

**“The glass ceiling” has been scratched. What now?****Episode transcript**

D: Hello and welcome to Konteksti! I am Dafina Halili and in today’s episode, we will talk about gender representation in politics and decision making, which has marked record growth in the last parliamentary elections, and how it can help the life for equality and social justice. Can the current political representation impact the transformation and social movements? How much space does the feminist discourse take in the political discourse and how much can it be transformed in feminist public policies? To discuss more about this, on today’s Konteksi episode I will talk to Besnik Pula, Proff.Ass. in the Political Sciences Faculty at Virginia Tech, USA, and Besa Luci, Editor-in-Chief, at Kosovo 2.0. Besa, Besnik, hello and welcome to Konteksti.

BL: Thank you Dafina.

BP: Thank you.

D: Since 2000, a minimal scale of women representation in Kosovo’s Assembly has been made possible through the quota which reserves 30% of seats, against men who practically have the remaining 70% guaranteed. Even though often the effect of gender quota has been contested, there are sufficient cases when women who have been elected as MPs because of this, however, they reached this without the quota as well. Such an effect was noticed especially in the 2017 parliamentary elections. Meanwhile, the last elections finally mark a turn in the gender, political representation in Kosovo.

*In the 13 years since Kosovo declared independence, Vjosa Osmani has become the fifth president. The 38-year-old lawyer also became the second woman to hold this post, after Atifete Jahjaga, who was President from 2011 to 2016.*

*On April 4 Osmani received 71 votes to 82 from the MPs present in the 120-seat Assembly. In the last snap parliamentary elections, the President received the most votes of any candidate in Kosovo history. after she received 300,756 personal votes.*

*This result is over 100,000 votes higher than the previous record of 183,868 votes for Albin Kurti in 2019. To put it into context, in the last election, Osmani personally received more votes than the PDK and LDK put together.*

*In addition to the presidency, gender representation in the Assembly also set a record in this legislation: For the first time, more than one-third of 120 MPs will be women — 43 women MPs in total.*

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*35 of the new women MPs were elected without the help of the gender quota of 30%, which is also a record. But beyond these accomplishments of women politicians, the parties still want to respect the Law on Gender Equality which requires equal representation in election lists. The new government's cabinet also consists of 30% women, this number marks the higher gender representation in the executive compared to any past government.*

D: Besnik, why is gender representation in politics important? What does this mean for gender equality?

BP: Gender representation is, in politics, one step toward reaching a norm of equality in representation as well as in other life fields. I think that the word that is used, that the glass ceiling has been scratched a little, is a correct expression because it has only been scratched, it has not been shattered and we are far from the situation, in Kosovo's context especially, where we have overall gender equality in social fields in general. This representation of women in Kosovo's current Assembly is a record and it is a positive symbol in this gender representation movement, especially the representation of women in the Assembly.

But at the same time, this should be seen as only the start of a larger work for reaching gender representation, as in politics, but also in addressing inequality in other social fields. I would like to mention for example, if you look at the work market statistics in Kosovo, not only that unemployment is higher among women compared to men, but women's participation in the working force is extremely low. Around 78 or 79% of women of working age do not participate in the workforce. These are staggering numbers. In Europe, there is no other case that we can compare to, where so few women participate in the formal economy. For example, this is one of the issues that should be addressed and could be addressed through a political representation of women who will address the issues that prevent women from, for example, equal participation in the workforce. This is only an example.

BL: I can also relate here. Besnik also mentioned those tragic numbers when we think about how little the number of women who partake in the workforce is, and I think that expectations also, political and social, are that the moment you have a higher representation of women in the decision making institutions that potentially it will result in policies which take into consideration the barriers and issues which women face. I think that now we are at the point, maybe with the scratching of the glass ceiling that those expectations will increase.

Not necessarily every woman that will be elected an MP or part of a governing cabinet or a leader of a Ministry, not necessarily each of them will have gender equality or policies that are built on equality in their agendas. But I think that at this moment in Kosovo and especially if we think about feminist activists and younger generations, they have expectations there. Especially in the last elections in February 2021, we have seen a much larger campaign calling out for votes for women and I think that each social action has impacted the election results. And we have seen that especially this year, that calling has existed and we have seen a large number of

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women who got elected at the end. Now we have yet to see how much the government, in general, will take into consideration and push forward policies that take into account the needs of women. "Women" is a large group, we have to break down what we mean because women are not a general group with similar problems, etc. we have to take into consideration race, age, social and economic statuses, etc. I hope that we will see those breaking down of categories in the new government.

