

Interview with Ambassador Brian Aggeler
Head of the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina
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1. Another femicide committed this month in BiH is proof of the growing trend of killing women by their partners. How does the OSCE Mission view such a worrying trend and where are the causes of it?

Firstly, I want to extend my heartfelt condolences to the families of the victims of the tragic killings in Gradačac and Živinice. I am also deeply saddened by the incident of attempted femicide in Bijeljina. The sheer brutality and horror of these crimes have left me profoundly shaken. As a father myself, I can't help but feel a deep sense of empathy for the parents and family members who are enduring unimaginable pain during this difficult time.

It is so unfortunate that it often takes terrible events like these to shake us and ignite discussions and action. For years numerous studies have presented alarming findings regarding this issue. The [2018 OSCE-led Survey on the Well-being and Safety of Women](#) was conducted in seven OSCE participating States, interviewing more than 15,000 women, including over 2,300 women in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The survey showed that 48 per cent of women in BiH have experienced some form of violence since the age of 15. The most prevalent form is psychological violence carried out by an intimate partner (36 per cent of women affected), closely followed by sexual harassment (28 per cent). In only about one in twenty cases of current partner violence did the victim contact the police herself. Reluctance among victims to report indicates mistrust in public institutions, particularly in the police. This can also be linked to lingering misperceptions about the nature of domestic violence and the capacity to identify oneself as a victim deserving of support, as up to 25 per cent of women tend to agree that domestic violence is a private matter and should be handled within the family.

These are alarming data that we continuously communicate to relevant authorities with proposed recommendations for action. Unfortunately, despite some improvement to certain legislative frameworks, especially in the RS, the situation seems to be deteriorating, leaving more women in fear for their safety and lives. Repeated failures of law enforcement and the judiciary to shield them from harm has resulted in an utter lack of faith in those institutions.

Unfortunately, as we keep witnessing, most fatal cases of domestic, intimate partners and gender-based violence involve the use of firearms. With the number of firearms in possession of BiH citizens increasing since 2020, it is also high time for BiH to tighten gun control provisions. This moment, right now, is pivotal – and demands action that yields visible, concrete results.

2. Many questions were opened after the case in Gradačac about the responsibility towards the victims, and questions of trust between institutions. Does the OSCE Mission consider that the system has failed and what, according to international standards, should have been done?

Our focus must be on preventing harm and violence before it occurs, and the law enforcement and judicial responses must themselves meaningfully combat impunity.

The egregious crimes in Gradačac, Živinice and Bijeljina have revealed many areas of concern and identified – unfortunately, yet again – many areas for improvement, from the institutional response to gender-based violence to firearms control to the importance of responsible reporting to the need for further progress to end gender discrimination.

What the Mission’s longstanding monitoring has shown is that there is a lack of understanding by relevant authorities of the true nature and impact of domestic violence, which, as we see, represents a significant deficiency in the institutional response to gender-based violence, including domestic violence and femicide.

Every reported case of domestic violence warrants urgent, co-ordinated and timely action from the police, judiciary, and centers for social welfare. Processing cases of domestic violence must not be based solely on the victims’ testimony or be conditioned by their willingness to testify. When reporting domestic violence, victims should be guaranteed safety, anonymity, and institutional protection. The process should also ensure that the victims and families are not re-traumatized, which requires the police and judiciary to be sufficiently trained and aware of the consequences of gender-based violence.

Thus, we welcome the urgent investigation into potential shortcomings in the institutional response to domestic violence emerging from these incidents. We strongly encourage relevant authorities at all levels to review the ineffective system of protection against domestic violence overall and to come forward with administrative and legislative proposals on how to better protect women against domestic violence.

3. OSCE worked a lot to improve the judiciary in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the post-war years, do you think that this work is not finished yet and what legal and generally prescribed changes should have been made to ensure that such cases are not repeated?

As concrete measures to address this terrible tragedy that touches all corners of the country, we would propose the following steps:

1. Immediate re-initiation of the procedure for the adoption of the draft amendments to the Criminal Code of FBiH concerning the implementation of the Istanbul Convention and of the FBiH Draft Law on Protection Against Domestic Violence.
2. Immediate initiation of a process of review and update - or, where relevant, drafting and adoption - of the standard operating procedures regulating the response by law enforcement to cases of domestic violence, including immediate mandatory seizure of firearms from the perpetrator and household following a report of domestic violence.

