Obrazovanje odraslih/Adult Education, ISSN 1512-8784, br./No. 1/2024., str./p.p. 97-124
UDK: 374.71:37.018.48-055.2(497.6 Sarajevo)
DOI: 10.53617/issn2744-2047.2024.24.1.97
Stručni rad/Professional paper
Primljeno/Received: 15.11.2024.
Prihvaćeno/Accepted: 24.12.2024.

Sehija Dedović[1]

Holistic Approach to Adult Education: Personal Development and Social Impact in the Programmes of the "Nahla" Education and Research Centre

Abstract: Adult education plays a crucial role in preparing individuals to tackle the challenges of modern society. This paper explores specific programmes offered by the Nahla Education and Research Centre (Nahla ERC) that focus on personal growth and development in five areas: mental and physical health, life skills, parenting, creative skills development, and active citizenship. These areas were selected due to the high demand for such programmes, the broad target audience, and the opportunity to assess the positive impacts on families, communities, and society as a whole through evaluations and feedback. The paper utilises both qualitative and quantitative data to gain insight into how these programmes affect participants' employability, entrepreneurship, self-confidence, and civic engagement. The findings show that women who participate in these programmes experience a sense of accomplishment, boost their self-esteem, and become more involved in community activities. There is a focus on the ripple effect of education: women who acquire knowledge often share it, creating a cycle of empowerment within their communities. The Nahla ERC model illustrates how adult education can serve as a catalyst for social change, beyond personal growth. This paper demonstrates how Nahla ERC's educational programmes exemplify a holistic approach to lifelong learning, with clear benefits at personal, social, and economic levels. It underscores the importance of incorporating personal development programmes into adult education offerings and their essential role in fostering sustainable community development.

Keywords: personal development, education, women, life skills, lifelong learning

[1] Mr. sc. Sehija Dedović is the founder and president of the "Nahla" Education and Research Centre; e-mail: sehija@nahla.ba

Introduction

Adult education is crucial for fostering personal growth and social development, particularly within transitional societies. It significantly contributes to cultivating deeper awareness and responsibility, as educated individuals are more likely to adopt healthier lifestyles, experience improved mental well-being, and engage less in risky behaviours. In this regard, adult education naturally aligns with an individual's personal development and well-being (Lopes, 2019). Within Bosnia and Herzegovina, continuous learning and professional development offer a path to more active participation in economic, family, and social life with research confirming its particular significance in empowering women (Ilieva-Trickova and Boyadjieva, 2023).

Nahla Education and Research Centre (Nahla ERC) is a non-governmental, non-profit organisation founded in 2000 in Sarajevo. It operates through three educational centres located in the Bosnian and Herzegovinian university cities of Sarajevo, Tuzla, and Bihać. The organisation is dedicated to the education and empowerment of women through various lifelong learning programmes. Nahla ERC offers a wide range of lifelong learning programmes, including both commercial and non-commercial options. Commercial programmes, primarily aimed at supporting the organisation's self-sustainability, include sports and recreational activities and courses available to the general public. In contrast, non-commercial programmes consist of free or subsidised activities funded by international donors and local partners, focusing on supporting the personal and professional empowerment of women.[2] For years, Nahla ERC's mission has been encapsulated in the message: *"By using the transformative power of knowledge, we drive change and build a better future for women in Bosnia and Herzegovina"* (Nahla ERC, 2021).

This paper explores Nahla ERC's long-standing practice, focusing on the period from 2020 to 2024. The aim is to analyse how adult education contributes to the personal growth of participants in Nahla ERC's programmes and to positive changes within the community. The introduction provides context and relevance, followed by a theoretical framework connecting lifelong learning, personal development, social capital, and gender equality. The methodology describes the research approach to Nahla ERC's educational programme offerings through a descriptive-analytical processing of data drawn from annual reports for the target period. The main section presents Nahla ERC's

[2] Information retrieved from: Nahla Education and Research Centre, available at: https://nahla.ba/o-nama (accessed: 6 April 2025).

programmes within five thematic areas: (1) mental and physical health, (2) life skills, (3) parenting and family communication, (4) creative and artistic programs, and (5) active citizenship. Based on this data, an analysis of the outcomes is provided, focusing on the effects of the programmes on the empowerment and well-being of women. Finally, the conclusion summarises the key findings and offers recommendations for adult education practices and policies that can be applied in Bosnia and Herzegovina and beyond.

Lifelong Learning and Women's Personal Development

The concept of lifelong learning is predicated on the idea that learning is not confined to formal education during youth but rather extends throughout one's life. It includes formal, non-formal, and informal modes of learning, with the aim of continuous personal, social, and professional development (UNESCO, 2020). Adult education allows individuals to gain new skills, broaden their knowledge, and realise their potential at different life stages. Jack Mezirow's theory of transformative learning emphasises that through reflection and learning, adults can alter their perspectives, develop personally, and adapt to changes in their environment (Fleming, 2018). Lifelong learning is particularly important for the empowerment of women, as it helps them to make up for missed educational opportunities, improve their socio-economic status, and build the self-confidence needed for active participation in both public and private life. Analyses by Nahla ERC of various learning outcomes show that involving women in various adult education programmes leads to increased self-awareness, self-respect, and a greater sense of competence in decision-making about their own lives (Nahla ERC, 2022). For example, an external evaluation of training at Nahla ERC revealed that 80% of participants experienced an increase in self-confidence and 81% of women reported valuing themselves more as individuals after the training (Nahla ERC, 2022). These findings support the theoretical assumptions that education can act as a catalyst for personal transformation and growth.

Social Capital Through Learning and Community

Social capital refers to networks of relationships, mutual trust, and shared values that facilitate coordination and cooperation within a society. In some domestic research,

the term 'societal capital' is also used, placing additional emphasis on the qualitative dimensions of these relationships—trust, normative expectations, and active participation in community life—as important factors of social cohesion (Spahić-Zekić, 2011). This differentiation can be useful in the local context, especially when examining the role of adult education in post-conflict societies such as Bosnia and Herzegovina. Robert Putnam particularly emphasises the role of social capital in strengthening social cohesion and community effectiveness, whereby adult education programmes can play a key role in connecting individuals and empowering communities (Putnam, 2000). Through adult education programmes, new social networks are often created and existing ones strengthened, thereby increasing a community's overall social capital. Connecting women through shared educational activities fosters a sense of belonging and solidarity, producing multiple outcomes—from practical information exchange and mutual support to collective action towards shared goals. In theory, a distinction is made between "bonding" and "bridging" social capital; the former refers to close ties within a homogeneous group, and the latter to ties that connect different social groups (Ibid: 22-23). A study published in *Sociology of Education* notes that "women participating in educational programmes develop bonding ties within their groups, providing mutual support, while also building bridging capital through interactions with external institutions and employers, thus expanding their social networks and opportunities" (Heard, Gorman, Rangel, 2018). Programmes for women such as those offered by Nahla ERC contribute to both: women build a supportive community among themselves (bonding capital), and through the networks Nahla ERC establishes with employers, institutions, and other organisations, they also develop broader social ties (bridging capital). An example of this is Nahla ERC's Business Community, a collaborative platform with companies that helps training participants establish contacts with employers and enhance their employability (Nahla ERC, 2022). Additionally, volunteer clubs and activist initiatives within Nahla ERC connect participants with local communities and international partners, serving as an important resource of social capital. By strengthening social capital through the education of women, communities become more resilient—they demonstrate greater capacity for mobilisation to address problems, foster a culture of mutual support, and promote positive social change.

