

OVERVIEW OF STRATEGIES APPLIED IN BULGARIA TO INCREASE WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION AND REPRESENTATION

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Since 1989, Bulgaria has built strong governing institutions and set itself on the path to a fully functioning democracy. A civil society with public outreach experience and national networks exists; elections are conducted in a free and fair environment; parliamentary committees and caucuses function properly; and European Union (EU) membership is expected in 2007 or 2008. Citizens, as well as political parties, view democracy as the only acceptable form of government.

Bulgaria's governing bodies and mainstream political parties nevertheless are failing at a core democratic tenet of democracy: effective political representation. The need and opportunity for better political representation of one particular constituency—women—are particularly evident. There are neither legal, nor internal party mechanisms to assist the process of achieving gender balance in decision making. There is neither a government body nor a parliamentary committee tasked with handling gender affairs (a broader anti-discrimination commission formed in the spring of 2005 is not yet operational)¹. Consequently, both numerical gender balance in decision making remains a long way to go, and such issues as domestic violence, equal pay and educational opportunities, and healthcare needs that impact on the lives of half of the country's citizens go unaddressed.

The women's participation in elected bodies in Bulgaria is good keeping in mind there are no mechanisms or policies for its enhancement. After the parliamentary elections in June 2005, 50 women were elected out of 240 members of parliament altogether, or a bit over 20%. This result was a step back from the record breaking achievement in 2001, when for the first time women in parliament reached 26%, or 63 women MPs. However, until 2001 women in parliament were only 11%.

These numbers show a trend of increasing women's participation, though the process has its ups and downs and results from better self-organizing of certain women, not in a strategic approach to achieve gender parity.

Women in government however only reach 16%. Women ministers traditionally deal with soft issues like social affairs, disaster and relief policy, European integration.

The regional (district) level of governance in Bulgaria is appointed, not elected. Bulgaria consists of 28 districts, and each has a governor appointed by the Council of Ministers after the parliamentary elections. This process in 2005 marked an unprecedented success in terms of women's participation: 7 out of 28 district governors are women (25%), compared with 4 female governors in the previous term in office. This result comes to confirm the observation that the inclusion of underrepresented groups and women in particular is easier

¹ A 2005 study by the Open Society Institute on gender equality in new EU members and candidate countries identified only Bulgaria as lacking a specific body on gender equality at the governmental or parliamentary level.

to achieve through appointments than through an election process. Another achievement was the appointment of a woman representing the Turkish community as a district governor.

A comparison between 2001 and 2005 brings about the following conclusions:

“New” parties (parties which originated after splitting from another parliamentary force like the New Time, Democrats for Strong Bulgaria, Bulgarian People’s Union) – demonstrate a tendency of including more women in their lists, whereas “older” parties are more conservative and less inclusive.

The only party that tried to introduce a 30% internal party quota for women – BSP – failed to implement it, and has a disappointingly small share of women. This experiment might discourage other parties to apply this or even other mechanisms for gender equality.

The only party whose chairperson is a woman – Allied Democratic Forces – is last but one in terms of the number of women candidates. Women’s participation is not measured by the gender balance in the top position of parties only.

Parties need to recruit more people into the political process who can represent constituent groups and women in particular.

At the local level women’s representation is more or less within the same parameters: 21% of the local councilors for the term 2003 – 2007 are women (out of 6,772 local councilors altogether); only 48 of them are chairpersons of municipal councils in the 263 municipalities in the country, and only 24 are the women mayors. Not only the ratio of women mayors is so low – 8% - but it has been on the decrease for three elections in a row. Strategic policies are necessary to overcome this significant deficiency of gender equality.

Enhancing women’s political participation has become an important issue in the public debate in the last five years. Different political subjects have applied various strategies in order to address it. Below are some of them:

International Context and/ or Pressure

The last 5 years were dominated by the theme of Bulgaria’s accession to the European Union. Within that period the country launched negotiations and signed an accession treaty, which is yet to be ratified and enforced. The European Union had imposed legislative standards and political criteria, which Bulgaria had to meet. This result in the adoption of several crucial pieces of legislature including the Law on the Prevention from Discrimination, the Anti-Trafficking Law, the Law on Domestic Violence. Although the somewhat speedy adoption of laws left the public administration unprepared to implement it properly, the European Union enlargement played a very positive role to synchronize the national legislation related to gender equality with the European one.

Since Bulgaria’s accession to the EU is expected to take place in 2007 or 2008, the influential driving force of the negotiation commitments at an earlier stage and of progress monitoring reports currently will be diminishing over the next two years. This will create a void which needs to be filled by both international networks and local policy and rule of law monitoring.

