few women who fall and find someone to support or help them. There are brilliant feminists, but they are rare.

**CURE: How did you learn and build your knowledge?**

**ĆESIR ŠKORO:** I have always loved reading, especially works by local authors, and when it comes to professional literature, I read anything that comes my way.

**CURE: How has activism changed you?**

**ĆESIR ŠKORO:** It has changed me profoundly, and this is easy to see when I compare myself to my sister. She is older than me and a feminist at heart, but she isn't involved in activism, so she often seeks my opinion. My family frequently asks for my advice, and they've finally realised that all my work and effort were worthwhile. I haven't had an easy life, but I have attended many training sessions and conferences, written a lot of papers, and learned to assess where I excel and where I need to work on myself. A particularly significant experience was my husband's illness – he was immobile for 13 years after a stroke. I knew it would be difficult, but I decided to fight. During that time, I often went to meetings I deemed important and left him at home, and people would ask me why I had left him. Now they understand that I was doing the right thing back then. It wasn't a plan but rather my response to the challenges I faced.

**CURE: What have been the biggest challenges you've faced in life, and how have you dealt with them?**

**ĆESIR ŠKORO:** The biggest problem and obstacle for me has been patriarchy. People would always ask, "Why you?" and I'd reply, "Why not me?" Or they'd ask, "What do you get out of this?" and I'd say, "I get myself." There was a lot of that. Once, while my husband was still alive and my sister was available to care for him, a friend called me, and I told her I was in Sarajevo. She immediately asked, "And who did you leave Bobo with?" Now I realise that was far too much interference in someone else's life. Still, there have been many situations where people thanked me or congratulated me on my persistence and determination. One interesting experience was during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I was in a part of Mostar where the majority were Bosniaks, working in a hospital, but people who weren't Bosniaks often came to me for help as well. At one point, I was accused of helping "only the others," which I found inappropriate. I said I was simply helping people. That was my form of resistance.

**CURE: How do you see the women's movement in Bosnia and Herzegovina?**

**ĆESIR ŠKORO:** Sometimes I'm very satisfied, and other times I feel like we haven't made much progress, even though someone before us fought for the right to vote – we're still "fixing the unfixable," but it feels like the movement has grown tired. I think we were stronger immediately after the war, but now there's perhaps a lack of support. Maybe the new generations are slower, but I believe we could do more and be stronger. There have been mistakes as well – maybe we were too lenient or took the path of least resistance, not being consistent enough during certain periods of turmoil. Perhaps we could have been more persistent, as we're not advancing as much as we should. The truth is, no matter how many dedicated and responsible organisations you have, there are always those paid to undermine, complicate, and delay progress, and maybe we haven't been clear enough about that. We must understand that we can't make decisions ourselves – we can only advocate. For instance, we haven't managed to secure 40 percent representation of women in government, only on the electoral lists, and now we don't even have 40 percent on the lists. Maybe we need to "restart" because the world is becoming

more radicalised.

**CURE: What should be the focus of activities in the future?**

**ĆESIR ŠKORO:** Working with citizens! Citizens are the ones we need to engage with because the messages they receive are filtered by those who are not allies of the changes we are advocating for. When I interact with people, I see that they don't know what should be done. This is the hardest work because people have often been deceived and betrayed, so they don't trust anyone. Just look at how long our political scene has been stagnant – we still haven't made real progress, not even on the issues that are important to all of us.

**CURE: In your opinion, what is the greatest threat to the development of a free democratic society and respect for human rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina?**

**ĆESIR ŠKORO:** Deeply rooted patriarchy. It is deeply ingrained in us and often creates obstacles for activists – we move forward, and then someone says, «Why do you need this?» and we stop, no matter how much we want it or how empowered we are. That is the fundamental obstacle. Another issue for me is the «guardians of patriarchy,» who are omnipresent and very aggressive. I would say that patriarchy and these guardians are the greatest barriers. Our society has undergone re-patriarchalisation, and we have to create opportunities and methods once again to explain to women that they are not slaves and that they have the same rights as their husbands. I don't think economic dependence alone is to blame; it's also the deeply rooted patriarchal upbringing in our lives. Additionally, it is in women's nature to serve – even I constantly say I love helping people. And what is that if not serving? And I consider myself empowered. What about women who haven't gone through what I have, who haven't had the support or education I've had, and who are constantly told that the husband is the head of the family? That's the problem.



## **Ifeta Mejremić:**

### ***Women Must Be Economically Independent***

Ifeta Mejremić from Konjević Polje is the founder of the Jadar Women’s Association, which has been operating for 21 years, helping women who are victims of violence and providing support for their economic empowerment.

Ifeta is also an entrepreneur – she owns a broiler chicken farm and previously, during her time as a refugee in Tuzla, ran a shop. Before the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, she worked as a textile technician at the Bilećanka factory in Gacko.

“Living off your own work has always been and should always remain the most important thing,” says Ifeta Mejremić.

### **CURE: How did you get into activism, and how did it all start?**

**MEJREMIĆ:** I’ve always fought for something in life – for truth and justice – but I didn’t realise I was born for activism until I got involved in the non-governmental sector after the war. That’s when I understood that I had been living this life since childhood. I fought even as a child because my mother wouldn’t let me go to high school. My late brother, however, insisted I would go, saying that if there wasn’t enough money, he wouldn’t attend school, but I would. While I was in Srebrenica, during the siege, I hand-sewed clothes for children – tracksuits, shirts, and t-shirts made from old clothing. In other words, I kept myself busy so I wouldn’t just sit idle. Even now, I don’t just drink coffee without doing something; instead, I make beads and similar items for children. For me, there’s no sitting around doing

nothing. That's how I preserved myself and my mind, so I wouldn't burn out in the hell we lived through in the enclave. When we returned, we immediately founded an association with the goal of educating and economically empowering women returnees in rural areas so they could live off their own work. I worked to provide them with greenhouses, orchards, hoes, seedlings – everything they needed to produce something of their own and sustain themselves. My entire life, I've worked to ensure that women aren't dependent on others and can live off their own work, which is particularly challenging in rural areas.

I see that even in larger cities, many women are dependent on someone else, and in such cases, the person who provides for them often controls their lives – sometimes even denying them the freedom to speak. Through our association, we've offered psychosocial therapy, educational workshops, and various activities like decoupage, working with aluminium foil, and similar crafts. These activities helped women relax, grow, and get involved in work.

It's important to me that girls go to school, that women are independent, think about their lives, and take control of their own destiny. For a long time, others controlled me, and I'm still fighting against that, but patriarchy always seems to pull me back.

**CURE: What is currently the focus of your work?**

**MEJREMIĆ:** The focus remains on educating and economically empowering women, as well as selling their products, which we've been successful at so far. Currently, we are also working with children on socialisation because young mothers don't attend meetings since they're waiting for their children outside school. The children cry, they're not socialised, and they don't have friends. The strategy for returnees here wasn't properly planned – one house is on one hill, another on a different one, people are far apart, and the children are lonely. Over time, we realised we also needed to work with the children. Now we're preparing a mini day centre where children can socialise, attend creative workshops, and similar activities, allowing them to connect with others without causing problems for their mothers.

**CURE: What is your guiding principle in your work, and what is your goal?**

**MEJREMIĆ:** There are moments when I feel I can't go on anymore – I get tired and feel overwhelmed – but those moments are rare for me because I spend a lot of time with people and stay active. My goal and my desire are to help girls and women avoid being like I was – feeling like they have nowhere to go. My goal is for women and girls to go to school and not depend on anyone. Simply put, in rural areas, education is a huge stepping stone.

In rural areas, for example, a father might have four daughters and one son, and only the son is sent to high school and university, while the daughters are expected to marry so they're no longer his responsibility. My goal is to improve the lives of girls and women in rural areas as much as I can – that's my guiding principle.

As for where I draw my energy from – wherever I go, whether it's from Džaneta Agović in Ulcinj or Sonja Biserko in Belgrade – I tell them I'm here to absorb some of their good energy and bring it back to Konjević Polje. I give energy, and I get energy from women like Jadranka Miličević and Staša Zajović – women who

“move mountains” and “make things happen.”

**CURE: Are you a feminist?**

**MEJREMIĆ:** Yes, I am. Feminism is very scarce here, and it’s a big struggle to promote that idea and spread it. For example, Selma Hadžihalilović is something extraordinary to me – the fact that I have a friend like her, Selma’s mother, and other women who fight for everything. Feminism means helping, expanding the network, giving to others, and growing together. But there’s little of that in Bosnia and Herzegovina because we depend on our politicians and have allowed them to do whatever they want. The problem exists both at the top and at the grassroots level. My belief is that women would govern much better, and we need to fight to have more women in positions of power – for them to lead. A woman runs the household, takes care of her family, thinks of everything, isn’t selfish, and gives her all for her family and children because a woman is also a mother. Honestly, they should put four rural women in charge – it would be much better.

**CURE: In your opinion, what is the greatest threat to the development of democracy, a free society, and women’s rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina?**

**MEJREMIĆ:** Politics that doesn’t allow us to have the laws we need but instead creates laws to serve its own interests. If they allowed women to shape politics and make decisions, and if we included as many women as possible, we would thrive.

**CURE: How did you learn, from whom, and what did you read?**

**MEJREMIĆ:** I’ve always had it in the back of my mind that I need to learn, be different, and drive change for the better. I learn from Women in Black and their persistence, from Jadranka Miličević and Selma Hadžihalilović – they give me strength. I’ve also learned from professors in Sarajevo. Even now, I constantly look at what is good, what is better, where we can make a change, and how we can move forward.

I know I can’t change anyone – everyone must change themselves – but I can at least talk about it, and when I see small steps or changes, it motivates me to be even more persistent. I learn from the best and the strongest among us.

**CURE: How has activism affected you, and how much has it changed you?**

**MEJREMIĆ:** I see big changes in myself and in my community, thanks to our Association and the women involved. At the beginning, women didn’t come to the meetings because their husbands wouldn’t allow them, but we managed to change that. We would prepare food, and then the husbands would come, eat with us, and talk a bit. When they saw that we were doing good things, everything changed. Still, the most important thing is that a woman doesn’t depend on anyone. That is key.

