

Women's Representation in Southeast European  
Politics

## NEW HORIZONS IN GENDER AND POLITICS

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# Women's Representation in Southeast European Politics

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*The book is dedicated to all women across Southeast Europe whose political experiences, advocacy, and democratic ideals challenge entrenched inequalities and continue to shape the development of institutions and gender equality mechanisms in post-socialist and post-conflict societies.*

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The editors

## 2. Insiders or outsiders: The Women's Parliamentary Network in Serbia

**Lilijana Čičkarić**

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### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

The active participation of women at all levels of decision-making and political involvement is essential to achieving gender equality, sustainable development, peace and democracy. However, in the twenty-first century, women worldwide continue to encounter impediments to their political participation and engagement. As articulated in the Sustainable Development Goals, the equal participation of women and men in government and decision-making is recognized as an inalienable right, fundamental to their active engagement in political life and the crux of gender equality and women's empowerment (United Nations, 2023). The equitable representation of both men and women in parliament and other political decision-making bodies is crucial for ensuring a more accurate reflection of societal composition. This representation can enhance the legitimacy of political processes by making them more democratic and accountable. The extant literature suggests a positive correlation between women's political participation and the human development index, electoral processes, democracy, and pluralism (Matland, 2005; Cornwall & Goetz, 2005; Tremblay, 2007).

The presence of a greater number of women in legislative bodies has a positive impact on the policy agenda, profound consequences on the implementation of policies, and a beneficial and important effect on society as a whole (Forman-Rabinovici & Sommer, 2019). Strategies aimed at enhancing women's participation in politics have been included in numerous international agreements and protocols promoting a gender perspective. However, these measures have yet to demonstrate efficacy in achieving gender parity at the highest political levels. Presently, women hold only 26.9 percent of all seats in parliaments worldwide (IPU, 2024). In the 52 countries that held parliamentary elections in 2023, women accounted for 27.6 percent of elected or appointed Members of Parliament (MPs).

A multitude of gender quotas are currently in operation across various regions worldwide. The implication of different quota regimes, defined as the combination of the electoral system and the quota type applied, is scrutinized in relation to two different concepts of equality: equality of opportunity and equality of result. Electoral gender quotas come closer to providing real equality of opportunity than equality of result (Dahlerup, 2007). The majority of European nations have adopted party-level gender quotas (Lang et al., 2023). Among the 43 chambers that had some form of quotas, women constituted 28.8 percent of the elected MPs, on average, compared to 23.2 percent in chambers without such quotas. The highest percentage of women elected was recorded in chambers that had both legislated and voluntary quotas, reaching 33.5 percent (European Parliament Think Tank, 2023).

In various regions globally, specialized bodies of women parliamentarians have been established to exert influence over the policy-making process. These bodies have been particularly effective in affecting political programs and establishing priorities, thereby ensuring the representation of women's interests in legislative reform processes and empowering women parliamentarians to play a more active role. These working bodies have been recognized as critical actors in strengthening gender equality, supporting inter-party cooperation, putting gender issues on the political agenda, proposing or amending laws to address gender issues, overseeing governmental progress on gender equality and contributing to a "good" collective process of women's substantive representation (Celis et al.; Sawer, 2020, 2023; Ahrens & Erzeel, 2024). Specialized bodies, such as committees, caucuses and all-party networks, are a crucial element in gender-sensitive parliamentary transformation, representing women's interests, needs and perspectives (Sawer & Turner, 2016; Sawer et al., 2013).

Following the parliamentary elections in Serbia in 2012, the implementation of legislated gender quotas resulted in an unprecedented increase in the number of women elected to the National Assembly. For the first time in the history of Serbia's parliamentary democracy, the proportion of women reached 33 percent, marking an increase from 54 to 82 women MPs out of 250 parliamentarians. The presence of a considerable number of women (critical mass) who were elected to parliament, the support by all political parties, and the political determination of the ruling political elite served to create the necessary conditions for the establishment of a cross-party, informal, specialized working body known as the Women Parliamentary Network (WPN) in 2013.

The objective of this chapter is to elucidate the principles and mechanisms of operation of the WPN, a specialized gender-focused body in the Serbian parliament. The first part is dedicated to the illustration of characteristics of women's presence in the National Assembly over the course of 35 years of parliamentary democracy. The second section focuses on the role of the WPN, a body designed and initiated with the objective of emphasizing solidarity,

enhancing the capacity of parliament, and protecting the interests and necessities of women. The objective is to address the following questions: What are the organizational structure and relations of the WPN? What activities does it perform? How does the overall political context affect the results and efficiency of this body? What are the main achievements of the WPN? The third section of the chapter is based on a short qualitative analysis of interviews with WPN members, offering insights into perceptions, challenges, cooperation assessments, achievements, and the impact of this informal body on gender policy and practice within the parliamentary space.

## 2.2 WOMEN'S PARLIAMENTARY PRESENCE

During the 1980s, a certain kind of positive action was applied to women and members of national minorities in the political systems of socialist countries in Southeast Europe. In 1986, during the final convocation of the Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, which was one of the six republics that constituted the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), women constituted 23.5 percent of the representatives (Čičkarić, 2009).

