

# **Statement by Nela Porobic Isakovic, WILPF, Women Organizing for Change in Bosnia-initiative**

My name is Nela Porobic and I coordinate an initiative called Women organizing for change in Bosnia and Herzegovina, introduced in 2013 and implemented by WILPF.

The statement will address the issues of economic reforms, shrinking space for activism and rights of migrants and asylum-seekers. Our recommendations will be shown on the Powerpoint as I speak, and you can find our submission with the full spectrum of our recommendations at the back of this room.

## **1. The impact of economic reforms on gender equality and economic, social and cultural rights**

Since the previous UPR cycle the government has since pushed forth economic reforms, with support from the EU and international financial institutions, conditioning economic growth to structural reforms and fiscal consolidation, ultimately leading to cuts in public spending, while no poverty-mitigation programmes have been introduced.

The reforms envision most investments to be made in large-scale infrastructure projects, which mostly benefit jobs in heavily male dominated sectors such as construction. Sectors where women are overrepresented in the workforce, or investments into social infrastructure that support women's participation and inclusion in the society, are not prioritised.

Protests have increased due to low salaries, unpaid benefits, or generally poor human rights situation in the country.

Despite the foreseeable impacts of the reforms on inequalities (including on gender inequalities), the reforms were not planned with a human rights-based approach or in an inclusive and transparent way.

Moving forward the government must create mechanisms that ensure systematic, meaningful and effective consultations with civil society, in particular with women's groups, during the planning, implementation and evaluation phase as well as introduce mandatory gender and human rights impact assessments into the process of planning and undertaking reforms.

## **2. Shrinking space for activism and increase in repressive measures**

During the last couple of years repressive measures have been used on several occasions to restrict the activities of human rights defenders and of civil society .

Our submission covers the case of Justice for David and the Women of Kruscica, but in the statement I will focus on repressive measures in relation to the Women of Kruscica.

To give you the general context, Bosnia plans to build 300 new mini hydropower dams around the country putting pristine rivers and communities' right to water and to a clean environment at risk.

Activists have major concerns regarding the issuance of construction permits without rigorous and transparent social, environmental and human rights impact assessments. The population affected by these plans has been systematically excluded from decision-making processes despite existing legislation that guarantees their right to participate.

Women of Kruscica, a small village in central Bosnia, have at a great personal cost successfully challenged construction permits to build hydropower dams that would have damaged waterways in their community. However, during their campaign the women involved were subjected to violations of their right to peaceful assembly including police brutality and intimidation through threats of high fines which put pressure on these women from marginalized and poor socio-economic backgrounds.

The government must ensure that enterprises operate under adequate regulatory frameworks, that the allocation of permits is revised and that they adopt measures to realise the right to water and environmental sustainability, without discrimination.

The gvt must also take all necessary measures to protect and promote civil society space and ensure a safe and enabling environment for human rights defenders and activists.

### **3. Rights of migrants and asylum-seekers**

Since the end of 2017 BiH has seen a sharp increase in migration revealing a substantive lack of capacity and interest from the relevant national institutions to ensure a dignified protection of migrants and asylum-seekers.

Accessible asylum procedures are not available and people are left without proper documentation without which they have no access to economic, social and cultural rights.

Places in formal accommodation camps are very limited, way below what is needed, leaving most migrants in inhumane and degrading conditions such factory halls, streets, makeshift camps and often without access to sufficient food; adequate healthcare, or clothing. This precarious situation puts women and girls at high risk of gender-based violence.

Detention of migrants and asylum-seekers by border police in cage-like holding cells have been documented, including families with children.

This pushes migrants to leave the country as soon as possible, often by resorting to smugglers, which puts them in harm's way. Single women and women traveling with children, unaccompanied and separated children, face a high risk of becoming victims of trafficking or exploitation.

BiH must take effective control over the asylum-procedures and the process of administration of camps and it must ensure humane, dignified and lawful conditions during the migrants stay in Bosnia, making sure that gender-sensitive measures and reception conditions respond to the specific needs of women and girls.