



# The Politics of Pseudoactions

## Local Governance and Gender Policy Implementation in the Western Balkans

Andrea Spehar



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## ABSTRACT

Successful implementation is often pointed out as a missing prerequisite in the attainment of gender equality goals. Only rarely, however, are gender policy implementation processes subjected to systematic study. This paper analyses the local-level implementation of national gender equality policies in three countries of the Western Balkans region (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Serbia), examining the extent to which the implementation work may have failed and the reasons behind the failures noted. Besides exploring general processes of local gender policy implementation the particular focus is put on the case of the implementation of Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) in the three countries in its focus in order

to allow for a more in-depth perspective. The analysis, based on extensive fieldwork carried out over a three-year period, shows successful implementation of GRB in the region to be hindered not only by barriers such as lack of political commitment and persistent political resistance, but also the poor functioning of basic democratic institutions. Various obstacles to gender equality work in the region more in general are identified. An important future task for gender equality advocates is to develop a new strategy for tackling the politics of pseudoactions, whereby the issue of gender equality is taken up on the agenda but not provided with the prerequisites for it to become a reality.

## PREFACE

The mandate of the Swedish International Center for Local Democracy (ICLD) is to contribute to poverty reduction by promoting local democracy in low and middle income countries. In order to fulfill this mandate we offer, decentralized cooperation through our Municipal Partnership Programmes, capacity building programmes through our International Training Programmes and knowledge management through our Centre of Knowledge. The Centre documents and publishes key lessons learned from our ongoing activities, initiates and funds relevant research and engages in scholarly networks and organizes conferences and workshops. We also maintain a publication series. This report *The Politics of Pseudoactions - Local Governance and Gender Policy Implementation in the Western Balkans* by Andrea Spehar is the sixth report to be published in ICLDs Research Report series.

In this report Spehar examines local-level implementation of national gender equality policies in three countries of the Western Balkans region; Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and Serbia. To what extent has the implementation work failed? And what are the reasons behind the failures noted? Are questions examined in this study. Particular focus is put on the case of the implementation of Gender Responsive Budgeting.

Spehar identifies an important future task for gender equality advocates: to develop a new strategy for tackling the politics of pseudoactions, where the issue of gender equality is on the agenda but without the actual means for it to become a reality.

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**Olov Berggren**  
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# THE POLITICS OF PSEUDO ACTIONS

## LOCAL GOVERNANCE AND GENDER POLICY IMPLEMENTATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

ANDREA SPEHAR

### INTRODUCTION

It is more of a rule rather than an exception that studies evaluating the progress towards gender equality in a country single out successful implementation as a missing prerequisite to the attainment of the stated gender equality goals (e.g., Hadjipateras 1997; Moser and Moser 2005; UNDP 2010; UNICEF 2008; World Bank 2012). In view of this recurrent observation in both gender policy research and reports emanating from international organizations and agencies, the lack of systematic research on the subject is surprising. Once adopted, a policy becomes part of a complex political process, which, essentially, means that it continues to be negotiated and renegotiated as it is being implemented, evaluated, monitored, and revised. Yet, research tends to stop at the point where the policy is formally agreed upon (see, e.g., Htun and Weldon 2012; Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2009; Mazur 2002; Mazur and Pollack 2009). The same holds for research examining the transposition of international gender norms and policies (such as those of the European Union and the United Nations) into national settings (see, e.g., Bego 2015; Blofield and Hass 2013; Kriszan and Popa 2012; Mazur and Pollock 2009; van der Vleuten 2007). While studying policy adoption is a necessary step, it will, however, not suffice in itself; it offers no indication, for instance, of how, if at all, the laws and policies in question are actually implemented and what their gender equality outcomes might be or turn out to be. Analyzing gender policy *implementation* is therefore crucial if we are to understand why, despite numerous, what can only be termed as progressive gender policies' having been adopted in many countries and even areas over the last few decades, we can still witness significant gender inequalities persisting in them.

To help to begin filling this research gap, this paper explores factors contributing to gender

policy implementation gaps on the local level in three Western Balkan countries<sup>1</sup>: Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Macedonia, and Serbia. In spite of recent efforts such as subsuming gender policies under newly enacted international human rights legislation in the countries in the region, the general perception continues to be that gender equality enjoys merely a *de jure* instead of *de facto* presence in them (e.g., Farnsworth 2011; Hughson 2014; Koteska 2014; Petircevic 2012; Prechal and Burri 2011; Spehar 2012a). In the Western Balkans, just as in other newly democratized countries, such "implementation failures" are often blamed on the lack of political will (e.g., Hadjipateras 1997; Oxfam 2005; SIDA 2012, 2013; UNDP 2010; World Bank 2012;). While, in many cases, the suggestion no doubt has its merits, the lack-of-political-will explanation is nevertheless too vague to be of much analytical use. It, to begin with, downplays the rather high degree of political will that *does* exist among certain political actors, even if, for a variety of reasons, it has not translated into tangible results as desired. Moreover, the explanation ignores broader democracy and governance-related challenges that impact negatively on gender policy implementation, such as those arising from problems with accountability, legitimacy, and transparency.

To examine the impact of these and other similar factors, this study placed gender policy making at the center of democratic processes, looking at both policy-oriented questions of agenda setting and policy design and questions of democratic performance and governance. Special attention was given to factors influencing implementation at the local (municipal/city) level. According to previous research, gender implementation gaps at the local level are particularly damaging to development prospects since they are at the root of

1 The term "Western Balkans" is used to refer to the countries of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia.

democratic and economic governance problems that, in aggregate, affect the country as a whole (Goetz 2004; UNDP 2010). Focus on exploring local gender equality policy implementations processes is also of particularly relevance in countries of the Western Balkans, caught as these currently are in a trend of increasing decentralization of welfare functions and budgets playing a key role in gender equality policy making. The central governments are responsible for setting the general national frameworks for gender equality laws and policies. However, it is in everyday life that gender equality is created – or inequality sustained. The municipalities and cities in Western Balkans meet inhabitants at all stages of life, from neonatal care to care of the elderly. Therefore they have a key role when it comes to making gender equality policy a reality.

This paper considered the extent to which Western Balkans countries might be failing in the local implementation of their adopted gender equality policies, and examine the reasons behind the observed shortcomings. Besides exploring general processes of local gender policy implementation the particular focus is put on the case of the implementation of Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) in the three countries in its focus in order to allow for a more in-depth perspective. Following the creation of CEDAW, GRB developed as central method of analyzing and implementing gender equality policies. GRB can be said to provide an important test case in this regard for those interested in analyzing and understanding the difference between adopted and implemented policies. It is not just a symbolic policy tool that defines and reflects social values and upholds governmental principles; it also carries significant budgetary and fiscal consequences (Annesley 2010, 52). Bearing in mind that the budget represents the operative part of public policies, through gender budgeting and gender budget analysis one can in fact analyze the extent to which public policies are gender-responsive and the extent to which formal commitment to gender equality is accompanied by the allocation of required budgetary resources (cf. Sharp 2002; Sharp and Broomhill 2002). The analysis of GRB implementation gaps and policy processes in the three countries in question is based on extensive fieldwork carried out in them in 2013–2015.

The main empirical material used for it consists of primary data from in-depth interviews with actors involved in local gender equality policy making, as well as official documents. The paper is organized as follows. First, in the section that follows, the contextual prerequisites for gender equality policy making in the Western Balkans will be outlined. After that, previous gender policy and implementation research is briefly discussed, to outline an analytical framework for studying local gender policy implementations gaps. The methods and material used in the study are described in the third section. Next, the extent to which Western Balkans countries indeed might be failing in implementing their adopted GBR policies is examined, followed, in the subsequent section, by an analysis of the factors accounting for the outcomes identified. Finally, the findings from the study are summarized, together with their implications for future national and local policy work and gender equality advocacy in the region.

