## Report on the Study Visit Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue

between North Macedonia and Poland



Warsaw, Poland, 25-26 March 2024

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## About the Study Visit

The scope of the study visit was to support and advance multi-stakeholder dialogue in North Macedonia on new strategies to reverse gender backsliding, especially online.

This was achieved through:

- Strengthening conceptual clarity of study visit participants on the nexus of intolerance on the grounds of religion, gender-based hate crime, anti-gender movements, and deteriorating situation of fundamental rights and values, including democracy and the rule of law.<sup>1</sup>
- Exchanges with relevant Polish counterparts (based on the event of March 4) and ODIHR staff regarding relevant work and emerging successes in the area.
- Joint work on an action plan- based on a draft designed last year to be implemented upon return to North Macedonia.

The expected outcome of the study visit included:

Active awareness of study visit participants of the nexus of intolerance on the grounds of religion, gender-based hate crime, anti-gender movements, and deteriorating situation of fundamental rights and values, including democracy and the rule of law.

Greater resilience of the emerging pro-gender equality platform for joint action to reverse gender backsliding in North Macedonia.

Stronger inter-linkages with relevant Polish counterparts and ODIHR's work.

Possible emergence of breakthrough initiatives.

The study visit was hosted by ODIHR and the second day was co-organized with the Polish Women Congress.

¹ "whereas the level of gender equality is often indicative of, and serves as a first warning of, the deteriorating situation of fundamental rights and values, including democracy and the rule of law, in a given society; whereas the present decade is witnessing a visible and increasingly organised attack on, and oppressive backlash against, gender equality, women's and girls' rights and the rights of LGBTIQ+ persons, which is manifesting itself particularly in a number of Member States as well as elsewhere in the world, and which has led to a visible increase in online and offline violence against women and LGBTIQ+ persons", Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence: EU accession, European Parliament resolution of 15 February 2023 on the proposal for a Council decision on the conclusion, by the European Union, of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (COM(2016)0109 — 2016/0062R(NLE)) (2023/C 283/29



Study visit participants from North Macedonia with ODIHR staff





# Agenda

Sunday, 24 March, Arrival of participants		
Monday, 25 March, Study visit Day 1, Helsinki Room, ODIHR		
Welcome coffee		
Welcome to ODIHR by Tea Jaliashvilli, First Deputy Director The importance of multi-stakeholder collaboration, Gorica Atanasova- Gjorevska, Minister Plenipotentiary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, North Macedonia Emerging lessons from Poland, Prof. dr hab Wojciech Brzozowski, Deputy Ombudsman Introduction to the CHANGE project, Sanja Nikolin, CHANGE Project Officer		
Introduction by study visit participants  Overview of the situation in North Macedonia with regards to attempts to reverse gender backsliding, and identification of knowledge and/or multi-stakeholder coordination gaps  Moderator: Tatjana Perić, Adviser on Combating Racism and Xenophobia, ODIHR		
Group photo and coffee/tea break		
<ul> <li>Overview of ODIHR's portfolio and tools to strengthen gender equality, tolerance and non-discrimination, women's political participation, freedom of religion or belief, safety, resilience of human rights defenders, and dialogue.</li> <li>Susan Kerr, Senior Adviser on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Human Rights Department</li> <li>Sara Haapalainen, Adviser on Gender Issues, Democratic Governance and Gender Unit, Democratisation Department</li> <li>Tatjana Perić, Adviser on Combatting Racism and Xenophobia, Tolerance and Non-Discrimination Department</li> <li>Angelica Notaristefano, Assistant Project Officer, Human Rights Department Jashar Jasharov, Associate Programme Officer, Contact Point on Roma and Sinti Issues</li> <li>Martina Barker-Ciganikova, Election Adviser, Elections Department</li> <li>Moderator: Susan Kerr, Senior Adviser on Freedom of Religion or Belief, ODIHR</li> </ul>		
Working lunch meeting of study visit participants with ODIHR staff		
<ol> <li>Tackling intolerance on the grounds of religion/gender-based hate crime and integrating FORB perspective         Moderators: Tatjana Perić, Adviser on Combatting Racism and Xenophobia, Tolerance and Non-Discrimination Department and Susan Kerr, Senior Adviser on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Human Rights Department</li> <li>HRD safety and tackling anti-gender movements         Moderators: Angelica Notaristefano, Assistant Project Officer,         Human Rights Department and Iryna Ivankiv, Project Officer,         Human Rights Department</li> <li>Breakthrough leadership and reversing gender backsliding         Moderators: Sanja Nikolin, CHANGE Project Officer and Sara Haapalainen, Adviser on Gender Issues, Democratic Governance and Gender Unit, Democratisation Department</li> </ol>		
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**Presentation of Breakout session action points** 