Following the dissolution of the Berlin Wall in 1989, a rapid process of re-traditionalization and repatriarchalization unfolded in all regional countries. Concurrently, there was a proliferation of "male democracies," and there was a concomitant limitation of women's participation in national politics. This limitation was further compounded by their exclusion from decision-making processes (Einhorn, 1993: 55; Kligman, 1996: 6). In the inaugural 1990 electoral process in Serbia, a mere 1.6 percent of women MPs were elected, despite the fact that 4.9 percent of them were the candidates (Markov, 2001: 42). During the 1990s, the ongoing armed conflicts in the region, the imposition of sanctions, and the economic devastation in Serbia resulted in a significant decline in the level of women's participation in institutional politics. Accordingly, in the 1996 election, only 2.8 percent of women MPs were successful in their electoral bids and secured seats in parliament (Čičkarić, 2016).

In the aftermath of the collapse of the authoritarian regime of Slobodan Milošević, marked by widespread opposition, election fraud, eruption of massive protests, and replacement by a democratic government, an increase in the representation of women in the national parliament was observed. Women constituted almost 11 percent of the council members. However, at the executive and administrative levels, the presence of women remained the same, with approximately 10 percent of government officeholders. This is further evidenced by the fact that, within the republican government, only two of the fifteen ministers were women, while all ministerial positions within the federal government were occupied by men (Markov, 2001: 46). The Group for Promotion of Women's Political Rights conducted an analysis of the

programs of 16 political parties (Čičkarić, 2020). Only three political parties, the Democratic Party (Demokratska stranka), the Social Democratic Union (Socijaldemokratska unija) and the League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina (Liga socijaldemokrata Vojvodine), stressed in their programs the issue of underrepresentation of women in decision-making positions. Only three parties, the Democratic Alternative (Demokratska alternativa), the Democratic Party (Demokratska stranka) and the Civic Alliance of Serbia (Građanski savez Srbije), exclusively addressed women in their programs.

In an unprecedented development for Serbia, legislation was enacted mandating gender quotas of 30 percent on candidate lists. Serbia has become the fourth European country to adopt gender quotas for parliamentary and local elections, though these quotas have yet to be implemented within political parties (Lončar, 2023). This groundbreaking measure was enshrined in the 2002 Law on Local Elections, and in the 2003 parliamentary elections, 12.4 percent women won seats (Čičkarić, 2023). A total of 225 women were nominated on party electoral lists, yet only 31 of these individuals secured seats in parliament, and only one woman was awarded one of the six vice-presidential seats. Among the seven caucuses, only one was chaired by a woman, and among the 30 parliamentary committees, only five were chaired by women. In the Assembly of Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, women constituted 19.2 percent of elected representatives, and within the 20 committees, women led three of them. According to a survey conducted in 167 municipalities in Serbia, only three municipalities elected women to the position of mayor, and only six elected women to the position of the president of municipal councils. Furthermore, women constituted only 13 percent of the presidents of municipal assemblies. The quota of 30 percent was met by only 17 municipalities, while 11 municipalities had 10 percent or fewer women in their councils (Čičkarić, 2020).

The establishment of the three most significant mechanisms for the implementation of gender equality in Serbia occurred concurrently with the influence of international organizations, the women's movement, and the civil sector. These mechanisms were integrated into the institutional and legal framework. In 2003, the Committee on Gender Equality was established as a permanent working body of the National Assembly. In the same year, the Council for Gender Equality was established within the Government of the Republic of Serbia. The electoral gender quotas of 30 percent on candidate lists were established by the 2004 Law on the Election of Deputies to the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia.

However, inconsistencies and shortcomings of the adopted legal provisions have large repercussions on the representation of women in parliaments (Pajvančić, 2006). Primarily, the underrepresented gender was allotted one-fourth of the positions on the candidate lists. The implementation of this

regulation resulted in a quota of 25 percent for women on candidate lists. Secondly, the regulation mandating the inclusion of at least 30 percent of the underrepresented gender in the candidate list potentially enables the placement of women candidates at the conclusion of the list. Thirdly, the regulations governing the allocation of seats won by the list (one third in accordance with the order of the list and two thirds at the discretion of the list submitter, with the stipulation that every fourth position be reserved for the underrepresented gender) in practice permitted noncompliance with the rule pertaining to the initial reserved position on the candidate list. Finally, the provisions concerning the termination of the mandate and the filling of vacancies for MPs effectively resulted in the de facto elimination of women in representative positions. Although gender quotas were enshrined in law, they were not enforced when party electoral lists were formed, and no sanctions were imposed for noncompliance (Čičkarić, 2020).

The second phase of the introduction of mechanisms for gender equality commenced with the elections for the Protector of Citizens in 2007 and the Deputy Protector of Citizens for Gender Equality in 2008. Concurrently, the Government established the Gender Equality Sector at the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy in 2007, which evolved into the Directorate for Gender Equality in 2008. The distinction between these two entities is merely nominal. The Government of the Republic of Serbia proceeded to adopt the first National Strategy for Improving the Position of Women and Promoting Gender Equality 2008–2014, accompanied by the Action Plan.