Education, Empowerment, and Gender Equality

Gender equality entails providing equal opportunities, rights, and status for women and men in all aspects of life.[3] Education plays a crucial role in empowering women by equipping them with skills and qualifications that enhance their competitiveness in the labour market, reduce economic dependence, and grant them more influence within the family and society.[4] In addition to economic benefits, education also helps shift attitudes, both among women themselves (by raising awareness of their rights and potential) and in society at large by gender role stereotypes.

The concept of women's empowerment, as outlined by Kabeer (1999), includes three interconnected dimensions: resources (e.g. education and information), agency (the ability to make decisions), and achievements (measurable improvements in status and quality of life). The adult education programmes offered at Nahla ERC address all of these dimensions by providing knowledge and skills, strengthening agency through building self-confidence and leadership abilities, and leading tangible outcomes such as employment, entrepreneurship, or increased involvement in decision-making processes. For example, women who have completed professional training at Nahla ERC have successfully entered male-dominated fields like IT, breaking down gender barriers in STEM disciplines (Nahla ERC, 2022). These achievements not only benefit the individual woman but also contribute to gender equality in society as a whole. An empowered woman not serves as a role model for others and actively participates in social change, aligning with Nahla ERC's vision of "an educated and empowered woman who changes the world"[5].

Methodology

This research utilises a descriptive-analytical methodology to investigate the impacts of adult education programs at Nahla ERC on participants' personal growth and community development. Data were gathered from Nahla ERC's annual reports spanning from 2020 to 2024, which are accessible in both printed and digital formats, as well as on the official website www.nahla.ba. The reports contain quantitative

[3] UNESCO, Gender Equality and Education, available at: https://www.unesco.org/en/gender-equality/education (accessed: 26 March 2025).

[4] World Bank, Gender Overview, available at: https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/gender/overview (accessed: 26 March 2025).

[5] Nahla Education and Research Centre, Annual Report 2021–2022, Sarajevo, 2022; Nahla ERC, "About Us", available at: https://nahla.ba/o-nama (accessed: 20 March 2025).

metrics (such as the number of courses offered, the number of participants, programme duration and frequency, and evaluation results) along with qualitative descriptions of the programmes and their outcomes. A case study approach was employed with Nahla ERC serving as a representative example of an adult education organisation focused on women's empowerment. Information from the reports was systematically reviewed and categorised into predefined thematic areas (mental/physical health, life skills, parenting, creativity, and active citizenship) to facilitate analysis. The quantitative analysis utilised descriptive statistical indicators from the reports (e.g. post-training employment rates, total education hours completed, number of counselling service users), while the qualitative analysis involved examining narratives and participant case studies included in the reports.

The reliability of the data is ensured by the fact that the reports are compiled by the organisation through systematic monitoring of programme implementation, with some data corroborated by external evaluators—often at the request of donors or partner organisations.[6] The limitations of the research include reliance on internal reports (which may introduce bias in interpreting success) and the inability to accurately gauge the long-term impact of the programmes beyond the reporting period. Nevertheless, by triangulating quantitative and qualitative findings, a comprehensive understanding of the implemented activities was achieved. The subsequent section outlines the outcomes of Nahla ERC's programmes, organised by thematic area, followed by a synthesised analysis of their overall effects.

Results

The results of the research will be presented based on the thematic areas defined during the analysis: mental and physical health, life skills, parenting, development of creative skills, and active citizenship.

Mental and Physical Health

Care for mental and physical health is a fundamental component of Nahla ERC's holistic approach to women's personal development. The period from 2020 to 2024

[6] DVV International commissioned an external evaluation of the effectiveness of selected training programmes, which was conducted by the company Qlity.ba (Nahla ERC, 2022).

was marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought increased stress, isolation, and limited access to healthcare services—particularly during the first two years of the observed period. Nahla ERC responded innovatively by integrating mental health support services into its regular activities. In the 2020/21 period, it introduced online psychological counselling and psychotherapy as a regular part of its offering, ensuring continuity of support even for users who, due to the pandemic or geographic distance, were unable to attend sessions in person. These services also became available to the Bosnian diaspora—women living outside of Bosnia and Herzegovina—who found it important to receive counselling in their native language (Nahla ERC, 2021).

At the same time, Nahla ERC demonstrated social responsiveness by providing free psychotherapeutic assistance to women who were victims of sexual harassment and abuse, as a form of support to survivors and a stand against violence (Nahla ERC, 2021). In the centres in Sarajevo, Bihać, and Tuzla, the work of psychological counselling services was intensified in response to increased demand: during the 2020/21 period alone, a total of 1,590 therapeutic sessions (individual counselling and therapy) were conducted, representing a manifold increase compared to previous years.[7]

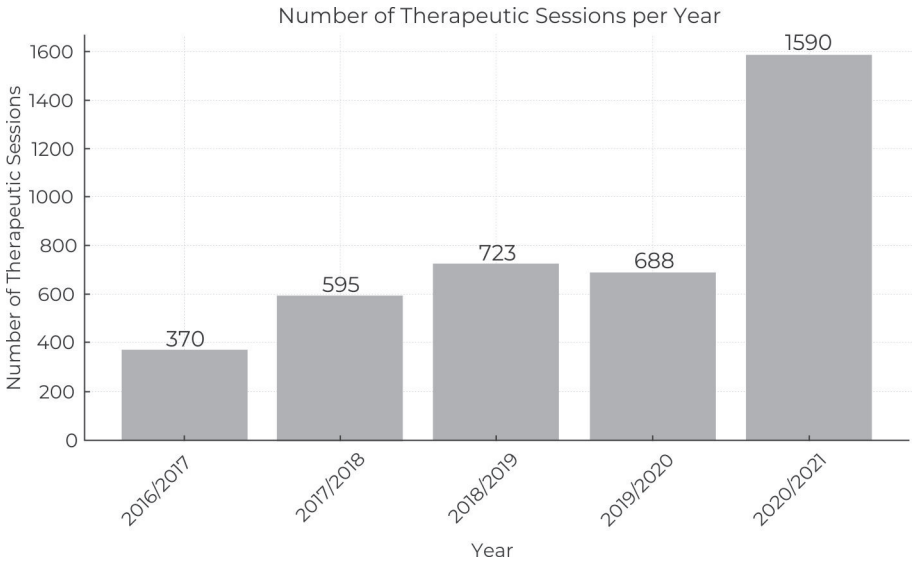

Chart 1: Growth in Demand for Psychological Counselling Services at Nahla ERC

[7] For comparison: in 2016/17, the number of sessions was 370, while in 2019/20, a total of 688 therapy sessions were conducted (Nahla ERC, 2021).

