

Our impact - Meet Shqipe Ibraj Mala

Since her time as a middle school student, Shqipe was sure she wanted to fight for human rights, but little did she know that she was to become a successful human rights lawyer and the Head of the National Preventive Mechanism against Torture within the Ombudsperson Institution. “If you allow your biggest passion to drive your profession you can really contribute in making the difference” she says.

A few years after the completion of her studies at the Law School at the University of Pristina, Shqipe started working in 1999 as a legal expert within the then Prosecutor Office in Peja/Peć. She remembers the experience as the one that had the most lasting impact on her future career, pushing her further to continue her journey as a human rights lawyer: “ While working on the most complicated cases of the time I understood what it truly meant to deal with serious violations of human rights. And that was the moment I was sure that I could do no other job than this.”

After having successfully passed the bar exam in 2005, Shqipe started working as a legal advisor at the Ombudsperson Office in Peja/Peć, becoming one of the first women legal advisors in the institution to be specialised and to investigate on human rights allegations involving torture and ill-treatment by conducting regular visits to the local correctional facilities and working for the prevention of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment in places of deprivation of liberty.

While remembering this period as one of the most professionally demanding in her career, she firmly affirms how working directly in the field has prepared her to tackle all the challenges that working as a human right lawyer and defender intakes.

However, the real turning point in her career was when in 2009 she moved to Pristina and started working hand in hand with the then Ombudsperson and representing locally and abroad the Office and its work on prevention of torture and ill-treatment until 2011, when she was officially appointed as the first-ever woman Deputy Ombudsperson in charge for the executive Department. During that time, she undertook the challenge to lay the foundation of what later on, in 2016, would have become the Department for the National Mechanism for Prevention of Torture (NPM) within the Ombudsperson Institution.

From that time onwards and as the most prominent expert in the field of prevention of torture and ill-treatment, Shqipe covers the position of Head of Department and together with her team of legal experts, social worker, doctor and psychologist regularly visit places of deprivation of liberty and monitor that there is no breach of the European Convention for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

Soon after establishment of the mechanism in 2016, Council of Europe implemented comprehensive capacity building program with NPM in the framework of the project “Strengthening the National Preventive Mechanisms against Torture” (2017 -2019). It contributed to tangible capacity development of the mechanism and awareness raising on its role and mandate with relevant institutions, and contributed to positioning NPM among the best in South-Eastern Europe, according to evaluation of international experts. The Council of Europe’s comprehensive support to NPM continued over 2020 and 2021, in the framework of

the project “Strengthening the Institutions in Fight against Torture, Ill-treatment and Other Degrading Treatment”.

Following the framework of the Convention, the National Preventive Mechanism acts as an independent body with the key role in making sure that the Convention is respected and human dignity preserved. “ We regularly visit detention facilities, and we constantly monitor the treatment of persons deprived of their liberty. Our role is to advise and provide recommendations to local authorities, promote legal and procedural reforms, as well as engaging with other relevant party authorities concerning prevention of torture and ill-treatment”, she explains.

“It’s a tough job, very dynamic, and no day is typical or rutinary; But me and my team are prepared and ready for it. Thanks to our constant coordination with counterparts and to the excellent cooperation and synergy established with the Council of Europe in Pristina we have access to the best pool of human rights experts coming from different European countries. This makes it possible for us to have fundamental peer-to-peer exchange that allows us to be always updated on best international practices, and most importantly to continue learning new ways to advance our work to the maximum standards ”.

Coming to the end of our talk we ask Shqipe what are her plans and hopes for the future of her career and her work: “ To continue learning, of course! You can never stop, especially when dealing with such a field.” she says joyfully. “What I hope is to be of inspiration for other women deciding to undertake a similar career path, and to transmit to them that with hard-work and dedication you can really pursue your goal and make your mark. Always strive for excellence and success will follow!.