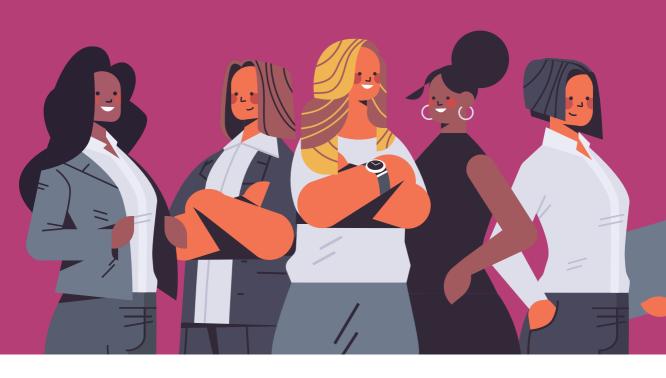
Strengthening Participation of Women Leaders and Grassroots Woman's Organisations in the Local Decision-making Processes

Building the Case for Women Led Mjesne Zajednice Citizen Fora: Analysis of the Challenges and the Way Forward Based on Primary Research in 41 Local Governance Units in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Nera Monir Divan, Gender Specialist











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>> Introduction

The goal of the second phase of the 'Strengthening Local Communities' project was to improve the quality of life of citizens through empowered gender responsive local communities. The communities have facilitated active citizen engagement in public life, stood for people centred performance of local government and catalysed the democratic transformation at the local level. The project has focused on encouraging community led local development in 41 local government units (LGU) across Bosnia and Herzegovina. In order to achieve this goal, the project revitalised community governance at the *mjesne zajednice* (MZ) level as the smallest administrative unit for direct government engagement with citizens in the country.

Building on the women as drivers of change approach and accumulated human and infrastructural capital, the project has continued to place gender equality and the empowerment of women at the centre of its development approach. This is because community is intrinsically linked to development, with women as important social agents who can promote transformational change towards more developed and more inclusive societies. The local governance level, where most life needs are met, was the most relevant for changing traditional social norms, tackling the root causes of gender inequality, activating the leadership potential of women and addressing the last mile of exclusion.

As an essential component of its community work, the project has implemented the MZ Citizen Fora with the expectation that this will strengthen citizenry and promote their meaningful participation in local level decision-making and priority setting processes. To build trust and ownership, the project combined its own and local authority resources in order to provide concrete opportunities for implementation of projects and initiatives that citizens have identified as priorities. From the onset, the gender responsive methodology of the MZ Citizen Fora has been framed in such a way that it will both attract and empower women to participate and allow them to put forward their concerns and ideas. This has created a new space for discussion and action on gender equality as it gives voice, validates the know-how and experience of local women leaders and women's grassroots organisations and then channels it into the co-creation of community interventions and activities. In its essence this approach has been an empowering one as it treats women as equals rather than as a vulnerable group (while clearly acknowledging gender-based vulnerabilities) and it has been used as an important lever and accelerator of social transformation.

>> Background

The project team has collected sex disaggregated data on a daily basis within its monitoring and evaluation system, which is designed to closely follow the project's progress towards the set objectives. It has been used primarily by the team members to track the indicators that were identified in the results framework as criteria for the success of the project. In addition to gender and with special regard for intersectionality, when feasible, the project also has carried out additional disaggregation of data according to age, disability, ethnicity, locality (rural/semi-urban/urban) and employment status.

Yet the project has not stopped at mere data collection. The collected data was periodically analysed from the gender perspective in order to ensure that the dynamic process of project implementation is on track and that its actions are suited to the context in this country. More qualitative analysis, such as this report, seeks to understand the 'why's' and the 'how's' of utilising the gender equality principle to secure more active citizenry, more developed and engaged communities and improved quality of life for both women and men. This can be done rather effectively thanks to the unique epistemological position of the project deriving from its long-term nature. The fact that the project has generated longitudinal datasets has positioned the team favourably in terms of capturing, measuring, monitoring and influencing gender variables over time. This was a powerful asset that allowed the project team to learn about cause-and-effect relationships, gather evidence on the long-term impact of gender related project interventions in local communities, bring to fruition new gender equality patterns and gather evidence of changes in social norms at the local level as a direct influence of the project interventions.