The increase in demand for psychological support as graphically illustrated in the report as a continuous upward trend, testifies to the importance of mental health in times of crisis and Nahla ERC's readiness to address that need. A more detailed analysis of the specific psychosocial challenges faced by women during the COVID-19 pandemic can be found in the publication *Women and COVID-19 Pandemic: Psychosocial Challenges and Opportunities* (2022), which dedicates an entire chapter to examining Nahla ERC's contribution as a local non-governmental organisation in addressing the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis.

In addition to individual counselling, Nahla ERC organised a series of psychological workshops and seminars aimed at enhancing the mental resilience of its participants. For example, in Sarajevo in 2023, an online lecture series titled "A Journey Through Personal Change – The Power of Self-Confidence and Self-Respect" was held with 22 participants (Nahla ERC, 2024), focusing on building self-esteem during life transitions. Workshops such as "Increasing Psychological Resilience to Stress" with 37 participants and "Stress Coping Techniques" with 32 participants were also conducted, demonstrating women's interest in acquiring practical skills for maintaining mental health and overall well-being. In Bihać, the workshop "Better for Myself" was conducted, focusing on everyday self-care, along with various activities for the prevention of violence against women, including panel discussions on domestic violence and seminars on recognizing and preventing abuse (Nahla ERC, 2024). These programmes not only provide knowledge and strategies for coping with stress and trauma, but also foster a supportive group dynamic where women share experiences and encourage one another—further enhancing and strengthening their mental health. The participant testimonies below illustrate the outcomes of these educational programmes.

> *At Nahla, I began to live again, to breathe, to feel. I was reborn. After so many years of merely existing, I now rise above everything because I know I can. I matter to myself. I love myself. (Participant from Bihać, 57 years old)*

> *Nahla gave me many beautiful moments, but the most important thing is that I learned how to take care of myself, accept myself, and become aware of how important my mental health and inner peace are—every day—and that I must invest in them. Now I know how important it is to pause, to focus on myself and my health, because only then can I be well for myself and for others.* (Amila, Sarajevo)

Through Nahla's Leadership Programme and the workshops on self-confidence, leadership, our rights and responsibilities, I realised the importance of every individual in society. It made me more perceptive—to look at situations from different perspectives, to draw conclusions based on arguments, and to practice critical thinking. (Participant from Sarajevo, 25 years old)

"I came to the seminar on building healthy interpersonal relationships with certain expectations, but I received something entirely different. In fact, I realised that my expectations—both of myself and of others—were mistaken, and that was why I always had problems in relationships. The seminar gave me exactly what I needed, even though I myself didn't know that this was what I needed. Since I'm still a young person, these skills came to me at exactly the right time. (Elma, high school student)

This is my third time attending the seminar 'A Journey Through Personal Change', and I want to say that I am truly the best example of the transformation these seminars bring. From being a fearful adult who didn't dare express her opinion even in her own home, I have become someone who can now openly share her thoughts—agreements and disagreements—in front of this whole group. Now I feel like I can make much better use of everything life has to offer. I am deeply grateful for everything. (Lejla, 26 years old)

Physical health is another important dimension that Nahla ERC integrates into its adult education programs. All three Nahla ERC centres include fitness facilities and sports and recreational activities specifically designed for women. One example is Nahla ERC's *Hiking Club*, which organises group field trips into nature, combining physical activity with socialising and mental relief. In 2023 alone, more than 120 women participated in full-day hiking tours (Nahla ERC, 2024). In addition to recreational activities, attention is also given to education about healthy lifestyles. In the 2023/24 period, a series of seminars and webinars on cardiovascular health was organised, holistically addressing medical, psychological, nutritional, and physical aspects of heart care. Through these seminars, participants learned from cardiologists about the prevention, symptoms, and treatment of heart disease; from nutritionists about the impact of diet on heart health; and from fitness trainers about age-appropriate cardio exercises. Topics such as the importance of vitamin D for immunity and overall health

were also covered in parallel. Nahla ERC also offered structured programmes such as the "Healthy Nutrition School". This was a 40-hour course held in 2023 in Bihać, where 12 participants acquired in-depth knowledge and practical skills for implementing healthy eating habits in daily life. The programme also included a hands-on half-day workshop focused on preparing healthy meals. In addition, Nahla ERC continuously provides support to pregnant women and mothers: lectures on pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding are regularly organised (e.g. "Breastfeeding Basics", "Preparation for Childbirth", the seminar "Pregnancy, Childbirth, and the Baby at Home") with the aim of educating expectant mothers about healthcare for themselves and their child. Such activities contribute to women's physical health and sense of security during pregnancy and motherhood. As a socially responsible community, Nahla ERC also organises an annual blood donation campaign in cooperation with the Institute for Transfusion Medicine of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, involving a large number of female donors (Nahla ERC, 2024), thereby raising awareness of the importance of caring for the overall health of the community.

> *The seminar helped me realise, after 20 years of marriage, what I had been expecting from my husband all along but never told him, because I believed he should be able to guess what I wanted. That kind of behaviour created tension, as he often said I was unpredictable. On the other hand, I am fully aware that he loves me and that my feelings matter to him—I obviously just needed to be clearer and more vocal about my expectations.* (Selma, 49 years old)

> *The lectures were rich in practical examples and used an interactive approach, which made understanding and applying what we learned much easier. This programme gave us an opportunity to connect and support each other, because during breaks we socialised, shared stories and experiences, and found emotional support in knowing we were not alone in our struggles. For me, it was especially important that my family enjoyed hearing about everything we went through and learned, and that I would talk to them after every lecture.* (Fatima, 40 years old, Parenting School)

By integrating programmes on mental and physical health, Nahla ERC encourages participants to adopt a holistic approach to their well-being. The outcomes of this intervention are multifaceted: through numerous evaluations, women report reduced anxiety, improved coping with stress, and enhanced physical fitness. On the

community level, empowered and healthier women are more capable of contributing to their families and society.

> *The Traditional Embroidery course I attended at Nahla thrilled me from beginning to end, with every detail in which I felt truly myself. There I met different people who share the same interests. It reignited my passion for reviving traditional skills and brought back memories of our elders who raised us with those same traditions, as well as helped me form beautiful friendships. Honestly, I recommend every woman to become part of this team that empowers us and makes our smiles part of everyday life.* (Ajla, 25 years old, Bihać)

Life Skills

Life skills encompass a broad range of knowledge and competencies that enable individuals to function effectively in modern society. These skills range from technical skills and digital literacy, to communication and financial capabilities, as well as time management and personal development. Nahla ERC places great emphasis on developing such skills among its participants to open new opportunities for employment, entrepreneurship, and active participation in life.