D: Except for the largest number thus far in Kosovo's Assembly of women MPs elected by citizens, it has been really interesting that there was a large turnout of women on election day. In fact, I have not read any official statistics. One statistic which we all know is especially the greatest voting for VV, around 60% of their voters have been women in fact. Looking back on a study from 2014 by the Kosovo Center for Gender Studies who through hundreds of responders in the field have analyzed how women vote, which are the topics and issues on which Kosovar women vote. Over half of them have declared that the gender aspect is not a crucial issue on which they reason their vote. There are three main topics which have been very important, we are always talking about the parliamentary elections in 2014: economy, economic development, demolishing poverty, and as I remember from when I read the study, I think it was the dialogue with Serbia as well.

The third topic, in fact, was practically invisible during the last electoral campaign so I do not believe that it was one of the main issues on which women based their vote, especially for VV. If we compare these trends and ways of voting, this year up until now at least, there has been no analysis or study on which are the topics which pushed women to vote for a particular party. But if we take the vote for VV and the main issues that they pushed during the campaign, which they advocated for, what do you think were the main topics that pushed Kosovar women to vote VV in such great numbers? Especially the change from 2014?

BP: For the lack of polls, it is difficult to know which issues for example have attracted women's votes. This is what you mentioned as well Dafina, it has been documented up until a point. At least on some exit polls, that women have voted in mass for VV and this is, at least in some of these exit polls because they are different and we don't have a deeper study, but at least based on these data that we have, women's vote as a block has differed from the men's vote meaning that women's vote, we're talking in aggregate terms, went more toward VV than all other parties. And this is a very interesting occurrence because we have a form of change, maybe not in the form of a movement or organization but at least an information of an electoral block, potentially, who voted maybe in a more independent manner than men or family members. Meaning, that traditionally in Kosovo we have seen the family voting trend - how the head of the household, the elder, father, etc. that's who the entire family voted. Here we see a breaking of this logic up until some point where there is a type of autonomy in the vote which is not simply a family vote, dictated by the man of the house.

On the other hand, which issues motivate this vote, this is an interesting question which we again do not know which issues attracted women's vote toward VV. It can be simply the fact that

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they had more women candidates in VV's electoral list which impacted the vote, other than having women, there were women in the list that have a public personality, that are not only symbolic figures, tokens, people who were only put there because of their names as women, but who have their own voices, their public personality. And through this, they empowered women's voice in politics in a new form in Kosovo's politics. This can be one cause. And the other maybe relates to the 2014 study, the interest in economic issues, maybe on the surface this may seem that it is simply a reflection of bigger trends because economics is a more general problem in Kosovo because unemployment is vast, wages are low, education is not on a good level, etc. And this impacts women through the fact that the negative effects of economics are felt more by women than by men. The economic burden is carried more by women than men. We see that even on numbers that are mentioned of non-activity, the fact that many women do not work in the formal labor market, that doesn't mean they are doing nothing. But it means they do the work of survival, reproduction at home, family, which maintains daily life even in the existing economic conditions. Mentioning one more fact from the labor market, if we look at the unpaid labor, uncompensated labor, not only the household work - taking care of children, the elderly, the home - but also the economic work but is unpaid, i.e. family agricultural work, work at small family businesses, markets, the largest unpaid work which is not paid in these contexts is done by women. Women work at markets for their families, they are not paid, but they do it as a contribution to their family. Or they work in family agriculture as a contribution to the family but they do not get paid. Generally, this economic burden falls heavier on women, meaning among the attempt to let's say, an economy which has higher employment, larger growth, there should also be the way that the goods of this economy are distributed in a more equal way among men and women. Because at the end of the day, economic empowerment is the basis of any other empowerment at least in the meaning that it is related to political empowerment, and personal empowerment up to some extent which is also important.

BL: I would like to relate to Besnik here as well. Because I definitely think that the economic barrier and economic issues have played a role and the lack of a study at the moment on what pushed women to vote on record numbers for VV. I remember those days after the elections when the exit poll surveys were published, there were many reactions and this was largely commented on. I checked it - today once more to refresh it - to read the UNDP publication, Public Pulse Report, where they measure the citizen's thoughts on a state level. And within this report, last year the data tell that women are much more worried about unemployment than men. While men and women are more or less worried about the economic direction, unemployment worries women more.

But at the same time, I think it is important to put this in the pandemic context as well and how the pandemic has specifically impacted women. Besnik also mentioned the burden of maintaining the family and other burdens which I think the pandemic has made the personal life much more difficult, women's economic participation, more so than men's. At the same time, within the same Public Pulse report, when women and men were asked about the economic impact that the pandemic had on their economic well-being, women in fact were the ones who said that the economic well-being was much more impacted than men did. I think this also

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played a role because potentially there are a lot of women who turned toward VV and realized that there were specific politics that will address the economic burden or unemployment which they face. But at the same time, I think that a wider political context played a role as well. Because we are talking about a period that from 2017 this is the third time that we are having parliamentary elections. We know the way how the government fell last year in 2020, and when we put that on the context of citizens' daily lives, I think that maybe this is something that is also interesting, potentially to look to what extent political developments have impacted where it was talked more about large political projects rather than the citizen's wellbeing when it comes to women's votes. I think there is something there to be further researched.