In practical terms, this analysis sought to identify the accelerators, activities that create the multiplier effect, and to design follow-up actions. Importantly, when the data indicates, such as in this case, a decline in the participation of women or in meeting the gender targets set in the project results framework at any stage of the project implementation, the MZ gender strategy obliges the project to consult with all relevant stakeholders in order to determine the root cause of the problem and to design affirmative measures to put it back on track.

>> Research Objective

In mid-2022, the project data has indicated that there had been a 20 per cent decline in the participation of women in the MZ Citizen Fora. In line with the aforementioned project gender strategy, the project has initiated research with the primary objective to map the problems and challenges that women at the local level face when it comes to participating in the MZ Citizen Fora so that reoccurrence of this problem could be mitigated in the forthcoming MZ Citizen Fora.

The research has sought to determine the degree to which the causes of the decline in participation of women in the MZ Citizen Fora were caused by cultural inhibitors such as traditional norms and gender-based stereotypes. This was intended to identify any covert bias or structural issues inherent in MZ Citizen Fora methodology or praxis that impede the participation of women and to solicit grassroots level ideas for its improvement. Ultimately, the research findings will, if needed, guide the project in adjusting its approach to MZ Citizen Fora implementation and in the introduction of specific measures to improve the future participation of women in the MZ Citizen Fora, scheduled in 2023, as appropriate.

A questionnaire was also carefully designed to enable intersectional analysis. To this end, the analysis of the research findings has included a nuanced approach that took into account how challenges differ among different groups of women based on their differing characteristics or identities. It has also recorded the experiences of women exposed to multiple forms of discrimination, including rural and Roma women and women with disabilities.

>> Research Methodology

Research method

The implementation of the research methodology relied on the primary research method, using a questionnaire as a research tool featuring a series of 13 questions designed to collect information from the respondents. The survey implementation was preceded by a further expansion and updating of the list of women leaders and gender champions in 41 local governance units. The survey was initially distributed using the online channels, targeting women leaders

and gender champions. To maximise the outreach and to make the questionnaire available to the general population of women, 2,000 questionnaires were also given out in hard copy directly to the network of 199 local communities for further distribution to women who live in those communities. The completed questionnaires were then submitted to MZ project staff for entry into a database for further analysis. The questionnaire was chosen as a research tool for the following reasons.

- **Practicality:** The questionnaire enabled the team to strategically manage their target audience using questions and formatting whilst gathering data on the identified priority subject.
- Cost-efficiency: The research and analysis were conducted using
 the internal staff capacities, relying on the expertise present in the
 team and the project network. This cut the typical cost associated
 with research implementation, such as hiring surveyors or external
 experts to deliver the survey, analyse the research findings and
 provide recommendations for the way forward. The initial use of
 the online questionnaire format also contributed towards a reduction in costs and time efficiency.
- Comparability: If needed, the team can use the same questionnaire on a yearly basis to compare research results and thereby gain valuable insights.
- Scalability: The questionnaire was designed to be highly scalable, allowing the team to distribute research to additional local governance units if required.
- Respondent comfort: When taking the questionnaire, the respondents were completely anonymous and were not subject to time constraints. This created an enabling environment that allowed for open and truthful responses.
- Ease of analysis: Following the entry of the data into a database, relying on the support of the UNDPs Innovation Cell, it was disaggregated quickly safely and efficiently.
- Eliminate bias: Survey bias was eliminated by avoiding leading questions, such as questions formulated in a way that influenced respondents to answer in a certain way. Questions were designed to be clear and concise, while the language was kept simple to avoid the risk of misinterpretation. The questions were framed in such a way as to avoid any covert bias that would reproduce gender-based stereotypes and perpetuate discrimination.

Ouestionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of both qualitative and quantitative sets of questions. The questions were both close-ended and open-ended.

The close-ended ones included multiple choice guestions, providing respondents with a series of predetermined responses from which they could choose. This provided the quantitative data required by the research, including information on and the characteristics of the respondents, that ultimately enabled a more nuanced and intersectional analysis. Contrastingly, the open-ended questions were designed with a view to giving the respondents the freedom to answer the questions in their own words to elicit more information than is possible in a multiple choice or other closed-ended format. This approach helped reach a deeper layer of knowledge as it collected input on the respondents' authentic opinions and experience with the MZ Citizen Fora. It also measured the respondents' behaviour, preferences, intentions, attitudes and opinions regarding the MZ Citizen For a and uncovered their viewpoints about the project's approach to MZ Citizen Fora implementation. Without doubt, this enabled the team to collect data that we could not have obtained in any other way and information and insights that were not considered previously.

