

Using ICT to empower young women and girls in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Presentation by Jesenko Osmanagić

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Dear Participants

My name Jesenko Osmanagić and I am from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Since 1996, I have been actively involved as manager of many non-governmental projects focused on the development of ICT opportunities for young women and girls in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I am happy to share my experience on efforts made to ensure that young women and girls to better utilize ICT, through different channels, including the education system and through youth nongovernmental organizations. In my presentation I will describe the impacts of these project endeavors and describe the obstacles that need to be eliminated to ensure improved access to ICT for young women and girls in my country. I hope that these experiences could be replicated in other contexts to ensure equal opportunities of young women and girls to use ICT for their personal empowerment and to make a stronger contribution to the development of their societies. Before describing the initiatives on ICT for young women and girls, I will briefly explain the political, social, economical and ICT environment in which these initiatives have been implemented, including the environment for gender equality.

Gender equality in Bosnia and Herzegovina

BiH has traditionally been led by men and its history has included war, crime and different types of discrimination. Change is only taking place slowly. Several national women and youth organizations, in cooperation with the international community, have implemented projects that have insured systematic changes in legislation but there have not yet been a strong focus on changing public opinion and educating the population at the grass root level about gender equality.

The social, economical, political environment in BiH

Bosnia and Herzegovina is in transition from the war to stable peace and from from command economy to market economy. The Bosnia and Herzegovina society faces a number of challenges such as the destruction of social fabric, poverty, corruption and ineffective structures and on-going political conflicts. These broader social problems are the main focus of politicians and it is very difficult to get attention focused on the need to advocate for and support increased use of ICT by young women and girls.

Current options for using ICT by young women and girls in BiH

The development of ICT in the country is very slow although there have been several positive trends. Supported by UNDP, the Government has developed a Policy, Strategy and Action Plan for developing ICT. These documents highlight the objectives of the government regarding the improvement of ICT in various fields, such as education, economy, employment, social security, health care, culture, rural development, transport, telecommunications, nature protection, non-governmental sector, public sector, youth politics, and media. These documents also identify ICT resources and activities that are necessary to improve access to ICT. The need for a gender-sensitive approach in accessing ICT is highlighted in these documents. However, the implementation of these regulations is at a very initial stage and little progress has been achieved. National laws that would support these regulations do not exist and there is no state ICT agency. The governmental budget for ICT projects is very limited.

ICT in the education sector

The education system in Bosnia and Herzegovina would be the main entry-point for ensuring more productive use of ICT by young women and girls. Several limitations to effectively utilizing the education system to promote ICT use exist. The education system has not yet established an Academic Network, as has been done in other countries in the region and in the rest of Europe. Professors and teachers are not trained to use ICT in the implementation of the education curricula. The number of female ICT teachers and professors who can conduct gender-sensitive ICT education for student is insufficient. Education plans and programmes do not require utilization of ICT for implementation of curricula topics. ICT education platforms do not exist in the local language; and most professors and teachers do not have English language skills. Most of the schools do not possess adequate computer infrastructure. The computer infrastructure in schools is old and the network infrastructure is insufficient. Most schools do not have **education cabinets** with networked computers but have a dial-up network connection. A large number of schools do not possess network connections at all. Governmental funds for payment of network connections and for maintaining ICT equipment in school do not exist. The investments of international organizations in ICT in schools are limited. During the period between 2004 and 2006, public telecommunication companies made a profit of approximately 500,000.000.00 Euros without any investment in the education sector.

ICT in youth and women nongovernmental organizations

Youth and women nongovernmental organizations are the main providers of ICT initiatives for women and young girls. Most of these organizations implement basic ICT courses for young women and girls. Some of these organizations also educate young women and girls to use ICT in preparation of different promo materials such as printing materials, web materials, video and audio materials. Furthermore, some organizations encourage young women and girls to use the internet, radio stations and web portals to access different social, educational, economical and cultural opportunities and to produce materials for these media. These nongovernmental organizations encourage young women and girls to utilize ICT in implementation of initiatives that advocate for improvements in different social fields as well as for strengthened participation of young women and girls in the decision making process in BiH society. The non-governmental sector has a number of problems that limit their ICT endeavors. The number of female trainers for ICT and other social topics is insufficient. Most youth and women nongovernmental organizations have to spend a lot of time on ensuring financial sustainability rather than on developing long term strategies for their work. Governmental funds for the nongovernmental sector are insufficient. Because of other urgent problems in BiH society, the international community is not focused on providing funds for ICT initiatives to nongovernmental organizations. Youth and women nongovernmental organizations don't have funds to purchase sophisticated ICT or to maintain their own ICT capacities. The nongovernmental sector has significant potential to support the empowerment and personal development of young women and girls through ICT but it is vital to ensure funds are made available for this purpose.