## PREREQUISITES FOR GENDER EQUALTY POLICY MAKING IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

The countries in the Western Balkans are similar in many respects, both in terms of their communist past and the transition processes towards democracy and market economy. The uneven pace of the processes of democratic transition and consolidation, as well as the post-conflict reality for many countries in the region, imposed a specific set of challenges that all these societies face. As concerns institutional capacity – the countries of the Western Balkans can be said to provide a highly unfavorable political environment for gender equality policy making: they continue to suffer from severe political, economic and security problems, including xenophobia and pathological forms of nationalism, underdeveloped democratic political culture, and weak rule of law (Efendic, Silajdzic and Atanasovska 2014; Pridham 2008).

### **Gender politics under the one-party communist rule**

In order to gain better understanding of today's gender (in)equalities in the region it is essential to

understand the complex heritage of gender equality policy making during the communist era. It is often claimed that gender equality was one of the major achievements of the Eastern European communist regimes. Constitutional regulations provided women and men with equal rights in political, economic, and social life (Funk and Mueller 1993). The Communist political party equality policies such as relatively high minimum wages, generous maternity leave and child care benefits supported women's participation in gainful employment (Paci 2002). However, much of the progress in the area of gender equality under communism remained ambiguous and contradictory. Some scholars claim that the communist experiment was nothing more than an instance of "forced emancipation" and that women's incorporation into public life was "insincere" (Ashwin 2006; Gail and Kligman). In spite of the heavily propagandized gender equality in the sphere of paid employment, the reality of the labor market was far from gender-neutral since the state socialist system did not manage to challenge gendered job segregation and wage gaps (Brainard 1997). In addition, under communism, gender-neutral stipulations in judicial sectors (e.g., family laws) were completely absent. Fathers, for example, were not encouraged to share responsibilities for raising children and there was no official notion of paternity leave. The lack of gender-neutral legislation as well as the lack of public gender approach contributed to the strong legacy of traditionalism in attitudes toward the family and gender roles. Furthermore, some central gender equality and women's rights issues, such as sexual harassment and domestic violence, were considered "private matters" exempted from state interventions and were completely absent from public debates (Spehar 2012b).

### **Gender equality politics since 1990s**

In developing and newly democratized countries many of the new policy ideas and visions for the societal development, including gender equality, originate from abroad. In the second half of the 1990s, Western governments and international organizations such as UN and EU have made Balkan countries a laboratory to test the idea that engaging women supports war-to-democracy transitions (Irvine 2013). The war-to-democracy

transitions in the Balkans defined intervention and assistance efforts with an increased focus on women's empowerment and civil society development. The transition to democracy created an opportunity for women in the region to start establishing new groups and also mobilizing other actors with similar policy preferences to pressure the political establishment to take action on a range of issues relevant to gender equality. Since the mid-1990s, the Western Balkans countries have made substantial progress in adopting new legislation and policies aimed at ensuring greater gender equality in different spheres of social life owing to the domestic women's mobilization and international pressure (Bego 2015; Spehar 2007, 2012a). Particular attention has been paid to eliminating discriminatory practices and passing laws that address specific problems such as domestic violence (Council of Europe 2005, Spehar 2012b). In the area of employment, new legal frameworks have been adopted for prohibition of gender discrimination. Most countries already had provisions in their constitutions and labour codes for equal treatment in the workplace but there were, for example, no specific regulations for the reversal of the burden of proof in cases of sex discrimination or sexual harassment at work. In the transition period countries passed supplementary legislation to clarify and strengthen those deficiencies. It is also important to point out that countries added stipulations in their family laws that encourage sharing the responsibilities of raising children. Despite some differences, recent national reforms show an increasing emphasis on fathers' rights, which is a new phenomenon in all countries (Spehar 2012a). As part of the EU membership process and international obligations, the governments in the region have also developed and set up national machineries for the advancement of gender equality. They have created special departments, directorates, agencies and committees at national and local level to deal with this matter (Bego 2015).

The wave of democratization and free elections in the beginning of the 1990s brought a distinct decline in women's participation in elected political bodies in the post-communist CEE countries (Matland and Montgomery 2003). Somewhat unexpectedly, the biggest progress so far both with regard to quota adoption and the grow-

Table 1. Women's representation in politics 2015

Country	Women in national parliaments %	Women in local councils %,	Women mayors (n)
Bosnia and Hercegovina	21	17	5 (out of 142)
Macedonia	33	29	5 (out of 81)
Serbia	34	29	7 (out of 174)

Source: [http://ec.europa.eu/justice/gender-equality/gender-decision-making/database/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/justice/gender-equality/gender-decision-making/database/index_en.htm)

ing number of women in parliaments, has been made in the Western Balkans. All Western Balkan countries have defined legally obliging percentages for women's representation in political decision-making.<sup>2</sup> However, while women's political representation has increased since 2000, there are still some glass ceilings to be shattered. Among these are women's access to local offices and particularly their election as mayors (see table one).

## DECENTRALIZATION AND GENDER-RESPONSIVE LOCAL GOVERNANCE

Gender-responsive local governance is about making sure that all local governance processes, procedures and systems are developed and implemented in ways that take into account the different needs of women and men and create equal opportunities (Goetz 2004). It is about making sure that in all its activities, local governments take into account gender inequalities, and address as well as reduce these through their policies, programs and activities.

Generally, decentralization processes are frequently presented as good for women. While the normative ideal of democratic decentralisation does hold out promise to women, the empirical evidence offers only modest encouragement as prejudices against women are often more strongly held at local than at national levels. In many countries, traditional and potentially oppressive gender relations will often be more entrenched at local levels, while national leaders tend to be more aware of gender equity issues. The more blatant power relations both in terms of gender and other factors are directly reflected in local

budgets in many countries (Elson 2006).

The decentralization processes in Western Balkans countries have been conceptualized in *gender-neutral terms*. There has been almost no discussion on how decentralization might affect women and men differently. This issue has only recently begun to be addressed through national and local legal and policy frameworks for gender equality, which highlight the obligations of Local Government Units (LGU) in the sphere of gender equality.<sup>3</sup> The LGUs are obliged and sometimes recommended to create policies and institutional mechanisms to support the implementation of gender equality policy at local level (see table 2).

Well-functioning governing institutions at the local level are critical for effective gender policy making. Local governments in the Western Balkans countries have been the target of significant decentralization processes in the last few years and are currently in charge of numerous duties. The process of implementing decentralization reforms was, however, conducted in unfavorable socio-economic and political circumstances (Coletti and Stochiero 2011). Even besides the strong technical and financial assistance provided by relevant international institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the European Union, the process failed so far in terms of meeting the objectives in the field of sustainable economic development, elimination of (social, economic and fiscal) disparities on the local, regional and central level, decreasing unemployment etc. The level of fiscal decentralization in these countries is far behind the EU in terms of volume, structure and quality of funds being managed at the local and re-

2 See [www.quotaproject.org](http://www.quotaproject.org)

3 According to national legislations (Gender Equality Laws) and policy documents (Gender Equality Strategies) municipalities are obliged to mainstream gender in to their policy processes.