Time and sample of the research

Prior to questionnaire dissemination, to maximise the relevance of outreach and research activities a list of women leaders recognised as gender champions was developed and validated by the project team in cooperation with the project partners and participating local authorities.

The questionnaire was launched online in September 2022 and targeted the said women leaders. In October 2022, the questionnaire in hard copy format was distributed to the general population of women who lived in the 199 local communities within the 41 local government units. Using the MZ councils as distribution agents a total of 1,270 responses to the questionnaire had been gathered by December 2022

Target groups

The primary target audience of this research was the general population of women living in the targeted local communities aged 18 years or older as well as women leaders within the targeted local governments.

The following target groups were selected in particular:

• General population of women aged 18 years or older who lived in

the 199 local communities within the 41 partner local governments where the Citizen Fora are established as a citizen participation mechanism.

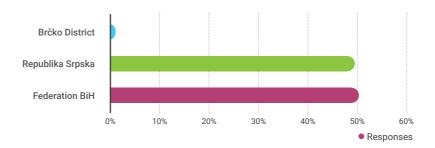
- Women that lead women's organisations, grassroots organisations, cooperatives, associations, etc.
- Women who lead informal women's groups.
- Women in local government units and management positions in MZs.
- · Politically active women.
- Prominent female leaders, role models or activists who are socially engaged and are not necessarily part of the political structures, public administration, non-governmental organisations or the like.
- Women that head public institutions (centres for social welfare, police, schools, kindergartens, etc.).
- Women managers/directors/owners of companies, private businesses and social entrepreneurs.

A secondary effect of the process of mapping and updating the list of gender champions in the 41 LGUs was to engage LGU and MZ representatives in gender equality and the empowerment of women issues in conversations on a deeper level. Ultimately, this process will be used as a steppingstone to further popularise the topics of gender equality and women's empowerment within the LGUs and to attract women within the LGUs to engage as role models. This will contribute toward a general mobilisation of women in larger numbers to participate in the future MZ Citizen Fora.

>> Key Findings

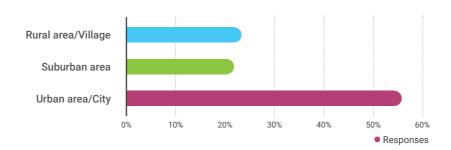
Overview of profile and characteristics of the research respondents: A total of 1,270 responses to the questionnaire were gathered. The respondents reflected a good balance of rural and urban local communities and an equal entity ratio and ethnic representation.

Q1: Please indicate where you currently live



Of the respondents 55 per cent were from rural areas and 45 per cent from cities and towns of which slightly less than half were from suburban and semi-urban areas.

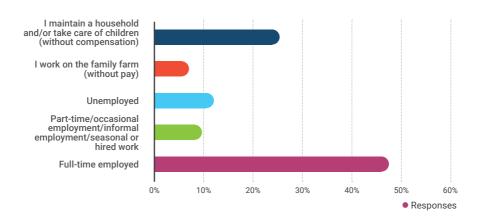
Q2: Do you live in urban or rural area?



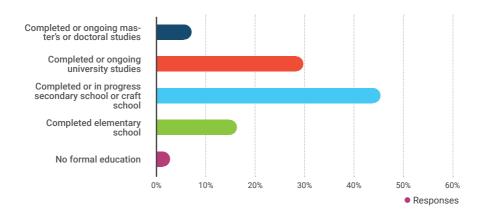
The most represented age group was 31-45 years (37%), followed by the 46-64 years (32%) and the youth category (23%). The least number of respondents came from the oldest group (65+) with slightly more than 8 per cent of respondents.

Close to half of all respondents were employed (47%), while 12 per cent of respondents were unemployed. However, more than a quarter (25%) reported being engaged in full-time yet unpaid household and care work and 7 per cent reported working on a family farm without payment. This brought the issue of the care economy to the fore and drew attention to the high level of economic dependency among rural women. The situation was not significantly more favourable for close to a further 10 per cent of respondents who were engaged in insecure informal or part-time work.