The observed period was marked by two major trends: the digital transformation of education necessitated by the pandemic, and the further expansion of vocational training programs tailored to labour market needs. The pandemic in 2020 forced many institutions and organisations to operate in online environments. Nahla ERC was well-prepared for this shift, thanks to its strategic investment in digitalisation. In 2020/21, the number of online educational programmes increased sharply; 46 programmes were conducted online, compared to just 14 in the previous year (Nahla ERC, 2021). This allowed Nahla ERC to reach participants who had previously been unable to attend due to distance or other barriers. At the same time, free webinars for the general public were organised throughout the year, covering a wide range of topics from IT and business skills to health and entrepreneurship. Between August 2020 and August 2021, a total of 32 webinars were held, followed live by over 1,700 individuals, while the overall online reach (via recordings and social media) exceeded 200,000 people (Nahla ERC, 2021).

The importance of online platforms and digital skills was further confirmed by data from Nahla ERC's 2022/23 annual report. During this period, more than 2,000 women participated in various training sessions in the fields of digital competencies,

online marketing, and digital content management, significantly increasing their competitiveness in the labour market and opening new professional opportunities (Nahla ERC, 2023). This level of engagement illustrates how digital education can multiply its impact. By making knowledge accessible online, Nahla ERC effectively created a virtual community of participants regardless of geography. A notable increase in participants from the Bosnian diaspora in online programs also confirmed the value of this approach for a population widely dispersed outside the borders of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In the area of vocational and business skills, Nahla ERC continued and expanded its educational and mentoring programmes aimed at preparing women for the labour market. Recognising that even during times of crisis there are sectors that demand qualified workers, existing programmes were continued and new ones introduced. In Sarajevo, two entirely new training programmes for work in IT sectors were accredited and launched in 2020/21: *Accounting Assistant Training* and *Automated and Manual QA Software Testing Training*. These programmes are publicly recognised (accredited by the relevant ministry), which means that participants receive certificates valid in the labour market, thereby increasing their employment prospects. In addition, Nahla ERC in Bihać launched an accredited programme in *Social Media and Online Content Management*, while in Tuzla, *Web Programming Training* was developed for the first time. A certified training in *UI/UX Design* (design of web and mobile applications) was also launched—an innovative step within the Bosnian context (Nahla ERC, 2021). Through thisprogramme, participants—including those with prior experience in graphic design—acquired advanced knowledge in designing user interfaces and user experiences; final projects in the form of application prototypes even served some participants as the foundation for potential start-up business ideas. Evaluations show that the results of these training sessions are quite positive—for example, the Data Science training programme led to the employment of participants in sectors such as banking, IT, healthcare, and sales, confirming that the acquired skills were in demand in the labour market (Nahla ERC, 2021).

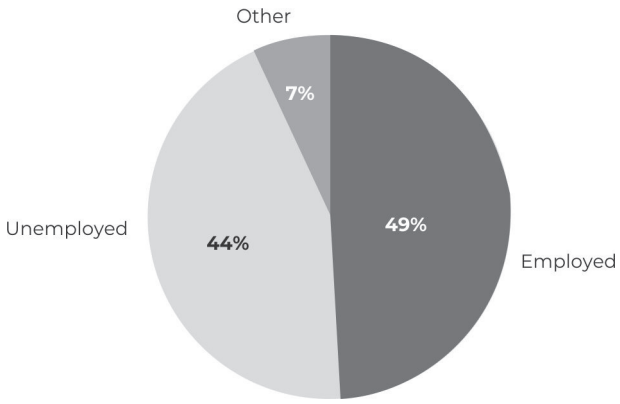

Chart 2: Employment Status of Participants at the Time of Enrolment

The evaluation conducted in 2022 showed that, in a sample of several Nahla ERC training programmes delivered between 2018 and 2021, **62% of participants found employment or paid internships during the course or within six months after completion**, indicating a high level of employability. Furthermore, the same study found that, through Nahla ERC's support in connecting participants with employers and through career counselling, women transitioned more easily from completing a course to securing a job (Nahla ERC, 2022). These figures are especially significant considering that most of the women were unemployed at the time of enrolment. Internal research found that the unemployment rate among the sample group dropped from 71% (before training) to 44% (after training), indicating a 27% reduction in unemployment. The majority of women (60%) found employment within six months of completing the training. These data confirm that developing life skills through adult education directly contributes to women's economic empowerment.[8]

[8] Employability after Completion of Nahla ERC's Training Programmes: Evaluation Report (September 2022), Archive of the Nahla Education and Research Centre Sarajevo, 122 Džemala Bijedića Street.

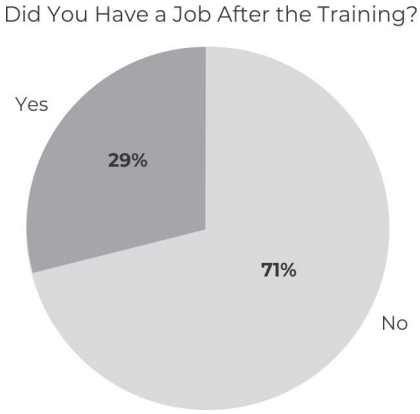

Chart 3: Participants' Current Employment Status (Post-Training)

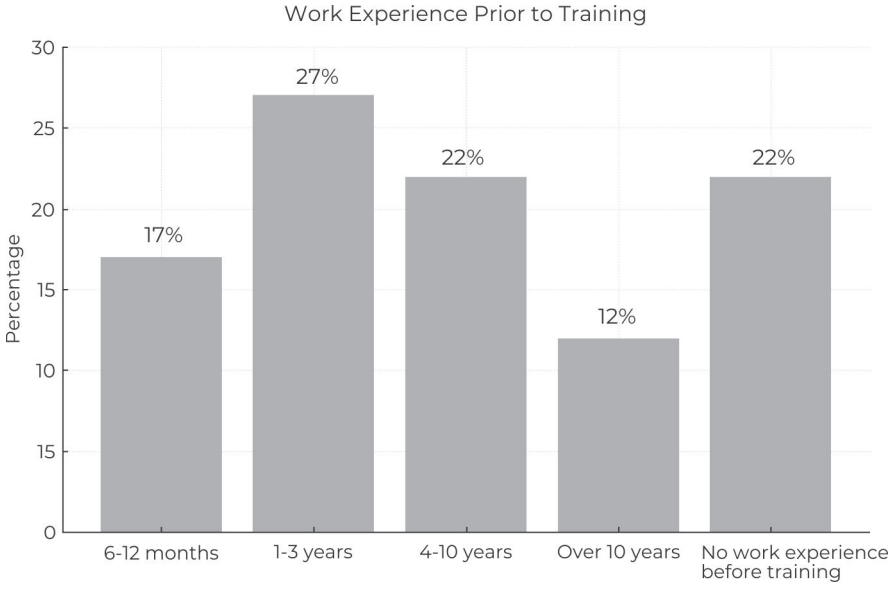

Chart 4: Participants' Work Experience at the Time of Enrolment

Nahla ERC also organises short seminars and workshops focused on general life skills. In 2023, special emphasis was placed on financial and digital literacy, communication, and organisational skills. For example, a seminar series titled *"Financial Skills for Life"* was held in Sarajevo and Tuzla, attended by 57 participants (Nahla

ERC, 2024), providing knowledge on personal finance, saving, and budgeting. Topics related to digital marketing and branding were also included: the seminar *"Social Media Marketing"* and the workshop *"Social Media for Small Businesses"* aimed to help women improve the online presence of their businesses (Nahla ERC, 2024).