Table 2. The Legal and Policy Framework for Gender Equality at Local Level in the Western Balkans

<p>The national and local gender-related legislation in the Western Balkans countries obliges Local Government Units to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaborate with central government institutions to implement gender legislation and national policies on gender equality;</li> <li>• Mainstream gender in all local policies, including local budgets;</li> <li>• Collaborate with civil society organizations that operate within their territory to achieve gender equality in different areas;</li> <li>• Collect and analyze data disaggregated by sex;</li> <li>• Establish special gender equality bodies within local government units, i.e. Gender Equality Commissions;</li> <li>• Appoint one or several local Gender Equality Employees to deal with gender equity issues;</li> <li>• Undertake temporary special measures for increasing women's representation in decision making positions (i.e. 30% quota).</li> </ul>
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gional levels (Mazllami and Osmani 2014, p.732). These circumstances can be expected to have negative influence on the processes of gender equality policy making at the local level. Legal and policy frameworks, as well as institutional structures, do require institutional and financial resources to develop effective gender equality policies, as well as effectively implement them, monitor their implementation, and provide informed guidance on how to improve them.

## RESEARCHING GENDER POLICY IMPLEMENTATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND BEYOND

Over the past few decades, governments around the world have adopted new gender policies across a broad range of policy sectors. At the same time, the question of under which conditions gender equality policies have become adopted or not has been a focus area of comparative gender policy research for quite some time already (e.g., Charles 2000; Gelb 1989; Katzenstein and Mueller; Mazur 2002; Randall and Waylen 1998). Little of the existing gender policy research, however, has thus far addressed itself directly to what happens to these policies after they are formally adopted, in their highly complex, yet crucial post-adoption

implementation phase. By largely leaving out any systematic study of national and local implementation processes of the various gender policies adopted, gender policy scholars have been unable to help bring about a better understanding of the kind of contributing factors and barriers that impact gender equality in specific contexts and institutional settings. Despite the significant international engagement, empirical case studies point to consistent failures in the implementation of gender policy by international development agencies themselves and their partner organisations in low- and middle-income countries (Hadjipateras, 1997; Moser and Moser, 2005; Moser, 2005; Razavi and Miller, 1995). “Strong political participation, powerful representation and even ground-breaking laws and policies,” we nevertheless need to keep in mind, “will change little for women unless policies are actually enforced” (UNIFEM 2009, 28).

The case of the Western Balkans serves as a good illustration of this oft-encountered dilemma. All countries in the region have today a fairly comprehensive legal framework in place to promote the public goal of gender equality. Yet, women in the region continue to face restrictions in the labor market, earn lower wages, suffer notably often from domestic violence, and have lower levels of political representation (see, e.g.,



Hassenstab and Ramet 2015; Petricevic 2011). Gender inequality in economic empowerment, in particular, has remained sizable. Women's labor force participation rate in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2014, for example, was no more than 42 percent, and in Kosovo it was even lower: just 18 percent (IMF 2015; UNDP 2015).

## A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYZING GENDER POLICY IMPLEMENTATION GAPS

In any “post-adoption” gender policy study, there needs to be a precise distinction made between the different stages of the post-adoption process: implementation, evaluation, and outcomes (cf. O'Toole 2000, 266). Implementation in this sequence refers to the policy phase where state and non-state actors carry out policy decisions through a wide range of activities (Matland 1995). When setting out to look for explanations to any gender policy implementation gaps in the observation material, one must therefore first define what the gap noted consists of, how it manifests itself, and what its magnitude is. In this article, an ‘implementation gap’ denotes the difference between the kind of solutions adopted in legal instruments (at national and local level) and what is actually implemented in practice (at local level). National policies provide the framework for guiding governance and development in each country. However, it is up to local governments to translate national policies – including gender equality policies – into *locally relevant* policies, strategies, and concrete programmes. Women and girls have different public service needs and priorities. This is due to gender-based ideas about their roles and responsibilities, and the division of labour that these ideas support. Translating national objectives into locally-relevant ones gives local governments an opportunity to identify the different needs and priorities of women and men, girls and boys in their communities, and to develop local policies that best respond to these differences.

Existing research on policy implementation successes and failures in general has in this regard emphasized the influence of variables such as, most notably, 1) policy ownership; 2) the clarity and adequacy of policy objectives and means; 3) the amount of resources made available; 4)

the chain of command and control steering the process; 5) the strength of critical actors; 6) cultural influence; 7) influences beyond the national level; and 8) decision makers' political will (e.g., Matland 1995; O'Toole 2000; Winter 2006). The very complexity of the implementation process as testified to by the sheer number of these factors, it has been argued, makes it impossible to develop one unified analytical framework to incorporate all the different variables explaining good and bad implementation (Hill and Hupe 2002, 43; O'Toole 2000; Winter 2006, 158). In consequence, “the only approach possible is to provide an accurate account of specific implementation processes” (Hill and Hupe 2002, 43).

Nevertheless, the exploratory nature of this particular study called for an analytical framework capable of identifying a broad range of factors impacting GRB implementation processes across specific country contexts. Towards this purpose, the hypothesis was adopted that, in countries of the Western Balkans and in countries with institutional settings similar to them, gender policy implementation gaps can best be understood as emerging as a result of the interaction of two main sets of factors interlacing each other. These can be categorized as constituting *behavioral barriers* on the one hand (how personal preferences, values, norms, and social pressures influence decision makers' behavior and thus contribute to the creation of gender policy implementation gaps) and *institutional barriers* on the other hand (the economic and political incentives provided to local implementers, public and private participation and interests, as well as financial, technical, and political capacities of implementing agencies). Figure 1 gives an overview of this analytical framework aimed to help us identify, describe, and understand the main reasons for the gender policy implementation gaps persisting at the local level in the three countries studied and, more broadly, in the region.<sup>4</sup>

4 The framework lends itself to additional uses such as the examination and identification of necessary and sufficient conditions for successful policy implementation in a comparative setting. In this study, it was, however, not possible to clearly categorize the municipalities based on their success or lack thereof with GRB budgeting, for which reason the framework is, in this article, used in an exploratory manner only.