D: It is interesting when we take three main names of people from VV's list, they are Vjosa Osmani, Donika Gervalla, and Vafije Krasniqi - three women on the top five on the list. Vjosa and Donika come from a traditional Kosovo party, LDK. Us at K2.0 and many activists from the 90s have continually documented through writings about the great push that women of LDK forums have had by the men in their activism during the 90s. Which was then passed to LDK's politicians after the war. Gervalla and Osmani themselves often have XXX of LDK men's misogyny and sexism. On the other hand, there is Vafije Krasniqi, a war-time sexual assault survivor, who represents in fact thousands of women and men who continually have been stigmatized with many attempts to silence them, not to help them institutionally. At least a small living pension has started in a legal way to be given by the state in 2018, many years after the war.

What is the motive of these three women especially, but many other MP women in the form through which they challenge the war narration for war, youth, for state-building?

BL: I think that potentially there will, at least how I see it, I think and hope that it will impact on a conversation to say, a social conversation which is more inclusive about the war, and potentially I hope that certain policies in that direction. Because generally, I think that the war narrative for a large period has been very controlled or monopolized by certain political groups. And there have been a few narratives that if you were not a warrior or did not belong to a certain image, or a certain political group, you were more or less excluded as someone who has similar certain experiences. If you did not belong to that dominant narrative, then very few people have talked about how it impacted others, different social groups. I think for example we see this with the case of former President Jahjaga. A large part of her agenda as President were women survivors of war-time sexual assault. I think that she was very loud in that aspect and that was very important not only advocating voice but also institutional and some of the largest legal changes came from the time when she was a president. So I see how women's representation can impact institutions, and how it will impact in pushing forward some narratives or topics that otherwise are left marginalized. So I hope that except only participation, except only these three women, at the same time I think there is a social reaction for war narratives to be more inclusive. And I think we see it in young generations who maybe do not have personal experiences or were very young and do not have tales, or do not remember them, and they see it by the way on how we research the past because they want a more widespread

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understanding of the past to feed the way how they see themselves, and where we are today as a state. I think there are positive movements in that direction and I hope that having more women represented in politics, will be much more work toward documenting and social dialogue let's say on how the war impacted who, in what ways. And what are those stories, tales, that we must remember and document?

D: However, we are talking about Osmani and Gervalla. They both rose as politicians within a center-right party and beyond their separation with LDK, they created a list and joined VV, and continue to declare as center-right politicians. And in this context in a typical way, right-wing parties are typically conservative, they support traditional women's roles and family structures. Can there be space for real feminist articulation by the most voted woman who holds the second most important role in the country?

BP: The situation is more complex than it seems when we say she comes from a right-wing party, or center-right, or conservative. What does this mean in the feminist sense? First, I would start with the fact that we previously mentioned, documenting for example the exclusion and marginalization of women within LDK since the 90s and further on. However, it has to be highlighted that this is not a characteristic of only LDK, meaning that patriarchy as a phenomenon is not confined only in family relationships or at home but it finds expression in all the public sphere, even in political organizations, business, in work-places, etc. And this is the phenomenon that maybe, from which Vjosa Osmani has also suffered. Those who followed the changes within LDK, the way in which she was treated as a personality, very popularized one of this party, who ended up absolutely marginalized and excluded by the party. This shows that the issues are much more complex rather than to say that she is a right-wing conservative thus, she has a specific stance. Because as a woman in politics, she has seen, much better than me, what it means to be a woman with independent political thought, regardless of your stances, and to have your own voice and be a sort of threat against men, or a type of figure that should be underestimated or marginalized.

The fact that she surpassed this barrier and she became President, I think that is a sufficient indicator that her personal political attempt was successful. To what extent will she translate that into gender activism, we have yet to see. I hope that she, as a President, will use her personal experience in politics to translate it into stances and policies to address these types of inequalities and practices which in fact do not benefit the society in the end because they are destroying the political, intellectual, societal potential which is marginalized, put aside because it is by a woman and is not worth it - or they do not consider it equal. This logic must disappear. And this logic finds expression in many spheres and is not confined only within a party, a family, or within a specific contact. And as such, I do not see it as a barrier to someone from a right-wing or left-wing party - because these issues are wider than ideologies in how we traditionally understand them.