The 2007 election was influenced by the newly implemented Law on Elections, which resulted in the presence of 21.6 percent of women MPs. This outcome was attributed to the introduction of a 30 percent underrepresented gender quota on the electoral lists. In the seventh convocation from June 2008, a woman Speaker of the National Assembly and three women vice-presidents were elected. Additionally, 28.1 percent of women were represented in the local governments in Serbia. However, only six of the municipalities were led by women, and women constituted 20 percent of the municipal assembly councilors. The Government of the Republic of Serbia appointed five women ministers, constituting 18.5 percent of the ministerial body.

The establishment of preliminary mechanisms for gender equality laid the foundation for the subsequent adoption of a comprehensive legal framework. This framework was designed to regulate and monitor applications of gender equality measures and mechanisms across all sectors and levels of societal structure. The Law on Gender Equality was adopted in 2008, and the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination was adopted in 2009. The National Strategy for the Prevention and Suppression of Violence Against Women in the Family and in Partner Relationships was adopted in 2011. In accordance with the aforementioned umbrella laws, a range of pertinent laws have

undergone revisions, including the Family Law, the Criminal Code, the Labor Law, and the Employment Law, with the objective of fortifying the legal status of women and ensuring their interests are safeguarded within the ambit of legal protection.

In 2011, an amendment was adopted to the proposed Law on Election of Deputies, stipulating that every third position on the electoral list must be allocated to the underrepresented gender. This development coincided with the 2012 parliamentary elections, during which women secured the largest share of seats, reaching 33.3 percent, a milestone that positioned Serbia as the 25th nation worldwide to implement such a quota system. Subsequent to this, in the early parliamentary elections of 2014, the law stipulated that one-third of the candidates must be from underrepresented genders, and 33.6 percent of these candidates were subsequently elected to the National Assembly. The 11th convocation from the 2016 elections includes 37.2 percent women MPs (Čičkarić, 2020).

In contravention of the established norms of democratic practice, a quota of 40 percent was established for the underrepresented gender on electoral lists in the year preceding the 2020 parliamentary and local elections. This initiative was developed by women's organizations and supported by national and international experts. The proposal was passed in the Serbian Parliament by the Serbian Government and adopted by a majority of the ruling party and several opposition parties. Consequently, a total of 99 women deputies were elected to the XII convocation of the Assembly of Serbia, constituting nearly 40 percent of the total number of MPs elected (Čičkarić, 2023). Moreover, there has been an increase in the number of women in the executive branch (Lončar, 2023: 93). Notably, women occupied ten out of twenty-three ministerial positions, including the prime minister position. Paradoxically, despite the presence of the largest number of women deputies in the parliament until that time, the discussion and final vote on the new law on gender equality proceeded with great difficulty, accompanied by numerous objections and corrections and the withdrawal of the procedural course in 2021. Subsequent to the 2022 elections, 35 percent of women deputies were elected, and in the most recent XIV convocation in 2023, 37.6 percent of women MPs entered the Serbian Parliament.

It is important here to elucidate a paradox that has emerged in recent years. Along with the perceived increase in the number of women MPs, primarily attributed to the implementation of a quota system, the erosion of parliament's authority and the diminution of its powers is obvious. The erosion of parliamentary authority results from broader political dynamics, such as the centralization of power in the executive branch, undermining the legislative body's effectiveness regardless of its composition. Even with higher numbers, women are relegated to less influential roles or committees, limiting their capacity to effect change. The increase in women MPs serves more as a symbolic gesture

than a substantive shift in power dynamics. The focus on increasing women's representation through quotas overshadows broader institutional reforms needed to strengthen parliamentary authority.

### 2.3 WPN STRUCTURE AND GOALS

Reflecting diverse experiences around the world, the existing literature offers a variety of forms of what constitutes the specialized working body of women parliamentarians. Palmieri identified seven criteria – mandate, formality, structure or modes of operation, leadership, resources, membership and activities – which have been combined into two groups, forming four categories (Palmieri, 2013: 23). The term “gender-focused parliamentary bodies” is used as shorthand for parliamentary bodies with a gender equality mandate (Sawer & Turner, 2016: 764). The working bodies of women parliamentarians are shaped by a variety of factors, including unique political and parliamentary contexts at the national level, the presence of women's movements or other civil society organizations, as well as the influence of international organizations. The following characteristics are indicative of gender-focused parliamentary bodies: their initiation by feminist critical actors; the creation of space for women-centered deliberation; their role as a gateway for diverse groups of women to access the legislative process; and their non-hierarchical and consensus-based organizational structure, which presents an alternative to dominant norms (Sawer & Turner, 2016: 766).

The initial expectations of women in parliament and acting in women's interests have never been fully realized, and scholars have proposed several reasons to explain this discrepancy between initial expectations and actual outcomes. These include the cross-cutting pressures of party discipline or party loyalty, ideology, and discursive shifts that may result in advocacy for women being framed as special interest pleading (Sawer, 2006). Critical actors are defined as individuals or groups who act individually or collectively to contribute to the creation and adoption of policies that are more favorable to women.