Q3: Employment Status



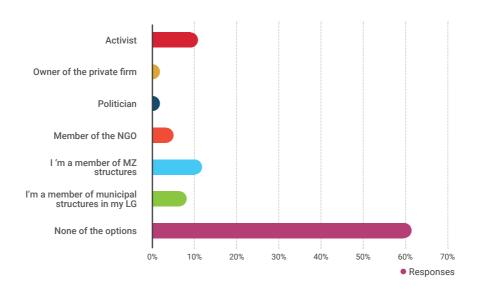
Q4: Education



When it came to the education levels, most respondents had completed their secondary level education (45%), close to 30 per cent had a university degree and close to 7 per cent had a masters or doctoral degree. Close to 16 per cent of respondents had only primary education and just over 2 per cent were without any formal education.

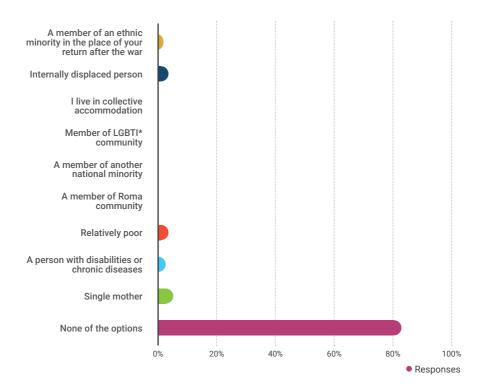
Most of the research participants (59%) self-identified just as citizens and did not choose any of the offered categories/target groups. Close to 20 per cent of the respondents self-identified as belonging to local governance or MZ structures, 11 per cent as activists without affiliation to any structure and 5 per cent as members of civil society organisations. The smallest percentage of respondents self-identified as business owners (3%) and political leaders (2%).

Q5: Choose the options that best describe your position



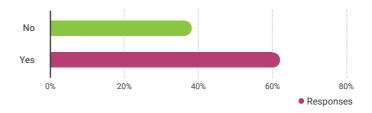
Close to 17 per cent of all respondents claimed a self-reported vulnerability. Dominant in this regard were single mothers (5.79%), followed by the relatively poor (3.83%), internally displaced persons (2.76%), persons with disabilities or chronically ill persons (2.43%), Roma and other minorities (0.86%), persons living in collective accommodation (0.55%) and members of the LGBTI population (0.23%).

Q6: Do you consider yourself a member of one of the following social groups? *LGBTI - a noun that includes homosexuality, bisexuality, transgender



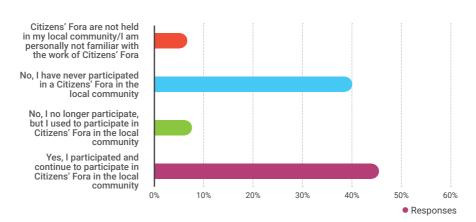
The overwhelming majority of respondents (62%) declared being familiar with both the concept and activities of the MZ Citizen Fora.

Q7: Are you familiar with the concept and work of the Citizens' Fora?



This is impressive given the fact that 18 out of the 41 local government units surveyed were relatively new to the process of MZ Citizen Fora implementation, due to their only being included in the project processes from the second phase of the project. Even more so, given the fact that only a small number of local communities from each local governance unit will participate in the second phase of the project. Hence, it can be stated that the respondents were very familiar with the concept of a citizen forum and that a lack of information about it did not represent the key issue or obstacle.

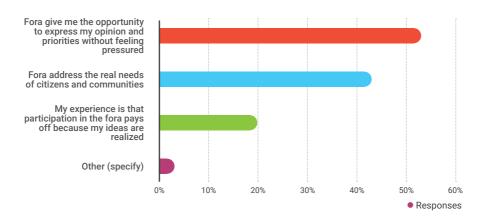
Q8: Have you participated in a Citizens' Forum in your local community?



Most had already participated in the MZ Citizen Fora (45%) and will continue to do so, which underlines the high level of interest and perceived relevance of the MZ Citizen Fora for women leaders, while 40 per cent had never participated in a MZ Citizen Fora and just 7 per cent had not had a fora organised in their local community. Of those who had participated in a MZ Citizen Fora 98 respondents (8%) would no longer participate.

Those who expressed themselves affirmatively about the fora and who intended to continue participating were of the view that the fora provides an opportunity to express their opinions and priorities freely without pressure (53%). Others (43%) felt that the fora address the needs and priorities of women. A significant number of women (20%) had had their ideas implemented at the MZ Citizen Fora and therefore considered it worthwhile participating.