**CURE: What have been the biggest challenges you’ve faced, and how did you overcome them? Can you share a particular experience that left a mark on you?**

**MEJREMIĆ:** I was a member of the local community council and had issues with the president, who tried to obstruct me, but I always managed to avoid it. He attempted to create problems for me, but I didn't let him, and I always succeeded in completing the work I had started. For a while, I had an office where they held council meetings, but when he started threatening me, I left that space and found a new one where I work much better now.

There were obstacles – for four years, we didn't get any project support because we didn't know how to write proposals. But we attended training sessions, fought hard, and achieved a lot. Now, 100 women in Konjević Polje are economically empowered and live off their own agricultural work. That's no small thing. As for support, Selma Hadžihalilović connected us with Andrea from Italy, and they came to help us and provide significant support. For example, we prepare for the Peace March and welcome 7,000 people, providing them with food and drink. Recently, we hosted 300 children from Italy – they came in groups of 25, stayed for three nights, slept at my place, and we cooked for them, spent time with them, and played together.

Groups from Italy come to visit Srebrenica and Konjević Polje and to experience our Bosnian buffet and traditional food. I believe it's essential to give love, be positive, listen to people, and help them – that's my goal. It's easy to trip someone and make them fall but offering them a hand to get up and helping them stand again is what truly matters in life. It's important to focus on communication, for people to connect, talk, and share love – that's what we all need. Even when I'm cooking, if I feel nervous, I stop because even food needs love.

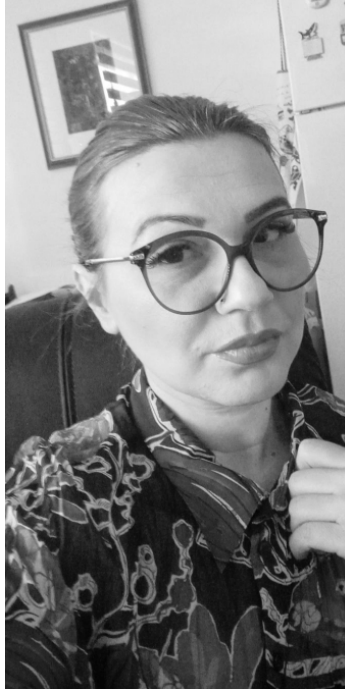
**CURE: In your opinion, what should be the focus of the women's movement in Bosnia and Herzegovina?**

**MEJREMIĆ:** We need to unite, to come together from all corners of the country, and set political goals that serve our needs. We need to mobilise, like the AFŽ (Antifascist Women's Front) once did. We are working on it now, but it's not the main focus.

At one point, I suggested organising a peace caravan – a few women from each city traveling to visit all the towns, getting to know each other, and sharing love and solidarity. We could achieve so much that way.

Right now, we have a problem where we retreat if we don't solve an issue immediately, and that's not good because it erodes trust. There are few honest and dedicated women who push things forward. We must give everything we have to attract other women and include younger girls – even schoolgirls – to focus on education and break the stereotype that “women are wolves to other women.” We need to build more trust and support among ourselves. For example, now we might “push” a women politician forward, but she ends up following party orders. We need politicians like Alma Kratina or Jasna Duraković. These are the kinds of women we need in politics, but ones whose minds won't be manipulated as soon as they're elected.





## **Aida Feraget, Daliborka Hadžišehić i Neira Raković:**

### ***Young People Should Be Taught That We Are All Equal, Yet All Different***

There are women who say they don't have to do anything anymore because they've done enough in their lives. These women are often described as being in the prime of their lives – fulfilled, accomplished, and doing only what they truly want. Among them (listed alphabetically) are Aida Feraget (Sarajevo), Daliborka Hadžišehić (Doboj), and Neira Raković (Bihać).

Speaking as a member of the middle generation and reflecting on the importance of intergenerational knowledge transfer, Hadžišehić believes that “young people should be taught to build their identity free from prejudice, judgment, hatred, or the creation of unnecessary divides among them. Everyone is equal, yet different, and these differences must not be a reason to reject others. Instead, they should be embraced as an integral part of who a person is.”

Aida Feraget, from Sarajevo, brings extensive experience in communications, public relations, and management within international and humanitarian organizations, as well as NGOs. A mother of two daughters, she uses her professional expertise

“to advocate for the rights of those whose voices are often unheard or whose rights are not considered important.”

“Activism allows me to fight for systemic changes that can improve society as a whole so that the problems faced by marginalized groups don’t have to be repeatedly resolved. I engage in activism to address the root causes of these problems, work towards their eradication, and create an environment where everyone has equal opportunities and rights. As I grew up and matured, activism became my way of standing up to injustice and contributing to the creation of a fairer society. Being active, speaking out, and taking action became essential to me, because staying silent is simply not an option when we are faced with issues that affect so many people around us,” says Feraget and emphasizes that her passion lies in “the status and rights of women, the status and rights of people with disabilities, especially children, the status and rights of LGBTQ individuals, animal welfare, and the human rights of smokers.”

She expects the women’s activist movement in Bosnia and Herzegovina to become louder and more visible, building strength that can significantly influence social change.

“I would love to see a women’s movement that resembles sports fan groups – inclusive of all ages, with the most diverse personal stories, educational backgrounds, values, and economic statuses, united by a shared love for their ‘team.’ That’s the kind of support I want for women. I want to see different groups within the movement join forces to support one another and work together toward achieving justice and equality. For me, antifascism is a universal value that should underpin all activist efforts. The fight against all forms of extremism, hatred, and discrimination is essential for preserving freedom and equality. We must develop and uphold antifascist values to ensure that all people are treated with respect and dignity,” says Feraget.

When asked about achievements or victories so far, she highlights the fact that women are increasingly speaking out about femicide, domestic violence, and rape.

“It’s far from something we can call a victory, but we’re not standing still, nor are we accepting the situation as it is...” says Feraget.

She believes the greatest threat to the development of a democratic society in Bosnia and Herzegovina is political corruption and the lack of accountability from those in power, as well as citizens’ disinterest or even lack of understanding about how powerful and important everyone is within society.

“It’s important for people to understand their power and responsibility, to recog-

nize that their engagement can have a significant impact on shaping society. Only through active participation and collective effort can we overcome challenges and build a democratic society where everyone has equal opportunities and the right to a voice,” says Feraget, concluding that silence and inaction have never brought about positive change.

“When citizens passively accept the status quo or fail to engage with issues that matter to them, they contribute to maintaining existing problems and obstacles.”

In Dobož, Daliborka Hadžišehić, an economist, teaching assistant, politician, and single mother, says she entered activism through high school volunteer work, driven by the idea of encouraging women to join political parties, movements, or organizations.

She believes that the greatest threats to the development of a democratic society and human rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina are nationalist parties, which have entrenched themselves from religious communities to the education system, producing ethnic divisions among citizens as a byproduct.

“Ethnic collectivism has taken root in political and social organization. This has led to the dysfunction of the political system, an expensive state administration, crises in local governance, corruption, the elderly struggling to survive on low pensions, unemployed and war veterans protesting due to poor social conditions, and what affects me personally – the emigration of young people. It’s not just individuals leaving; entire families are abandoning the country because of the biggest threat to a democratic society – the policies of ethno-nationalist parties,” concludes Hadžišehić.

“Women often believe that men are better mentors, and this is most evident in politics. However, each woman, through her work and experience, should encourage young women to be more visible and realize that a woman’s role is not solely to expand the community as a biological being but also as a social being with her own needs. We should not limit ourselves to the fact that we have the power to give birth; we must set other societal priorities for ourselves as well – not just as workers but as equals in society and within our families. We must not diminish our role in the family but rather strive for equality both at home and in society,” explains Hadžišehić.

She observes that the women’s movement in Bosnia and Herzegovina has excellent ideas, which, in most cases, have a positive impact only on women who are already aware that they are not “servants” of the community.

Neira Raković, a lawyer from Bihać, member of the *Glas žene* (Voice of Wom-

en) organization, and single mother, says activism is innate to her – she displayed resistance to injustice even as a child.

“In those early days, the first PitchWise festival was significant for me – a live encounter with feminism, with peace activists from across the Balkans, and with women activists carrying and spreading phenomenal energy. Simply put, that moment of collision awakened me and helped me continue my path of feminist activism. But growing up alongside my mother, Enisa Raković, who fought tremendous battles and achieved major victories for women’s rights in the Una-Sana Canton, left an indelible mark. Living activism in small local communities is not easy, and strong women leaders are essential as pillars of support in our activism,” says Raković.

One of the most notable activist victories she highlights was an action led after the death of a woman and her baby during childbirth. Activists from Glas žene, along with Una-Sana Canton Assembly representative Ilda Alibegović, secured the right for women to have a companion during childbirth at the Cantonal Hospital in Bihać.

“We managed to put this issue on the agenda of the cantonal government, which, through the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Social Policy, accepted and supported it,” says Raković.

She describes herself as particularly sensitive to the suffering of those who are “weaker” or unprotected at any given moment, including women, children, migrants, disenfranchised individuals, people with disabilities, and the LGBTIQ+ community.

“I believe feminism is closest to justice, while the principle of human rights is more of a general concept aiming to balance everything and everyone, which can sometimes lead to injustice for a specific category,” says Raković.

She notes that being an activist in a society that provides no support for single-parent families or single mothers is a significant challenge.

“I often had to put in much more effort to carry out the activities I wanted to achieve because there is no support. During those times, my support came from my feminist colleagues and my parents, who selflessly provided immense help in various ways, especially through understanding and support – thank you to them. Beyond that, our activism has faced condemnation, rejection, humiliation, threats, persecution (from institutions), and inappropriate actions directed at me or those close to me. I overcome obstacles through perseverance and by not giving up, even when things are at their hardest, because I somehow cannot allow myself to be

broken,” concludes Raković.

She sees the greatest threats to the development of a democratic society and human rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina as the constant threats of renewed armed conflict and corruption, which lead to human rights violations and other negative phenomena in society.

“On the other hand, the lack of equality and the underrepresentation of women in decision-making positions result in a lack of democracy, which in turn leads to corruption. However, there are fewer visible and adjudicated cases of severe corruption involving women because women are either less susceptible or more resistant to it,” concludes Raković.