3. Immediate initiation of the procedure to introduce mandatory initial and continuous comprehensive training on the response to domestic violence into the FBiH Police Academy training curricula for police cadets and in-service officers.
4. Immediate initiation of the procedure to introduce mandatory training for judges and prosecutors on domestic violence and related offences as well as the proper application of the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence.
5. Immediate tightening of firearms control by amending the legislation regulating ownership and possession in line with the relevant European and international standards. Citizens should be encouraged to hand over their firearms to law enforcement authorities for destruction.

4. Gender-based violence is a long-standing problem, regardless of all the campaigns for women's empowerment, education, but it seems insufficient. What should BiH have to do to approach this issue more seriously?

Addressing gender-based violence requires a multidimensional approach. We would urge BiH to work on alignment of the response system and services with the standards of the Istanbul Convention that it has ratified and is thus required to implement. This is a collective endeavor that demands not just policy, legislative, institutional reform but also a shift in societal values and norms.

Yes, BiH should enhance educational programs that not only focus on women's empowerment but also instil values of respect, empathy, and gender equality in all citizens, and condemn violence. Comprehensive awareness campaigns should be designed to challenge harmful gender stereotypes and promote healthy relationships, thus cultivating a culture of respect from an early age. These initiatives must also engage men and boys as allies in the fight against gender-based violence.

Legislative reforms need to be enacted and enforced to provide stronger protection against gender-based violence. This includes stricter penalties for perpetrators, expediting legal proceedings, and eliminating legal gaps that can enable impunity. BiH has a weak penal policy in cases of domestic violence.

The establishment and bolstering of accessible and well-equipped support services for survivors of gender-based violence are also crucial. Survivors of violence and those at risk should have access to protection and general and specialized services. This encompasses not only shelters but also rape crisis centres, medical, psychological, economic, and legal support tailored to their needs.

There are currently eight safe houses, three in RS and five in FBiH, managed by NGOs, several safe spaces and two SOS help lines are available for survivors of, primarily, domestic violence. They are chronically underfunded, and should receive more robust and regular state support.

Training law-enforcement officials and members of the judiciary to handle gender-based violence cases sensitively and effectively by applying gender-sensitive, victim-centered approaches is also paramount. Law enforcement and the judiciary must foster a more knowledgeable, and effective response to gender-based violence, contributing to safer communities and better support for survivors. This ensures survivors receive the support they need and perpetrators are held accountable.

6. What are the OSCE planned activities related to Gradačac case and the broader prevention of gender-based violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina?

The OSCE Mission to BiH will continue to support authorities in BiH in strengthening the survivors-centered institutional response to all forms of gender-based violence.

Specifically, we are engaging with relevant institutions in Tuzla Canton and Gradačac and reiterating our commitment and readiness to support all serious attempts to address domestic violence comprehensively and to develop preventive measures as well.

We have invited all relevant law-enforcement institutions to a meeting where we hope to agree on the implementation of an action plan on tightening the processing of domestic violence cases. The Mission will continue to support relevant Ministries of Interior in development of mandatory training programs on gender-sensitive policing in GBV cases for police cadets and in-service police officers. We will support local communities in applying coordinated institutional response to cases of domestic violence.

The Mission will continue to support the FBiH Ministry of Labour and Social Policy in finalizing the programme for social work professionals on domestic violence. The goal of this programme is to provide the necessary knowledge and skills to social work professionals so they can more effectively contribute to combating domestic violence.

We will continue monitoring domestic violence proceedings as per current practice under the Mission's extensive trial monitoring programme, applying a victim-centric methodology developed by the Mission, and our upcoming "Survivor's Voices" report will capture the experiences of those who try to address domestic violence through the criminal justice system and systemic deficiencies. We will also, of course, monitor any other proceedings resulting from these recent tragedies.

We are co-ordinating with the Ministry of Security and UNDP in supporting BiH to conduct a future campaign for citizens' voluntary handover of firearms, ammunition and explosives - as was done recently in Serbia and North Macedonia. Our network of field offices would enable us to reach key target groups - such as hunting and veterans associations.

We also plan to re-initiate a public campaign to share information on available services for survivors of violence. We would like to take this opportunity to remind all victims of gender-based violence that BiH has two SOS lines: both are free and active for calls.

For guidance, please call 1265 for FBiH or 1264 for RS. You will receive initial psychological and social support, with the option to remain anonymous and without the obligation to report your case. To report a violent act, please call the police at 122. We will continue to do our very best, together with other international partners, to keep this serious issue at the top of the political agenda and assist BiH to adopt the measures necessary for preventing such cases in the future.