

Breaking Barriers and Empowering Women: An Interview with Donjeta Sahatçiu, Deputy Mayor of Prishtina Municipality, in Celebration of International Women's Day

International Women's Day marks the recognition and celebration of women's achievements all over the globe. Since the early 1900s, March 8th has been a reminder of this cause and an opportunity to recognize and address the challenges women still face today, such as gender-based violence, discrimination, unequal access to education, and unemployment.

Today, EYE decided to talk with Donjeta Sahatçiu, the Deputy Major of the Municipality of Prishtina. By sharing her experiences and background, we hope to send a motivating and inspiring message to young women in Kosovo. Hopefully, this story will reach the women who will occupy future key positions in private companies and public institutions of Kosovo.

Q1: Can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

Growing up as the eldest of two younger siblings, a sister, and a brother, I always felt a sense of responsibility. Being the oldest meant that I had to set a good example for my siblings as they looked up to me. This sense of duty has followed me throughout my life, and precisely this sense was a driving force in my personal and professional journey. I am naturally inclined to be attracted to and take on big responsibilities, seeking out new challenges without hesitation. It's a part of who I have grown to be.



Q2: Can you tell us about your journey of self-discovery and how it led you to the technology sector?

Honestly, throughout my academic life, academic success wasn't the ultimate goal for me. I wanted to get involved in extracurricular activities to discover more about myself and to clarify my career goals. In primary and high school, I served as class president, and later during my bachelor's studies, I joined the student government. I wanted to explore my options and find my passion. While some of my friends had their career paths laid out in their heads, I was envious of that clarity. I didn't know what I wanted to do, but I knew I wanted to find something that resonated with me. As time passed, I discovered new opportunities I still needed to consider, such as communication and tech.

I didn't plan to go into the technology sector. However, after completing an internship in telecom, I started as an assistant at Rrota, one of the first digital agencies in Kosovo. At the time, there were very few women working in the company. When I joined, I had no programming or design skills whatsoever. Regardless, the skills and experience I acquired during my studies at RIT Kosovo, were fundamental.

During my 10 years at Rrota, I grew tremendously as a person and as a professional. When you become a CEO at the age of 23, your character is everything. How you focus your growth and keep yourself grounded is crucial to your path. For the first time, I discovered my drive to work with people and help them grow. I enjoyed motivating and pushing people to be their best and creating opportunities for them to shine. It was an awkward realization as those around me know me as quite introverted.

Q3: Did you face any challenges as a female leader, and how you've worked to overcome gender bias? Can you share a specific instance where you felt your gender was an obstacle in your professional life, and how did you handle it?

When reflecting on my first years as a CEO, I recall feeling excluded or even ignored. It wasn't easy, as many people questioned my capabilities not only because of my age but also because of my gender. I remember once feeling attacked because of both age and gender; as I was attending a meeting at one of the government agencies to discuss a contractual issue, I was assumed to be an assistant or secretary to my boss, who was late to the meeting. This was a turning point in the reality I was working in: I either had to fight or flee. I chose to fight. I would still do it.

Q4: What actions have you taken to promote gender diversity in the IT industry, and what advice would you give young women interested in pursuing STEM careers?

Everywhere I went, everything I did over the past 15 years was around women. I was convinced that the more opportunities you give to younger girls, the more lives you will impact. At one point, Rrota even reached a 50:50 ratio of women to men employed. That was huge. At one point, even STIKK, the Kosovo ICT Association, had 2 women leaders - Vjollca, the CEO, and myself voted as the first woman Chair of the Board. I am exceptionally proud to have witnessed progress and contributed to the acceptance of women's roles in the IT industry. Today reminds me of the importance of encouraging women to pursue careers in STEM fields. One need not be limited to programming or design; since management, communication, and psychology roles are equally valuable in the IT industry. This year's theme of DigitALL for International Women's Day highlights the potential for women to make meaningful contributions. Our statistics show that we have a record high of women who have joined the University of Prishtina IT department when compared to men. This is a success that needs to be celebrated, and I know lots of other women have committed their careers to this day.

Q5: What advice would you give young women hesitant to take on leadership roles due to the fear of facing discrimination and negativity, especially in male-dominated fields such as politics?

I'd like to believe that everything happens for a reason. You reach a point where everything you pour in finds its way. So did I. Every leadership role I have undertaken this far has found me, and I have accepted it with an open heart. Deciding to serve as the first woman Deputy Mayor was a once in a lifetime opportunity. Again, I could choose to fight or flight. As women, we often overthink and are preoccupied with external factors. We sometimes even question our capabilities, more often than men. Surely, women face greater prejudice, online shaming, and sexism. Even more so in politics, where judgments are rampant, people have a preconceived notion that women can't handle the pressure and can only play the role of a puppet, that is, looking good and staying put.

I even remember being called naive and delusional after my first public outing as a Deputy Mayor, for even thinking I could be the change I was aiming for. It was disheartening to hear, to say the least, especially since Prishtina had never had a woman in such a position before. But, as with everything else, I had to work with myself, find the drive, and focus, and let time prove everything.



Q6: What motivated you to take up the challenge of becoming a deputy mayor despite facing doubt and criticism?

Simply: pave the way for other women after me. As I say this, I still can't help but think how naive I might sound yet to this day. Regardless, that is my drive and what keeps me going. Upon completion of my term, I want to ensure that this is the new standard; no political party can run for office without a woman mayor or deputy mayor candidate. If I witness this reality, regardless of where my journey may take me, I know now that I would want to fully embrace and celebrate it, knowing that I played a role in establishing this legacy.

Q7: What advice do you give women who may feel discouraged or limited by societal expectations or barriers when pursuing their goals and dreams? And how do you believe education can play a role in breaking down these barriers and promoting gender equality?

It is imperative to develop independent thinking and braveness to take a risk - explore, learn, fail, and grow. When I speak to youth, they often ask me the same question: how did I achieve the position of a Deputy Mayor, assuming almost everything. Little do they know that I never even planned or worked for it. I come from a typical middle-income family from Prishtina, with an education and career all pursued in Prishtina, with no intention of getting rich and famous.

But what almost always makes a difference in pursuing leadership roles is the character you build and how you learn from past experiences. Don't compare yourself to others, as this can lead to setting unrealistic benchmarks and limiting your potential. We're all unique individuals with limitations and strengths, so it's important to focus on your progress and growth.

Unfortunately, gender inequality will co-exist for many years to come. That is why education is a critical part of my portfolio as Deputy Mayor. We must invest in our children from a very early age and provide equal opportunities for all, regardless of gender. It's essential to break down these societal barriers and create a future where everyone has an equal chance to become a leader. We are often too focused on preparing "the future generations" without realizing that we must also prepare the ground for such future generations. It is essential to ensure that our current system functions correctly to create a better future for the upcoming generations, who will undoubtedly benefit from technology and globalization, and impact society.

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Q8: What is the most important advice you want to send to young girls today?

Be you. Embrace yourselves. The good and the bad. Be open, and explore. As someone who strives to be the mentor I needed when I was younger, I encourage young girls to dare to think differently and freely express their opinions, regardless of whether they align with the views of those around them. Only by daring to think differently can we grow and expand our horizons in ways that nothing else can. I invite them to join me in daring to be different, and I assure them that it's ultimately worth it.