Q9: Reason/s for which I participate in Citizens' Fora in the local community

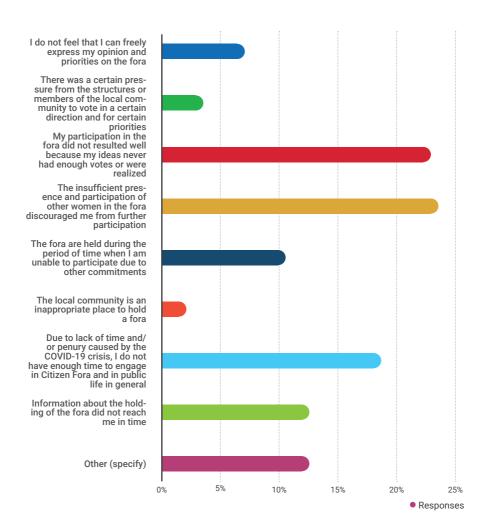


Those respondents (24%) who once participated in the fora but had lost interest were mostly of the opinion that the low level of participation of women discouraged them from taking part in future events. The second most common reason was the fact that the ideas voiced were not selected for funding (23%), while the third (19%) was that respondents stopped attending either because of a lack of time or financial resources.

This draws attention to the need to address the issue of time poverty as well as to consider the impact that the economic crises has had on women following the COVID-19 pandemic. Both have serious implications in terms of significant loss of the gender dividend.

Among the respondents 12 per cent felt that they had not received timely information about the fora, while 10 per cent felt that the times when fora were held were not suitable because of their obligations. A total of 7 per cent of respondents felt that they could not express themselves freely at the MZ Citizen Fora, 3 per cent felt pressured by the staff members or MZ structures to vote in a certain manner and 2 per cent considered the MZ premises inadequate places for the organisation of fora.

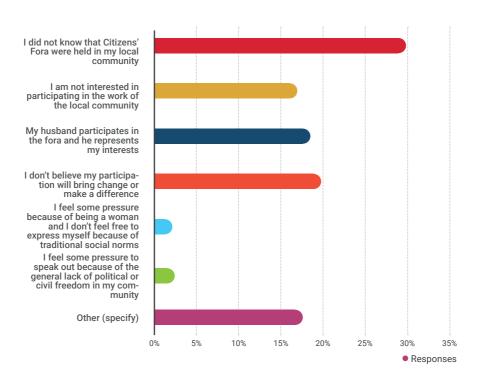
Q10: Reason/s for which I no longer participate in Citizens' Fora in the local community



Close to 30 per cent of the respondents that had never taken part in the fora claimed that their reason for not participating was a lack of information about such events. Others (20%) felt that their participation would not make any difference. A surprisingly high percentage of women respondents (18%) stated that their husband participated in the MZ Citizen Fora and that he represented their interests, which points to the high levels of traditional social norms that persist in society in this country.

A total of 2.6 per cent of respondents did not wish to participate because they perceived an overall lack of political freedom and civic liberty in society in Bosnia and Herzegovina, while 2 per cent did not participate solely on the grounds of their gender. Namely, the latter felt unable to express their views and priorities under the pressure of traditional social norms, simply because they are women. At the MZ and neighbourhood level, especially in rural areas, there still exists a tacit form of social control over women's movements and their daily trajectory. Often women felt that their activities were being scrutinised and controlled by their female neighbours and by the community in general.

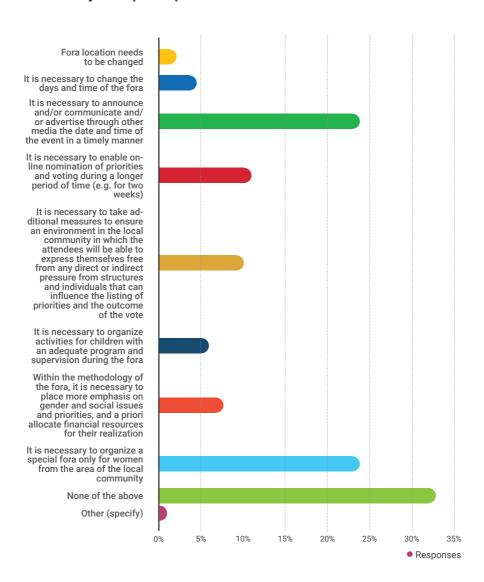
Q11: The reason I have never participated in Citizens' Fora



Regarding recommendations for improvement, most respondents (24%) suggested that separate fora for women should be held in the local communities and 24 per cent thought that timely communication about the date and venue should be given ahead of time as well announcing it more widely on the media in order to improve the par-

ticipation response of women. More than 11 per cent of the respondents believed that online voting over a longer time span (such as a two-week period) should be introduced to maximise the contribution of women to the fora.