In Tuzla, seminars were held on time management ("*Effective Time Management and Planning"* with 22 participants, and the development of communication skills as a prerequisite for personal and professional growth with 18 participants. A public speaking workshop titled *"What Makes a Good Public Speech?"* was also organised with 25 participants (Nahla ERC, 2024). These programmes fall under the category of so-called soft skills, which are applicable in all areas of life and career. Their value lies in helping women become more confident in expressing themselves, more efficient in organising responsibilities, and more prepared to stand out in the labour market or within their communities.

In summary, the life skills thematic area in Nahla ERC's programmes includes everything from professional training to personal development. Through flexible learning models (both in-person and online) adapted to contemporary challenges, Nahla ERC educated thousands of women during the observed period. Data from annual reports clearly show growth in participation: in 2020/21, 23% of all participants were enrolled in programmes under the category "Health and Life Skills" (Nahla ERC, 2021), while in 2023/24, that number rose to 35.76%, indicating growing interest in this type of content. The results are visible not only in employment statistics, but also in the personal stories of women[9] who, thanks to newly acquired skills, launched their own businesses, became financially independent, or simply improved their quality of life—by better managing household budgets or navigating technology more confidently. At the community level, skilled and self-assured women contribute to overall economic development and represent a new pool of human capital that drives innovation and entrepreneurship.

Parenting and Family Communication

Adult education at Nahla ERC also includes support for women in their family roles—as mothers, spouses, and family members. Strengthening parenting skills and quality family communication is essential not only for the well-being of women but also for

[9] See: Nahla Education and Research Centre, available at: https://nahla.ba/o-nama, Annual Reports Archive.

their children and extended families. Nahla ERC recognises that an empowered woman as a parent has a multiplier effect: the knowledge she gains is reflected in the healthy development of children and harmony within family life. Therefore, *parenting education programmes*, as well as family counselling services, have become an important component of Nahla ERC's work.

The "Parenting School" is a comprehensive programme for educating parents and other educational actors on contemporary challenges in child-rearing, and Nahla ERC has continuously offered this programme for more than 20 years. The aim of the Parenting School is preventive—to provide parents with knowledge before problems escalate. The programme consists of a series of seminars, lectures, and workshops on topics such as *prevention of addiction in children* (psychoactive substances, alcohol, gambling), *children's mental health, discipline and setting boundaries*, *media literacy*, and more A distinctive feature of these activities is the inclusion of not only parents but also students of psychology/pedagogy and educators, creating an interdisciplinary approach—future professionals and parents learning from one another. In parallel with work involving parents, workshops for children aged 9–12 were organised on the same topics covered with parents (Nahla ERC, 2024). This model of parallel education ensures that the knowledge acquired is immediately applied in practice: while parents learn how to recognise and prevent early signs of addiction, children engage in interactive sessions about their rights, healthy habits, and how to seek help.

In addition to this project, Nahla ERC continuously organises individual seminars to help parents tackle specific challenges. At the start of each school year, the seminar "Successfully Navigating the Maze of School Responsibilities" is regularly offered to parents of school-aged children. Ahead of the 2023/24 school year, this seminar in Sarajevo attracted a large number of parents. Topics included child time management, development of independence, responsibility for schoolwork, the optimal level of parental involvement in learning, and setting boundaries for technology use. Discussions and expert advice helped parents better understand how to balance support and control in raising a school-age child under contemporary conditions. Nahla ERC also incorporates the dimension of family relationships from the perspective of values and culture. Through this lens, it seeks to integrate traditional and contemporary knowledge—linking universal family values with modern psychological and pedagogical insights.

Nahla ERC's *Family Counselling Service* also provides direct assistance to families in crisis or facing specific challenges. Psychologists and marital counsellors at Nahla ERC work with couples and families on conflict resolution, improving communication, and strengthening family cohesion. Reports indicate that many counselling sessions were focused on mitigating the consequences of the pandemic period—families facing job loss or prolonged isolation sought support to regain stability. Although such programmes may be less visible in numerical terms, they have a profound impact on the lives of participants: a woman who improves her parenting competencies and family relationships contributes to a healthier environment for raising the next generation and reducing intergenerational challenges (Nahla ERC, 2021).

Thus, Nahla ERC's parenting and family communication programmes uniquely combine prevention and practical solutions to existing challenges. Through education and counselling, women gain knowledge on how to build positive family relationships, raise children who grow into healthy and responsible individuals, and navigate the challenges of parenting in the digital age and a rapidly changing society. Indirectly, these programs also strengthen the position of women within the family—empowered by knowledge, the mother/leader in the household is better equipped to negotiate responsibility-sharing, advocate for the well-being of children, and implement healthy practices. In this way, Nahla ERC treats education not only as a tool for individual growth, but also as a means of family development and transformation.

Creative Expression

Adults often discover or further develop their creativity through artistic expression, which has a positive impact on their mental health and overall well-being. A study published in *Frontiers in Psychology* explores the value of creative arts therapies for healthy older adults, emphasising their role in preventing common age-related conditions. These findings support the idea that engagement in creative activities during adulthood can foster personal development and emotional well-being (Galassi et al., 2022).

The experience of beneficiaries at the Nahla ERC has confirmed that creative skills and expression through art, handicrafts, and hobbies play a significant role in personal growth and emotional wellness. By learning new creative techniques, a person develops imagination, patience, a sense of achievement, and self-esteem. For many women, creative courses also serve as a path towards finding their own voice or even starting a

small business such as crafting souvenirs or handmade products. Aware of these benefits, Nahla ERC has, over the years, developed a diverse programme of creative workshops and courses that have become highly sought after among participants.

In the period from 2020 to 2024, there was a noticeable increase in interest in creative courses, particularly during the pandemic. Isolation and stress led many women to turn to creative activities as a form of therapy and practical support such as sewing face masks, making soaps for home use, and similar activities. Nahla ERC responded by expanding and diversifying its offerings in this area. The range of creative courses was enriched with an enhanced photography course that combined classroom theory with hands-on fieldwork, product photography and digital marketing. In addition to photography, a variety of new or improved workshops was introduced, including patchwork (sewing fabric scraps), decoupage (decorating objects using napkin technique), glass painting, painting on aluminium foil, natural soap making, jewellery making, knitting, and more (Nahla ERC, 2023). The approach ensured that every participant could find something aligned with her interests and prior knowledge – from introductory creative workshops to more advanced courses.