Consequently, the establishment of women's political networks as special bodies within parliament confronted numerous challenges. These networks are intended to unite all women MPs. However, the limited number of women MPs results in a less influential body. Turnover of membership can also be an issue, where one or two passionate MPs drive the work. When they leave parliament, the momentum may fade (Ahrens & Erzeel, 2024: 96). The existence of a specialized body can, paradoxically, result in less effective gender mainstreaming if other committees perceive gender as the exclusive purview of the specialized body rather than a collective responsibility (Johnson, 2022). Empirical evidence indicates that party discipline remains an important challenge for women who want to cooperate along party lines, but that it does not

represent an insurmountable obstacle per se (Čičkarić, 2020, 2023). A compelling illustration of this phenomenon can be observed in the implementation of gender quotas in Serbia, which have been observed to promote women's political representation. However, the efficacy of these measures is impeded by factors such as the influence of political parties, internal resistance within parties to the inclusion of women, and a reluctance to allocate high-ranking positions to women (Lončar, 2023: 71).

In a historic development for Serbian parliamentary democracy, women MPs convened in 2013 to establish a specialized, gender-focused informal body, irrespective of their party affiliation. This initiative emerged following a seminar organized by the NGO Belgrade Fund for Political Excellence as part of the Women for Democracy and Equality project (Dražković, 2020: 120). The event received support from the Speaker of the National Assembly, the Committee on Human and Minority Rights and Gender Equality, and the OSCE Mission to Serbia. The primary objective of women MPs was to engage in the legislative process in an active manner, thereby influencing the formulation of new laws and the modification of existing policies. It was crucial to maintain a vigilant and rigorous oversight of the implementation of existing laws and policies (Džambašević & Jovanović, 2015: 71).

The WPN has been constituted as an informal group comprising a panel of 15 coordinators, 1 women's representative from each parliamentary group, and 2 independent women parliamentarians. The panel members partake in the debate, adopt decisions, and disseminate information regarding these decisions to their women colleagues within their respective parliamentary groups. The panel is presided over by a women's coordinator for a duration of three months. The order of chairing the WPN is determined on the basis of the size of the parliamentary group, from the largest to the smallest. The coordinator's role encompasses a variety of responsibilities, including the facilitation of meetings, the formulation of the annual work plan, the allocation of responsibilities to members, the supervision of the execution of decisions, the submission of an annual work report, the management of the documentation created during the course of work, the proposal of work rules, and the execution of other essential tasks. Meetings are convened on a monthly basis, with additional meetings held as required (Džambašević & Jovanović, 2015: 71). In addition, the WPN has been granted the support of a technical secretary, a decision that was made by the Speaker of the Parliament. It is imperative to emphasize that the WPN has resumed its operations in all convocations of the National Assembly from 2014 to 2023. However, during the last convocation, the activities of the WPN were hindered due to the presence of irreconcilable tensions, disagreements, and conflicts among the various political parties.

The primary objectives of the WPN encompass the formulation of novel legislation and policies, in conjunction with the oversight of the implementation

of prevailing regulations, particularly within the following areas: women's healthcare and family welfare; domestic violence against women and children; economic empowerment of women; promotion of women's education; women's discrimination; and women's participation in decision-making. Members of the WPN play a pivotal role in the oversight of the implementation of the Law on Gender Equality and the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination, which were initiated in 2021. These members possess the prerogative and obligation to petition local institutions for gender-sensitive reports on their activities, data concerning gender-based discrimination cases, and gender-sensitive data within the budget execution report. Women MPs have the capacity to promote gender equality in their activities within the assembly, as well as in the media and during public appearances. The secretaries of the Committee on Human and Minority Rights and Gender Equality, in conjunction with other committees in the assembly of significance for the WPN, distribute material to network members to facilitate the preparation of sessions and proposals for decisions to be considered for adoption. This approach serves to mitigate the invisibility of a local mechanism, thereby ensuring that members are engaged in the decision-making process.

## 2.4 WPN ACTIVITIES AND OUTCOMES

In 2013, the WPN organized a major conference entitled *The Situation of Women in Serbia*. This event marked the inaugural presentation of the WPN and served as a platform for the support of female parliamentarians. The conference was attended by the women ministers of the Government of the Republic of Serbia, state secretaries, and high representatives of various international organizations operating in Serbia, including the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and the Council of Europe. It is noteworthy that the WPN played an active role in the discourse surrounding the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in 2013. Serbia's accession to the convention, which pertains to the prevention and eradication of violence against women and domestic violence, signified its formal adoption of the convention, making it the eighth country to do so. A significant undertaking was the signing of a pivotal cooperation protocol between the WPN and the Coordinating Body for Gender Equality of the Government of Serbia. This was done with the objective of ensuring that work on women's empowerment is given precedence over all other considerations (Džambašević & Jovanović, 2015: 73).