Wrap Up of Day 1

16:15 - 17:00

Polish experience in tackling gender backlash and drifting away from democratic good practice		
10:00 — 11:00	<ul> <li>Session I, Polish Women Congress: building networks under the diversity of women's movement</li> <li>Keychallenges in building women's networks. How to succeed and make it work? Good times and bad times – the impact of the changing political climate, Dr. Ewa Rumińska- Zimny, Vice President Women Congress</li> <li>Women in politics. Evaluation of successes and failures in the context of parliamentary elections. The impact of the Congress on Polish politics, Prof.dr hab Małgorzata Fuszara, Chairperson of the Council of Women Congress</li> <li>Role of social media in supporting young women in engaging in politics, Anna Maziarska, Social media coordinator</li> <li>Followed by plenary discussion Moderator: Sanja Nikolin, CHANGE Project, ODIHR</li> </ul>	
11:00 – 11:30	Group photo and Coffee break	
11:30 – 12:30	<ul> <li>Session II, Perspectives of women and men from underrepresented groups</li> <li>Including men: Looking beyond the Work- Life balance directive,         Karolina Andrian, President, Foundation Share the Care</li> <li>Mobilizing young women to participate in elections and political life,         Klaudia Nowak, Association Dziewczyny na Wybory</li> <li>Political participation of women with disabilities, Dr. Anna Drabarz,         European Disability Forum</li> <li>Followed by plenary discussion         Moderator: Tatjana Perić, Adviser on Combating Racism and Xenophobia, ODIHR</li> </ul>	
12:30 – 13:20	<ul> <li>Working with European networks: the case of green local movement,         Ewa Sufin-Jacquemart, Vice President Polish Women Congress</li> <li>Building allies within the parliament: the case of a small party,         Klaudia Jachira, Member of Parliament, Green Party</li> <li>Justyna Białczak, Leader of Women's Councils in Poland,         The community-based perspective</li> <li>Followed by plenary discussion         Moderator: Susan Kerr, Senior Adviser on Freedom of Religion or Belief, ODIHR</li> </ul>	
13:20 – 14:20	Lunch	
14:20 – 15:15	Troubleshooting and agreement on the next steps Evaluation and Wrap Up	

## Greetings by ODIHR

Dear Study Visit Participants,

Welcome to the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and to Poland. ODIHR's "Capitalizing on the Human Dimension Mandate to Advance Gender Equality" (CHANGE) project is relying on ODIHR's convening mandate to respond to your request laid out last December at the meeting in Skopje titled "New strategies to reverse gender equality backlash in North Macedonia".

Over the next couple of days you will meet a number of my colleagues who are experts in related fields of human rights, freedom of religion and politics, tolerance and non-discrimination, gender equality, as well as Polish counterparts from civil society, National Human Rights Institution and women in politics. They are all eager to share their knowledge and experience in attempting to address obstacles to advancing substantive gender equality and reversing gender backsliding.

While no success story is fully transferable and every context is specific, diverse examples can inspire, and even sharing concerns brings people together for concerted action. We will learn from your successes and shared challenges will connect us, and enable us to lay the ground for mutual support well after the Study visit ends. After all, we can draw strength from the fact that we are facing push backs that are typically less strong than those faced by women who were able to push the gender equality agenda forward in times when making

progress was even more difficult than it is today.

We must also remember that if we want human rights to be really guaranteed in practice, we shall continue to demand their fulfilment, enjoy them to their fullest and promote their equal application to others. If we lead by example, keep an open mind ready to learn from each other, and support women and men whose challenges are similar to or greater than our own, then we stand a chance to create real change.

I wish you memorable exchanges and new ideas that emerge from collaborative approaches.



Tea Jaliashvilli, First Deputy Director of ODIHR and Gender Focal Point





# Study visit Gay 1 25 March 2024

After the welcome remarks, participants introduced themselves and their work as related to gender equality in North Macedonia. To a large extent, they explained the situation in the country as related to what they called gender backlash/backsliding/anti-gender movement, as they saw it. Some of the issues mentioned include:

- "Draft Law on gender equality did not make it to the parliament after anti-gender movement's protests and Strategy for gender equality (2022 -2027) is facing implementation issues". Lack of accountability for violence against women in politics, in CSOs and in society was also mentioned, among other broader human rights problems, as monitored/reported on by external actors as well.
- The work on gender equality lacks an intersectional approach. Women and girls
  with disabilities are rarely present, disability is not mainstreamed across topics.
- Religious communities are seen as 'bastions of conservatism', and some participants work within communities to oppose "regressive tendencies", by working with women, through education, or trying to focus on getting religious leadership to recognize the existence of certain problems (e.g.: violence against women). On the other hand, it was noted that the word "traditional" can also be understood in a stereotypical, negative manner, while gender activists are seen as "elitist". It was additionally noted that there is a lack of understanding and communication between religious actors and the gender movement, where there is little understanding that certain religious teachings around gender cannot be changed, while religious actors are confused by the "transgender ideology".
- The effects of gender backsliding were mentioned by a number of participants. Issues included the effects on agendas women politicians (can) push for. In spite of a 42% of women in Parliament at the time of consultation, lack of unity was invoked. Another aspect was local level where municipalities would be reconsidering action plans on gender equality and renaming them into action plans for equality between women and men to respond to pressures from the anti-gender movement;
- On the other hand, it was also mentioned that even before the gender backsliding, the situation for women in politics at local level was not very good, and now even progressive municipalities are taking steps back. The difficulty of the work in trying to counter this trend and misinformation, through conversations, or finding the perspectives of men that work to convince, was also mentioned;
- It was also mentioned that NGOs do not act with sufficient unity, and they are additionally seen as "western mercenaries coming to erode traditional values". Foreign critique is seen as an important push factor for reform, although it was also pointed that there are many things that look good on paper, but are not actually implemented in practice. The anti-gender movement is seen as increasingly pervasive across the country, spreading misinformation, especially online and anonymously. Additionally, state institutions are considered unprepared to react to the anti-gender actions, which are seen as very well prepared, including in terms of critiquing the