She expects more mutual solidarity from the women’s movement in Bosnia and Herzegovina, less focus on donor interests, and greater attention to real issues.

“I think we should be more decisive, courageous, louder, and united, especially in advocacy efforts. The lethargy that has somewhat affected our movement bothers me, but I understand that it stems from the overall situation in the country and society,” says Raković.



## **Ana Kotur Erkić:**

### ***Our Mothers Didn't Raise Us to Be Silent***

Ana Kotur Erkić, a native of Banja Luka currently living in Brčko, focuses on the rights of people with disabilities but comes from a background in human rights organizations. Her childhood and upbringing unfolded in two parallel worlds – one filled with regular obligations like daycare, school, and studying, and the other with doctors, exercises, rehabilitation, and institutions.

“That meant I missed out on many social activities that were a given for others simply because there was no other way,” says Ana.

When she was deciding on a university major, her main dilemma was between economics and law. She ultimately chose law, even though she excelled at math, because she developed a dislike for the subject due to a homeroom teacher who kept counting her absences caused by rehabilitation.

“When I chose law, I didn't think I'd end up doing what I do today. But in my fourth year, my international law professor, Vitomir Popović, mentioned the installation of an elevator for people with disabilities at the faculty – it was a current issue at the time. He said it was the state's obligation, not an act of goodwill, and that it should be done properly. At the time, he was politically active and remarked

how awful it was to see parents carrying their children to lectures on the first or second floor – the second floor was inaccessible for people with mobility difficulties. All my classmates were probably expecting some kind of reaction from me. I was aware that this wasn't the time or place because I was going to live my life anyway. He didn't realize I had a disability and that his comment was misplaced. But that moment sparked something in me, marking the beginning of my activism. Back then, I didn't have the voice to challenge authority or false authority like I do today," shares Ana Kotur Erkić, who is currently preparing to defend her master's thesis.

**CURE: How did you get into activism? How did it all start?**

**KOTUR ERKIĆ:** At the end of 2013, the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly of Banja Luka posted a job advertisement seeking a journalist to work on the rights of people with disabilities as part of the IN project, which was the first portal for people with disabilities in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Before that, I wrote for school newspapers in high school and university. While the topics were highly engaging, that wasn't activism; it was simply a natural inclination towards certain issues. At that time, I was also facing challenges within my family. My parents struggled to cope with my diagnosis – my father found it difficult even to say it aloud, and my mother wrestled with my abilities and the rejection I faced from those around me. As a lifelong teacher, she chose to teach me something invaluable: to fight for myself. If I couldn't physically fight, she said, I should yell and make noise to draw attention. When I started working for the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly, I was an outsider. Thanks to what I learned from my colleague Jelena Despotović and what I gained through education, I found myself in activism. Even then, I didn't perceive it as activism or the development of social awareness, but now I can say that it all found me. Today, people around me believe it would be a shame if I did anything else – activism defines me now. When ODIHR published its report this year (2024) on human rights defenders and my name was included, even though it was in connection with an attack on me, I was deeply honored.

**CURE: What is the focus of your activism at this moment?**

**KOTUR ERKIĆ:** One of the topics that interests me is security, especially in extraordinary circumstances. The COVID-19 pandemic taught us that nothing is as secure and stable as we are used to thinking, and that all the challenges faced by activists in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as around the world, can escalate into major societal problems. Not the pandemic per se, but any other situation can be exploited to create problems. At the same time, I am deeply interested in the position of women in Bosnia and Herzegovina, both from an activist and an academic perspective. Additionally, my sense of justice makes the LGBTIQ+ community a focus of mine, simply because hate speech and anti-gender movements have become increasingly prevalent and relevant in recent times. All of this is something I cannot accept as a person. As a human being, I cannot endure such levels of injustice.

**CURE: What is your guiding idea? What is your goal?**

**KOTUR ERKIĆ:** On one hand, it's my sense of justice, and on the other, it's important to me that these issues we're discussing are brought into focus in a meaningful way – for the public, society, and the community as a whole. I am also a bit frustrated because a significant part of the NGO sector is very superficial and doesn't consider everything necessary to achieve a satisfactory level of respect for human rights. It doesn't address these issues in a quality manner or tackle the problems in a way that leads to real solutions. As an activist, I want to address these issues at a higher level, particularly through advocacy processes where I have the opportunity to make an impact.

**CURE: How did you learn and build your understanding?**

**KOTUR ERKIĆ:** When I was starting out, my “bubble” or circle of interest was focused on activism and our shared goals. It was enough for me to have that perspective and stick to what I found important. However, that was completely unrealistic, and I had to consider the other side to influence what they were doing and potentially change it.

I believe I learned the most from the generations of my mother and our grandmothers, simply because they were somehow freer, more combative, and less prone to making rotten compromises for the sake of survival, as we see among some younger women today. This ties into the revolutionary past, various aspects of socialism, and the strengthening of women during that era. Those generations were much more direct in their demands of society, and that gave me tools, confidence, and courage to position myself within society. If I had been raised by someone younger, someone who grew up in these turbulent times when equality wasn't even part of the conversation, I don't think I would have gained everything I have today. These were women who had access to quality education, which most women don't have today, and who grew up without the burdens of the divisions we face now. If I were to name specific individuals, I feel a great sense of obligation to **Žarana Papić** – I received a scholarship bearing her name at the Gender Studies program at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade. I would also highlight **Lana Jajčević** because she, with her straightforward approach to everything she does and her simplicity, is somehow a great corrective influence.

**CURE: How has activism influenced you as a person, and how has it changed you from your childhood to now?**

**KOTUR ERKIĆ:** Growing up the way I did, I couldn't get answers to many questions that were important to me – my mother was overwhelmed with life's challenges and emotionally invested in my situation, while the “Zotović” Center, where I spent much of my time in rehabilitation, didn't focus on the women dimension of life, as all people with disabilities there were treated the same. Later, through activism, I realized that the point is to amplify the issues faced by women with disabilities. When I received support from women I respect, I understood how important it is to be involved in activism. My role is not only to solve my own problems but also to create mechanisms for those who come after me, who will face the same battles, and to pave a path they can follow. If I hadn't learned



through human rights organizations and been raised to question authority and keep asking questions until I got answers, I wouldn't have the confidence in my beliefs that I have today.

**CURE: Are you a feminist, and how do you understand feminism? Does it exist in Bosnia and Herzegovina?**

**KOTUR ERKIĆ:** I carry my feminism as a special honor, not just as an identity, because in the face of all the attacks on feminism we are experiencing and witnessing, it's particularly important to be proud of feminism. Our mothers didn't give birth to us to remain silent, and women throughout history didn't fight for us to give up now. For me, feminism is the essential equality of all who are different, with women playing a central role. This might differ slightly from theoretical definitions, but today we see that feminism isn't just about women, nor should it be. It also concerns men who, in societies like ours, are burdened by patriarchal roles and aren't given the space to exist as human beings. Women, as the backbone of all communities – not just biologically – should share the idea of feminism with their surroundings and, in doing so, shouldn't bear the burden of the fight for equality alone. There's a term that Nikola Vučić explores in his book *Toxic Masculinity*, which resonates with me. It's important because treating men poorly exacerbates the position of women and denies space to men who don't fit into stereotypes. For me, feminism is support, help, critique, protests, and the paper on which everything that bothers us is written and submitted to institutions. It's a reaction to a politician's statement, voting for a woman, opposing poor treatment of women politicians, and offering support to women in politics.

**CURE: What are the biggest obstacles you've faced, how have you overcome them, and which experience has most changed or influenced you?**

**KOTUR ERKIĆ:** First and foremost, it's very important to me that I come from a human rights organization rather than one advocating specifically for the rights of people with disabilities. The biggest struggle throughout my activism has been proving that disability is not an entire identity. People with disabilities, or at least most of them, often conform to the disability movement, choosing to present themselves as more disadvantaged than others, such as members of the Roma or LGBTIQ+ communities, perhaps because it's easier that way. My fight is to resist adopting that mindset. Additionally, I learn the most from every mistake I've made, and I've erred most when I viewed the world as better than it actually is or when I failed to anticipate who might oppose a particular idea or initiative. Sometimes you have to take off the "rose-colored glasses" and recognize your adversaries, who are often conformists – people content with their position. These adversaries aren't just a single individual but anyone who has achieved something through small favors, corruption, or similar means, getting ahead faster than the rest of us who stand in line and wait. These are people who have never been marginalized or seriously disadvantaged and whose comfortable bubble is enough for them to live in.

**CURE: How do you see the women's movement in Bosnia and Herzegovina? What are its greatest strengths, and what mistakes, if any, do you see?**

**KOTUR ERKIĆ:** My first association with the women's movement in Bosnia

and Herzegovina many efforts pulling in different directions, lacking the strength to come together. If they were to unite, they would have a much stronger impact. That said, we shouldn't overlook what has already been achieved: gathering information from the field, highlighting pressing issues, and addressing solutions – all of this is something we do very well. I'm encouraged by the tremendous support shown to women who, at any given moment, find themselves endangered in their work because they are feminists. However, what I find lacking is the solidarity we all believe in. While we all believe in solidarity, demonstrating it is another matter, and many factors erode the women's movement. At the same time, the women's movement has long been a movement of typical, average women, but it has yet to fully extend its reach to marginalized women, primarily women with disabilities or Roma women, even though all women are, in some way, marginalized. There have been some tentative steps forward, but the women's movement hasn't built the capacities of these groups, and that's something that needs attention. It's crucial to understand that the barriers faced by, for example, women with disabilities are greater and more difficult than those faced by most women. Additionally, they suffer from a "hero syndrome," where special recognition is given to individuals with war-related disabilities, leaving other people with disabilities outside the social reality. This imbalance needs to be addressed within the movement to ensure true inclusivity.

**CURE: What should be the focus of the women's movement in the future?**

**KOTUR ERKIĆ:** First and foremost, we need stronger peace activism, as this region is burdened with conflicts. We live alongside generations weighed down by war, and even those who weren't born during the war advocate for conflicts. On the other hand, we live in deep ethnic divisions, which are a façade for economic disparities – something feminism recognizes as a field of struggle and action, and there's much work to be done there.