In addition to addressing gender disparities at the national level, there is a strong emphasis on the expansion of local networks. To this end, seminars have been conducted in various municipalities in Serbia. During these seminars, the WPN addressed issues related to the Law on Gender Equality, the

establishment of the local Network of Women Councilors, and the challenges faced by women who lost their jobs in the privatized textile industry. Since its inception, the WPN has expanded its activities to the international level, as evidenced by a visit to Finland in 2013 by a delegation consisting of 20 members of the network, the president, and the Secretary of the Committee on Human and Minority Rights and Gender Equality. The topic of gender equality in the Balkans has been incorporated into the agenda of the regular meetings of the four Foreign Affairs Committees of the parliaments of Montenegro, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia. This initiative was initially implemented during the 2013 meeting of these four committees in Belgrade and has since become an integral component of their regular proceedings (Drašković, 2020: 124).

In 2014, the WPN spearheaded the organization of an educational lecture on the prevention of cervical and breast cancer in the National Assembly. This initiative was undertaken in recognition of these diseases as significant threats to women's health in Serbia. The discussion encompassed potential legal provisions, with a particular focus on the establishment of a mandatory framework for regular gynecological examinations in Serbia. This initiative was driven by the objective of enhancing the effectiveness of preventative measures and concurrently addressing the necessity of persistent public education concerning the significance of routine examinations and health monitoring.

In 2015, the WPN spearheaded the establishment of a regional network of women MPs from Southeastern Europe at the international conference, with the objective of fostering cooperation on gender equality. In 2017, the WPN convened with a UK parliamentary delegation to discuss its activities and scope. The meeting highlighted the network's pivotal role in the adoption of gender-responsive budgeting as a component of Serbia's legal framework, specifically the Budget Law and Budget System Law. The National Assembly House hosted the conference marking the completion of the project *Integration of Gender Mainstreaming into Local Economic Governance* in 2017. The objective of the initiative, which was executed in the municipalities of Kraljevo, Zrenjanin, and Vranje, was to formulate diverse local self-government budget initiatives for the allocation of resources toward the stimulation of women's entrepreneurship, thereby leading to local economic development.

Despite an optimistic beginning and sustained success in the first five years, a number of contextual factors have exerted a significant impact on the conduct of parliamentary practice and on WPN activities. The intensification of political and ideological disputes within society, the polarization of the population, and the absence of debate and dialogue between opposing parties are reflected in the parliamentary life. The repercussions of these unfavorable conditions have been discernible in the quality of relations within the WPN, culminating in a gradual erosion of integration and synergy within this informal body. A

conspicuous absence of consensus among women MPs on issues of gender importance has been observed, compounded by a propensity to resort to personal attacks, both in the chamber and on social networks.

In the convocation 2016 to 2020, the Serbian Radical Party (Srpska radikalna stranka) was the sole party not included in the work of the WPN. However, the party has made it clear that it would not interfere with the work of this body. The WPN's inaction in addressing various forms of violence against women in politics, both within parliament and beyond, prompted the opposition MPs to propose a withdrawal from the WPN, aiming to exert more effective pressure on the government. In the convocation for 2022–2024, the parliamentary group of the Green-Left Front/Don't Let Belgrade (Zeleno-levi front/Ne davimo Beograd) had announced that, given the prevailing circumstances, it would not participate in the constitution of the WPN. This decision was a consequence of the observed instances of abuse perpetrated by representatives of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska napredna stranka). The abuse of the WPN can be defined as the selective and disproportionate condemnation of one form of violence against women and the justification and silence regarding another, exclusively along party lines of division. Consequently, the probability of the WPN being established in the last convocation was terminated by MPs from both the ruling and opposition parties. However, both groups were accused of engaging in such activities by their political opponents.

In summary, notwithstanding the aforementioned deficiencies and impediments encountered by the WPN in the parliament, significant accomplishments have been realized. The National Assembly has amended certain regulations and initiated the discussion of specific subjects. Over the span of a decade, the WPN, in collaboration with the government's Coordination Body for Gender Equality, the Office of the Commissioner for Equality, the civil society sector, and international organizations, has attained substantial outcomes in Serbia. The ensuing outcomes can be ascribed to the unrelenting endeavors of MPs within the parliamentary network:

- Adoption of the Law on the Prevention and Diagnosis of Genetic Diseases, Genetically Conditioned Anomalies, and Rare Diseases (2015);
- Adoption of the Law on Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (2016);
- Amendment to the Law on In Vitro Fertilization – women were given the right to in vitro fertilization regardless of marital status (2017);
- Changes to the Law on Police regarding the prevention of domestic violence, the Labor Law, and Law on Social Policies (2018);
- Amendments to laws to provide economic support to women entrepreneurs in Serbia (2018);

- Amendment of the Criminal Code, eliminating the statute of limitation for acts of sexual violence against minors (2019);
- Adoption of the Law on Anti-discrimination and the Law on Gender Equality (2021);
- Introduction of gender-responsive budgeting into the Budget Law, in cooperation with the Ministry of Finance, civil society, and international organizations (2021).