- government actions, and leading to silencing of voices that advocate for gender equality, from political to media. The fact that the issue is brought to the attention of international organizations is credited by some speakers strictly to voices from civil society, as well as the CHANGE project's past work.
- Another layer of difficulty mentioned was the linguistic one, where backlash against gender activism would meet less solidarity from broader society if it happens in Albanian. The situation of Roma women, additionally difficult in terms of inequalities and exclusion faced was described, achievements were also mentioned regarding women's awareness of their sexual and reproductive rights in the past years due to work of civil society. The situation of women inmates, especially minor women, lacking a separate facility was another aspect mentioned.

Following the presentation from Macedonian participants, ODIHR staff gave presentations of relevant portfolios, and how their work integrates gender equality considerations. The afternoon was dedicated to three breakout discussions:

## **Breakout Discussions**

## 1. Tackling intolerance on the grounds of religion/gender-based hate crime and integrating FoRB perspective

After a presentation of FoRB and ODIHR's FoRB portfolio, as well as ODIHR's work on addressing hate crimes, participants discussed various situations and topics they considered relevant in this context, including:

The case of a woman gender activist being targeted by a hate campaign because she publicly reacted to gender-biased statements from a religious leader. Both aspects related to solidarity as well as how a spiral of hate can be galvanized, and especially online, were highlighted during the discussion.

An incident of antisemitism left unsanctioned in a higher education institution, was also mentioned.

Another topic brought up was the situation of Islamic religious schools, their (lack of) accreditation, the big number of girls attending, the purpose of such education and the norms conveyed when it comes to gender issues, including violence on women, or how the state should engage with religious leadership to accredit the schools.

Language barriers when it comes to women speaking Albanian and potentially having to report an act of violence in Macedonian was also mentioned.

Traditional rules invoking religion (even if falsely so) were also highlighted as problematic, making it difficult to speak about violence against women, or even recognize it as an issue. The difficulty of reporting such violence within the religious community where the religious leaders are all male, or a tendency to try and sort out issues at community level (instead of reporting) were also mentioned.

Other issues brought up included: profiling through securitization measures, overwhelming or male-only faculty in certain theological universities raising questions as to women's educational path; no accommodation for religious dietary requirements in prisons; property restitution issues or religious discrimination.

Participants discussed each topic and debated possible solutions and ways forward.

## 2. HRD safety and tackling anti-gender movements

After briefly presenting the work of ODIHR on monitoring the situation of human rights defenders (HRDs) and on capacity-building activities for human rights defenders, ODIHR's facilitators clarified the objectives of the breakout group session and kickstarted discussions on various issues related to HRD's safety and security. In particular, participants had a brainstorming about possible ideas and strategies to tackle anti-gender movements and narratives.

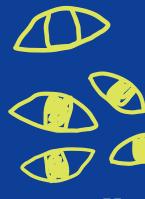
First, they discussed what they would do in this regard if they had unlimited resources, trying to identify what means of communication they could use to efficiently tackle anti-gender rhetoric, who could be the key target groups of their communication, and what messages they could send. Then, participants assessed what actions would be possible in the context in which they operate and what would be the potential obstacles to achieve what they would like to achieve, as well as how they could overcome these obstacles. Lastly, participants discussed what could be done concretely, in light of their capacity and the context in which they work.

As a result of the discussion, participants agreed about the importance of education and awareness raising in countering anti-gender movements: they stressed the need to reshape narratives and attitudes, redefine values, and involve youth as well as the elderly. Participants noted that, to be able to effectively do so, it is essential to use clear and accessible communication and build networks, which would also help civil society increase their outreach and have more visibility. The strategic use of storytelling tools, means and channels of communication and a careful assessment of the outreach timing could also make a difference.

Participants further highlighted that promoting and pursuing joint actions, joining forces, promoting transnational co-operation, and enhancing solidarity and co-operation within civil society can be instrumental in tackling anti-gender movements, as it allows for the de-fragmentation of messages. According to participants, paralegals can support civil society and human rights organizations in reaching the grassroot level and the local community. The participants discussed differences in approaches while working in urban centers and smaller rural areas, and emphasized the necessity to work at both levels. The OSCE/ODIHR and other international organizations also play a role in putting pressure on the government on addressing human rights challenges and countering anti-gender narratives. All participants agreed that it is also important to listen to one another, understand everyone's needs before acting and consider intersectionality.

During the discussion, participants also brought to ODIHR's attention cases of women HRDs who were the target of online and offline anti-gender verbal attacks and smear in North Macedonia.