Q12: Please mark in what way the Citizens' Fora could be improved to make them more interesting for you or women like you to participate?



The next group suggested that additional efforts should be invested into creating an enabling environment within MZs that is free of any pressure on women in regard to voting on priority outcomes and to make MZ Citizen Fora more attractive to women. In total 7 per cent of respondents were of the opinion that gender equality issues should be further reinforced within the MZ Citizen Fora methodology and that the financial resources for their implementation should be earmarked in advance. In total 6 per cent of respondents believed that specific activities should be organised for babysitting and children's activities during the fora.

>> Recommendations

Recommendation 1:

Enhance information sharing

- Among the priority issues that need to be tackled is further improving the information sharing system about the MZ Citizen Fora in terms of setting and announcing the date and agenda of the fora well in advance.
- A wider outreach for sharing this information should then be secured by intensifying the sharing through social networks and Viber groups.
- To reach out to those that are not internet savvy or avid social network users, outreach should be conducted by relying on traditional offline modalities such as distributing leaflets, postings on MZ and Community Hub notice boards, the buildings of public institutions like the municipality, schools, centres for social welfare, community health centres, on public lighting and other public spaces.
- Advertising actions/commercials formulated in a gender responsive manner and targeting women could be broadcast on community radio and TV stations as well as in traditional newspapers and internet portals. The content/media products should use gender sensitive language and ensure adequate inclusion of images of women in all visual material.
- As a medium to long-term investment, MZ coordinators, Community Hub managers as well as project field officers should be encouraged to develop and/or advance working relationships with the local media (radio, TV stations and web portals) and to connect with local influencers. The latter should be targeting women who have a significant number of followers and are willing to engage in gender equality work. This would mean that authentic

- non-commercial content about MZ Citizen Fora will be shared and will draw attention to and awaken interest in participating among women.
- The project should further strengthen its Communication for Development approach, sharpening the focus on human interest stories and blogposts by women leaders that would zoom in on the up-to-date impact that MZ Citizen Fora have had on the quality of life of women. Such actions should be designed to engage women leaders who could then talk about the benefits of civic engagement, the opportunities that can be created by participating in decision-making processes and by showcasing the results of women activists and grassroots organisations. These actions would incur no or only marginal costs for the project but would require additional time and the engagement of partners and team members.

Recommendation 2:

Investigate ways to cultivate new and reinforce established synergies among stakeholders in a given field

The project needs to capitalize on the strong partnerships that UNDP and project itself has established with the gender machinery in Bosnia and Herzegovina, LGU gender commissions, women's groups and civil society organisations. Of particular interest is the possibility to explore synergies with the recently prepared UNDP Country Office of Bosnia and Herzegovina 'Engagement Strategy for Women's Civil Society Organisations and Grass-roots Movements' project prepared through the Women Forum for Development in cooperation with the Gender Equality Agency of Bosnia and Herzegovina and 35 women's CSOs.

Building on this, synergies with Women Forum for Development (WF4D), a spinoff of the 'Women in Elections' project, that focuses on women leadership and activism should be created. This platform could be used to further promote the MZ Citizen Fora, its achievements, gender equality targets, crowdsource ideas, forge issue-based coalitions, etc.

Women leaders need to be exposed to deeper knowledge on how the patriarchal structures function and why is it essential to build coalitions between women for empowerment. Solidarity between women needs to be translated into their political interest, but this is only possible if they understand the causes of their lack of solidarity.

Therefore, the cooperation with WF4D should go much deeper than

information sharing and in particular along the avenue of the transformative leadership track of WF4D.

Recommendation 3: Examine how to establish a supportive environment that facilitates increased participation of women in relevant activities or initiatives