The extent of women's participation in Nahla ERC's creative programmes illustrates their significance most effectively: during the observed period (2020-2024), an annual average of 16-20% of all education participants attended one of the creative courses, making them the third most popular category (following business-related education and health/life skills). These figures demonstrate that creative programmes fulfilled an important need for social interaction and productive use of time during challenging times. Nahla ERC also recognised the economic potential of creative skills, especially traditionally female crafts such as sewing. Noticing *a particularly strong interest in sewing courses*, Nahla ERC not only increased the number of such courses but also innovated their content: a Clothing Design Course was introduced (focused on pattern construction and design), providing an advanced level of skill for those who wish to pursue tailoring more professionally. Additionally, a specialised sewing course for teenage girls was introduced, tailored to this target group to help them acquire practical skills and spark interest in fashion design.

Nahla ERC conducts part of its educational activities—such as professional training or advanced creative courses — on a commercial basis, with participation fees. However, a large portion of Nahla ERC's programmes that are focused on personal growth and development—including workshops intended for vulnerable groups—

is implemented on a non-commercial basis or with minimal fees, in order to ensure accessibility for all. Alongside commercial courses, Nahla ERC has made continuous efforts to make creative programmes accessible to marginalised groups, recognising their potential for economic empowerment. Through partnerships and collaborations, free sewing courses were organised specifically for vulnerable groups. These courses enabled participants to acquire practical skills that could directly improve their economic situation, while also restoring a sense of self-worth through the experience of learning and social interaction. Community and solidarity were prominent aspects of these courses: women shared materials and ideas, supported one another, and in doing so, the process of learning creative skills was enriched with a valuable element of social capital.

Creative and artistic programmes are not viewed merely as hobbies at Nahla ERC, but rather as multidimensional initiatives: therapeutic (for mental health), educational (for skill development), and potentially economic (for self-employment). Participant testimonials reveal that creative workshops help them cope with anxiety and loneliness, while others have transformed their creativity into an additional source of income (selling handmade products at bazaars or online).

Knitting has given me confidence and enriched me as a person. *Personally, it has fulfilled and inspired me—through acquiring new skills and meeting new, dear people. I believe that programmes like this would benefit anyone in the third age of life because apart from being useful, they help us broaden our horizons and grow within our communities. Most importantly, they help us care for ourselves, as knitting has therapeutic effects. I am 71 years old, currently retired, and I remain very active. (Participant of the knitting course)*

Although my formal education and nine years of teaching experience were not related to the textile industry, my love for this kind of creative, manual work dates back to childhood. *[...] This training has made me more competitive in the labour market within the textile industry, and I can confidently say that it is easier to find a job after completing it. (Participant of the tailoring and sewing course)*

During the course, and even after completing it, I received a great deal of motivation and inspiration for photography as my hobby. *I also had more ideas for product photography and established new collaborations. The support I received from Nahla ERC was excellent. [...] The course is more than useful for business development, especially for those who want to stand out from the competition on social media. (Participant of the product photography course)*

I completed a Master's degree in Biology, but I have always been interested in fashion and practised sewing as a hobby in my free time. *After some time, I heard about the programme at Nahla ERC, which further motivated me to turn my hobby into a business and professionalise it. I was further encouraged by the fact that completing the training at Nahla ERC provides a certificate—something very important for starting a business and opening a showroom, which is my great desire. I met wonderful people from whom I learned a lot—tidiness, precision, new skills, and valuable experiences. (Participant of the tailoring and sewing training)*

Nahla ERC occasionally organises exhibitions of works created by participants of creative courses or supports them in networking with social enterprises and handmade goods markets, thus completing the circle from learning to practical application. This approach demonstrates how non-formal education in arts and crafts can be part of a broader strategy for women's empowerment, helping them enrich their daily lives and gain a sense of accomplishment in something they truly enjoy (Nahla ERC, 2021).

Active Citizenship

Active citizenship involves awareness, knowledge, and skills that empower individuals to actively participate in their community's social life, advocate for their rights, and contribute to the common good. For women who have historically been marginalised from public engagement, programmes that promote activism, volunteerism, and leadership skills are crucial. Nahla ERC educates women not only for personal success, but also as active agents of social change, as seen in its youth programmes, activist initiatives, and community engagement projects.

One of Nahla ERC's key initiatives in its active citizenship programme is the "FIRST" Initiative (Against Racial and Religious Intolerance) – a group of Nahla ERC's activists dedicated to promoting human rights, specifically the right to freedom of religion and belief. This informal initiative brings together women who want to combat discrimination and prejudice, providing them with training and a platform for action. In 2023, a special training programme was launched within the FIRST initiative for educators and activists working on defending the right to freedom of religion, combating Islamophobia, hate speech, and discrimination Nahla ERC, 2024). The programme included seminars, workshops, and hands-on work. Additionally, through a separate project focused on protecting women's and children's rights, Nahla ERC

trained activists, high school students, and teaching staff to become educators children's rights and violence protection (Nahla ERC, 2024). Following the training, these young educators led a series of workshops for other women and children in local communities, spreading awareness about rights and protection mechanisms, creating a ripple effect of education within the community.

CER Nahla also places significant emphasis on training young female leaders and volunteers. Through its Youth Club "Tignum" and teenage club, the organisation works to raise awareness among girls about social issues, encourage critical thinking, and inspire action. Young activists have opportunities to engage in campaigns, volunteer work, and educational visits. A notable event occurred in 2023 when Nahla ERC's activists met with Tawakkol Karman, Nobel Peace Prize laureate (Nahla ERC, 2024). The messages of encouragement and determination shared during this meeting deeply impacted the young women, motivating them to persevere in their quest for a better society despite challenges. Such interactions andlearning from successful activists serve as inspiration and boost the confidence of young women, showing them that they too can drive change.

In the field of active citizenship, Nahla ERC conducted training for young activists during 2022/23 through a special workshop series titled "Youth for Social Justice". The programme included training in the field of human rights, advocacy, and social activism, empowering a total of 70 young women to initiate local campaigns and actions aimed at raising awareness of gender equality and human rights (Nahla ERC, 2023).

