

Achievements of Bulgarian non-governmental organizations, addressing women's issues in the last decade

The non-governmental organizations in Bulgaria working on gender issues have accomplished serious achievements during the last decade. However, for the purpose of this article it is not possible to list all the achievements of every organization¹ in the sector. Therefore, we can focus only on the most important large scale national initiatives and accomplishments and the most active organizations that are involved in them.

Most women's NGOs in Bulgaria are members of 4 national networks: *National Network for Equal Opportunities*² – initiated by the Women's Alliance for Development in 2000; *National network of organizations in support of women, survivors of violence in Bulgaria*³ – leading organizations as trainers and consultants are "Animus Association" and "Center Nadja" Foundation which initiated the coalition in 2000; *Bulgarian Platform to the European Women's Lobby* (2003) – leading organization is Bulgarian Gender Research Foundation⁴; *Bulgarian Gender Equality Coalition*⁵ – initiated by Gender Project for Bulgaria Foundation in 2004.

In Bulgaria there are two big trade unions, which have their women's organization – the "21 Century Public Women's Parliament" and the Women's Committee at the Confederation of Independent Syndicates in Bulgaria, and the Women's Union at "Podkrepa" Trade Union. Some NGOs are affiliated with political parties, though they have an independent status as non-political organizations. These are national membership organizations like: the Bulgarian Women's Union, the National Civil Forum "Bulgarka", the Democratic Union of Women and the Women's Solidarity Forum.

The biggest forum for women's NGOs in Bulgaria which acts as the most influential factor for the consolidation of the sector and putting the problems on the agenda is the *National Annual Meeting*⁶ of non-governmental organizations, addressing women's issues in Bulgaria. From 1997 to 2003 the Meeting was organized by its initiator – the Women's Program of the Open Society Foundation, and since 2004 – by its successor the Center of Women's Studies and Policies Foundation⁷. The Sixth Meeting (2004) focused on the newly adopted Bulgarian legislation concerning the rights and status of women in the context of the European Union accession process and partnership with the local governments. The Meeting was attended by more than 170 representatives of NGOs, local authorities, experts and media.

¹ For more information about separate organizations, please refer to the list in Annex3.

² Women's Alliance for Development initiated the National Network for Equal Opportunities (NNEO), which brought together around 60 NGOs across the country. The members represent a range of specific interest and expertise and WAD office serves as secretariat to the network. In 2004 the network unites 72 organizations of which 41 are full and 31 are affiliated members. For more information: http://www.women-bg.org/index_en.html

³ This is an informal coalition of 14 organizations providing services to victims of domestic violence which aims to: 1) organize a united national campaign for lobbying on topics connected with violence against women and 2) exchange of experience and good practices among the organizations in the field of prevention of violence and support of women survivors. For more information: <http://www.animusassociation.org/en/networking.html>

⁴ The Bulgarian Women's Lobby /BWL/ was established as a Bulgarian Platform to the European Women's Lobby. The BGRF is among the national coordinators of the Platform together with Demetra Association, Bourgas and Nadja Foundation, Sofia. More than 15 organizations have adhered to the BWL so far. For more information: <http://www.bgrf.org/>

⁵ This is an informal group uniting representatives of civil society, institutions, political parties and media, which works for achieving de facto equal opportunities for women and men in Bulgaria. It is an open structure, set up in 2000 as a network of "Gender Task Force – Bulgaria" organizations to the Stability Pact.

⁶ In 2004 was held the Sixth Annual Meeting, in which participated more than 100 organizations. The agenda was focused on the new legislation mentioned above and cooperation with the local authorities.

⁷ For more information: <http://www.cwsp.bg>

In 2000 the select Consultative Council on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men was established at the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, in which experts from the state administration, academic circles and a wide representation of the non-governmental sector, drafted a Bill on Equal Opportunities. Although the Bill was twice rejected by the National Assembly in 2002 and 2003, this broad partnership established a new model for collaboration and joint efforts.

Another example for NGOs joining efforts in elaboration and lobbying for new legislation is the Bill on the Protection against Domestic Violence. The Bulgarian Gender Research Foundation was actively involved in the elaboration of the draft and was one of the leading organizations in the lobbying for its introduction in the Parliament. The Bill was approved for the first reading by the Legal Committee of the Bulgarian Parliament on 29th of April 2004. First reading is expected within July 2004.

“The Equal Opportunities for Women and Men⁸ in the European Accession Process Program” – was launched in 2002 as a joint initiative of the Open Society Foundation, Romania and the Network Women’s Program of the Open Society Institute. The aim of the Program was to monitor the progress of candidate countries for integration into the European Union and ensure that they meet the Copenhagen political criteria, especially the *acquis communautaire* in the field of equal opportunities. The reports for the seven candidate countries⁹ gave an account of their level of compliance with EU standards in the field of gender equality. The first phase of the Program ended in 2002; since 2004 has started the second phase, which will determine the new progress of each country.

In the beginning of 2003 at the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy was set up an informal structure - a Consultative Commission on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, in which are represented executive bodies and leading non-governmental organizations, which aim is to consult the authorities on urgent issues of the policy of gender equality.

A number of organizations¹⁰ within different projects conduct surveys and analyses on different women’s issues. The most recognized are: Bulgarian Gender Research Foundation, Women’s Alliance for Development, Gender Project for Bulgaria Foundation, Bulgarian Women’s Union, Bulgarian Association of University Women, Animus Association, Center Nadja Foundation, Center of Women's Studies and Policies etc.

The 16-days Campaign against Violence against Women has been held in Bulgarian since 1997. The coordinator for Bulgaria is Center Nadja Foundation, one of the leading anti-violence organizations in the sector. The campaign focuses on the large scale involvement of national and local media in informing the society about the problem and distributes a large variety of information materials. As a result of the good collaboration of the NGOs in the campaigns the informal coalition against violence was initiated in 2000. (see a.m.)

The White Ribbon Campaign (symbol of and a promise for zero tolerance to male violence) was launched in Bulgaria in 2001 by the Bulgarian Gender Research Foundation with the financial support of Open Society Foundation, Sofia. BGRF has become a partner to the European network of organizations of the international White Ribbon Campaign and has been working for attracting more men for the cause of non-violence by distributing during the campaign white ribbons, posters, booklets and other information materials.

⁸ Please refer to: <http://www.eonet.ro>

⁹ The participating countries in the project were: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland and Romania.

¹⁰ Please refer to the list of organizations in Annex 4.