Currently, the growing strength of anti-gender movements hiding behind patriarchal values is truly concerning. They succeeded in blocking a new domestic violence protection law in the National Assembly of the Republika Srpska, and shortly after, there were several cases of femicide, one of which involved a woman with a disability. The problem isn't just the law that's yet to come but also the time passing until it is adopted, during which many women are left unprotected. The essence of their actions is also deeply problematic, as they are reviving outdated practices, such as inequality within families and decisions about children and women being made without their input. I don't wish to delve into the religious aspect, but I cannot allow religious elements to be incorporated into laws, as this undermines the secular nature of the state. Moreover, these movements lack a basic understanding of what they oppose, such as the definition of gender and related concepts. In this context, the issue of the right to life in terms of reproduction is particularly relevant, especially concerning selective abortions, primarily involving children with disabilities. There is data indicating an increase in abortions due to suspicions that a child might have Down syndrome based on tests that are not definitive, as well as reports from Montenegro of rising abortion rates because par-

ents don't want daughters. I support a woman's right to abortion and do not want to impose my will on anyone, but we must ensure access to quality information about abortion and the potential challenges a child might face.

**CURE: What do you see as the biggest obstacles to developing a modern democratic society in Bosnia and Herzegovina?**

**KOTUR ERKIĆ:** It's inequality on all fronts because, despite all the effort invested, we don't all start from the same position. Equality in education is especially important, particularly for people with disabilities and Roma women. For them, starting school often requires immense effort and sacrifices, both on their part and from their families – something society doesn't even consider. It can mean selling the family's only cow, carrying a child through the snow, or other extreme measures. Society doesn't think about these realities at all. There's also inequality in employment, which we will feel even more in the future, as we've focused too long on pay inequality while neglecting employment discrimination. We've also ignored the stereotypes perpetuated by social media, where women are expected to be perfect. This will become a stumbling block for young girls as they try to navigate their identities. Finally, I want to be represented in the society we're building by women who understand me, which is not currently the case. Too often, when women gain a position within the circles of power, they seem to forget how many women behind them made that possible and how much those women need them to serve in that role to the best of their ability.



## Elvedina Dina Alić:

### *I Broke the Generational Pattern of Raising Children*

“Elvedina Alić from Konjic: feminist, activist, humanitarian, peacebuilder, and friend. A mother of four grown children, a wife, and a cohabitant with three cats – though I prefer not to call myself their owner. I have a passion for writing and enjoy my hobbies, especially decoupage. I don’t have ‘free time’ because I see life as freedom, and I use my time rationally, even when idling. I’m happy to have the privilege of being aware of the small successes I savor and for which I am grateful. I like to describe myself as a woman with superpowers, which I recognize in my choice to be useful to my community, to other women, children, animals, and to live a life that respects nature and everyone’s right to be who they are.”

#### **CURE: How did you get into activism, and how did it all start?**

**ALIĆ:** I don’t remember anyone in my family embracing activism as a way of life. I come from a family where one of the values was “minding your own business,” but even as a little girl, I was inclined to care for others, not just myself, and that’s how it has been my whole life. I started building a true activist lifestyle during the war when I joined Civil Protection and worked on distributing humanitarian aid to those in greatest need. After the war, my rebellion against a flawed system that doesn’t protect people became my life – a fight for human rights. For years, I found ways to secure scholarships for women students who were overlooked by the system. Some of these girls are now engineers, management experts, and professors. A few of them received awards at their universities as top students.

The greatest reward is knowing you were a small source of support on someone's path to success. That matters to me. It's the fuel for my activism. Happiness. That's what makes me human. For a long time, I wrote posts on social media, sometimes criticizing the authorities, sometimes reflecting on whatever life brought. I realized I had a lot of people who understood me and trusted me. I used the free online space to launch numerous humanitarian initiatives. Each one was successful. When I think about it, it feels like I didn't step into activism – it pulled me in with an unexplainable gravitational force, and I don't regret it. If I were born again, I'd choose the superpower of being an activist. Years of volunteer humanitarian work have marked me as one of the biggest drivers of humanitarian actions in my hometown, Konjic. But at some point, it was no longer enough to secure medicine for someone who couldn't afford it, to provide books and school supplies for children whose parents were unemployed, or to arrange scholarships, clothing, footwear, firewood, and so much more. It simply became time for me to grow in a different direction. The women's activist movement was something that resonated with me, a space where I wanted to channel my remaining energy.

**CURE: How did you learn and grow?**

**ALIĆ:** The education I received through the Women's Network of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the experiences of other members, and the mentoring support I received from the Network were the foundation upon which I began building myself as a feminist. Everything I am today, I owe to the incredible activists like Jadranka Miličević, Selma Hadžihalilović, Dubravka Kovačević, and Seida Sarić. From them, I learned about feminism, women's activism, women's rights, submitting initiatives, creating safe spaces for women, and the economic empowerment of women.

**CURE: So, are you a feminist, and what does feminism mean to you?**

**ALIĆ:** In my heart, I am embraced by feminism, and that embrace never loosens. Today, I am a recognized activist and feminist in my local community and, to be a bit bold – even beyond it.

**CURE: What is the current focus of your work?**

**ALIĆ:** I am focused on the economic empowerment of women in Konjic. Through economic empowerment, I have integrated humanitarian work, the fight against poverty and violence against women, and the socialization of women. This also brings me personal fulfillment as I witness the visible, tangible, and concrete changes in the lives of individual women. Every phase of activism I went through during my personal growth was essential, providing me with experiences that now serve as my primary tools in this work.

**CURE: How has activism changed you, from your upbringing at home to who you are now?**

**ALIĆ:** I always feel the need to emphasize that it's not easy to stand out and be different in a small local community. My journey as a "black sheep" has been the most beautiful path one can take. It's a painful process to grow up in a patriarchal

family and strive to live freely. I never had support from my parents, especially my late mother. She was ashamed of my defiance, my outspoken opinions, and my need to intervene during loud arguments in the neighborhood. She believed that a woman's place was in her home, with her sole concern being household duties. I did the exact opposite. I have three daughters, and when I look at them and compare them to myself at their age, I'm proud that I've broken the generational cycle of raising girls in the same way.

**CURE: What is your goal, guiding idea, and why do you do what you do?**

**ALIĆ:** Activism in a small local community comes with constant challenges. Every initiative can lead to new objections because even the simplest effort for public good might seem to someone like a personal attack, a threat to their work, or an attempt to change long-standing practices. It's much easier to make enemies, as every initiative addresses some systemic shortcoming that may be benefiting someone else. I'm not sure what method I use to overcome obstacles on my activist journey, but I am 100% certain that the fight, honor, solidarity, and dedication are worth it.

**CURE: Can you share an experience that had a significant impact on you?**

**ALIĆ:** If I had to highlight some of the activities I initiated and am proud of, I would definitely mention organizing protests in Jablanica following the violence committed by the owner of Hotel Jablanica against an employee – as well as leading a humanitarian campaign to procure isolation units and improve conditions for COVID-19 patients. I led the latter campaign while hooked up to an oxygen tank – as a patient with pneumonia, hospitalized in that very facility. The response from people in both cases was incredible. The most important lesson I've learned is that there always needs to be someone bold – or even crazy enough – to start the process.

**CURE: What would you highlight as the most significant achievements of the women's movement in Bosnia and Herzegovina?**

**ALIĆ:** I am grateful to the Women's movement for empowering women and for the fact that today, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, we have a large number of women's non-governmental organizations improving the lives of Bosnian women. The truth is, without this movement, many small local communities would never have had activists courageous enough to establish associations or take independent action.

**CURE: What, in your opinion, should be the focus of the women's movement in Bosnia and Herzegovina?**

**ALIĆ:** I would love to see the women's movement in Bosnia and Herzegovina become more impactful. At present, I believe it's crucial to focus on educating young girls and women – and consistently rejuvenating the activist base – to drive change. We've made mistakes by burning out in the fight to prove inequality and through the independent efforts of numerous organizations without interconnect-

edness or mapping out the best initiatives. It is essential to identify the strongest initiatives and support them collectively – one by one! These initiatives need visibility and unified, determined advocacy until they are fully realized. A more effective women's movement requires stronger connections and collaboration among organizations and individuals – this is our strength! It is especially important to persevere as feminists in a time when the women's movement is under threat from regressive policies, the misuse of religion, and political lobbying. A woman is an equal member of society, with rights guaranteed by the Human Rights Convention – and there is no alternative to this. Equality is imperative! As long as my health allows, I will continue working on empowering women. Freedom – be free!



## **Anela Kozica:**

### ***The Obstacle Is Believing You Have No Right to Be Happy***

Anela Kozica founded the informal Facebook group *Special Mama (Posebna mama)* to support mothers of children with disabilities – a community of 2,000 women who often find that the first help they receive comes directly from this group. Kozica explains that in everyday communication, it is correct to use both terms “child with a disability” and “child with challenges,” but emphasizes that it is inappropriate to offer help when it is not requested or to give charity simply because a child has a disability. A few years ago, Anela experienced the heartbreaking loss of her daughter Emina. She is now a mother of two and works at the *Give Us a Chance Service Center (Servisni centar Dajte nam šansu)* in Sarajevo. Anela proudly identifies as a feminist.