Active citizenship also includes economic empowerment through networking and public events. In 2021, Nahla ERC began marking the Women's Entrepreneurship Day as part of Global Entrepreneurship Week, continuing this tradition in 2022 and 2023 in cooperation with local authorities. In Sarajevo, in partnership with the Sarajevo Canton Ministry of Economy, an event was organised that brought together over 60 entrepreneurs and aspiring entrepreneurs. C2B, B2B, and B2G info sessions and networking activities were held, offering participants the opportunity to engage directly with representatives of institutions, start-up incubators, law firms, and successful online businesswomen. A panel discussion titled "How to improve online business" also took place, attended by more than 80 participants (Nahla ERC, 2024), where important questions were raised regarding digital entrepreneurship in Bosnia and Herzegovina and adapting to market changes. These events combine education with practical activism,

advocating for better conditions for women entrepreneurs, networking as a form of collective action. Women are encouraged not to be passive recipients of knowledge but to create opportunities through networking and joint initiatives, and to seek support for their business ideas.

Through these examples, we can see that Nahla ERC's approach to active citizenship integrates education, empowerment, and action. Education about rights and civic participation skills gives women knowledge; empowerment through examples, mentorship, and networking gives them motivation and confidence; and action—whether through volunteering, participating in campaigns, or engaging in dialogue with institutions—enables them to apply that knowledge and motivation and gives them the opportunity to see tangible results. In this way, education is treated as a tool for social change: every empowered participant becomes a potential agent of positive change in her family, workplace, or local community.

Results Interpretation

An analysis of Nahla ERC's long-standing practice reveals consistent positive results of its educational programmes on participants' personal growth and broader societal well-being. Quantitative indicators demonstrate the wide reach and impact of these programs. Each year, several thousand women complete educational programmes at Nahla ERC, and this number continues to grow. Despite the pandemic, the number of participants in 2020/21 increased compared to the previous year, as well as to pre-pandemic years, thanks to a diversified programmes offering and the transition to online learning. The increase in the number of beneficiaries and the growing interest in these programs reflects both the agility and sustainability of Nahla ERC's model, as well as the need for and benefits of these programmes in women's lives — which is why many participants return and recommend the programmes to others.

Employability and economic empowerment of participants stand out as one of the most tangible outcomes. An internal survey conducted in Sarajevo (2020/21) found that the unemployment rate among former training participants dropped from 71% to 44% after completing the training, with 49% currently employed and 7% engaged in alternative forms of work (freelance, entrepreneurship), suggesting that the acquired skills were directly applicable and in demand (Nahla ERC, 2021). Nahla ERC encourages this trend not only through training but also through *support networks*

(collaboration with start-up centres, networking events) to help participants bridge the gap between a business idea and its implementation more easily.

Psychological empowerment and well-being resulting from these programmes are particularly reflected in the discovery of one's own potential – from women who gained qualifications at Nahla ERC and now compete equally in the labour market, to unemployed women who had been devoted solely to their families for years and are now developing their own career interests or business ventures. Moreover, mental health programmes have contributed to reducing stress and anxiety among participants, while parenting support programmes have lessened feelings of parental helplessness and improved family communication (according to post-seminar parent satisfaction surveys).

Enhanced social capital and networking are more subtle values, but they are a noticeable result of Nahla ERC's programmes, where women build new connections and find support. One aspect is horizontal networking – participants of the same courses often form informal networks even after the programme ends (social media groups, regular meet-ups, and even joint initiatives). Another aspect is vertical networking—Nahla ERC connects participants with professionals, mentors, and different institutions. Over 100 local and international organisations and companies have collaborated with Nahla ERC's programmes over the years, providing participants with access to resources beyond the Center itself. These connections represent significant social capital that remains available to women even after they complete a course – they know whom to approach for advice, how to find information or funding more easily, etc. Moreover, Nahla ERC nurtures an alumni community – former participants often return as volunteers, lecturers, or mentors for future generations, thus closing the loop and strengthening the development of social capital.

The contribution to gender equality and the transformation of social norms is one of the key outcomes of Nahla ERC's work. The fact that hundreds of women have entered "non-traditional" professions (such as IT, entrepreneurship, and project management) or achieved financial independence helps shift the boundaries of what society typically views as a woman's role. Women trained at Nahla ERC now work as programmers, graphic designers, project team leaders, but also as athletes and activists – a wide range of fields where increased female participation contributes to the establishment of more equitable relations. Additionally, the projects led by Nahla ERC in the field of human rights and freedoms directly address the protection of rights where they are deemed threatened, covering topics such as violence against women, women's right to work and education, freedom of religion, and similar issues. Evaluations of

these projects show an increased level of awareness among participants regarding the mechanisms available for protecting their rights, as well as a greater willingness to report discrimination or violence after taking part in such initiatives.[10]

Community resilience and social change represent perhaps the highest achievements of this type of education. Throughout the observed period, Nahla ERC has repeatedly demonstrated how such centres and, more broadly, civil society organisations can play a crucial role in overcoming crises. During the pandemic, the organisation quickly transitioned to online work, offered psychological support, and continued delivering educational programmes. This fast response mitigated the negative impact of the crisis on its beneficiaries (they continued learning, received psychological support, and remained well-informed) (Dedović 2022). Awareness of the importance of education as a public good has also increased within the community; each year, a growing number of citizens, organisations, and companies support Nahla ERC's initiatives, recognising it as a partner in community development. It can be said that Nahla ERC is building a model in which an adult education centre also serves as a community hub—a place for gathering, information-sharing, cultural events, and civic activism.

In short, the results of Nahla ERC's work during the observed period confirm that adult education for women's personal growth and development brings multiple benefits: women acquire knowledge and skills that make them more independent and fulfilled at the individual level; their families benefit from improved economic status and better-quality relationships at the family level; and the community gains more active, aware, and connected members who initiate change and contribute to overall progress at the societal level.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Adult education contributes to the development of more resilient communities by increasing both individual and collective capacities for adapting to change and responding to crises (UNESCO, 2020). Community resilience includes the ability to cope with challenges, mitigate their impact, and regenerate through social networks, education, and active citizenship.

[10] Internal evaluation report of the project "For our Better Future – Education and Awareness-Raising for Bosnian Child's and Woman's Rights", Evidence-Based Development International, December 2023. Document available in the archives of Nahla ERC, 122 Džemala Bijedića Street, Sarajevo.

The experience of Nahla ERC during the 2020–2024 period offers a compelling example of the transformative power of adult education in empowering women and fostering resilient communities. Through a holistic approach – encompassing mental and physical health, professional and life skills, parenting support, encouragement of creativity and community engagement, Nahla ERC has positively impacted the lives of thousands of women, helping them realise their potential.

Formally, participants have earned various certificates and qualifications through Nahla ERC's educational programmes, which opened pathways for their further education and employment. However, even more important than the formal recognition were the values and changes resulting from the learning process itself: the development of self-confidence, the awakening of awareness about one's rights and possibilities, and the building of a sense of solidarity and community with other women. This model, in which education is treated as a tool for social transformation, and knowledge is directly translated into action for the benefit of individuals and the community, can serve as guidance and inspiration across the adult education sector.