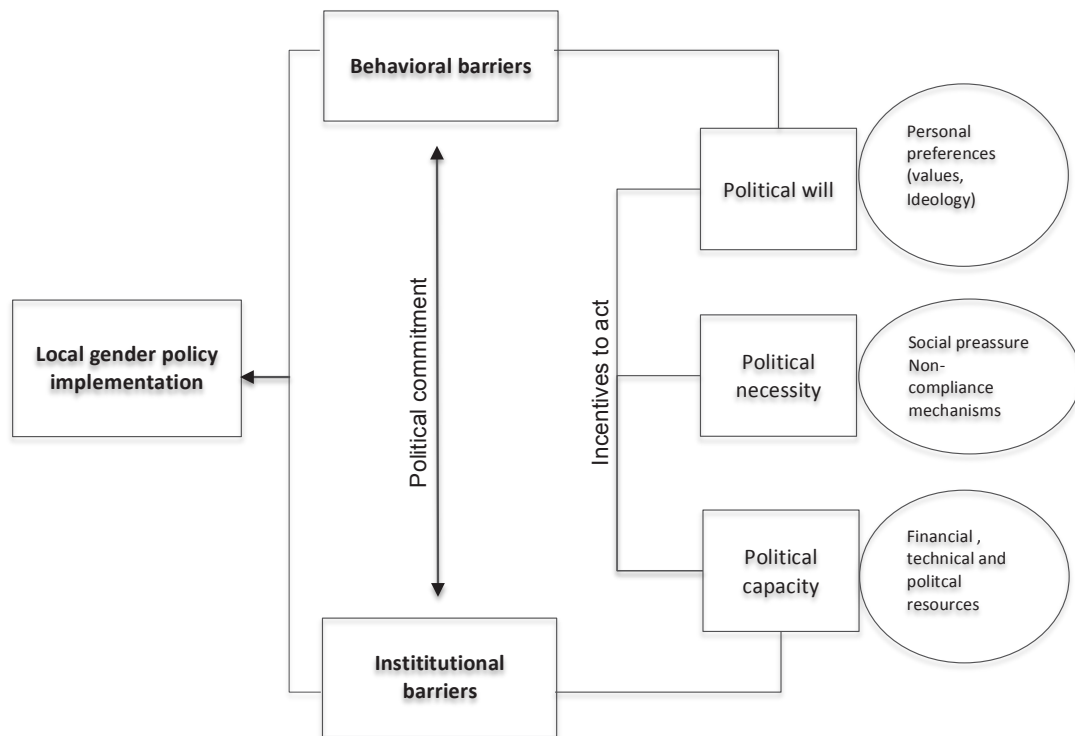


Figure 1. Analytical Framework

## BEHAVIORAL AND INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS

In gender policy research and discussions, failures in gender policy implementation are often (one might even say typically) attributed to lack of ‘political will’ (e.g., Byrnes and Freeman 2011; Hellum and Assen 2013; Oxfam 2005; Sweetman 2005; UNIFEM 2011). Despite the frequent and emphatic employment of this concept as an explanatory device, there is a surprising lack of specificity concerning what is meant by it and how to measure its influence on the observed implementation gaps. Any evidence of political will or lack thereof as described in the literature is typically indirect, speculative, and retrospective: a failure to implement change supposedly manifests lack of political will, while successful implementation constitutes proof of its existence.

What is true is that working for gender equality in patriarchal societies is often an ideological challenge, with resistance to change and frequent lack of political will something to be expected.

Nevertheless, the reasons behind decision makers’ low levels of willingness to implement gender equality policies are often also related to other incentives to act or not to act. Political will does not exist or develop in a vacuum, but is influenced by the sociopolitical environment in which the actors operate. Therefore, identification and understanding of the linkages between actors and their environment, in terms of the demands, pressures, and incentives created, are important to capturing a full picture of actors’ behavior in the implementation processes. Indeed, it is useful to consider political “will” as only one component of the *political commitment* variable, with its other components being what one might term as political “capacity” and political “necessity.”

### *Political Will*

“Will” in this context can be defined as ideological interest in advancing gender equality through policies. Where gender inequality is not perceived as a problem by the leading politicians and political parties, it is perfectly rational

of them not to engage in gender policy making. In tackling behavioral barriers for successful implementation of GRB, the first sets of factors considered in this study were different political actors' preferences and roles in *agenda setting, policy formulation, and implementation processes*.

When political leaders choose gender policies based on their own assessment of the likely benefits to be obtained, the alternatives and options, and the costs to be incurred, then one can speak of independently derived preferences and willingness to act. Accordingly, for this study it was of interest to consider where the vision for GRB originated from, how the issue of GRB ended up on the public agenda, which actors participated in the formulation of national and local GRB policies and regulations, and how well GRB was understood by those responsible for its implementation. In developing and newly democratized countries, many of the new policy ideas and visions for societal development originate from abroad. Aid dependency has given donors the power to influence the direction of policy ideas, which can create a lack of domestic political ownership; the same can happen when the push for change comes entirely or overwhelmingly from external actors (Booth 2011; Moser and Moser 2010).<sup>5</sup> In the context of this article, then, where GRB was put on the public agenda and adopted mostly for formal reasons under international pressure, it may likely have been seen as having been enacted for the sake of appearances only, with a negative impact on implementation through lack of commitment and support from domestic politicians and civil servants as a result. In organizations where GBR is on the agenda, it may also encounter active resistance from politicians and civil servants. Winning the active backing of leading politicians and civil servants is, however, crucial for ensuring effective gender equality work: whether or not these produce instructions and demand work for gender equality may make all the difference in ultimate implementation success.

<sup>5</sup> Some have gone as far as to argue donor funding of women's NGOs to be counterproductive to effective mobilization of domestic women's movements (Eisenstein 2009; Hemment 2007; Irvine 2013).

### *Political Capacity*

Political capacity, for its part, is here defined as the capacity to implement reforms. What, to outsiders, may appear as a lack of political will may actually have to do with insufficient capacity. Indeed, in this precise regard – as concerns institutional capacity – the countries of the Western Balkans can be said to provide a highly unfavorable political environment for gender equality policy making: they continue to suffer from severe political and security problems, including xenophobia and pathological forms of nationalism, underdeveloped democratic political culture, and weak rule of law (e.g., Efendic, Silajdzic, and Atanasovska 2014). Gender equality policy reforms that require new skills, mechanisms, procedures, and resources may then hinder the emergence of political will, to the extent that political actors are not confident that they have sufficient capacity for implementation.

Another institutional capacity factor impacting the implementation of gender policies pertains to economic resources. There are costs associated with implementing and enforcing laws, and it is not uncommon for government officials in the Western Balkans region to reckon that they simply lack the means needed for the purpose. In the economically weak municipalities of the Western Balkans, the lack of financial resources may thus form a serious impediment to concrete monetary investment in GRB.

### *Political Necessity*

Finally, political “necessity” is made up of public pressure and citizen engagement, organizational rules and regulations (i.e., sanctions), and a personal sense of civic duty. Without at least some governance structures and procedures to establish checks and balances among the various branches of government and enable citizens to voice their concerns and hold public officials accountable to some degree, political commitment to tackle gender inequality is likely to be weak, as is the ability to implement reforms.

However, also the behavior and preferences of the electorate in gender policy making processes should be considered here. One may assume that gender policy implementation gap will be eradicated only when the supply of sound laws is met by corresponding demand on the ground to im-



plement them. Given that, in the countries of the Western Balkans, policies aimed at gender equality promotion on the whole are not electorally popular and generally bring few votes, politician's lack of involvement in them can be regarded as perfectly rational from their own actor's point of view.

## METHOD AND MATERIAL

The analysis of local gender equality policy implementation processes in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Serbia that follows is based on extensive fieldwork in the three countries in 2013–2015. During the fieldwork, a total of 56 semi-structured interviews were conducted with national and municipal stakeholders. In addition to them, the analysis draws on relevant policy documents and reports. The data collection and analysis were carried out in tandem, in two stages. The first stage was focused on policy formation processes at the central government level, with relevant data collected through interviews with stakeholders involved in the agenda setting and policy formulation processes related to GRB, including representatives of international donor agencies, national and local governments, and women's NGOS, as well as gender policy experts. The interviews were conducted in Belgrade (Serbia), Sarajevo (BiH), and Skopje (Macedonia). In addition, for the purposes of the process analysis carried out as part of this study, official policy documents were consulted. Primary documents here included national gender equality and GRB policy documents and legislation as well as gender equality evaluation reports issued by various international organizations (e.g., European Union, United Nations) and national women's organizations.

This initial mapping of the national contexts during this stage yielded important information about the existence (or lack thereof) of certain prerequisites for successful GRB implementation. The research questions guiding the work here were: To what extent and degree has there been political and bureaucratic commitment to GRB at the national and local levels? Who were the actors participating in the GRB policy formulation processes? How has GRB policy been understood by

the key stakeholders? Have the national GRB regulations/policies been operationalized through concrete targets and benchmarks to measure progress?

During the second stage, the institutional settings and different actors' roles and interests in the gender equality and GRB implementation processes were examined at the local level. The first task here was to identify which of the municipalities studied ( $N=143$  in BiH, 80 in Macedonia, 174 in Serbia) had actually been carrying out concrete actions related to GRB (e.g., integration of gender analysis into economic policy and local government spending, allocation of resources for realization of gender-sensitive programs, and/or development of indicators for monitoring success of implementation of GRB activities). Towards this purpose, qualitative analyses were carried out. First the information about the municipalities and cities gender equality work in general and GRB in particular was collected in interviews with; a) representatives of umbrella organizations for local governments (Association of the Units of Local Self-Government of the Republic of Macedonia [ZELS], the Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities [SKGO] in Serbia, Associations of Municipalities and Cities [AMCs] in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and in the Republika Srpska), b) the representatives of the donor organisations such as UN Women, c) local women's NGOs, d) Municipal/city Mayors and civil servants. Second, the existing data bases and documents on the gender equality work at the local level were consulted.