### **CURE: How did you get into activism? How did it all start?**

**KOZICA:** I was the mother of a little girl with developmental challenges and started “dealing” *nutritional drinks (nutridrink)* – a special food supplement for children with challenges, which for some is their primary source of nutrition. I like to say “dealing,” but I was connecting mothers. Sometimes some moms had a surplus and would donate to moms who didn’t have any. It’s quite expensive – one bottle costs around 8 KM, and kids often drink two or three bottles a day, making it unaffordable for many moms. Once, on the forum *Pretty Women*, through Nina Grebo, a mom was looking for *nutridrink* for her son. At the time, I was driving a little Kadett and offered to gather bottles around the city with my daughter Emina



and deliver them to her. That's when I accidentally encountered a woman in front of the *Inat House*. She handed me a package of *nutridrink* and asked if Emina was my child. When I said yes, she grabbed my sleeve and invited me over to her place, saying she had a daughter just like mine. I had never met this woman before, but I took Emina in my arms and went to her house. There, I saw a little girl who was just like my daughter. That's how we met – her name is Merima, and her daughter is Hana. Merima thought she was all alone in the world, that no one else had a daughter with the same diagnosis. It was the first time she met someone else with the same challenges, the same diagnosis, and who was alive. That's how we started – we had coffee together, and later we became close friends. She's like a sister to me now, sometimes even more than a sister. When I got home, I realized how wonderful it would be for other moms if I could connect them, so they could share experiences and so much more. So, I sat down and created the Facebook group *Special Mama (Posebna mama)*. That was in August 2016. At first, it was just Merima and me, but she knew two moms, and I knew two moms, and that was how it started. Now, we have over 2,000 moms in the group. Every day, we exchange questions – what to do, where to go... We're real support for each other – informational, moral, psychological. And even today, I still “deal” *nutridrink* hand to hand – when one mom has a surplus, we send it to Zenica where there's none. We also share *butterfly needles* from Germany, PEGs (percutaneous endoscopic gastrostomy feeding tubes for patients who cannot swallow, placed through a small incision in the abdominal wall and can be either permanent or temporary), wheelchairs... I don't even know how many wheelchairs we've distributed – one chair is too small for one child, so we give it to another... I don't know everything we've shared, how many friendships we've created, or how much we've facilitated life for so many women, but we've certainly made a huge difference. The Facebook group is informal, but it's very well-known – every mom in Bosnia and Herzegovina knows about it. If you see a little child with challenges, the first question you ask their mom is whether they're part of the *Special Mama* group.

**CURE: What is currently the focus of your work?**

**KOZICA:** Honestly, I've taken a bit of a break over the past two years, focusing on myself after spending years dedicating my time to others. I now have two children; my daughter Emina passed away six years ago when my other daughter was just five months old, and last year I gave birth to a son. Seven years ago, when the *Give Us a Chance Center (Dajte nam šansu)* in Stari Grad opened, I was offered a job, and it felt natural to accept – somehow, my heart led me there. However, I've never stopped connecting people; I still distribute *nutridrink* and assist many families. I hope that in the coming period, I'll return to activism and focus once again on women's rights.

**CURE: What is your guiding idea? What is your goal?**

**KOZICA:** My goal is to make life easier, primarily for mothers of children with developmental difficulties – to empower them, connect them, and show them they are not alone. Sometimes, I spend hours and hours on the phone just to connect women. The other day, one special mom from Switzerland found me through the *Give Us a Chance Center (Dajte nam šansu)*.

**CURE: What does feminism mean to you?**

**KOZICA:** Feminism is something we desperately need. To me, it means understanding yourself as a woman, loving yourself as a woman, accepting yourself, claiming what is rightfully yours, fighting for another woman, accepting her as she is, being her friend, and standing in solidarity with her. Somehow, in this world, no matter how hard we fight, women are always sidelined.

**CURE: Why do you think women are not more involved in politics or feminist actions and organizations?**

**KOZICA:** I think it comes down to upbringing – women often don't embrace their femininity, their rights, or anything else – they remain subordinate to men and their families. I believe the root of this lies in the way we are raised from a young age, being taught to behave this way. By the time you mature and become aware of yourself, life has passed, and you don't have the time to engage in feminism – unless like in my case, life hits you hard and forces you to fight, to realize your worth, your strength, and your ability to achieve.

**CURE: How did you learn? From what or whom?**

**KOZICA:** If I compare myself now to who I was 15 years ago – I am not the same person at all. I don't recognize myself in the mirror, in my soul, in my mind – in any way. The Anela from back then and the Anela now don't know each other. I only know who I was, and I would never go back to that old self, to that patriarchal upbringing where a woman had to be a housewife, a mother, a cook, a cleaner, an employed woman – everything she's supposed to be, because it's expected of her. Now, I love the way things are – I have the knowledge, but I don't have to do everything, and nothing is taken for granted. If I want to have a day where I do nothing, not even take care of the kids – someone else will step in. That old Anela and I wouldn't even cross paths anymore.

**CURE: When you say that now someone else will step in – have you changed in the past 15 years or has the world around you changed?**

**KOZICA:** I've changed. I often say that I've been married twice – this is my second marriage. I've changed a lot, and I often think that if I had been the person I am now 15 years ago, I wouldn't have divorced. I would have known how to approach things differently and would have been who I am today – if only I had known, but I didn't.

**CURE: Do you think the world around you has changed as well, in terms of new services opening up and the involvement of other women?**

**KOZICA:** The world can change as much as it wants, but if you don't open the windows and doors in your mind – nothing will happen, it's all for nothing. But yes, the world has changed. For example, this Service Center – it helped me so much as a mother of a child with disabilities. For the first time, I could leave my child with someone and focus on myself.

**CURE: How has your activism changed you, from your upbringing to who you are today?**

**KOZICA:** I have so much confidence now. Through all that activism, you prove to yourself that you have value and that you can do it, and then, once you become self-aware, you strive to raise awareness among others around you, especially mothers who may now be going through what I went through 15 years ago.

**CURE: What do you think is the most important thing you and the other women you communicate with have “exchanged”?**

**KOZICA:** Experience. Experience, knowledge, love, and a sense of mutual support. I wish I could sometimes share some of my strength with other mothers who are confined to their homes, who say their child can't go a minute without them, and who won't go out because they think it would make them bad mothers.

**CURE: What have been the biggest obstacles you've faced – and how did you overcome them?**

**KOZICA:** One obstacle is the belief that you don't have the right to be happy – to take care of yourself, to dress up, wear makeup, have your own private life, marriage, love, or a partner – because you're the mother of a child with disabilities and should only focus on caring for that child. Then you receive social reinforcement for this belief, like, “Look at her – she has a child like that, and she's wearing lipstick; look at her with that kind of child, and she has long nails.” Or I'd step outside, dressed, neat, and clean – and constantly worry that someone might approach me and hand me some money. It often happens that when people see you with a child with disabilities, they approach and give money to the child. Over time, I've become more used to it – and maybe I've changed too – but it has never felt entirely comfortable. For example, now I go out with my neurotypical daughter, and if someone gives her money to buy herself some chocolate, I'm fine with that. But I wasn't okay when they did the same for my Emina. I don't know – maybe it's just me. In general, I dislike it when people offer help without being asked – like when I'm getting a stroller onto the bus or doing something else. I'm proud to have had Jasmin Džemidžić as a friend – we used to joke about this. He'd say, “Come on, help me,” and I'd reply, “I won't, because you don't help me either,” and then we'd laugh. Honestly, I don't understand how people decide someone needs help – sometimes, it only creates tension and disorder.

**CURE: When you have a child with disabilities, your communication with the community, the system, and institutions is completely different. Have you encountered problems, and did you have to learn the laws?**

**KOZICA:** Fifteen years ago, the system didn't function as it does now. It's easier now, partly thanks to the Service Center *Give Us a Chance*. Today, we have the status of parent-caregivers, and mothers can gain work experience through caregiving. Back then, accessing institutions wasn't easy, especially if you had a child in a wheelchair. You'd go to the municipality office and wait, hoping someone would take pity on you and provide some information. This is what inspired me to create the group – now, nothing can be hidden. Sometimes they refuse to give you

a required form and claim it doesn't exist, but over time, I've gained confidence and say, "Give me a blank paper, and I'll write it myself." And it worked. Now, if a mother doesn't know something, she asks in the group, and other moms tell her what to do – how to get transport costs reimbursed, which form to use, whom to contact – and you already have all the answers.

**CURE: Are children with disabilities more visible now than they were 15 years ago?**

**KOZICA:** Yes, they are! When I was a child, I don't recall knowing anyone with disabilities or challenges. I didn't even know they existed. If I saw someone on the street, my mom would say, "Don't stare," and that was the end of it. When I had a child with disabilities, the hardest part was accepting that she had a challenge – mostly because I was afraid of what people would say. That fear was inside me. I vividly remember being in isolation at the hospital with another mother, Lejla, who had a son named Ajdin. Ajdin was about five or six years old at the time. Lejla was an aware, kind, and intelligent woman. My daughter was just three or four months old, I was around 23 years old, and I was a single mother of a child with a disability. Lejla was so proud of Ajdin, even taking photos of him. I asked her how she wasn't ashamed, and she told me she walks with him every day, head held high and is proud of him. I've never received such a boost in my life. She said, "As soon as you leave the hospital, put her in a stroller and walk proudly. The only people who might have the right to say anything are those who feed you – and no one else. The most important thing is that you accept your own child."

**CURE: In your opinion, what should be the focus of the women's movement in Bosnia and Herzegovina?**

**KOZICA:** We need more women everywhere. Women were given intellect, while men were given strength. Still, I believe the most important focus should be on women's economic empowerment – ensuring they have their own money and don't depend on men or their families. As soon as they are able, women should start working, engaging in something that strengthens them. Having their own income in their hands makes everything easier.

**CURE: What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of the women's movement?**

**KOZICA:** I think, in some ways, we women have shot ourselves in the foot – we gained the right to vote, to work, but many women have taken on too many responsibilities without balancing them well. Now they work, run to pick up their kids from daycare, rush home... and then face everything they left behind. I feel we haven't allocated our rights and responsibilities in a balanced way. On the other hand, it's beautiful when you have a lot of women standing behind you, someone to reach out to when you're in trouble. For instance, in my old apartment, a neighbor attacked me, but Selma from the CURE Foundation reached out, asking if I needed them to come – saying there are 50 of them. It means so much to have an army of women behind you. All my women from the LGBTIQ+ community came too. But, for example, I haven't experienced institutions respecting the women's movement, recognizing it as a partner or someone worth listening to. Honestly, I

think they even find us annoying.

**CURE: What do you think is the main obstacle to developing a democratic society and advancing human rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina?**

**KOZICA:** Corruption, an insensitive government, and perhaps apathy – a lot of things are done superficially. Take social welfare centers, for example – my child had developmental difficulties, and I could do whatever I wanted with her; no one ever came to check on her. Maybe they would like to, but they don't even have the authority to do so.