The media coverage of these results was extensive, and the public responded positively to their implementation. Furthermore, these results were utilized by predominantly ruling political parties in their efforts to garner women voters support during election campaigns.

The WPN's noteworthy accomplishments in promoting women's status include fostering heightened gender sensitivity within parliamentary bodies and recognizing the pivotal role of diminished political integration of women in engendering democratic deficits (Drašković, 2020: 132). These achievements can be attributed to the effective collaborative endeavor among the WPN, women's NGOs, political networks, and international organizations, thereby underscoring the value of strategic partnerships in achieving meaningful impact.

## 2.5 THE VOICE OF “WOMEN WHO DARE”

### 2.5.1 Methodology

Aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subjective perspectives of the members of the WPN on the matter of gender equality within the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, qualitative research was conducted through semi-structured interviews between March and June 2024. The applied research method was based on purposive sampling, with interviews requested and obtained from women MPs who were specifically selected for their experiences, knowledge or expertise in working of WPN. A total of 30 interviews were requested from current and former members of WPN from various political parties, both in power and in opposition.<sup>1</sup> In a few months, 24 interviews were conducted. It was challenging to obtain a sufficient number of interviewees, due to demanding schedules and reluctance to address all queries pertaining to the parliamentary roles. Additionally, it was a period with an election campaign and the active participation of women politicians, which made securing an interview a notable achievement. However, the old and new members of WPN demonstrated an exceptional willingness to respond to questions, thereby making a significant contribution to this pioneering research project.

The interview encompassed a series of inquiries concerning the subjective perception of pivotal activities related to the WPN, with a particular emphasis on the primary challenges encountered; the patterns and quality of inter-party cooperation; women's trust and solidarity; initiatives to promote gender equality, discrimination, sexism and gender-insensitive language; the relationship to the system of gender quotas; and ultimately the role of the WPN in establishing a gender-sensitive parliament.

### **2.5.2 Gender Equality Issue**

The majority of respondents indicated that they were personally motivated to address the issue of gender equality in the National Assembly from the outset of their political engagement.

In order to elicit a decision from women parliamentarians regarding cross-party cooperation, it was necessary to select a topic that would provoke a response from them. One such topic would be the position of women in society, their troubles, and strategies for alleviating those troubles. Another topic that would be appropriate for this purpose would be environmental protection or climate change. (K.M.)

The impetus for women MPs to engage with the subject of gender equality was initially rooted in professional considerations, educational endeavors, family socialization, personal experiences of discrimination, and the marginalization of women politicians. Respondents emphasized that gender equality issues transcended the divisions along ideological and party lines.

It hadn't always been easy to find common ground, but some topics overcame our party and parliamentary differences – the position in election procedures, women's health, their status in labor relations, the fight against domestic and intimate partner violence. (F.N.)

A review of the respondents' perceptions regarding gender equality in the parliament reveals that, while the primary objective of the WPN is to convene female Members of Parliament to address issues pertaining to gender equality, the collaborative efforts on these matters have led to the transfer of expertise and knowledge to other domains. This suggests the potential for the WPN to play a more extensive role in fostering inter-party dialogue within the National Parliament.

Cooperation started with simple questions: what did it matter who a woman votes for if she experienced domestic violence, if she was unemployed, discriminated against in the workplace, prevented from professional training, tired of poverty; what did it matter which party was in power or in the opposition; and what did

it matter what she thought about any of us? Our job was to alleviate her troubles. (I.M.)

As one of the principal accomplishments of the WPN, respondents highlighted the incorporation of gender equality into all legislation enacted by the National Assembly.

The WPN was instrumental in incorporating gender-responsive budgeting into the Law on the Budget System. This resulted in increased financial allocations for women's entrepreneurship and the promotion of women engaged in agriculture. The WPN achieved notable outcomes by amending the Criminal Code, which now stipulates that sexual offences against minors are not subject to a statute of limitations. Additionally, the WPN collaborated with other stakeholders to facilitate the enactment of the Law on Combating Domestic Violence. (E.K.)

### **2.5.3 Solidarity and Trust**

It is noteworthy that the members who participated in the research also highlighted the proposed amendments that they had submitted, illustrating the constructive impact of the WPN. Some of the amendments proposed by the members received a greater number of votes from parliamentarians outside the network, indicating that a significant proportion of their colleagues were in support of their initiative. Despite the fact that these amendments were not adopted, the joint action of MPs demonstrated that their solidarity could significantly enhance their collective strength. This joint action also demonstrated that, in matters concerning gender equality, they were capable of transcending the interests of their respective political parties.

This cooperation shifted from the topic of gender equality to some other areas, and women from different parties began to cooperate on other issues such as ecology. Because we had established the principle of work and gained mutual trust. My best friend from the parliament was a woman from another party. (F.N.)

The majority of MPs asserted that the issue of gender equality and the status of women does not constitute a matter of political division. Instead, it is a subject that unites all political parties. The WPN exemplifies the capacity to collaborate despite political and ideological differences, thereby achieving positive outcomes in enhancing the status of women through legislative initiatives. This perception predominantly pertained to the first six years of the network's program of activities. Conversely, the last four years were often characterized by a heightened prevalence of challenges and significant discord among members hailing from diverse political backgrounds.