## 3. Breakthrough leadership and reversing gender backsliding

The CHANGE project supports breakthrough leadership so that individuals and groups can initiate, manage and sustain change. The CHANGE ABC model is three-dimensional and it consists of the following dimensions:

- 1) Awareness (includes awareness raising, visibility, capacity building and policy advice);
- 2) Breakthrough leadership; and
- 3) Collaboration.

The project seeks to support breakthrough leadership initiatives and this breakout session was designed as an "idea forum" to explore and promote innovative ideas, and to distil attempted new approaches and initiatives that inspire hope and contribute to gender equality. ODIHR presented a brief overview of gender backsliding features and sources based on emerging research in the OSCE region. The participants then discussed how the anti-gender initiatives in the Macedonian context fit these descriptions. Isolation of victims of anti-gender movement to increase their vulnerability was identified as a key outcome of anti-gender initiatives. Fear was another elements and some of the local actional plans for gender equality were renamed as action plans for equality between sexes. Therefore, loss of acquired status of rights was another outcome. Conceptual blurring a third outcome. Increased coordination and collaboration among the fragmented pro-gender actors was identified as a way forward. Current strategies in this area are not sufficiently broad and inclusive, nor is there required consideration of intersectional issues. There are many examples of an organization- or network-led campaigns, and numerous analyses are available, but effective strategies that mitigate, let alone reverse the impact of the opposers of gender (equality) are yet to be agreed upon and implemented. One example of a cross-sectoral and multi-stakeholder coordination effort was a draft action plan proposed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. However, it was not supported by CSOs because of the election period and the expectation that election outcome may determine the faith of the plan. At the same time, the participants agreed that elections are sometimes used as a default excuse for lack of collaboration, although a lot can be done, especially by CSOs in between elections and even during an election campaign.

A broad issue-based coalition focusing on reversing gender backsliding is needed. However, leadership of such a coalition needs to be fleshed out more. Once such a coalition is in place, it should seek to network transnationally. These efforts can be complemented by breakthrough leadership initiatives that seek to push the boundaries, test new approaches, mobilize new allies. Impact of individual initiatives and efforts implemented by a small group of advocates should not be underestimated. Repeal Shield in Ireland was used as an illustrative example. Another potential breakthrough leadership initiative is the CHANGE project supported effort to connect gender equality community with the FORB community, to identify and work on issues that are shared and/or constitute a common ground, such as violence against women.

Further support is needed for breakthrough initiatives, including stronger safeguards for HRDs and gender activists that can also include solidarity-based initiatives and dialogue platforms.



# Study visit a ay 2, 26 March 2024



Study visit participants with Polish counterparts and ODIHR Photo credit Polish Women Congress

During the discussion, participants also brought to ODIHR's attention cases of women HRDs who were the target of online and offline anti-gender verbal attacks and smear in North Macedonia.

Representatives from the Polish Women Congress presented the history, experiences and lessons of the organization, among which:

- Difficulties in bringing different approaches among women together (e.g.: feminists and business women), or even having members identify as feminists; having "primadonnas" forward the Agenda, but also difficult to work with; women from small and big cities; lack of trust, etc.
- Practices and lessons included: having a shadow government, working on the principle: "if you have an idea, just do it"; the project "the flying academy" (short 10 minute lectures, some .ppts and literature to deepen knowledge); building a strong network across differences; governments change, but it is key to move on and do things regardless of governmental attitudes towards gender equality; keep providing arguments and concrete solutions; look for allies, including at international level.



The Macedonian quota system had served as a great example for Poland. Backsliding happens regularly, one needs to keep going. The idea for the Congress came because it was only men speaking about Poles and their national identity, and telling women what they should think. The first Congress, taking place at the Palace of Culture in Warsaw, and gathering thousands of women, was a first step to activate women to think about what they want, and that they are obliged to do something about their own issues. For some it was the first time in their lives when they met women who thought like them. It is organized yearly, and has a large number of side events. Women now also organize their own congresses at local level. The Swedish Ambassador used to participate in these local congresses. Online participation makes it easier for leadership at central level to be present in the local congresses. The networks of trust created by women working together on various issues was important when refugees from Ukraine came.

- When the Women's Congress advocated for quotas, they could have chosen the "easy way" of having 15 MPs support it. Instead, they chose the 100,000 citizens initiative pathway, and treated it as an opportunity for a national campaign raising people's awareness on what the quota system was. By the time it was voted, it had 80% approval rate in Poland, starting from 30%.
- Speakers who serve/d in Parliament also recounted their experiences, mentioning work across parties, or speaking for hours in favour of various topics (eg.: ratification of the Istanbul Convention), which they treat as "educational opportunities" for their fellow MPs. They also considered the work a duty to the pioneers fighting for voting rights 100 years ago, while recognizing significant progress made from 30 years ago.
- One speaker focused on lessons from using social media to support young women engaging in politics. Some of the lessons were on how social media helped to reach women in rural communities, how using content that was easily shareable made a difference, how making politics entertaining, approachable and funny was impactful (e.g.: campaign named "Abortion Dream Team"), or how they combined the online with the offline by placing campaign images in various spaces where youth go (e.g.: bars). They achieved almost 30% of women in politics, highest number after 1989. They see women in Parliament not as an end in itself, but as a means to secure equality in various fields.

