

## **FemCities Conference 2016**

### **Panel of Mayors: Personal experiences, challenges, supportive measures to become a Mayor**

**Jelena Trifunovic, mayor of Svrljig (Serbia)**

First of all, I would like to thank the organizers for inviting me to attend this impressive event. I am honored to get a chance to speak in front of you today. In two years of being a mayor, this is the first time I speak in an international setting and share my personal challenges as a mayor. I am coming from a small municipality of Svrljig in South-East Serbia, mostly a rural area. The political party I belong to, United Peasant's Party is a rather minor party on national level. We mostly act on local level, and represent the interests of those working on farms and producing food. Food production and agriculture is one of the most important branch of economy in Serbia, and many women work in that sector. Unfortunately, their contribution to the economy is not formally recognized nor paid, so there is a lot to be done in that area.

Serbia has close to 30% of women in the National and local parliaments thanks to the quota system we have established a couple of years ago. Unfortunately, we do not have a quota set for the national and local executive bodies. So in the Government, where the representation is noticeable, there are about 20% of women, but on local level, it is even less - about 15%, and there are municipalities where no single woman participates in the work of executive bodies. On the micro local level, neighborhoods and villages, or as we call it - the local community self-governing, there is no quota for women, and therefore women's participation is dramatically low, about 8%.

In such a political environment for women's leadership, there is only 10 women mayors out of 168 municipalities, which makes about 5%. The proportion of women mayors has been stable during the last 5 years, since the Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities started keeping track of them. Among those 10 there are only 3 women serving as mayors of big cities at the moment, which is actually an increase, since previously there used to be only one.

It is not easy to be a woman in politics in general, and especially not on a noticeable position. Media are very harsh on women politicians. They are analyzing their looks, which is never good enough: either too stylish or without any style, too feminine or too masculine, too cheap or too expensive, too conservative or too provocative. While you are young, you are considered too young and inexperienced. At some point, woman becomes too old, while men never need to deal with that as a problem. This is also true when certain women's issues are put on the table: it is either too early for them or too late – the chance is missed. The way you address some issues as a woman is always questionable as well: usually it is either too "aggressive" and inappropriate style for a woman, or too mild because you are a woman. Even the feminists are harsh towards women politicians: they expect us to be advocates of women's issues, and as such, they have expectations that they never have from men. Those expectations are not easy to meet, so we, women in politics, are trapped between the women's movement and their standards and finding our way in the political labyrinth, facing obstacles designed in a patriarchal culture.

Therefore, it is demanded from women in politics to perform better than any man. The most important question posed to a woman is of course: "How will she handle it and balance between the family and the duty." If you are a woman and you do not have a family, for example, you are unmarried or divorced, this is treated as a disadvantage. In a small town in south-eastern Serbia the patriarchal norms are even more expressed, and the community thinks it knows better what is good for everyone and how he or she needs to live their lives. There is no right on privacy and rumors appear distribute quickly, even without media. During electoral campaigns, "everything is allowed". The goal to win, regardless if something

is ethical or not. I personally experienced a lot of accusations and shaming because I am over thirty and still not married. It was easier to give up, but I never did and I will not, because I believe that I have a responsibility to be a role model for future generations. Fighting for equality and women's rights was never an easy job, and I know that. If a young girl sees me as a mayor, and feels encouraged to wish the same for herself as well, I believe that a part of my mission is completed.

As a mayor, I really do my best. I am working very hard to make good results. I choose my coworkers in a way which will contribute the most. And you know what? Most of the coworkers that I chose, are women that I can rely on. Sometimes they even accuse me of being too supportive towards women. But I have two clear goals: first - make the job done in a good way and on time, and second - create fair chances for women. In a country where women are traditionally better educated and earn less than men, have more knowledge and less chances to use it, I believe it is fair to give them an opportunity.

If we were to speak about supportive measures, I could say that there are not many. There is no direct support for becoming mayor. Thanks to years of a great and dedicated work of women from the political parties, academia, experts and NGOs, in the Serbian law on elections now we have a quota of 30% for less represented sex when councilors are elected nationally or locally. At the same time, in Serbia, the mayors are not directly elected by citizens, but by and among the council members. Of course, in that situation, having 30% of women in the council, gives 30% of chances to a woman to be elected. The experience however, teaches us that when it comes to electing "only one" it is usually a man. Nevertheless, in rare cases - 5%, women win, as in my case. I am aware that a set of circumstances made me a mayor but I am giving my best not to disappoint those who believed in me and I feel responsible to open opportunities for others, in the same way I was given this chance.