## **Adisa Likić:**

### ***We Must Not Pass Ethnic Intolerance on to the Young***

Adisa Likić from Vareš is the founder of the “Zvijezda” Association (“Star” Association), which was initially intended to support women who survived wartime sexual violence, regardless of their ethnic background. However, she explains, “It quickly became clear that every woman needs support, regardless of wartime experience.”

#### **CURE: How did it start – what led you to activism?**

**LIKIĆ:** My activism began after the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina – inspired, or perhaps provoked, by the events that took place in Stupni Do, Vareš.

#### **CURE: What drives you – why do you do what you do?**

**LIKIĆ:** The position of women in Bosnia and Herzegovina – including in our Vareš – is not favorable. Significant work is needed both within society and the system to truly understand the roles and needs of women. Over the years, our association has focused on providing economic support to women – but we have also created a safe space where women can share their challenges and express needs that are neither recognized by society nor at home.

The energy generated in such a safe space has given women a sense of solidarity and strength. In collaboration with numerous organizations, they have built their

capacities and expanded their knowledge. Capacity building is key – as it has empowered women with the courage to clearly articulate their initiatives.

**CURE: What is currently the focus of your work?**

**LIKIĆ:** We strive to develop economic support for women, encourage the growth of business ventures, and offer services and assistance to interested women to contribute to the financial strengthening of our families. The commemoration of war crimes will continue to ensure that younger generations remember and fight against war. We will focus on being mentors to the youth, sharing our experiences and knowledge through various projects, and emphasizing the value of networking. Advocacy for securing places at decision-making tables will persist, along with efforts to participate in political processes – as this is imperative for a healthy and prosperous community.

**CURE: How has activism changed you – from your upbringing to who you are now?**

**LIKIĆ:** Activism, as well as feminism, has transformed me by making me more aware of my capacities and my role in society and the system. I consider this incredibly important for my mental and physical well-being.

**CURE: What do you believe should be the priorities of the women’s movement in the upcoming period?**

**LIKIĆ:** I believe it’s time to implement changes that amplify the voices of young people. It’s crucial for young women to have the space to set the pace of the women’s movement and introduce changes that foster their growth and development. As older activists, we should provide support and share our experiences, but we must stop imposing our ideas, as it’s clear they are not always the right ones. The biggest mistake we’ve made so far is allowing fewer young women to engage in activism and attend our gatherings. I think this is because our methods and ideas don’t align with their needs and aspirations.

**CURE: What do you see as the greatest threat to the development of a democratic society and human rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina?**

**LIKIĆ:** Above all, it’s the perpetuation of ethnic intolerance, which should never have been passed down to younger generations. They should not bear the cost of past mistakes and violence. Instead, they need to know the facts to understand what to guard against. Additionally, corruption and crime, stemming from all directions within our country, jeopardize democracy and the right to safety for all citizens.



## Mersida Mešetović:

### *The Importance of Every Individual Is Enormous*

Mersida Mešetović is one of the few women in Bosnia and Herzegovina who has had a successful military career and later founded an association for women who served in the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

She graduated from the Faculty of Political Sciences, majoring in National Defense, which marked the beginning of her journey in uniform. During the war, she served in the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina and continued her career in the Armed Forces of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. She was also among the founding members of the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Mersida retired in 2016 with the rank of brigadier, becoming the first woman to hold this rank in the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

She is a mother of two sons, one of whom serves in the military, and a grandmother to one grandchild. Mersida currently lives with her husband and their cat.

**CURE:** How did you become involved in women’s activism? How did it all start?

**MEŠETOVIC:** I never faced serious issues at work – like harassment or mobbing – but as you move up the professional ladder, you encounter rejection or exclusion with comments like, “What’s she doing here? She’s a woman,” and so on. This isn’t noticeable at the lower levels of the hierarchy, where there are more people, but as you ascend the pyramid, the number of people decreases, and



women become more visible. Meanwhile, men are much more subtle – they’re better organized, socialize more, and form exclusive networks that often sideline women. This isn’t unique to the military. This experience sparked a desire in me to protect women from such negative attitudes during their career progression. I also wanted to increase the number of women in the system. At that time, I was in the Joint Staff, holding the rank of colonel, with brigadiers and generals above me. My efforts were supported by UN Resolution 1325 – *Women, Peace, and Security*. If we want more women involved in the peace process, there must be more women in the military. Unfortunately, this resolution was underutilised and not widely recognised. My rank gave me some level of authority, but my interest lay in being on the ground – working with young people in the system – and breaking down gender divisions so that the primary focus would be on the quality of work and task execution. However, I encountered resistance. At that time, as a military officer collaborating with the NATO staff, I travelled across Bosnia and Herzegovina – visiting small towns and explaining to people why having women in the military is important and how it ties into global integration. Simultaneously, within the system, I organised conferences, prepared relevant documents in collaboration with the Agency for Gender Equality, and worked with a coordination body at the Ministry of Defence level. My personal goal was to be part of the changes that needed to happen – especially in the context of gender equality and securing women’s human rights.

**CURE: What challenges did you face back then, and how did you address them?**

**MEŠETOVIĆ:** The main issues were being denied opportunities for advancement and having my achievements ignored. For instance, I was the first woman from the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina to participate in a mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea, and the first woman to lead a sector there. Yet, no one acknowledged this in any way. Instead, there were questions about how I even got there, or claims that I had extended my stay on my own initiative.

**CURE: What professional experiences did you try to address through your activism?**

**MEŠETOVIĆ:** First and foremost, I noticed that women – both professionally and outside their professions – were completely sidelined, especially after leaving their careers. For example, women demobilised after the disbandment of the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, who returned home to become housewives or continue their professional careers, were entirely forgotten. Our male colleagues, with whom we spent 3.5 years, forgot about us. They created a monograph about our brigade, through which 130 women had served in various roles – from finance and personnel officers, secretaries, communication unit members, medics, to working in kitchens preparing meals. These women were mentioned in just one footnote in the monograph! They were barely acknowledged, which is, at the very least, shameful. These women baked bread, rescued the wounded... The situation was similar in other units.

Now, women are trying to organise themselves more, but they are often lethargic, demoralised, and tend to give up the fight. We need more women in politics because, without women in leadership positions, who will ensure gender representa-

tion? However, the problem is that when women do reach certain positions, they often forget about other women.

We first established an association of women members of the Army of BiH in Ilijaš, then registered at the state level, aiming to unite all women who served in the Army of BiH. We are now working to socialise, connect, and determine what is needed for future activities to empower women both physically and mentally and to provide psychological support.

**CURE: How has your work in the military and your encounters with women through activism changed you as a person?**

**MEŠETOVIĆ:** I can say that my military career shaped me into a responsible and disciplined person. I am proud of my team spirit, which people quickly recognise when choosing a leader. This happened to me during my training in the United States – people from 53 countries, after just seven days of knowing me, elected me as the class leader, and I am incredibly proud of that. This defines me as a person, a worker, and a professional.

**CURE: How do you learn and continue to build your knowledge?**

**MEŠETOVIĆ:** I work and volunteer at an association for children with developmental difficulties. I spend time with women, invite them to take part in community actions, sweep in front of the building, leave water out for stray cats, and pick up litter in the park where my grandchild plays. I also research what's happening in other societies – for instance, there are no women in the Swiss army, women make up just 1 percent of the Italian military, and in the Austrian army, the highest rank a woman can hold is captain. This makes me wonder why we have such a negative attitude towards our own society.

**CURE: As a military officer, how do you comment on the case of a woman who had to leave military service because of her headscarf?**

**MEŠETOVIĆ:** The law is clear, and if it stands as it is, it must be respected – but it can be changed. For example, headscarves are permitted in military service in countries like the United Kingdom, Canada, and others. We cannot talk about human rights outside the framework of the law, but we can change the law if necessary.

**CURE: What message would you like to share with women who may not have had the chance to learn this yet?**

**MEŠETOVIĆ:** First and foremost, people – especially women – often fail to realise the importance of every individual, no matter how small their role may seem. When twenty people with these “small roles” come together, they gain strength, but only if they are part of a team and resist manipulation, ensuring they can't be swayed for a dinner, a hundred marks, or some other benefit. In any community, when five or ten people unite their mental capacity and willpower, they can bring about change. However, our society suffers from lethargy and dissatisfaction, often remaining overshadowed by that dissatisfaction without making real efforts to change things. Recently, 25,000 people took to the streets to cheer for basketball players. Imagine if even half of that number gathered in front of Parliament or the Presidency – there's nothing that couldn't be changed. Unfortunately, we calcu-

late too much and worry about personal gain. Look at women in Mexico – despite Mexico being much more dangerous in terms of security, women have managed to prevent drug lords from entering local communities. Some lost their lives in the process, but they succeeded.

How many women here take to the streets when a femicide occurs? Sadly, nothing that happens in our society provokes a genuine reaction from its citizens.

**CURE: How do you see the women’s movement in Bosnia and Herzegovina?**

**MEŠETović:** We cannot overlook the achievements in transferring international acts and standards into Bosnia and Herzegovina. For example, we signed the CEDAW Convention in 1993, which demonstrates the incredible strength and vision of the women’s movement in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Additionally, there is the UN Resolution 1325 and many others that followed. A significant number of organisations have been formed, many of which are very successful, but they are rather fragmented. There is also a lack of socially recognised successes – good laws have been adopted, but their implementation is lacking. I believe it would be better if we turned into a movement, connecting with each other while retaining our individual identities. We need an analysis of what is happening – why the laws that have been adopted are not respected, what women in politics have achieved in terms of women’s rights, and where the impact of women from the non-governmental sector on politics stands.

**CURE: Considering all of this, what do you think is the biggest threat to the development of a democratic society and human rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina?**

**MEŠETović:** The underutilisation of available resources, with women being a resource for society. Why did no one say during the war that they didn’t need women?

**CURE: What should then be the focus of the women’s movement?**

**MEŠETović:** Networking, better connectivity, and insisting on maximally aware and incorruptible women in the political arena are key to enforcing laws and working with young women, especially those in high schools. I am afraid that the non-governmental sector, burdened by survival and sustainability, has become insular, and we must not allow what has already been achieved to be lost.