The following session looked at perspectives from under-represented groups and other different perspectives. One speaker, coming from an organization that advocates for the implementation of the EU work-life balance directive, presented their approach on advocacy around men taking their parental leave (9 weeks of non-transferable such leave). Such work entails dispelling prejudice, working with men, with employers, as well as with women, so that genuinely sharing the parental care is seen as beneficial by both parties. Another speaker presented the initiative of having 50 young women filmed in a video on "Girls Go Vote" which was linked to and distributed through a large university event. A speaker presented the situation of women with disabilities and their engagement with politics and in other fields of life and decision-making. She noted there are no persons identifying as having disabilities in the Sejm, even though there were candidates – she noted this is the first time in 20 years that such absence happens. Women with disabilities were not included in party programmes, and when the topic of disability was included, this was from the perspective of caregivers, labour market and benefits. One party had a separate document on



the topic, but did not look at disability in an intersectional manner. Legal advocacy was not successful on the matter of women with disabilities in the past year, and women with disabilities were seen as excluded from both the women's rights movement and the disabilities movement.

The final session looked at working with allies, networking and creating issue-based coalitions. Speakers gave their perspectives and lessons from working on feminism and the environment and the coalitions to be created there, or working on issues that are important for women across parties within the Sejm. Another example was that of women's councils, which act in an advisory role to local municipalities primarily on matters related to women's issues, but largely on human rights. The councils act on a voluntary basis (not paid). They grew from 23 in 2021, to 51 at present. There is a network of the Councils, and the network has strong lobbying power. Additionally working with local government, women feel more empowered to run themselves for office. There is an aim to formalize and fund the work of the councils. These councils are seen as activating grassroots participation and democracy.

In answering a question on how to keep people and the networks engaged, one speaker responded that there is a need to have a good coordinator, who must be paid.

Ewa Sufin-Jacquemart highlighted the importance of looking for all opportunities, also outside traditional feminist or gender movements, to empower women and highlight their potential for action and agency. Environmental protection and green activism are such fields. Visibility gained can help women to be involved in political action and run in local or national elections. The examples focus on the potential of women to defend the rights to the environment of local communities, threatened by international investment projects which would pollute their homelands or destroy nature. Environmental defenders are very often like David fighting Goliath and are victims of various harassments and even killings. Therefore, engaging in such activities requires courage and other qualities that inspire appreciation and trust, facilitating involvement in politics.

Key questions for the discussions: what are the experiences of the participants in building issue based coalitions? Do they see the potential of cooperation with already existing coalitions to tackle gender backlash and empower women to strengthen their democratic voice? What are the blocking factors and what can help to establish gender oriented cooperation with such locally active women activists?

Klaudia Jachira (Green MP in Polish Sejm, second mandate): Building allies within the parliament: the case of a small party.

Klaudia commented on how women deputies are building networks of cooperation between different political groups and how it deserves gender equality and helps to tackle gender backlash and strengthen women's political voice.

Key questions for the discussions: Is cooperation between women from different political parties/groups developed in Macedonia? Could it help to tackle gender backlash and give a stronger power of political influence to women to reinforce gender equality and democracy? What could be done to reinforce such cooperation? What are the main obstacles?

Justyna Białczak (Member of the All-Poland Presidium of Women's Councils). Developing Women's Councils network to reinforce political voice of women and gender equality

Justyna presented how the Women's Councils, advisory bodies for local governments, and their network were established and developed in Poland, what are their main priorities and how they cooperate with the Women's Congress.

**Key questions for the discussions:** Do women's advisory bodies like the Polish Women's Councils exist in North Macedonia? If not, what could be done to introduce them? If yes, what could they learn from the experience of the Polish Women's Councils?

In the final session Macedonian participants discussed troubleshooting and next steps. Ideas included a scientific conference at the University of Theology on gender equality; work with women's networks on value-based multi-stakeholder collaboration; an initiative to train women's movement activists in intersectional approaches; multiple initiatives contributing to building multi-stakeholder dialogue and bridges between feminist activists and FORB/religious communities; a video including leaders from religious communities on addressing/preventing VAW, working regionally against gender backsliding, connecting with Mission to BiH and religious leaders there to expand the initiative on engaging religious leaders in the fight against GBV; and building bridges between CSO activists and women in politics, especially around the new Gender Equality Law and determining the 'red lines' regarding gender equality in cooperation with politicians.

Recommendations regarding multi-stakeholder work, coalition and network development to reverse gender backsliding and advance gender equality:

### **Ewa Sufin-Jacquemart**

### 1. Look for easy allies

In order to effectively tackle gender backlash and drift away from good democratic practice, it is necessary to enlarge the public sensitivity to issues of equality and women's perspective and give stronger political voice to women. To achieve that I recommend networking and looking for space of cooperation with organized groups and networks where women are strong actors and at the same time potentially important target groups.