Initiatives for improving position of young women and girls to utilize ICT in schools

As an employee of international organization Catholic Relief Services (CRS), I contributed in implementation of the project "Parent School Partnership" that was implemented between 1999 and 2003. This project was the first and only project in BiH that provided significant funding for improvement of school infrastructure through engagement of parents in local parents' school councils, with special attention on improvement of ICT infrastructure for female students. Before this project, computers were rare in schools. Through this project, 114 schools were provided with **cabinets for ICT education**, internet clubs as well as free internet connection for two years. This project enhanced the process of improvement of ICT in schools by encouraging school stakeholders to advocate for additional investment in ICT school projects by government as other donors. As an employee of a local nongovernmental organization Foundation for Creative Development (FCD), I managed project "Youth

Network for Cooperation with Government”. This project engaged youth female activists in advocacy efforts for an “Academic ICT network”. Through advocacy activities, such as around tables, debates, meetings, media efforts and street performances, youth female activists brought their proposals to the attention of governmental representatives. As result of these efforts, Republic Srpska agreed to the recommendation to establish the Academic Network of Republic Srpska. The government of Republic Srpska founded a public institution that will maintain the Academic Network and provided initial funding for the development of the required infrastructure. The Academic Network is a tool that female students can use to ensure access to e- knowledge through the academic data bases as well as to cooperate with colleges around the world in academic projects. (However, this opportunity was not taken in the second part of BiH (Federation of BiH). The government of FBiH is awaiting the adoption of legislation at state level which may take some time, depending on the political situation in BiH). This project also provides youth female activists with grants for local ICT projects. In cooperation with local government, youth female activists implemented 10 projects that educated 337 female teachers and professors to use ICT in implementation of education curricula. Finally, as manager of project “Codex for protection of human rights in school”, I contributed to the preparation of a document which established standards for utilization of ICT in the education process to ensure improved access to ICT for students, with special attention to female students. This document requires utilization of ICT in the preparation of education topics as well as in the implementation of classes. Adoption of this document is in progress. Beside these initiatives, a limited number of international institutions and nongovernmental organizations implement ICT projects. The World Bank implements the EMIS project (Education Management Information System) in primary and secondary schools. Other large projects on ICT by international nongovernmental and governmental organizations ended several years ago. Only nongovernmental organizations, such as One World SEE, Youth Information Agency, Youth Culture Center Abrasevic, Youth organization Urban Culture and Youth organization “Naša Djeca”, in partnership with international donors CRS, CIDA and BTDF, implement small projects that empower female students to utilize ICT in school. Enhanced development of ICT in schools and improved access to ICT for young women and girls in schools requires much stronger investments by government and the international community.

ICT initiatives in youth and women nongovernmental organizations

It is important to highlight that youth and women nongovernmental organizations have been the main providers of ICT courses for great number of young women and girls in BiH. Their activities have, however, decreased during last two to three years. Currently, international organizations, such as Save the Children Norway, Save the Children UK and UNICEF, are the main actors in implementation of projects for children. These organizations are focused on strategic issues regarding children and do not focus on ICT education for young women and girls. Other main external donors are not interested in supporting informal ICT education for young women and girls. As an employee of CRS and FCD, I provide a number of ICT courses to girls through the project “Child Development Program”. These courses have improved basic ICT knowledge and skills for approximately 5,000 young girls without financial means for ICT education. I also managed several other projects to encourage young women to use ICT. Through the project “Youth Culture Initiative Program”, young female cultural leaders were provided with an opportunity to learn how to use ICT for graphic design, web design, audio production and video production in order to ensure opportunity for cultural and social expression. Through informal education workshops, they were encouraged to produce web portals, graphic installations, printing promo materials, music songs and video materials. They were also provided with the opportunity to present their ICT achievements to large audiences through exhibitions, performances and concerts. A conclusion of this project was that ICT is very strategic tool for engaging female youth civic activists in advocacy on pressing social problems. Because of this, we developed a project approach to address the needs of young women that incorporated elements such as graphic design and video production education, and production of advocacy media (graphic and video) materials. We used this approach in implementation of four projects that gathered approximately 750 female youth activists

from 22 communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Through one project, we also provided six youth organizations with sophisticated ICT equipment for video production in order to develop stronger youth production network in BiH. As result of these endeavors, the voice of young women became much stronger and more visible in society. In addition, a new generation of female youth leaders willing to contribute in social changes is emerging. As a result, some young women became leaders of video productions in their youth organizations and they earned income for themselves and for their organizations through the utilization of video production equipment.

My experience regarding empowerment of young women and girls through access to ICT

As an employee of the CRS and FCD, I had the opportunity to implement several projects to encourage young women and girls to utilize ICT in their personal development and in addressing some of the most pressing problems in society. On the basis of my experience, I concluded that better access to ICT is an excellent mechanism for protecting women's rights. Access to ICT through the projects I have described has developed a new generation of young female leaders in youth politics, civil society, culture and education. The utilization of ICT also provides young women with the opportunity to further improve their knowledge and skills, and be more equal participants in the labour market and ensure higher paid job opportunities. Improving the ICT skills of young women undermined the stereotyped perception that maintaining and developing ICT is an exclusive job for men. Access through ICT to information and examples of how other countries protect women's rights have empowered young women involved in these projects to replicate of the strategies and ensure faster improvement of the situation of women in BiH.