Since 2013, when the WPN had been established, there was no interruption in cooperation. Even during the period when some parties boycotted the work of the National Assembly, that cooperation between the women parliamentarians from different parties within the WPN did not stop, when it came to gender equality. (C.G.)

#### **2.5.4 New Communication Paradigm**

The respondents' assessments of the WPN's performance vary, yet the network remains a pivotal instrument in fostering trust among women parliamentarians from diverse political backgrounds. Notwithstanding the myriad challenges confronting the WPN, it has achieved advancements in the National Assembly's operations. These enhancements encompass the initiation of dialogues on subjects that were previously overlooked, the establishment of a novel paradigm of communication patterns, and the democratization of institutional space. It is noteworthy that several respondents underscored the distinctive approach women contribute to problem-solving, characterized by an enhanced awareness of the needs of vulnerable groups, families, and communities. Moreover, members of the WPN have demonstrated a heightened sense of responsibility and commitment to preparing for meetings, discussing legislation, and communicating in a more measured manner.

It was more probable that women would direct their attention to specific subjects than men would. To illustrate, the topic of financial support for families with disabled children was one that is of particular interest to women. Women tended to engage in more nuanced and constructive discourse, often employing a more measured and composed tone. It was a distinct mode of communication. (J.Ć.)

A few respondents highlighted the significance and contribution of critical actors, women who possess the capability to impact decisions within the party and their respective parliamentary group. These women are politicians of a feminist background who possess the political knowledge and capacity to act independently. They typically come from academia or the women's movement. It is imperative that their presence be expressed to a greater extent in parliament.

When the time comes to decide something, to "push for" something, it goes through the party and a woman is often outvoted or afraid, does not dare to present it to her leader in the presidency meeting. That's why it's important to always have women who "dare", who have greater autonomy in the party and to demand some changes in the name of the WPN and in the name of those other women parliamentarians. (L.S.)

### **2.5.5 Dual Loyalty**

The respondents' evaluation of the cooperation achieved through the WPN was mixed. While some respondents rated the cooperation as good, others identified persistent obstacles to the process. These respondents, mainly from far-right and far-left parties, cited a lack of comprehension, heightened political tensions that cannot be overlooked, and the existence of a considerable number of parliamentary groups as the primary factors impeding progress. Despite these challenges, the respondents reported that they had been able to establish a common language.

The informal group intended to function on a voluntary basis. However, there were evident discrepancies and considerable political turbulence between the parties involved, rendering it unfeasible to reach a minimal consensus, even on the issues on which we have previously achieved a degree of understanding. (M.M.)

A few respondents noted that, under certain circumstances, the interests of the party, or more specifically, the concept of loyalty, can take precedence over the solidarity of women. For instance, some members of the network refrained from endorsing the initiative to deliberate specific bills submitted by their political parties' colleagues, citing the WPN's perceived lack of influence over the content of these bills. In such instances, the WPN resolved to submit amendments to the legislation rather than offering an opinion on the initial bill. This decision can be seen as a potential schism within the WPN, as the party's interests are regarded as superseding those of the network. The concept of dual loyalty emerges as a significant factor in the political landscape, particularly in the context of women's involvement in representative institutions. This phenomenon can be attributed to the electoral process within the context of multi-member constituencies, whereby MPs are elected not on the basis of their individual names, but rather as part of a larger group.

It has been posited that women possessed two discrete loyalties: one to their gender and one to the political party with which they were affiliated. When these two loyalties intersected, the consequences were often shouldered disproportionately by the gender rather than the political party itself. (B.R.)

Although all respondents generally agree on the importance of the WPN for the National Assembly, they see the transformation of the network and its role in parliament in different ways. Some believe that in recent years the quality of work of the WPN has declined due to impact of turbulent political context in Serbia, reflected through the rise of political tensions in parliament and increased cross-party animosity and intolerance in communication.

Earlier, the meetings of the WPN were something we were looking forward to and we all came and talked honestly, and then it turned into a place for political skirmishes. The work of the WPN has actually been reduced on achieving some party interests, and the engagement and reactions were no longer connected to women in general, but to women in relation to which party they were from. (D.H.)

A few interviewees also provided rather negative perceptions when queried on their assessment of the impact of WPN on parliamentary life, as well as on the capacity of women to participate in decision-making processes and further in transformative procedures. It implies that although there has been a significant increase in women's participation in representative institutions, these numbers are not necessarily an indicator of gender equality in parliament and significant women's influence on decision-making.

It still seems to me that there is a big gap between women in "positions", regardless of whether they are parliamentarians or hold some other state office or decision-making position, and women who defend their human and civil rights. Everyone, even women parliamentarians too often remain on the "line" of their party and parliamentary borders and give up the risk that is inherent in women – to come forward and say YES or NO, no matter how it ends. (J.P.)