Green, environmental, ecological and climate activists and organizations are natural allies, as many sociological research show bigger interest of women than men in environmental issues, women are often overrepresented in those groups and such movements tend to address and involve women circles. I am thinking of groups like climate movements of young people (ex.: FFF) and grass roots supporting them (Parents for Climate, Grand Mothers for Climate, etc.), but also simple inhabitants who became local defenders of their "small homelands" against projects which threaten their living environment (protests against extractivist projects, farms-factories, dams etc.). Becoming an "ecoterrorist" (what those people are often called by the media and authorities supporting projects damaging the environment) needs a lot of courage, capacity to learn a lot of new topics, understand law, argument, communicate on social media and with journalists, look for allies and mobilize people. Women who become leaders in such threatened local communities have a great potential to become local councilors, enter local governments or become deputies. It's crucial to make them at the same time defenders of women's rights and gender ambassadors. To do so, they must be trained to perceive and understand intesectionality of discriminations: women are always first victims of environmental damages and transformations of nature based regions into industry based regions. New extractivist projects bring many male workers from outside (without families),

followed by prostitutes. There are excessive sex abuses, male oriented activities replace the previous activities (tourism, HORECA, gardening, nature conservation, etc.) which were involving many women and giving them independence. Deterioration of health of the population has a direct negative influence on women's professional and economic situation.

In North Macedonia there are more than 80 international projects of gold and other metals mining on 40% of the territory of the country. They mobilize many local communities, who live from tourism and agriculture. Many women are involved in organizing democratic resistance to those new projects. Those new local leaders are often leaders of opinion in their communities, but also victims of violent pressure and hate attacks. They need the support of other women and empowerment. They are perfect targets for gender training, to make them tackle not only environmental damage, corruption and authoritarian derivatives, but also tackle gender backlash and fight for gender equality and political positions for other open minded women.

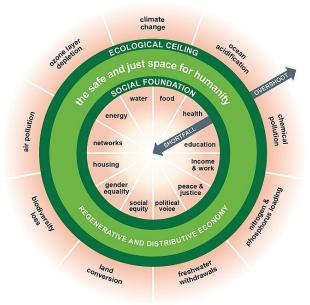
### 2. Organize to tackle gender backlash in social media

I recommend organizing a group of people (which can be constantly renewed to bring new people to the network) to tackle gender backlash and non democratic practices in social media.

The model is an NGO in Poland that has been leading for a few years already a project called "Climate guardians". Their objective is to tackle renewable energy backlash and coal (fossil fuels) promotion and influence how they are perceived.

They train once a year a new group of about 15 volunteers who become their "climate guardians" for a year. The method is simple. The group communicates by an app like Slack. There is one coordinator/leader of the group, who uses a program for online press monitoring. To make it more efficient they focus on just a few mainstream online media which most often write articles on climate change, fossil fuels (coal in particular) and renewable energy. When a new article appears, the leader sends the link to the group on Slack. People from the group put comments (negative to coal, positive to REN and energy efficiency, based on right scientific knowledge but written in "normal internet dialogue" way, but without violence, vulgarity etc.). They also put positive reactions to the comments of other guardians (they know who has what "name"), likes, hearts etc. The leader follows and shares the results (impacts) of the day...

## 3. Promote the "doughnut economics" and "economy of care" to empower women and tackle gender backlash





Patriarchal domination of men and discrimination of women - in economy, politics, health-care, reproductive rights, access to education, to water and other resources, etc. - persist despite efforts of the UN, the EU and many governments to eradicate or reduce them. The global neoliberal economic system based on general overconsumption, waste and women's unpaid domestic labor maintain it. But there are ideas and efforts to change it. I recommend exploring and sharing two very promising schools of thinking: the "doughnut economics" (developed by the British economist Kate Raworth and being implemented by more than 70 cities in the world) and ecofeminist transformative approach - "economy of care". Both are strongly feminist defending equality for women and men, but also respect of diversity and other no human species. Both give tools to the transition into the "safe and just space for humanity", so needed in the world of new cold war and chaotic world, changing world too fast and leaving many (women) behind.

### Justyna Białczak (Women's Councils):

- Adopting the goal of establishing the Women's Council in local government, the key to success is to find a progressive local government that is open to talking about establishing such an advisory body.
  - Often it is preceded by many conversations with the president, mayor or governor, but it is worthwhile to **meet (always in person!)**, and promote the values and benefits of establishing such a council. It is good to **have a catalog of benefits prepared** the language of benefits always talks to decision-makers.
- **2.** When setting up a Women's Council, it is worth noting several important aspects. Best practices:
  - 1. Define the purpose, Vision and Mission of the Council:

#### Relevant questions:

- What is to be the role of the Women's Council?
- What should be the rules of operation in the council and with the local government?
- What values unite women in the council and what values divide?
- What are the strategic goals for the term of the Women's Council?

Workshops of a strategic nature should be held regularly, at least every 6 months, in order to work out the next steps, identify short-term actions to achieve strategic goals. Workshops should be held with the participation of local authorities.

#### 2. Funding: budget of Women's Councils.

The councils do not have their own budget. They cannot apply for funds for e.g. municipal mandated tasks, members do not get paid for council meetings. Often, in order to conduct an action, e.g. educational, they acquire investors themselves or even finance from their own money.

It is necessary to engage in a dialogue with the office at which the council is established, what funds for current activities the council will be able to dispose of, what budget the office can set for these activities. This will make it possible to design a schedule of activities for each year of activity. As a rule, funds from the local government should be the basic budget of the Women's Council.