- A significant number of women expressed discouragement caused by the insufficient presence and participation of other women at the fora and the sense that they cannot freely express their opinions. One highly popular suggestion was to organise women only MZ Citizen Fora. Creating safe spaces for women where they can express themselves in an enabling environment is a widely deployed praxis and has been implemented with varying degrees of success in many different contexts. The project team might indeed seek to explore the financial, human and technical implications of this action. However, it is estimated that in the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina the segregation resulting from such an action might actually lead to an additional layer of isolation of women in the long run, unless the project can run in parallel capacity and empowerment interventions targeting women and invest in deconstructing toxic masculinity (which is beyond the financial capacity and scope of the project and represents a project in itself). Therefore, women- only MZ Citizen Fora would not tackle the root causes of the problem.
- Creating MZ Citizen Fora organised solely for and comprised only
 of women also runs the risk of deepening the harmful stereotype
 that gender equality is 'a women's issue'. Thus, creating MZ Citizen
 Fora for women and men together and making gender a visible
 category could be a much more efficient strategy.
- Therefore, rather than creating this 'bubble' that could also cause a backlash against gender equality the project is recommended rather to focus on creating an enabling environment within the MZs and its MZ Citizen Fora.
- This could be done by making soft and small-scale investments aimed at changing the ambience.
- Gender responsive rules of engagement could be prepared for people running and overseeing the MZ Citizen Fora.
- Guidelines should be prepared to clearly instruct all parties concerned, organisers and participants alike, on the set of universal and United Nations values that need to be complied with by any party affiliated with the United Nations. This implies zero tolerance of corruption or the exerting of pressure of any kind on any constituencies as well as gender-based discrimination in either overt

or covert form.

- SH & PSEA policies¹ could also be translated and shared with every project constituency.
- A dedicated session on this topic should be held with LGUs and MZ representatives at the next project conference or large group gathering. The topic should also be brought up by field officers in their work and through technical meetings.

Recommendation 4:

Digital MZ Citizen Fora

Because of the evident high levels of time poverty expressed, especially by women of childbearing age, it is highly recommended to explore options to organise digital MZ Citizen Fora and to keep them open for a slightly longer time. Not having to physically go to a venue at a set time might work well for women with family responsibilities. Having digital MZ Citizen Fora open to voting over a longer time span, if communicated in a timely and adequate manner, would most certainly have a far-reaching impact and would maximise the participation of both women and youth at the fora. A high response rate among women of all ages (except the category 65+) to this online survey is the best indicator that digital fora could be the most viable intervention to increase the participation of women.

However, this option should be further explored in order to ensure that any future online Citizen Fora would be supported by the sex disaggregated data modality. Namely, during the implementation of the online fora held during the pandemic the team could not reliably monitor whether the person participating was a woman or a man.

Recommendation 5:

Affirmative measures

As an affirmative temporary special measure, the project should consider earmarking financial resources for future project activities specifically for gender equality and the empowerment of women. A specific thematic window within the MZ Citizen Fora combining community development and gender as an area of intervention could be introduced.

¹ One example could be to explore synergetic action with the RELOAD 2 project, given the fact that this project also has citizen fora.

One or more of the topics identified below could be embedded into criteria:

- gender specific needs in a community;
- gender aspects of the quality of life in communities;
- · gender mainstreaming of local development plans;
- women's active participation in community life;
- women's mobility and free access to public spaces;
- gender budgeting at the community level;
- gender mainstreaming of local organisations and institutions;
- gender aspects of infrastructural development;
- gender aspects of climate change and environmental protection;
- gender aspects of population development (demographic trends such as fertility, marriage and death rates, aging of the population and migration);
- gender aspects of health and access to services;
- · gender aspects of rural economies;
- gender and food security;
- gender and poverty risks;
- economic empowerment of women in local communities;
- rural women's economic empowerment;
- women's active participation in decision-making at the community level:
- transformation of gender relations in families and households towards higher gender equality;
- violence against women and the prevention of violence;
- women's self-organising, women's networks and women's NGOs;
- women's empowerment and raising awareness;
- social inclusion within the community (vulnerable groups);
- gender aspects of social cohesion and solidarity in a community;
- general social climate in a community, including dominant values and norms:
- gender aspects of safety and disaster management in a community;
- representation of women and gender issues in local media;
- gender and reconciliation, etc.

>> Conclusion

This analysis has identified the accelerators for strengthening participation of women leaders in the local decision-making processes. It has also pinpointed which activities have potential to create the multiplier effect and charted the way forward for follow-up actions. Importantly, this process showcased the importance of having in place gender equality strategy by any UNDP project. Having a gender strategy and having a pulse on its implementation ensures that the project meets the gender targets set in the project results framework at any stage of the project implementation. Moreover, having an efficient mechanism in place to ensure that the project can be put back on track if the data indicates any degree of decline in the participation of women and to design affirmative measures to put it back on track, is of paramount importance for UNDP's leadership in gender equality work.

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