Based on the conducted research, the following recommendations can be made:

Integration of a holistic approach into public adult education policies. Policymakers should recognise the value of models that combine professional training with workshops on health, parenting, and personal development. It is recommended to include multidisciplinary programmes inspired by Nahla ERC in adult education and gender equality strategies, as these programmes demonstrate broader reach and sustainability of results (economic, social, and health effects).

Financial and institutional support for women's empowerment programs. Nahla ERC is primarily an NGO and non-profit organisation, and its results show that investing in such centres yields a high social return. State institutions, local communities, and donors should strengthen support for these programmes—through co-financing courses for vulnerable groups, providing facilities, joint projects, etc.—in order for them to reach an even larger number of women, especially in rural areas where needs are significant.

Replication of good practices in other communities. It is recommended to establish similar centres or programmes in other cities/regions, modelled after Nahla ERC centres in Sarajevo, Bihać, and Tuzla. This can also include strengthening the

capacities of existing institutions to apply Nahla ERC's methodologies. The knowledge and curricula developed by Nahla ERC (e.g. accredited training courses for specific professions, parenting education modules) should be made more widely accessible through partnerships, enabling a broader group of women to benefit from these positive practices and raising the overall quality standards of women's education.

Networking and knowledge exchange between organisations. Nahla ERC can serve as a mentor or resource centre for other NGOs working with women by offering expertise in programme development, quality assurance, and outcome evaluation. Regular exchange of experiences—through conferences, joint projects, or online platforms—can improve the overall quality of the adult education sector and amplify its impact, as well as make innovations in practice more accessible and transferable.

In conclusion, the example of Nahla ERC serves as the best proof that investing in women's knowledge and personal development is not merely a matter of individual benefit, but a question of broader social value. Every woman who is educated and empowered has the potential to become a driver of positive change – fully aligned with Nahla ERC's vision of "an educated and empowered woman who changes the world". By investing in such women, we are in fact investing in a better, more just, and more humane society. Adult education should therefore be viewed and strategically supported as a key tool for building social capital and more resilient communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Holistički pristup učenju i obrazovanju odraslih: Lični razvoj i društveni utjecaj programa Centra za edukaciju i istraživanje „Nahla”

Sažetak: Obrazovanje odraslih ključni je faktor u izgradnji pojedinaca sposobnih za suočavanje s izazovima savremenog društva. Ovaj rad bavi se analizom specifičnih programa Centra za edukaciju i istraživanje Nahla (CEI Nahla), fokusiranih na lični rast i razvoj u pet oblasti: mentalno i fizičko zdravlje, životne vještine, roditeljstvo, razvoj kreativnih vještina i aktivno građanstvo. Ove oblasti odabrane su zbog velikog interesa za ovu vrstu programa, brojnosti ciljne grupe te mogućnosti da se kroz evaluacije i povratne informacije najbolje sagleda niz pozitivnih efekata na porodicu, zajednicu i šire društvo. Rad kombinuje kvalitativne i kvantitativne podatke i analize te donosi uvid u to kako ovi programi utječu na zapošljivost, poduzetništvo, samopouzdanje i građansku participaciju polaznica. Rezultati pokazuju da žene, uključivanjem u ovakve programe, razvijaju osjećaj postignuća, jačaju vjeru u vlastite sposobnosti i sve češće preuzimaju aktivne uloge u zajednici. Poseban naglasak stavljen je na multiplikativni efekat edukacije: žene koje steknu znanje često ga prenose dalje, stvarajući lanac osnaživanja u lokalnim zajednicama. Nahlin model pokazuje kako obrazovanje odraslih može biti, pored lične dobrobiti, i sredstvo društvene promjene. Ovaj rad pokazuje kako su obrazovni programi CEI „Nahla” primjer holističkog pristupa cjeloživotnom učenju, s jasno prepoznatim koristima na ličnom, društvenom i ekonomskom planu. Rad ukazuje na važnost razvijanja programa ličnog razvoja u okviru obrazovanja odraslih te njihovu neraskidivu povezanost s održivim razvojem zajednice.

Ključne riječi: lični razvoj, obrazovanje, žene, životne vještine, cjeloživotno učenje

References

Nahla ERC 2021. *Annual report 2020/21*. Sarajevo: „CEI Nahla", https://nahla.ba/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Godisnji_izvjestaj_web_2020-21.pdf

Nahla ERC 2022. *Annual report 2021/22*. Sarajevo: CEI „Nahla", https://nahla.ba/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/NAHLA_godisnji_-izvjestaj-21_22.pdf

Nahla ERC 2023. *Annual report 2022/23*. Sarajevo: Nahla ERC, https://nahla.ba/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/NAHLA_godisnji_izvjestaj_22_23_WEB.pdf

Nahla ERC 2024. *Annual report 2023/24*. Sarajevo: Nahla ERC, https://nahla.ba/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/NAHLA_godisnji_izvjestaj_23_24_WEB.pdf

Dedović, S. 2022. How can NGOs be Effective in Meeting the Pandemic Challenges – A Case Study of "Nahla" through the Pandemic in B&H Society. U: S. Draganović, E. Topçu, & S. Fišo. ur. *Women and COVID-19 Pandemic: Psychosocial Challenges and Opportunities*. Sarajevo: Centar za napredne studije, pp. 181-204.

Fleming, T. 2018. Mezirow and the Theory of Transformative Learning. U: V. Wang ur. *Critical Theory and Transformative Learning.* IGI Global, pp. 120-126.

Galassi, F., Merizzi, A., D'Amen, B., & Santini, S. 2022. Creativity and art therapies to promote healthy aging: A scoping review. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 906191. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.906191

Heard, H. E., Gorman, B. K., Rangel, J. T., M. 2018. Gender and the Returns to Adult Education: Evidence from a National Survey. *Sociology of Education* 91(3), 240–261, https://doi.org/10.1177/0038040718776143

Ilieva-Trickova, P. & Boyadjieva, P. 2023. Adult Education as a Pathway to Empowerment: Challenges and Possibilities. U: J. Holford et al. ur. *Lifelong Learning, Young Adults and the Challenges of Disadvantage in Europe.* Cham: Palgrave, pp. 169-191.

Kabeer, N. 1999. Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment. *Development and Change* 30(3), 435–464.

Lopes, Henrique. "How Adult Education Can Save Your Life." In ICAE Virtual Seminar: Role and Impact of Adult Education, (pp. 13–19), Belgrade: ICAE & DVV International, 2019.

Putnam, R. D. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Spahić-Zekić, A. (2010). Socijalni kapital kao faktor održivog razvoja. *Pregled: Časopis za društvena pitanja,* 51(3), 103–118. https://pregled.unsa.ba/index.php/pregled/article/view/628:contentReference[oaicite:17]{index=17}

UNESCO. 2020. *Embracing a Culture of Lifelong Learning: Contribution to the Futures of Education Initiative*. Hamburg: UIL, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374112

UNESCO. *Gender Equality and Education*. https://www.unesco.org/en/gender-equality/education

World Bank. *Gender Overview*. https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/gender/overview