Based on the information gathered from documents and interviews, 12 municipalities/cities – four for each country – were selected for a subsequent in-dept study of GRB implementation processes. These were Tuzla, Visoko, Doboj Jug, and Banja Luka in BiH, Skopje, Tetovo, Bogovinje, and Cair in Macedonia, and Becej, Uzice, Arandjelovac and Novi Pazar in Serbia. To better understand the variation across cases and the full range of factors contributing to implementation gaps, the sample was selected so that it included a) municipalities with at least some concrete GRB initiatives and municipalities with no such initiatives at all b) both rural and urban municipalities and c) municipalities with and without a woman mayor.

Both the behavioral and institutional capacity of these municipalities to implement GRB was then examined, including their capacity to formulate gender-sensitive policies, mobilize resources for gender and capacity development, collaborate with women's NGOs and other non-profit organizations, and play a monitoring role. The data relied on for this analysis was collected from official municipal documents having to do with gender equality and budgets as well as through interviews with persons responsible for gender equality policy making in their municipality. Given the ability of political parties to make authoritative decisions about concrete policy measures, their actions or inaction in relation to GRB were also included in the analysis. Policy documents of local political parties, including party constitutions and election manifestos (from the last municipal elections), were analyzed for possible provisions on gender equality in general and GRB in particular.

The interviews conducted were partly of an informant type (mapping of cooperation among actors, functional division of tasks) and partly of a respondent type (actors' views on GRB policies and on benefits and challenges with the current system). Due to the political sensitivity of the research topic (failure in policy implementation), all interviews have been anonymized as regards personal information. Most interviewees appeared willing and capable of speaking openly during the interviews, even about difficult matters (clear problems in gender equality policy implementation in their country). The interview questions were open-ended and inquired about the gender equality policy making in general and gender perspective in the budgetary processes in particular in the interviewees' municipality, as for instance: Are you familiar with Gender Responsive Budgeting and interested in working towards the inclusion of gender perspective in your regular work? Are sex-disaggregated data used in the budgetary processes in your municipality? Are there currently or have there been any GRB initiatives in your municipality? If yes, who leads or led those and who are or were the key stakeholders with relevant expertise? If not, what are the reasons for the absence of such initiatives? Are there currently any initiatives related to participatory budgeting or civil-society monitoring of the budget in your municipality?

## GRB IN NATIONAL PLANNING AND POLICY MAKING

Since the mid-2000s, significant progress has been made in each of the three countries studied in introducing regulatory measures and frameworks to support GRB, including laws, strategies, action plans, budget guidelines, and the like. Of all the countries in the region, Macedonia has adopted the most comprehensive national framework for GRB, being also the sole one to have adopted a specific National Strategy for Gender Responsive Budgeting.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, in the country's 2012 Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, there is a special amendment concerning GRB (Article 5).<sup>7</sup> These legal and strategic frameworks have defined the measures for systematic integration of the principle of equal opportunities for women and men in the process of creation, implementation, and monitoring of policies and budgets at both the national and local levels.

In BiH, the obligation to implement Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) at all levels of government was mandated by the Gender Action Plan of Bosnia and Herzegovina (GAP), adopted in 2006 and 2013.<sup>8</sup> The GAPs includes a separate chapter on gender budgeting with specific recommendations that are to be used as a platform for further gender budgeting work by national and local government institutions. In Serbia, a Law on Gender Equality was adopted in 2009, requiring the local self-government units to integrate gender issues in the relevant local planning documents and, subsequently, long-term budget cycles (Article 39).<sup>9</sup> According to the country's 2010–2015 National Strategy for Improving and Promoting Gender Equality, gender budgeting was to be introduced in government programs and projects and the local governments were to restructure and allocate the distribution of public expenditures so as to improve women's econom-

6 "The Strategy for Introducing Gender Responsive Budgeting in the Republic of Macedonia (2012–2017)"; Skopje: Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, 2013.

7 Law on Equal Opportunities of Women and Men, Official Gazette no. 6/2012

8 Gender Action Plan of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2006–2010; Official Gazette no 41/09; Gender Action Plan of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2013–2017; Official Gazette no 98/13

9 Law on Gender Equality, Official Gazette no. 104/2009

ic opportunities and equal access to resources (Section 2.1.3.2).<sup>10</sup> At the regional level, the autonomous province of Vojvodina has adopted a particular GRB strategy to facilitate the mainstreaming of GRB and related practices in provincial bodies and institutions.<sup>11</sup> According to their national GRB regulations, the municipalities in BiH, Macedonia, and Serbia are, in their strategic plans and budgets, obliged to analyze the impacts that the various allocations of public resources have on men and women and on gender equality. Based on this analysis, strategic objectives towards enhancing gender equality are to be introduced into policies and budgets. The municipalities are also obliged to monitor effects and impacts over time.

In addition to legal instruments, the national governments have also produced various manuals and guidelines to facilitate the implementation of GRB. In Macedonia, the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy has issued a document entitled “Analysis and Assessment of the Budget Process and Budget Policy Reforms from a Gender Equality Perspective,” along with a handbook for gender-responsive budgeting for the country’s administration to support gender mainstreaming processes and further strengthen the capacities of civil servants. A GRB advocacy toolkit for civil society organizations (CSOs) has also been developed following the training for CSOs on GRB where the need for such a support tool was identified. In BiH, a publication called “Implementation of the Action Plan for the Introduction of GRB in Pilot Institutions in the Federation of BiH in 2010–2013” was produced, providing an overview of the steps for introducing GRB in select organizations. There is, furthermore, a “Guide for the Introduction of GRB at the Local Level” to provide guidance on how to integrate GRB tools and methods into municipal programs. Finally, in Serbia, UN WOMEN supported production of the practical tool “GRB3 -Gender responsible budgeting in three steps”. In all three countries, a

pool of gender experts has been created at both the national and the regional level to support central and local government officials in conducting gender analyses and integrating gender into various programs and budgets.

## WHERE’S THE GAP?

Despite national regulations and comprehensive GRB frameworks in place in the three countries studied, different kinds of local-level implementation gaps could be identified in them in this study. These were categorized into three main groups based on their origination: 1) national GRB commitments made by national governments were in the vast majority of cases not reflected in local policies; 2) the GRB measures implemented had been very limited in their scope; and 3) most of the GRB initiatives had been one-off interventions with no follow-up in the consecutive budget years.

As revealed by the data in this study and other surveys, the vast majority of municipalities in the three countries considered had not implemented any kind of national GRB measures (Aleksov 2015; Miftari 2015). In BiH, for instance, only one in every ten municipality (12.3%) had made provisions for gender equality promotion in their annual budgets (Miftari 2015). According to national GRB strategies and recommendations the local budgets should be gender mainstreamed in all policy areas. For example, in Macedonian Strategy for Introducing Gender Responsive Budgeting (2012–2017) it stands that gender budgeting “does not imply only separate budgets for women, but assessment of the budgets in terms of gender equality and incorporation of the gender perspectives at all levels in the processes of budgeting” (p. 8).

