

Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women

Women mayors have the chance to ensure gender balance in politics

Facts have proved that women are equally good leaders as men. The secular mentality in the Republic of Moldova allows women to have lowly positions in politics, business and public administration. The most accessible way for women in rural areas to accede to power is to become mayors.

While heads of government, ministries, districts or factories are still under the impression that women hold a secondary role in society, and have a hard time admitting the representatives of the opposite sex in decision centers, a few dozen women from different villages in Moldova have decided to follow another path. They run in local elections and succeed in persuading women and men in their communities that they can lead the Village Hall and be successful.

Ecaterina Moraru was recently elected mayor in Crihana-Veche village. In spite of having two male opponents in the elections, Ecaterina managed to win, obtaining the vote of the majority. She teaches French, and has recently discovered the meaning of the French proverb 'Cherchez la femme'. For a few months now, her husband can reach her only at the Village Hall, because the 'new mayor' is not to be found at home.

'It's true that I love French philosophy and I still teach a few classes at the Cahul University. Public administration is an extremely interesting area. I am satisfied with the people I work with, and together we solve problems confronting us. That is why late nights are spent at the Village Hall; we have so much to do,' told us Ecaterina Moraru. The first step in local political campaign she made in the 1999 elections. She entered the second round, but then withdrew her candidature, thinking that teaching would be more comfortable at the newly-opened Cahul University. However, the challenge of the competition won. In the 2003 elections she went all the way and she doesn't regret it. 'I am aware that I am a woman. At the Village Hall I am a mayor and I do not divide people in men and women. I see them all and listen to all of them. I don't have a special skill, except maybe the study of communication, allowing me to understand different people. Most people seek financial help because poverty is the top priority. Most people leave the hall content but without the money. I do not offer empty promises, I offer explanations, sympathy, suggestions and advice. I believe these to be valuable now because people need a correct attitude from their elected representatives.' This is how Ecaterina Moraru explains the role of the mayor. She doesn't divide people in genders but intends to eliminate the difference between men and women. 'In the morning when I come to work those waiting for me on the steps of the Village Hall are mostly men. They come here with legal, fiscal and financial matters. I do it with good grace but when we part I tell them that if I hear that one of them hit his wife or verbally abused her, he will have to answer to the mayor. The women I advise to make a step forward and stand by their men. If they fail, it means they are equally to be blamed', says the mayor of Crihana objectively. She is working on a number of projects that will change not only the mentality of the community but the economic and social situation.

For Silvia Butucel, position of mayor is already an 'old' profession. In June she was reelected mayor of the Miclesti village for the fifth time in a row. 'I did not need the support of television, or the press or of the political parties. People know me well. Some of my opponents were very active during elections but my fellow villagers voted for me,' Silvia Butucel told us.

Actually, her opponents withdrew so that on the electoral lists for Miclesti she ended as the only candidate. 'Men are not fond of seeing women walk ahead of them and they always try to overtake them. In the previous elections I had male opponents; at the recent elections they gave up when we got to the stage of collecting signatures. Probably they understood that my fellow villagers support me and did not dare to go all the way. Thus I was the only candidate for the two villages coordinated by the hall in Miclesti. Ninety-three percent of the population voted for me.' Silvia Butucel persuaded her fellow villagers that women have an important part not just in domestic issues. For 16 years now she manages a few villages and this has not tired her yet. 'I have never strictly obeyed appointment schedules, in the sense that I meet with the citizen when he/she comes to the hall even if the programme for appointments says otherwise. I cannot turn my back to them, and I have recommended this to my team. We work on holidays if we have to. We work outside on the road if the citizens stop us and ask for our help. My husband tells me I have spoiled the villagers too much, that I try too much to accommodate their needs. This is how I am and this is how I taught my team members to be,' Silvia Butucel tells us sincerely.

To her and to the other dozens of female mayors in Moldova, the gender equality in administration is an outdated issue. They have tested their powers in this competition and, now, after they have won, they wish to unite their efforts to achieve more. They know that women mayors can understand and discuss the situation of women and children in villages, so that they are interested in a direct dialogue with the leaders of the Republic to promote women's issues in rural areas.

Silvia Saca, manager of the UNDP Moldova project for training leaders declared that in the last decade women have persevered and made it to the top of the state power. 'If in 1994 only 4 women held positions in the government - 2 vice-ministers and 2 department directors - today one woman is a minister, 6 are vice-ministers, and 8 are department directors. It is not enough, since according to the Millennium Development Goals gender equality means equal opportunities to men and women. Women mayors have an opportunity to continue their work because after learning to lead a community of hundreds or thousands of people they will be able to lead larger communities. What is regrettable is that women fight alone to achieve their goals, while the decision factors only make declarations, without taking specific measures that would consider strategies or equal opportunities. For now, men leaders recall the importance of women empowerment only when delivering reports to European institutions. However, reports cannot be repeated, so in order to present an improvement, the reality must truly change,' said Silvia Saca.

The Republic of Moldova can currently declare that women represent only 50% of the unemployed, while in the administration top position they represent 10%. In Sweden and Norway the number of women in parliament is over 40%, and these countries aim to improve the participation of women. These countries are encouraged not only by the special programmes of their own governments, but also by the United Nations. 'If we invest in women, the society will become stronger and the country will be stronger,' declared Noeleen Heyzer, Executive Director of the United Nations Fund for the Development of Women at a recent meeting promoting gender equality in Tokyo.

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