D: Many left feminists' critique continues to target liberal feminism which is defined by representation and gender justice, in political and economic representation, within existing

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power and economic order structures. They continually highlight that it is not sufficient to simply count the women in high state roles, but that we need real feminist leaders. Do we have real feminist politicians in Kosovo?

BP: I can say that it's not that we do not have a feminist expression in Kosovo. But I do not know how much they find space in the political sphere in general. I think that you are right that up to some point, feminism which is present in the political sphere in Kosovo is somewhat limited in representation issues and this is often a barrier in addressing deeper structural issues, etc. So, this is the challenge which maybe is related to this parliamentary representation of women, which it did not reach to constitute a movement that has a wider impact in addressing structural issues which are related to women but with social justice more generally as well, because at the end the feminist issue is a social justice issue in general, is not just a women's issue; Then, there is a chance to radicalize this political feminist movement a bit. It is difficult to predict to what extent that will happen. But I think it is important not to limit this understanding of liberal feminism where we say okay we have two women here, three there, and we are doing fine. Because the other issues we mentioned will be left unaddressed.

BL: I can relate maybe, I have said it earlier as well, I think there is a kind of expectation for the new government to be more progressive, especially pertaining to social justice, economic, economic, and socially marginalized groups, etc. But I think we have yet to see. I am talking about many policies not necessarily only in the feminist context, but policies we are left yet to see. When we rethink some things, like at the beginning when we mentioned the low participation of women in the labor market, we must now see if there will be such policies that will be pushed in the parliament but in the government context as well, which will take into consideration the barriers which women face; will they take into consideration the unpaid labor they do at home, the care for their families... which are all factors that make their participation in the labor force more difficult. But similarly in the pandemic context, how do different measures impact them. If you close pre-schools or schools, women are much more impacted than men in a family context. Will these realities be taken into consideration when drafting policies? And further, normally, how women of different communities are impacted, women who come from different socio-economic backgrounds... based on the policies we see from now on, we will be better able to evaluate how much of a feminist approach they hold.

D: We are waiting for a more detailed plan by the government on how they will address gender inequality, but what we have seen from some of the priorities articulated in the last campaign, there were policies for increasing the number of public preschools, sharing paternity and maternity leave, both welcomed by women's rights activists. Another policy that was mentioned by VV was the financial support for unemployed new mothers with 250 EUR per month, which has received some critiques from a few activists who have defined it as a policy that further pushes women to close up within their homes and reduces them to a mother's role especially with no supporting, parallel policy for their empowerment. Does the new government offer any different vision of gender justice?

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BP: I think that you are right. We have to see a bit more of a concretization of these policies. It is very positive that these policies were mentioned, opening preschools, paternity and maternity leaves, supporting pregnant women, etc. They have an impact, this is known from studies from other countries as well, these are programs that most affect women and could be a push for women to participate in the workforce because they are not burdened with childcare which again falls more as a burden on the women than men. And we should see a concretization of these policies, but the fact that they were mentioned is positive. To say, these are open issues on the table, they will not quickly disappear, and I hope that they will be addressed and will be realized at least in the upcoming months of years.

BL: I think that what I hope here is that we do not only see measures or reactions toward the maintenance of the existing system. Not only to financially help women after birth but to take fundamental actions that long-term will address the inequalities and injustices that exist. Because, yes, I agree that all that we have seen are good things, and it is good that they are being mentioned and addressed, and fulfilling the process of naming the issues, calling issues by name. Because if something doesn't exist in our language, i.e. paternity leave, we believe that doesn't exist as a societal practice. It is very good when we start to use the concept of paternity leave more and more, because potentially it will turn to social action as well, and then it is turned to specific policies. But we definitely must have a great push for that inequality and injustice to be treated by the roots, to have long-term political and societal changes.

BP: I think, if I can add, Besa is right that the design of these policies must be careful for them not to have effects or consequences let's say on reinforcing existing relationships in families where the woman is expected to take care of the children. For example, to say by giving the woman financial support to stay at home while the man works. This is a type of, again, even though a help, it is a reinforcement of existing traditional relationships. But if you have programs such as, for example, pre-schools are good examples for the woman not to be the only person responsible for the child but has the opportunity to go to work while somebody else takes care of the child in the meantime. These interventions that are made by social policies, should have a type of emancipating element, not to simply help or support which maintain existing structures.

D: Besnik, Besa, thank you a lot for all the contributions to this episode of Konteksti at Kosovo 2.0.

BP: Thank you a lot, it was a pleasure.

*DISCLAIMER: This podcast is part of the Human Rightivism project, which is funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), implemented by the Community Development Fund through its Human Rightivism Program. The author's views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA).*