3. The number of women's council members should be limited, the council should have a maximum of a dozen members.



**4.** The term of office for the Women's Council should not end with the term of office of the local government, it should assume a longer period of operation of the Council so as to ensure the continuity of its work.

#### 5. Networking of Councils

Networking of Councils builds a culture of support and gives input to the vision and mission.

#### 6. Diversity of members of Women's Councils

Councils should be diverse in terms of:

- age (young women should also be attracted to the ranks of the councils) background (disability, migrant, LGBT+ person)
- empowerment and work in local government (good cooperation with city authorities and practical support of local government)
- experience in local non-profit organizations (experience and network of own contacts)

#### Klaudia Jachira (parliament and other political bodies):

1. Use extra-parliamentary relationships, cooperations and friendships to establish intra-parlamentary cooperations with women from other pro-democratic political groups

In Polish parliament cooperation inter-political groups of women deputies is facilitated by the possibility to create thematic working groups, organizing meetings, discussions, experts' hearings and any other activities (like study visits) on the topic the group is working on. It was easy for women deputies to create a "Women's Rights working group". If there are such possibilities in the North Macedonian parliament, women of different political groups could use this opportunity, if not, informal meetings can be organized

2. Encourage women to run in the elections and to vote for women

Let's encourage each other to run in the elections, let's "blow each other's wings", let's vote for women and encourage other women to do the same. The more women on the electoral rolls, the more women in local politics, the greater space and opportunity to fight for women's rights and tackle gender backlash. But let us also remember that substantive equality is not only about numbers.

## Overall Conclusions

- Whereas there are multiple pathways in addressing and reversing gender backsliding, successful efforts typically stem from collaborative approaches. This was the main point of the study visit and the participants agreed that there is a need for further support to collaborative solutions. The Polish Women's Congress experience sheds a light on the need to value and nurture multi-stakeholder collaboration and dialoque as an end in itself.
- Multi-stakeholder dialogue is a relevant format for engaging stakeholders in environments where there is a lack of trust, and lack of cooperation. The study visit also provided opportunities for exchanges between two countries and the participants from North Macedonia found this opportunity to hear from Polish counterparts to be of great use and relevance.
- OSCE/ODIHR brings a value added through conceptualization of issues based on contextualized information as well as experiences and lessons learned from the OSCE region, bringing together the participants from different stakeholder groups, engaging participants in ideas sharing and joint planning and action, and supporting emerging initiatives on the ground. ODIHR is seen as a catalyzer and initiator (breakthrough leader), as well as a supporter of breakthrough in initiatives.
- The CHANGE project's orientation to a three-pronged approach in working with the women's movements,
  the religious and traditional communities, and relevant state and independent institutions creates new
  opportunities for collaboration and trust building. In going forward, confidence building of stakeholders can
  be increased by focusing on joint action focused on reversing gender backlash. This action needs to be
  based on do not harm principles, and responsive to needs and opportunities identified by the local stakeholders.

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## Study Visit Evaluation Summary

The study visit took place from 25 to 26 March 2024. The scope of the study visit was to support and advance multi-stakeholder dialogue in North Macedonia on new strategies to reverse gender backsliding, especially online.

The study visit included 14 participants and 13 filled in the evaluation form. The evaluation summary report indicates that the study visit objectives have been accomplished. Participants awareness on the nexus of intolerance on the grounds of religion, gender-based hate crime, anti-gender movements, and deteriorating situation of fundamental rights and values, including democracy and the rule of law was increased (average grade 4.58/5); they know what to do to contribute to resilience of the emerging pro-gender equality platform for joint action to reverse gender backsliding in North Macedonia (4.53/5); see stronger inter-linkages with relevant Polish counterparts and ODIHR's work (5/5); and have new ideas, approaches and initiatives (breakthrough initiatives) (4.92/5).

Participants are much clearer with regards to the role that ODIHR plays in promoting democracy, human rights and reversing gender backsliding (4.69/5); they are better informed about the experiences of Polish counterparts in addressing gender backsliding (4.92/5); and more willing to work together with other study visit participants from North Macedonia on joint actions to reverse gender backsliding in North Macedonia (4.92/5).

The study visit participants see the CHANGE project as catalyser and initiator, a crucial stakeholder in supporting amplifying voices from the field, a platform for transfer of know-how, as an actor with innovative and new ideas to tackle anti gender backlash, and someone who received a chance to make change, even revolutionary.

The idea to co-host the second day of the study visit with the Polish Women Congress proved to be a sound one, and this peer exchange that also included Association Dziewczyny na Wybory, Foundation Share the Care, European Disability Forum, Women's Councils in Poland, and an MP provided a truly useful and inspiring overview of a variety of issues related to networking, coalition building and different ways to overcome obstacles and strengthen resilience in reversing gender backsliding.

ODIHR Team of 13 received the highest grade and was commended as 'amazing'.

Answers to individual questions are presented below. For numerical answers, average grades are included.

## 1. What is one new thing that you will do when you get back to address gender backsliding?

- a. How to empower women about their rights more often and also to educate men about all the issues women are facing just because of misunderstanding or wrong laws.
- b. With the new composition of the parliament, try to organize an event jointly with CSOs working on women's issues to put gender equality in their Agenda.