However, instead of gender mainstreaming local budgets, the most common form of GRB activity among the municipalities that had done something was organizing training sessions for local municipal councilors and civil servants, arranging study trips to other countries in Europe and the region for representatives of national and local equality authorities, formulating GRB strategies, and analyzing various programs and budgets from a gender perspective. Several pilot activ-

10 National Strategy for Improving and Promoting Gender Equality, Official Gazette no. 15/2009

11 Towards Gender Budgeting in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina. [http://www.gender-budgets.org/index.php?option=com\\_joomdoc&view=documents&path=resources/by-region-country/europe-cee-and-cis-documents/towards-gender-budgeting-in-the-autonomous-province-of-vojvodina&Itemid=542](http://www.gender-budgets.org/index.php?option=com_joomdoc&view=documents&path=resources/by-region-country/europe-cee-and-cis-documents/towards-gender-budgeting-in-the-autonomous-province-of-vojvodina&Itemid=542), accessed 15.04.03

ities, for example, had been carried out as part of donor projects assessing policies and budgets at the municipal level, to raise awareness of their possible and predicted outcomes and impacts for women and men.<sup>12</sup> In some municipalities, to be sure, budgets had money allocated in them for specific gender equality investments such as in public lighting, public transportation, infrastructure, agriculture, and women's employment and education opportunities. Most commonly, however, these were about highly specific GRB investments not requiring substantial financial input, as, for example, in the case of the 2011–2012 budget of the municipality of Bitola (Macedonia) that provided funding for health checks for women working within the municipal administration, or the 2013–2014 budget of the municipality of Arandjelovac (Serbia) that had an allocation for purchasing sports equipment for female pupils in its public schools (Council of Europe 2012; Standing Conference of Towns 2015).<sup>13</sup> In BiH there are also several examples allocating funds for gender equality. For example, municipality of Ribnik awarded 60 scholarships in 2013 for educating women and girls from the territory of the Municipality of Ribnik and municipality of Sapna, co-financed informal education of 99 girls and women in 2013 through the program “Localizing Gender in FBiH” (Miftari 2015 p.46).

What was striking in the cases considered was that in none of the municipalities selected for the more in-depth analysis, the formulated municipal gender equality strategies were accompanied by the necessary budget to implement all the activities cited in the strategies. This suggests that gender policy making at the municipal level was not well coordinated. Another peculiarity was how the concrete GRB interventions that had been

carried out had been expressly framed: their stated goal was to benefit women or girls, not gender equality in general. Problem definitions and solutions tended to all narrow themselves to the level of individual women. For example, in the municipality of Bogovinje (Macedonia), a proposal to fund construction of wider sidewalks was motivated with an argument about better safety for *mothers* (not ‘parents’) with strollers (interview with a municipal employee, June 2015). Such a focus on women alone likely reflects, in part, the more and more commonly accepted emphasis on the empowerment of women in the region, and in part an understanding that presents gender equality as being about a “women’s issue” only. However, when gender equality through GRB is framed as being exclusively a women’s problem, one runs the risk of not addressing at all the position and behavior of men in society and thus merely reproducing the inherited notions about, for instance, the gender division of labor in it.

To summarize, while the national GRB roadmaps in the three countries were comprehensive in their goals, there was thus a conspicuous gap in all of them between what had been envisioned at the national level and what (at least thus far) had been achieved at the local one. All in all, GRB policy making in the three countries appeared to have failed to move beyond the very first step in the process – the agenda setting (extremely important in itself, though) and the trainings and orientations for the various stakeholders to be involved in the unfolding GRB work. Moreover, many of the municipal initiatives had been small interventions of the “one-off” type; sometimes the question could even be of nothing more than a single workshop with no follow-up or further action taken.

12 In 2014, partnership agreements committing to gender-responsive budgeting was signed between UN women and mayors of 10 pilot municipalities (Aerodrom, Bitola, Bogovinje, City of Skopje, Gjorche Petrov, Mavrovo and Rostushe, Shtip, Strumica, Sveti Nikole and Tetovo). In 2015, UN Women signed a Memorandum of Understanding today, on 16 June 2015, with Mayors and representatives of the Prijedor City and municipalities of Lukavac, Odzak and Samac.

13 For example, for the year 2015 the municipality of Karpos allocated 300000 mdk (5000 EUR) for gender equality investments, while Bitola allocated 500000 mdk (8000 EUR) (for specific gender equality actions plans see <http://www.robzels.org.mk>)

## EXPLAINING GAPS IN GRB IMPLEMENTATION

### *Political Commitment: Will*

As suggested by previous research, GRB has greatest potential to impact gender relations and the gender equality situation in society when, rather than representing a one-off initiative, the work around it is continuous and driven by local political actors rather than foreign donors (e.g.,

Elson 2006; Sharp and Broomhill 2002). To clarify how it was in this regard in the cases considered, the question of how GRB entered the political agenda in the three countries under study and who were the leading actors in their GRB policy making processes was posed.

At the national as well as the local level in the Western Balkans region, the vast majority of concrete initiatives in the area have been launched and driven by international donors, most prominently UNIFEM, USAID, the European Union, UNDP, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR), the Austrian Development Agency, and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, with the participation of embassies of countries like Austria, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, and Norway. Among all these actors, UNIFEM and UN Women have played a key role in the introduction of GRB in the region. All the interviewees in this study expressed it as their view that without UNIFEM's and UN Women's pioneering work with GRB in their countries, the issue would never have made it to the political agenda there and no changes would have been made to their legal frameworks in this regard.

Through the regional project "Promoting Gender Responsive Polices in South-East Europe", UNIFEM/UN Women has, since 2006, been providing support to national and local stakeholders in strengthening democratic governance and advancing women's rights, with the main initiatives under the project aimed at mainstreaming gender in policy planning and budgeting.<sup>14</sup> Between 2006 and 2015, UNIFEM/UN Women, with additional funding from the Austrian Development Cooperation and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, provided financial and technical support for the implementation of specific GRB project activities in select pilot municipalities in the Western Balkans region. International donor organizations were also involved in analyzing and formulating concrete GRB measures. Only in a few special cases have local and national women's NGOs taken a leadership role; usually this has involved specific GRB interventions addressing issues like domestic violence or women's entre-

preneurship. One example is the 2014 initiative of the Women's Center in Uzice, Serbia, to have the local government make specific budget allocations to address the needs of women in agriculture and women victims of domestic violence.<sup>15</sup>

Still today, it is only seldom in the region that GRB becomes a local government priority, and, when it does so, it still remains too reliant on external donor support to survive without it. As one representative of a Macedonian nation-wide women's NGO put it, "The readiness of the national and local government and the institutions to secure the equality among men and women is expressed through production of legal documents, strategic and action plans, and introduction of mechanisms on the national and local level, which, however, are inefficient since the implementation is in large measure conditioned on financial means made available from the international institution; in Macedonia, even the national strategy for introducing GRB was only produced after being financed by the UN Women" (interview with NGO representative, June 2015). What characterizes powerful political leaders in the region, both male and female, is their great passivity when it comes to gender equality issues in general and GRB in particular. In the municipalities in this study that showed some initiatives on GRB, the initiators were international donors, women's NGOs, and civil servants ("femocrats"). In general, there was a tangible lack of commitment among local political elites and parties to prioritizing gender issues. This in line with other research speaking of gender insensitivity and lack of gender transformation within political parties,

15 In addition, in Serbia, Association Fenomena led an initiative in 2013 that aimed to contribute to the strengthening of the role and engagement of women's organizations from less developed areas of the country in local policy making while advocating for local GRB processes in general. Eight women's CSOs from seven towns and municipalities in western, central, and southern Serbia (Novi Pazar, Kraljevo, Kragujevac, Uzice, Krusevac, Nis, Leskovac) were involved. In BiH in 2007, NGO VESTA carried out a project aimed to help introduce gender-sensitive budgeting procedures in five municipalities and strengthen the capacity of the NGO sector and municipal officials for gender-sensitive analysis of municipal budgets. In the same country in 2007, the NGO United Women in Republika Srpska (supported by UNIFEM), as part of broader initiatives on gender-responsible budgeting, conducted a training project on budget analysis from the standpoint of allocations for the cost of safe houses/shelters for victims of domestic violence.