#### **2.5.6 Gender Quotas**

The majority of respondents expressed a favorable opinion of the impact of the quota system on enhancing the representation of women in parliament. They regarded legal quotas as a necessary condition for achieving substantial representation. However, the concept of quotas as an affirmative measure is met by a few MPs with skepticism and opposition.

The increase in gender quotas is merely a staged performance designed to convince the public that the institutions function democratically, when in fact they do not. Doors are only open for women when institutions are rendered meaningless and subordinated to the executive power, as is the case with the parliament. (R.K.)

A number of women interviewed expressed rather negative sentiments regarding the implementation of quotas and the election of women deputies to the assembly. The perspective offered by one of the interviewees affiliated with the right-wing party is particularly noteworthy, as it provides a compelling insight into the correlation between the perceived deficiency in political knowledge and competence among women MPs and the quota system.

The legally mandated quota of 40 percent women representation on party lists has resulted in the nomination of candidates who lack the personal confidence to effectively represent their party. Consequently, a considerable number of women have

been elected to parliament, yet they lack political experience and, most crucially, experience in recognizing higher interests. (O.V.)

### **2.5.7 Discrimination and Double Standards**

In regard to the most prevalent issues encountered by the network's constituents, the context of discrimination, sexism, and political violence, predominantly of a verbal and symbolic nature, is recognized. A greater proportion of women deputies reported direct exposure to experiences of unequal treatment within the parliamentary environment, and some respondents indicated that they had been subjected to discriminatory treatment on more than one occasion. Women MPs who have personally experienced discrimination reported that this unfair treatment manifests in various forms, including the prioritization of a colleague without objective reasons for which that colleague would have an advantage, incorrect address, use of gender-insensitive language, or making inappropriate comments or remarks related to gender.

Upon direct inquiry, approximately half of the MPs revealed that they had been subjected to remarks, humor, or propositions from their colleagues that were based on their gender.

There were inappropriate tones and jokes. Such behavior is indicative of a lack of cultural refinement. The majority of these jokes pertain to physical appearance. I never fail to address the issue, nor do I remain silent. (S.V.)

The majority of women MPs reported that, throughout the course of their political careers, they encountered greater obstacles to advancement than their male counterparts. They also indicated that they had to demonstrate their capabilities to a greater extent and that the party leadership was more circumspect in its acceptance of them. The challenge of dismantling the prevailing political, social, and economic stereotypes, despite the current state of dormancy of the WPN as a gender-specific body, is a formidable task.

It was challenging to assume a responsible role within the party while simultaneously managing the demands of infant care. I was consistently punctual in all my commitments. In the ten-year period under review, there was only one occasion on which I was unable to attend a meeting of the presidency, and that was due to my being on a business trip. However, I rapidly demonstrated my capabilities, which led to my acceptance. (Z.I.)

## **2.6 CONCLUSION**

The results of the qualitative analysis suggest that the WPN has played a significant role in fostering cooperation and trust among MPs from diverse

political affiliations over an extended period. Despite the aforementioned challenges and shortcomings, the issue of gender equality has noticeably enhanced the operations of the National Assembly. Evidence of this enhancement is seen in the introduction of a novel quality for relations between MPs, the initiation of dialogue on topics that were previously overlooked and of particular significance to women, and the commencement of a transformation directed towards a gender-sensitive parliament.

While all political parties, irrespective of their ideology, demonstrate an interest in the female electorate, the manner in which they engage with and advocate for women varies considerably. This study's findings indicate that the ideological positioning of the WPN does not exert a significant influence on the attitudes of its members towards the purpose and goals of the network, the treatment of gender equality issues, or attitudes towards gender-based violence. However, a slight divergence in the effectiveness of quotas and their justification is observed. Right-wing MPs place less emphasis on the importance of quotas for ensuring essential representation, while social-democratic MPs underscore the necessity of including critical actors and more feminists in the parliament. With regard to inter-party cooperation, the most pronounced differences are evident in the perceptions of left-wing oriented MPs, who evaluated the cooperation as unfavorable and even resigned from the WPN in 2023. A parallel phenomenon was observed among the members of the far-right party, whose MPs had already departed from the network long time ago.

Despite the efforts of the WPN, which represents the set of critical actors, there remains a considerable challenge in enhancing the involvement of women in executive structures and local policies, as well as in amending the Law on Ministries to implement a 40 percent quota for women in governing bodies. The enhancement of the representation of women MPs as members of delegations in various statutory meetings, in conjunction with the formulation of strategies for achieving gender balance in all parliamentary committees, is imperative for the creation of a gender-sensitive parliament. However, the current dynamics within the National Assembly, including those stemming from partisan competition, hinder the capacity of gender-focused parliamentary bodies to wield influence over the mainstreaming of gender perspectives.

## NOTE

1. The Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska napredna stranka), Socialist Party of Serbia (Socijalistička partija Srbije), Party of Freedom and Justice (Partija slobode i pravde), People's Movement of Serbia (Narodni pokret Srbije), Democratic Party (Demokratska stranka) and New Democratic Party of Serbia (Nova demokratska stranka Srbije).

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