## **Varja Nikolić and Roksanda Mičić:**

### *The Elderly Are a Powerful Investment*

Activists Varja Nikolić (Sarajevo) and Roksanda Mičić (Istočno Sarajevo) have extensive experience in activism – one publication would not be enough to list all their achievements. Speaking about age and activism, Roksanda Mičić says that it is good to “retire” at the age of 65, but only from formal employment and eight-hour workdays, not from the activities one chooses and plans for oneself.

“I think that’s precisely why many women are more active than ever – because they can do everything, but they don’t have to,” says Mičić.

Varja Nikolić confirms this through her work:

“I am currently working with ten activists – older citizens – in what is called grassroots democracy. I am preparing a document to promote civic participation of older adults in shaping social life in the Sarajevo Canton. The goal is for the authorities to adopt a sectoral strategy allowing older people to participate in and influence decisions affecting their quality of life. We have designed the document and are lobbying Sarajevo Canton authorities. We placed special emphasis on changing the perception of society, which often stigmatises older adults as an ‘economic burden’ or ‘socially useless segment’ rather than recognising them as a powerful investment willing to contribute their resources – acquired professional

skills and time – to societal processes. This initiative group is highly motivated for civic participation, and we believe collaboration with young people is crucial for the further development of society,” explains Nikolić.

Both women speak about how retirement changed their relationship with activism: “Attitudes towards activism shift through different stages of life, influenced by personal growth and the development of the community we live in. What remains constant for me is the activist way of life. Participating, contributing to the community, working for change that benefits both myself and others – that’s what defines me. It starts from the family, from early years. When my father was the president of the local community council in Marijin Dvor, where I was born and raised, he always said we should engage with the local council. Whenever a friend visited me, he would ask if she was involved in the council. At the time, I didn’t understand him,” shares Nikolić.

Now, she never refers to herself as a pensioner but as an activist.

“You become more engaged in the non-governmental sector or informal groups, write and work on project implementation, meet new people, and sometimes you don’t even have time for everything,” says Nikolić.

Mičić recalls following the formation of the non-governmental sector in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1997 and the introduction of the concept of human rights. Recognising its potential, she wanted to form an association but work and family obligations prevented her.

“When my children grew up and left home, and my work commute shortened to nine hours, I decided to get involved in the community and, together with others, try to make positive changes. Our first action was clearing overgrown areas in the local community to create a space for young people to spend their free time. In 2013, I gathered an informal group of citizens to improve community life. In 2014, we registered the citizens’ association *Wake Up (Probudi se)*, which continues to successfully operate today, particularly in promoting gender equality, environmental issues, and helping vulnerable populations.

We were one of the first associations in Istočno Sarajevo to effectively raise awareness about the non-governmental sector, contributing to a growing consciousness and encouraging people inclined towards activism to make changes in society,” says Mičić.

Both activists are guided by strong principles. Mičić is inspired by two maxims: “The world would be an ideal place if everyone did their part” and “Everyone has a duty to make the world better for themselves and others.”

“My guiding idea is that everything must be logical, fair, and just to build a good system and improve the quality of life for individuals and society. Another idea is that nothing is impossible – you just need to want it and work for it,” says Mičić.

Nikolić, on the other hand, focuses on what benefits the community, with human rights as her guiding principle:

“Fieldwork and talking to people about their problems are most important to me, always with the goal of helping if I can or at least sharing some of my own experiences. While working for the OSCE in 2005 as a local community development manager, I wrote *Theses for Fieldwork*, understanding the field as a living organism where templates are not suitable,” says Nikolić.

Both activists, now in their later years, describe themselves as feminists.

“Feminism, to me, is women’s struggle for equal standing in society and the family, economic independence, participation in social processes, the fight for Women’s human rights, and against injustices toward women. Feminism also means being an activist and a driver of change. Broad education about feminism, especially among young people, is crucial because there are many prejudices against the term and feminists, often with negative connotations. That’s why it’s important to break down these prejudices,” explains Nikolić.

Mičić adds: “Feminism is the fight for equality for all people, regardless of gender or sexual orientation. Over time, feminism has acquired negative connotations, especially in conservative and patriarchal communities. This has been influenced by those resistant to changing traditional gender relations and those imposing radical changes too quickly, often prioritising publicity over solving fundamental problems.”

Mičić concludes that feminism is as necessary today as ever, but many activists fail to address key issues like the economic empowerment of women and the challenges faced by women in smaller communities, which differ significantly from those in urban areas.

Both activists see nationalism, which shows no signs of fading, as the biggest threat to the development of a democratic society and the protection of human rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina. They also highlight the stagnation of peace processes initiated after the Dayton Agreement, the lack of political will to acknowledge war crimes as a prerequisite for reconciliation, and irresponsible governance.

“There are increasingly present forms of fascism, and the worst part is that it has multiplied, making the fight against it more difficult and creating significant obstacles to the development of democratic processes, especially for young people. The

greatest threats are nationalist political parties, which, for 30 years, in their own ways, have kept their populations captive. Bosnia and Herzegovina can be compared to a house without a foundation or roof, floating in time and space.

We need to build a foundation and a roof: constitutional reform, strengthening BiH institutions, and organised, active citizens as the integrative thread,” says Nikolić.

Mičić believes the government is problematic because “it lacks knowledge, wisdom, and information to make decisions or represent others.”

“I’ve heard a saying: ‘Just because all the fools are on one side doesn’t mean they’re right.’ Freedom of speech has led to general chaos in public discourse, including hate speech, and it seems that democracy has devoured itself. There’s also the question of whether forces behind the façade of democracy govern us for their own benefit, not ours, abusing democracy to do so more effectively,” concludes Mičić.

In this context, Mičić believes the women’s movement in BiH should focus on education and empowering women for entrepreneurship and leadership positions in business and politics, systematic solutions for violence against women, and greater focus on the most impoverished women in society and those in rural and small communities, whose rights are still neglected.

“The most significant achievements of the women’s movement in BiH include the legal regulation of gender equality, visibility of women and their successes, and the fight for equality. However, the biggest problems are fragmentation and duplication of activities by various organisations and activists, as well as insufficient solidarity and synergy among them,” concludes Mičić.

Nikolić says she hopes to see the women’s movement in BiH become an authentic, broad movement, more visible and accessible to young people:

“We need to return to the roots of antifascism, like the Women’s Antifascist Front (AFŽ), focusing on four directions: gender equality, education, women’s empowerment, and their inclusion in social and political life. We already have all of this, but the results are insufficiently visible. I feel that women’s organisations are more inward-looking, focusing on their small circles, which do not expand.

We lack a shared vision, a clear strategy, priorities, organisation, women’s solidarity, joint actions, alignment, compatibility, continuity, and connection to grassroots problems. We need well-thought-out activities and concrete actions in these areas, requiring teamwork and interdisciplinary efforts, but also awareness of potential negative developments – like the AFŽ’s ban at the Fourth Congress of the SSRNJ in 1967 due to excessive political engagement,” explains Nikolić.



## **Dubravka Kovačević:**

### *Everything Is Easier When We Have Money*

Dubravka Kovačević is the director of the Foundation for Women's Empowerment. Thirty years ago, she began contemplating how to economically empower women, especially in rural areas. After graduating in mechanical engineering, she pursued studies in economics and gender studies. Her master's thesis in gender studies focused on the economic empowerment of women and the economic status of women from marginalised groups, such as Roma women, single mothers, returnees, and survivors of war rape. She applied her knowledge in underdeveloped municipalities where women often lacked employment opportunities.

“Life is much easier when we have money. In the field, I saw many women knitting and crocheting, and I came up with the idea to organise them so that their work would make economic sense and generate profit. However, the obstacle was that non-governmental organisations cannot sell products. That's how it all began,” says Kovačević.

**CURE: How did you become involved in activism, and how did it all start?**

**KOVAČEVIĆ:** During the war, I was in Central Bosnia and saw what women were going through. By chance, I met Jadranka Miličević, who was then working to support women returnees, and we immediately connected – a connection that



has lasted for 30 years.

I initially worked with minority returnee women because I believe they faced the greatest challenges. These women needed jobs, schools for their children, textbooks... I had been through similar struggles myself, so I understood how hard it was. I thought about how to help, but as a mechanical engineer raised in socialism, I didn't understand economics. So, I enrolled in the Faculty of Economics to understand what economics, businesses, and small and medium enterprises mean. Through that, I discovered non-governmental organisations that gathered women, and that's how I began working in this field. Later, I enrolled in gender studies to understand what "gender" means and to whom it belongs.

**CURE: What were the biggest obstacles you encountered, and how did you address them?**

**KOVAČEVIĆ:** In the communities I visited, I saw women knitting, crocheting, and socialising... It seemed to be a form of therapy for them, something that calmed them. Occasionally, someone would come and buy something. Once, a woman asked for a receipt, but NGOs couldn't issue fiscal invoices. That's when I realised cooperatives were a good solution, especially for women in rural communities, as they allowed them to join forces. I'm proud that I helped establish the first women's cooperative in Kravica and even served as its "godmother." After that, we organised numerous training sessions – on market analysis, lawful product sales, and more. The cooperative in Kravica expanded its business, growing raspberries, securing a loan, and purchasing a cold storage facility. It's now a serious business project. Women's problems are similar everywhere, though they may manifest differently. These include poverty, inequality in all aspects – from political and social participation to inequality within families – and discrimination, such as against Roma women, as well as unequal access to certain services or rights, like healthcare, safety, and education.

**CURE: How does economic empowerment for women today compare to 1996 or 1997, right after the war?**

**KOVAČEVIĆ:** Budgets do allocate money for women's employment and self-employment, but reports show that these funds often go unused. Instead, they're spent on war veterans. Right after the war, empowerment was often more like therapy – women gathered, suppressed their emotions, and survived, which fulfilled them. It was a time of return. People lived in difficult conditions, sometimes in ruins. At that time, politics made a poor decision by advising returnees not to register for voting, only to later deny them aid in returnee areas if they weren't registered. Women, who were usually the first to return, faced the brunt of this. We were asking for seeds, house reconstruction, water... I witnessed entire villages returning to places where they had taken refuge because they could again form a community. Today, empowering women is also challenging. A cooperative cannot be established with minimal funds, and few women own property that could secure

a loan. Additionally, many women don't understand the context, the market, or their opportunities. For example, the Lara Foundation started greenhouse projects for women, cleaning newly built apartments... They provided machines, and part of the income belonged to the women.