14 See <http://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2010/1/gender-responsive-budgeting-in-south-eastern-europe-unifem-experiences> (August 11, 2015).



and of inadequate internal policies and programs to promote gender equality (e.g., Aladus 2015; Bacanovic 2014). In the last local elections in the 12 municipalities chosen for the in-depth study of GRB implementation processes in this study, not one single party winning seats in the municipal council made as much as a mention of GRB or related measures in its election manifesto. There was a general impression among all the GRB advocates interviewed for this study that, in practice, local governments had no intention whatsoever to implement the lofty goals of the international organizations, and that international investments in gender equality were merely pressed into perverse service in providing politicians and administrations with political legitimacy. As one of the interviewees put it, “The whole process of GRB initiatives resembles a technocratic exercise where specific standards are ticked but not followed up on the essence” (interview with local GRB advocate [Serbia], 2014).

#### *GRB and the Varieties of Political Resistance*

Besides lack of political initiative, also active and passive resistance towards implementation of GRB measures was a common characteristic of the local political elites in all three countries studied. One form of active resistance that stood out in the data relied on the method of *arguing against*. Typically, this meant raising counterarguments against the proposed decision when concrete decisions on GRB were to be made. The most common type of such counterarguments was that there were other, more pressing concerns that needed to be addressed first (usually requiring investment in local infrastructure) and that gender gap considerations were not compatible with what was called for by these priorities. Another form of active resistance engaged in was *undermining* gender equality work. Very often, this involved withdrawing posts or resources, or hiring individuals without requisite gender equality expertise. Poorly functioning local Commissions of Equal Opportunities (CEOs) provided yet another means of undermining gender equality work. National gender equality laws in place in BiH, Macedonia, and Serbia all call for the municipalities in the respective countries to establish CEOs as permanent bodies and appoint municipal Gender Coordinators, with the task of the

CEOs being to propose local measures and activities to aid the implementation of these laws and to develop local gender equality strategies. While most municipalities in the three countries indeed had established their own CEOs, the interviewees in this study frequently complained that these had insufficiently developed capacities to perform their designated function and carry out the responsibilities assigned to them by the law (see also Blankert, Popovicki Capin, and Nilsson 2014; Macedonian Women’s Lobby 2012; Miftari 2015; Ministry of Labor and Social Policy 2014; Zdruzenska 2014). According to them, it was, moreover, more of a rule than an exception that the municipal CEO coordinators were appointed from the ranks of officials already working in the administration (some even without their own knowledge of the fact), which meant that most of them came without any previous experience of working with gender equality issues. No clear instructions specifying the coordinators’ exact work tasks were provided, either, the interviewees reported, and there was a high level of turnover among them. As regards the gender equality officers working in ministries and municipalities, these were marginalized, with few of them ever becoming involved in programmatic planning, budgeting, impact assessment, and analyzing draft laws or policies from a gender perspective.

A third form of political resistance noted in the material, one that was of a more passive character and probably the most common one in the sample, relied, quite simply, on *playing deaf*. As already noted, GRB had not been implemented in the vast majority of the municipalities in the three countries, and very often it was hard to find any explanation for the fact other than one’s ability in general to get away with doing and saying nothing and not taking any action. Passive resistance could, however, also be manifested through *pseudoactions*, as in when the issue of gender equality was taken up on the agenda but the tools and resources needed to take effective action on it were not provided. A gender equality plan could be drawn up, a gender equality committee set up, and a gender coordinator appointed without it leading to any concrete action. As several of the interviewees reported, the support from local governments and the mayor’s offices was often only declarative and verbal but not operational

in nature. One of them summarized the problem as follows: “To be perfectly clear about it, I’m not saying I don’t get *any* support from the municipal government: the mayor sees me when I ask for it, he listens to me, serves me a cup of coffee, but it all ends there when I leave the room and close the door of his office behind me; there’s no further support, and it’s not just because of money – there are a lot things you can do without money” (interview with CEO coordinator [Serbia], June 2015).

In addition, municipal gender equality action plans were usually drafted in extremely general terms and issued without any specific or very limited budgets for their implementation.<sup>16</sup> In many cases, they were, moreover, then adopted anew each year without revision or modifications. All in all, while local strategies for gender equality were thus adopted in keeping with national laws, in actual practice there was insufficient commitment on the part of the local administration and political leaders to gender equity issues in general and the introduction of gender mainstreaming into the local governance structures and policies more in particular.

#### *Political Commitment: Capacity*

Besides lack of political commitment by the local administration and political leaders, one of the most significant problems faced by the advocates of GRB in this study was the general lack of transparency and accountability of public institutions. The interviewees, for example, frequently expressed the view that there was a need for more transparency of budget data and in budget decision-making processes, suggesting there to be a strong connection between the level of democratization and gender equality. As one local civil servant in BiH elaborated on this: “The political culture is more in favor of ruling without responsibility, rather than governing and being accountable and responsible to citizens” (interview with municipal civil servant, April 2014).

In the countries of the Western Balkans, the culture of civic involvement in local decision-making remains generally weak (Bartlett,

Malekovic, and Monastiriotis 2013). Together with the low levels of trust in local government, this contributes to poor awareness among citizens about even the existing opportunities for feedback, and discourages them from demanding greater democratic accountability. While in some cases municipalities in the region, supported by international donors, have engaged in efforts to encourage citizens to participate more in policy-making and development processes, the widespread perception among the public at large remains that government officials are “untouchable” (Efendic, Pugh, and Adnett 2011). The interviewees in this study frequently complained that policy making at the local level often takes place behind closed doors without much publicity or consultation.

In addition to weak participatory processes at the local level, another major obstacle to effective GRB implementation in the region has been the lack of robust gender statistics locally. This the interviewees saw as a serious concern for local gender development efforts, since, without them, policies could not be based on a clear understanding of the problems and opportunities at hand. Lack of data on the municipal level was seen as a problem in two different ways: it meant not only that there was not enough evidence to support the identification of problems and the definition of appropriate objectives and actions, but also that monitoring the effects of policies and their adjustments was made more difficult or altogether impossible.

Yet another major barrier that the interviewees identified as hampering the success of GRB strategies was lack of financial resources, which frequently made policy implementation difficult. Western Balkans municipalities, having not so long ago emerged from socio-economic upheaval while transitioning to a more market-based system, are often caught coping with high levels of unemployment, a significant mismatch between labor opportunities and skill sets among citizens, and the need for pressing structural adjustments that require additional finances (World Bank 2013). The recent decentralization efforts in the region have unfolded in unfavorable socio-economic and political circumstances. Despite significant technical and financial assistance from international institutions such as the World

<sup>16</sup> For more information on municipal gender equality action plans for Serbia see <http://rr.skgo.org/>, for Macedonia see <http://www.rob.zels.org.mk/>, for BiH see individual webpages for municipalities and cities.

Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the European Union, the process has largely failed, in terms of meeting its objectives such as sustainable economic development and elimination of (social, economic, and fiscal) disparities on the local, regional, and central level (Bartlett, Malekovic, and Monastiriotis 2013). The pace of devolution of a great number of responsibilities from the central to the local level has opened a gap between the human resource skills and capacities at the local level and the requirements for the implementation of the new tasks. With few resources and many competing needs and interests, it is today up to local government units to prioritize gender equality initiatives when deciding on local budgets. According to the interviewed mayors in this study, lack of financial resources was thus the most common explanation for why investments in gender equality were not prioritized in their municipalities. As one of them put it, “We are a rural municipality with many settlements and citizens. In recent years we have had to allocate funds for many roads, many school facilities have needed to be renovated, and [in all those projects] all ministries and donors require co-financing. So the people ask for these things first.” (Interview with municipal mayor [Macedonia], June 2015)

#### *Political Commitment: Necessity*

While fully noting the institutional and behavioral barriers to effective gender policy implementation, it is, at the same time, also important to ask why governments in the Western Balkans region have been willing to publicly commit themselves to adopting gender equality policies along with tools for realizing their goals such as GRB (and setting up institutions to promote these and their use) if they then do not want to expend too much effort to implement them, too. Judging from the findings from this study, the answers to this question may have to begin with the absence of political “must.” No government or organization in the region needs to feel it has anything to fear from gender equality advocates and women voters. At the municipal level in the Western Balkans countries, political power is shared between the mayor and the municipal council. While there are many energetic, highly enthusiastic, and well qualified women engaged in gender equality advocacy work on the ground, they are usually not

powerful political leaders in the sense of having a capacity to influence political decisions in their community. In general, women continue being heavily underrepresented in local administrations. For example, in Macedonia, only four out of 80 municipalities have a woman mayor (Ministry of Labor and Social Policy 2014), while in Bosnia the corresponding figure is five out of 143 and in Serbia seven out of 174 (Bacanovic 2014; Miftari 2015).

In the civil societies of the region’s countries, women rarely represent a well-mobilized constituency, and in the positions of power in both politics and public administration they remain heavily underrepresented, only rarely acting to entrench a powerful feminist corporatism (cf. Lycklama à Nijeholt, Vargha, and Wieringa 1998). In consequence, the chances that there will be a fundamental change towards actually working for greater gender equality can only be negligible for as long as there are no forceful and demanding enough constituencies both within and outside the state. Having nothing to fear from women, national and local governments of the countries of the Western Balkans can instead concentrate on making important political gains at the international and domestic levels by espousing gender equality, with no serious risk of being held accountable and having to operationalize the promises made in top-level rhetoric. In the same way, there is nothing to fear from international donors, either, since gender equality as a policy field does not imply any sanctions for non-implementation of the adopted policies. For all these reasons, then, an important task for the national, local and international gender equality advocates in the region is to develop a new strategy for tackling the politics of pseudoactions of kind described above, whereby the issue of gender equality is taken up on the agenda but not provided with the prerequisites for it to become a reality.

In addition, the national control mechanisms in relation to local gender equality policy making must be developed and clarified. The national governments should create new legal instruments in order to force or entice local governments to implement national regulations, including providing monetary incentives and sanctions. Current mechanisms are insufficient. For example, In Macedonia, the local Commissions on Equal



Opportunities are requested to submit a performance report to the Department for Equal Opportunities (DEO) within Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP) once per year. The Gender Equality Law provides for financial penalty (3000–5000 EUR) in case any coordinator fails to submit a report to the DEO (Art. 42). The DEO is legally obliged to check different institutions including local governments for their implementation of gender related policies. As several of the interviewees reported, there are strong indications that the concrete monitoring and reporting is not systematic and that DEO has, thus far, failed to follow up and punish municipalities/cities that do not submit their annual gender equality strategies. Although the MLSP and DEO have a leading role in coordination of governmental and local institutions in terms of gender impact analysis, it seems that they have no capacity and authority in making the other local institutions to implement national gender strategies.

## CONCLUSION: THE POLITICS OF THE LOWEST COMMON DENOMINATOR

Gender equality policy making in the Balkans takes place in a complex context of transnational, international, national, and local structures and dynamics. The above analysis of gender equality work and GRB implementation processes in three Western Balkans countries suggests that the road leading to successful implementation at the local level is littered with potholes. The vast majority of municipalities had not implemented any of the GRB measures that they were obliged to according to their own national laws and regulations. The GRB measures that had been implemented were very limited in scope, and were, moreover, for the most part just one-off interventions with no follow-up in the consecutive years. The situation was very similar in all three countries studied.

In focusing on BiH, Macedonia, and Serbia, the intention here, however, has not been to give the impression that these countries would be particularly remiss in their approach to institutionalizing and implementing gender equality policies such as GRB within their jurisdictions. No country can be considered fully “developed” in terms of how

far they have progressed with their gender policy implementation processes. At the same time, however, what is striking about the three countries in this study is that they all lacked nearly all of the conditions identified in previous research as necessary for the successful implementation of gender policies. That this was so is no doubt owing in part to challenges involved in the pursuit of gender equality objectives more in general, such as those arising from lack of political commitment and the poor functioning of their basic democratic institutions. What characterizes powerful political leaders in the region, both male and female, is their great passivity when it comes to gender equality issues in general and GRB in particular. In the case of the municipalities in this study that showed some initiatives on GRB, the initiators were international donors, women’s NGOs, and civil servants (“femocrats”). In general, there was a tangible lack of commitment among local political elites and parties to prioritizing GRB. Nevertheless, also broader governance-related challenges played a part. Of these, those influencing the outcomes most prominently in this study were caused by the paucity and still-rudimentary form of strategic planning and program budgeting; poor coordination among institutions tasked to implement laws and policies; lack of transparency and budgeting “behind closed doors”; and obstacles facing CSOs in monitoring government work. In addition, local governance was hampered by unclear delineation of powers and responsibilities, a high fragmentation of local government units, and lack of administrative capacity. Other common problems were lack of democratic accountability on the part of local political parties and the tenuous link between elected politicians and their constituents. In other words, what hampered effective gender policy implementation in the three Western Balkans countries studied most was, ultimately, the poor functioning of their basic democratic institutions. The gap between overly ambitious national goals and poor institutional capacity at the local level is thus one important factor explaining prevailing gender policy implementation failures.

International assistance has contributed to the rapid pace of change in agenda setting on gender equality issues in the region, including GRB. Politicians in it no longer can be openly dismissive

about the importance of gender equality problems in their societies. At the same time, however, donor support has been shown to have its drawbacks as well. One of them, rather expectedly, is the tendency towards international policy ownership and financial dependency. In keeping with it, specific actions in the area of GRB in this study typically ended with the end of the donor involvement in the project.

In the GRB work of international donors in the region, workshops and pilot projects are a popular activity form. While having demonstrated their value in helping to spread new ideas to relevant stakeholders, they, as a typical form of external assistance, have also contributed to a fragmented, inconsistent, badly sequenced, and short-term reform agenda in the Western Balkans. Data from interviews and documents in this study revealed GRB reform efforts to have been piecemeal and un-coordinated, rather than carefully planned and vertically and horizontally synchronized. When project support is favored over institutional funding, there is a risk of focusing the attention to gender equality on the “lowest common denominator” that donors and political leaders can agree upon. Typically, this has meant

the introduction of only such GRB measures that are not too demanding in terms of cost, time, or expertise. The life of a GRB policy following its official adoption should therefore to a far larger extent be focused on institutional transformation, better coordination between different political levels, democratic deliberation, and systematic monitoring of the implemented GRB measures. Key issue is also to make gender equality electorally relevant. Without politicizing gender equality, the local gender-responsive governance easily becomes a means of pleasing international donors or fulfilling technical requirements. Political parties need to pay greater attention to surfacing and addressing gender equality in their manifestos and election programs, to outline how they propose to promote gender equality, address gendered needs and enhance the lives of women. Election candidates should be grilled on these issues by citizens and civil society organizations, and elected politicians held to account for delivering substantively on commitments. To put it differently, gender policy implementation gap will be eradicated only when the supply of sound laws and policies is met by corresponding demand on the ground to implement them.

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