Internal Party Reform

The EU accession process coincided with the ideological orientation of the mainstream political parties in Bulgaria, most of whom entered during that period a European or International family of sister parties like the Socialist International (SI), the Liberal International (LI), the European People's Party, etc. the process of joining a sister party family again required not only clarification of core values and principles but also certain organizational and procedural standards. The left to center political formations seem to have influenced most their Bulgarian counterparts in terms of women's participation. In that period the two liberal parties in Bulgaria – National Movement Simeon II and Movement for Rights and Freedoms – established women's chapters and networks. These women's structures provide technical assistance to women, develop their skills and help them become visible.

The same is true for the Bulgarian Socialist Party, which also constituted a women's chapter. However, with support from SI, the party made some internal reform to enhance women's participation:

30% quotas for women were recommended by the national leadership to the local branches for the parliamentary elections candidate lists though the recommendation did not lead to significant increase;

At the BSP Congress in December 2005, the party's leadership voted to institutionalize its women's chapter and mandated that each regional branch nominate at least one woman to serve in the party's Supreme Council. This change has increased the number of women from 20.6 percent in the previous Supreme Council to 30.2 percent in the current one. The higher number of women in the Supreme Council resulted in an increase of the number of women in the elected Executive Bureau of 13 in the previous Bureau to the current 19 percent.

Internal party reform is crucial for the successful achievement of gender equality in decision making at all levels, and political parties are indebted to Bulgarians. Parties yet need to respond to the following recommendations:

Promotion of women candidates as official party policy;

Mentorship programs to assist and motivate female activists within the party;

Financial support to develop women candidates within the party;

Internal party training for women candidates on policy development, debating techniques, networking, public speaking and media relations;

Recruiting female candidates in urban and rural locations;

Building strong relations with civil society organizations to support advocacy campaigns that support women's representation; and

Assisting women candidates in developing skills in traditionally male-dominated areas, such as budgeting and national security, so that they are equipped to deal with all policy matters.

Creating a Pool/ Critical Mass of Trained Female Politicians

Technical assistance providers and national and international NGOs have invested into training women politicians at different levels: MP candidates, party headquarters, local branches, local councilors and administration. The focus of these programs varied from good governance to representing constituents to individual skills to awareness building. To mention some of the NGO training programs: Women's Alliance for Development, *Incorporating Women's Issues In Local Government Agenda*, funded by the Embassy of Norway; the

National Democratic Institute, *Enhancing Women's Political Participation*, funded by the National Endowment for Democracy; Gender Project for Bulgaria, *Women Can Do It* and *Roma Women Can Do It*, funded by the Stability Pact Gender Task Force.

Particular areas in which women in politics need training are mainly in the domain of gender sensitive policies and service delivery: drafting legislation, gender impact assessment, budgeting and gender budgeting. In terms of individual political and campaign skills, the target is shifted more towards minority women who suffer double discrimination and demand targeted assistance to be included into the political process.

The most important lesson learned from NGO delivered training to women politicians is that it is all about relationship building. Training programs are good only if part of a long term project, allowing to build relationships of trust.

Keeping in mind the rapidly developing and changing political context, training programs need to become more adaptable and if possible, drawing on more expertise. Innovative training methods like online academies, "ask-the-expert" forums and resource mailing groups need to be checked out and applied on a large scale.

Issue Based Advocacy

In the last five years several successful advocacy campaigns addressing gender related policies have been conducted in Bulgaria, including drafting and adopting the laws on domestic violence, trafficking in human beings and anti-discrimination.

Whereas drafting legislation offered a window of opportunity for women's NGOs, it is much more difficult to get an issue into the political agenda. Areas that need a lot of improvement like women's labor rights and decreasing the share of the informal economy, reproductive health, maternity leave and others remain barely addressed.

Issue based advocacy needs to be connected with comprehensive gender impact assessment and monitoring, or in other words to combine the elements of damage control and public awareness building. It needs to target to a lesser extent legislation since it is more or less in place, but to focus of implementation, rule of law, assessment and increasing the administrative capacity of the country to develop and manage gender related and gender sensitive policies.

Apart from their specific goals and objectives, Bulgarian women's NGOs need to take the lead in establishing zero tolerance for gender discrimination in the public discourse. In the last years influential male politicians have made discriminative public statements, which mainly passed unnoticed². Women's NGOs need to watchdog consistently decision makers and to hold them accountable, whereas politically active women need to unite for joint action around similar issues.

² To mention a couple, the claim of the attorney general that we cannot fight crime with women judges; or the former minister of education's interview for Playboy stating that the most admirable part of a woman is her breast.