**CURE: Do you monitor how municipalities or employment agencies manage funds for women's employment?**

**KOVAČEVIĆ:** It's quite difficult because the criteria are strict and hard to meet. One year in the Republika Srpska, only two women met the criteria, while the rest of the funds went to veterans. I think the authorities know exactly what they're doing because, if they truly wanted to help, the criteria would be designed to be achievable. They ignore the fact that economic empowerment is crucial not just for economic progress but also for women's safety. An economically empowered woman can resist and fight against a wide range of negative societal issues, from violence to social exclusion. Many studies show that economic dependency is one of the biggest reasons women remain in abusive marriages.

**CURE: How has all of this changed you personally?**

**KOVAČEVIĆ:** It pushed me to learn more. Additionally, I've realised that women always remain mothers. I've also learned that networks are extremely important because when one woman asks for something alone, no one listens, but when 200 women show up, that's a force.

**CURE: Are you a feminist?**

**KOVAČEVIĆ:** They say I'm not because I also support men (laughs). For me, feminism is the fight for women's rights, but that doesn't exclude men. Feminism includes fair pay for work and the fight against domestic violence, which also involves men. It's different when a man tells another man not to hit a woman and explains why it's wrong.

**CURE: What do you think should be the focus of the women's movement in BiH?**

**KOVAČEVIĆ:** I think we should identify three to five key issues and focus on them because we can't work on 50 goals at once. If it's ecology, then we should all direct our efforts toward ecology. The problem is that we often align ourselves with donor policies and shift priorities according to their goals. NGOs have also become spaces for employing women.

**CURE: What would you like to see the women's movement do?**

**KOVAČEVIĆ:** Develop solidarity and unity and show strength in numbers. Right now, it feels like we're stuck, spinning our wheels. After the war, we had much more enthusiasm, solidarity, and strength than we do now. Over the years, we've tried various models and have realised that economic empowerment is the most

important factor, but not through theoretical lectures.

**CURE: Why do you think the authorities don't accept the initiatives of the women's movement?**

**KOVAČEVIĆ:** Why would they when we're a thorn in their side?

**CURE: In your opinion, what is the biggest obstacle to the development of a democratic society and human rights in BiH?**

**KOVAČEVIĆ:** The strong influence of religion on governance and all aspects of life, even though religion should be separate from politics. Recently, I was thinking about how there are dozens of religions, yet here everything boils down to three. We can't even agree on the language we speak, the history of the Bosnian state, or national monuments...

We divide ourselves through systems like "two schools under one roof." And when you look at the budget, after ministers and their cabinets are paid, there's nothing left for the economy. The question is how we'll live, especially since the loans they're taking will need to be repaid.



## **Amira Avdić:**

### *Activism Yields More Visible Results in Smaller Communities*

Amira Avdić has been the president of the Women's Association *Srce i Duša* (Heart and Soul) in Prokosovići near Lukavac for more than ten years. Since her youth, she has been involved in various activities in her local community, participating in youth organisations and the KUD Modrac cultural society. For forty years, she worked in the RK *Vijenac* in finance and accounting. She is a mother of two daughters and a grandmother to five grandchildren.

“My goal is to create communities that meet the needs of citizens, where women are respected and valued as part of that community. I find motivation in the women who support my activities and in all the people willing to be there when needed. The results we achieve – increased visibility of women, environmental preservation, and other positive changes in our local community – give me the drive to keep going,” says Avdić.

She emphasises that both she and her colleagues benefit greatly from organisations and foundations that provide education and guidance for activists, helping them confront those who undervalue women while also focusing on self-care and recognising their contributions.

Avdić has been an activist since high school when she joined a cultural society and worked with peers to promote the cultural heritage of her region. Family obligations later drew her away from activism, but when her daughters grew older, she noticed issues in her local community and decided she could help improve things.

She gathered her neighbours, and since then, activism has become a serious part of her life.

Avdić identifies as a feminist because her activism reflects feminism and the fight for equality and equal rights in political, social, economic, and all other areas.

“To me, feminism is a way of life and a symbol of a struggle that is not – and must not be – radical,” says Avdić.

She views the women’s movement in Bosnia and Herzegovina as a fight to challenge patriarchal traditions and perceptions in the country. It is also a fight with political actors – decision-makers – for necessary and overdue changes, as women’s rights are increasingly under threat.

“We’ve achieved certain progress, but it’s not enough. We must find ways to combat those who don’t take our struggle seriously. We will achieve this by increasing the number of women in decision-making positions and on influential platforms, where we can act and make changes that align with the Law on Gender Equality,” says Avdić.

She points out that the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the building of a free, democratic society that respects human rights is very challenging, but the biggest problem lies with the authorities:

“We are led by people who do not understand certain things; who are loyal, not capable – with exceptions, of course – and who fail to grasp that they need to consult citizens about what they want, not just during election campaigns.

They don’t understand the importance of dialogue with civil society organisations, which serve as a bridge between authorities and citizens and best understand the needs and problems of the people.

They don’t realise that problems need to be addressed quickly because many solutions cannot be delayed. That’s why we face issues like femicides, the near loss of our diaspora, and young people leaving with their families, acquiring new citizenships – soon, we won’t even have a diaspora.

We need to work on creating conditions for people, especially young, capable, and intelligent individuals, to stay in the country. We need to improve living conditions

and fight together for mutual respect and understanding,” says Avdić.

She believes the women’s movement should focus on expansion, increasing its numbers, and connecting with other movements.

“We need to show more empathy toward one another, listen to the people’s voices, and gather allies,” concludes Avdić, emphasising the importance of avoiding radicalism as force never brings positive outcomes.



## **Lenka Ljevak Stajić:**

### *Art Connects Women the Fastest*

Lenka Ljevak is the founder of the association *Jake žene Pale* (Strong Women of Pale), created to engage women in the local community to improve general living conditions, the status of women – particularly older women – and environmental protection.

Lenka was born in Sarajevo, where she spent most of her life. She worked at the Medical Institute and the Higher Medical School, later at the Ministry of Science and Culture of the Republika Srpska, and at the Museum of Contemporary Art of the Republika Srpska.

This retired economist now lives and works in Pale. She has a daughter and two granddaughters and is known among activists as a knowledgeable art enthusiast who understands how art makes life more beautiful and easier.

“Art is one of the best ways to make women visible and empowered. Whether they create art themselves or consume art with feminist messages, providing spaces to showcase women’s authorship opens opportunities for more effective advocacy in other areas.

We cannot expect results in any field if women's work remains invisible to the public. Through art, connections between women are made most quickly, and together – as we've seen in numerous examples – they can achieve much," says Ljevak.

Because of her life principles and the important decisions, she has made, Ljevak considers herself a feminist.

"Feminism is scarce, or at least not as present as it should be, due to deeply entrenched patriarchal principles, constant appeals to tradition to justify everything, and the perpetual sidelining of women, especially in decision-making roles.

Feminism is absent because institutional mechanisms don't function, leaving women to often accept their circumstances, whether it's enduring violence in relationships or workplace mobbing, because they don't believe anyone can protect them," says Ljevak.

However, she adds that feminism in Bosnia and Herzegovina exists as much as it does elsewhere but is often limited to personal spaces where women individually strive to realise its principles.

"It's absent on a larger scale and often missing where it is declaratively promoted. Feminism doesn't truly exist in politics, despite quotas, and without those quotas, I believe most women wouldn't even be candidates on electoral lists.

Even when they are present under these forced circumstances, the leaders of political parties – who are always men – remain at the forefront," concludes Ljevak.

As the greatest threat to the development of a free and democratic society, Ljevak sees nationalism and the continuous fabrication of conflicts:

"All of this is done to maintain power and protect what has been stolen and plundered," says Ljevak.

She believes the focus of the women's movement in BiH should be on finding new ways to support women living in violence.

"We can see that existing mechanisms have completely failed. A potential law on femicide won't help us unless we start seriously addressing risk assessment.

In this context, the women's movement should focus on insisting on establishing mechanisms for risk assessment as a key prerequisite for preventing femicide," concludes Ljevak.



## About the CURE Foundation

The CURE Foundation is a feminist-activist organisation in Bosnia and Herzegovina committed to advancing gender equality and women's rights, building peace, and combating gender-based violence through various forms of activism. The organisation focuses on empowering women through education, networking, and promoting a non-violent and inclusive culture.

The foundation is well-known for activities such as the *PitchWise Festival of Feminist Art and Activism* and its participation in global campaigns, including the *16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence*.

With a long-standing tradition in leading projects, the CURE Foundation contributes to building a solidarity-based and inclusive feminist network in BiH and the region, emphasising efforts toward peace, stability, and the development of a democratic society.

## About the Project Feminist Time Travel

*Feminist Time Travel* is a project by the CURE Foundation, running from 1 January to 31 December 2024, aimed at providing women with a completely new concept of self-care and strengthening their capacity to confront trauma and challenges.

The project focuses on sharing personal stories of women from Bosnia and Herzegovina, with a special emphasis on the mechanisms they used to preserve their mental and physical health in the past.

Through collaboration with psychologists, *Feminist Time Travel* offers women the opportunity to confront issues from the past, including retraumatization caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. The project works on identifying and applying techniques that help women process and accept trauma and develop new strategies to improve their mental health.

Special attention is given to young women in BiH who suffer from transgenerational PTSD, a condition often overlooked in society. This project provides concrete support mechanisms, helping them develop tools to overcome stress and traumatic experiences.

The goal of the project is to create a safe space for women of all generations to share their experiences and feelings freely while working to strengthen their mental and physical capacities.

*Feminist Time Travel* aims to establish a strong support network among women, offering opportunities for individual and collective empowerment by addressing past traumas and embracing new possibilities for a better future.

The CURE Foundation is proud of this project, which seeks to improve the quality of life for women in Bosnia and Herzegovina over the long term and create a platform for sharing experiences and mutual support.

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