- c. Development of future plan of Gender equality.
- d. Continue where I left off but a bit more empowered and with a few more allies.
- e. Initiating a workshop on intersectionalities and with focus on disability and CRPD.
- f. To contact more often with women from private sector.
- g. Work on the platform for Gender Equality and its values, coordination; represent North Macedonia on UNFPA Conference focused on anti-gender response and strategy.
- h. Find the similarities activists of women's right share with the religious people.
- i. Sign MoU/ MoC with the CSOs on official cooperation between the Ombudsman Office and the CSOs community. We will work together on this topic.
- j. Try to do the most o unify members of the Gender platform (CSOs) and often relevant actors to combat the rise od anti- gender movements.
- k. I've been thinking to write a book on religion and gender equality for few months now and probably this is the right time to start writing it.
- I. Work on the ways to find common ground on difficult issues among politi-

## 2. How do you see the role for the CHANGE project with regards to reversing gender backsliding?

- a. Catalyser and initiator.
- b. Platform for transfer of know-how.
- c. I see it as a crucial stakeholder in supporting amplifying our voices.
- d. Revolutionary.
- e. I see it in a way that can help me to change and make my work better for women
- f. The CHANGE project has innovative and new ideas to tackle anti gender backlash.
- g. Reduce corruption and improve democratic quality by involving women.
- h. Like someone who received a chance to make change.
- i. As a safer international space to work together on gender backsliding.
- j. A very important start.
- k. Marvellous! Keep doing the great work!
- I. As a positive initiative.

The table below presents average grades for level of agreement with statements related to intended study visit objectives, expected outcomes, and assessment of segments of discrete elements of the study visit:



Number	Question	Average grade
3	Please rate the extent to which study visit accomplished the following, Please rate on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is the lowest and 5 the highest grade.	
3a	I am now clearer with regards to the role that ODIHR plays in promoting democracy, human rights and reversing gender backsliding.	4.69
3b	I am now better informed about the experiences of Polish counterparts in addressing gender backsliding.	4.92
3c	I am now more willing to work together with other study visit participants from North Macedonia on joint actions to reverse gender backsliding in North Macedonia.	4.92
4	In my view, to what extent were the study visit outcomes achieved	4
<b>4</b> a	Greater awareness on the nexus of intolerance on the grounds of religion, gender-based hate crime, anti-gender movements, and deteriorating situation of fundamental rights and values, including democracy and the rule of law.	4.58
4b	Greater resilience of the emerging pro-gender equality platform for joint action to reverse gender backsliding in North Macedonia.	4.53
4c	Stronger inter-linkages with relevant Polish counterparts and ODIHR's work.	5
4d	Emergence of new ideas, approaches and initiatives (breakthrough initiatives).	4.92
5	Please rate the Welcome session on Day 1 from 1 to 5	5
6	Please rate the session Introduction by study visit participants on Day 1	5
7	Please rate the session Overview of ODIHR's portfolio and tools on Day 1	5
8	Please rate the breakout session you took part in on Day 1	
8a	Tackling intolerance on the grounds of religion/gender-based hate crime and integrating FORB perspective.	4.70
8b	HRD safety and tackling anti-gender movements	4.50
8c	Breakthrough leadership and reversing gender backsliding	4.72
9	Please rate Session I on Day 2, Polish Women Congress: building networks under the diversity of women's movement	4.81
10	Please rate Session II, Perspectives of women and men from underrepresented groups	4.50
11	Please rate Session III, Working with allies, networking and creating issue-based coalitions	4.83
12	Please rate the Final Session Troubleshooting and agreement on the next steps	5
13	Please rate your own contribution during the study visit	4.83
14	Please rate the contribution by other study visit participants.	4.46
15	Please rate the contribution by ODIHR team.	5
16	Please rate the contribution by the Polish Women's Congress.	4.85
17	Please rate the working conditions (venues).	5
18	Please rate the food served during the two lunches.	4.92
19	Please rate the hotel accommodation.	5

### 21. The most memorable moment/session/experience during the study visit for me was

- a. The visit in the Office of ODIHR.
- b. The presentation of Polish Congress of Women especially the part on Eco feminist activism. Also, mobilization of women to vote.
- c. Breakthrough leadership and amazing ODIHR/OSCE team.
- d. Getting to know one another and building bridges among us (what's up group:))
- e. Creating unofficial network with Polish counterparts.
- f. The chance to work together,
- g. The discussion in groups.
- h. The entire event- great lessons.
- i. The Polish amazing women.
- j. Everything, but if I had to choose one, it would be the work in groups.
- k. The exchange of experiences and ideas. Meeting and getting to know better all these women
- I. During the second day the Women Congress representatives.

### 22. Do you have a message for the CHANGE project?

- a. You do great work!
- b. Thank you for all of your support in tackling anti gender movement.
- c. Promoting gender equality in political parties and democratic institutions.
- d. Gender equality through CRPD.
- e. Please continue to work with us:).
- f. Thanks for your invitation.
- g. Thank you for the very productive and informative two days and for giving us a safe space to express the issues faced.
- h. Keep up the great work.

