Change Starts With Us

Mama Cash grantee Bilitis reflects on the ingredients for impact
Founded in 2004 as a community organisation of lesbians and bisexual women based in Sofia, Bilitis has become one of Bulgaria’s leading LGBTI rights organisations. Bilitis’ mission is to achieve equality for lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, trans*, and intersex people (LGBTI) and overcome all forms of discrimination against them in Bulgaria. Bilitis organises activities aimed at expanding and supporting LGBTI community building. It also engages in advocacy and public education in collaboration with the broader LGBTI rights movement. Bilitis has official responsibility for organising the annual Sofia Pride event and the annual LGBTI Arts Festival. In partnership with the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, it oversees the strategy towards a national plan for LGBTI equality. Bilitis received its first grant from Mama Cash in 2009.

A woman’s face at the fore of the movement

Bulgaria joined the European Union in 2007, precipitating a sharp decline in funding from international donors and leading to the collapse of a number of established human rights organisations, including the main LGB organisation, Gemini, in 2009. With Gemini having disappeared, the movement lost its public face and there was little coordinated collaboration between various LGB groups and initiatives. Lesbians and bisexual women were barely visible in national level organising, and trans* people were not represented in the movement at all. Bulgaria’s first Pride parade, in 2008, was small in numbers and attracted severe violence. At that time, Bilitis operated as a community organisation of lesbians and bisexual women. It was one of the few organisations with the capacity to engage in national level advocacy, so it stepped into the void. Bilitis gradually developed into what it describes as the “spider in the web” for a movement that, at the time, consisted mainly of loose and informally organised groups.

Over the years, Bilitis’ focus on community support for lesbians and bisexual women—discussion clubs, self-support groups, social events, and the like—has decreased. The group explains: “The mainstream changed. There is a women’s club in Sofia and an LGBT club that is frequented a lot by lesbians. There are initiatives organising parties and social events for LB women. Social media has made a huge difference for lesbians and bisexual women: it not only provides accessible information but also social networks.”

At the same time, the group saw the need to motivate lesbian, bisexual women, trans*, and intersex persons to become more politically active. It began planning some of its traditional activities in a different way, to facilitate community empowerment and engagement. For example, the traditional LGBTI Art Fest, organised by Bilitis since 2005, became an LGBTI Community Festival in which every performance, discussion, exhibition, literature night, and so on was initiated by volunteers from LGBTI communities. This strengthened the event’s character as a platform for unifying LGBTI people. The result of the 2014 festival was the founding of the informal LGBTI-HHH (healthy, horny, happy) Collective, supported by Bilitis. The Collective engages young LGBTI activists and motivates them to take political action.
Since it began, Bilitis has helped bring about a shift in social norms. This can be seen, says the group, in the reception to and participation in the annual Pride event. When Sofia Pride was first organised in 2008, it drew about 150 participants. They were attacked with petrol bombs, rocks, and glass bottles. Since then, Pride parades have taken place peacefully and have drawn an increasing number of participants, as well as the support of political parties and embassies. In 2012 there were over 1,500 participants and the event was expanded to include a movie programme, open air concert, and an arts festival. Sofia Pride is now perceived by the general public as a major annual public event. Anti-Pride demonstrations, although consistently organised every year, are strictly controlled by the police and, to a large extent, have reinforced the significance of Pride and its social impact: the number of Pride supporters who are not from LGBTI communities has grown.

“The fact that an increasing number of us speak openly—in public debates, in the media—as lesbians, as bisexual women, as trans* and intersex people, has been important in shifting social norms, shifting how we are perceived,” believes Bilitis. “We have consistently been as present and visible as possible. This consistency has been an important contributor to the change we have seen in the lives of LBT people and in society.” Bilitis’ increased visibility has been facilitated by the favourable attitude of journalists and mainstream media towards LGBTI people and issues. Bilitis describes this as a drastic shift over the past five years. Its members now appear frequently on television, radio, and in newspaper articles. The group is consistently asked by mainstream media to give opinions on any issue affecting LGBTI people in Bulgaria and Europe. This positive media attention has played an important role in changing mainstream norms and perceptions.

The fact that Bilitis is led by lesbians and bisexual women and its staff and volunteers are women, trans, and intersex people, has contributed considerably to lesbian, bisexual, trans*, and intersex visibility. Because Bilitis’ board and staff members regularly appear in national media, the face of Bulgaria’s LGBT rights movement is often a woman’s face. “The most important change since 2009 is that we are out there, and we are noticed,” says the group. “Our issues are human rights issues and we are considered part of the human rights movement. We increased the visibility of and diversity within human rights and women’s rights movements.”

Bilitis has recently launched a new initiative in the field of education, developing research-based advocacy to promote school policies that are inclusive of LGBTI people, and to promote changes in educational standards and content, so that the latter include scientific information on LGBTI identities, and awareness-raising about diversity and human rights.

A growing constituency

Bilitis positions itself as a feminist organisation and as an LGBTI rights organisation, with a focus on lesbians, bisexual women and, more recently, trans* and intersex people. Its politics have always been feminist. Bilitis engages with Bulgaria’s women’s rights movement, ensuring the presence of lesbians and bisexual women in women’s rights spaces. Recently, Bilitis has organised activities oriented to the general public and intended to trigger a critical reflection on hetero-patriarchal norms and highlight the role of minority women, including LBT women, in Bulgaria’s history and culture. Such events include the Walk a Mile in Her Shoes event, widely covered in the mass media, a feminist exhibition on the role of women in Bulgarian history, and a feminist walking tour of Sofia which included a history of the lesbian and bisexual women’s movement that began in the 1990s.

Since 2012, Bilitis also runs a support group for trans* and intersex people. The fact that one of Bilitis’ founders came out as intersex and trans* identified helped inspire the group in this direction. Trans* and intersex people started
approaching Bilitis for information and resources as there was no other organisation in Bulgaria offering such a space. Bilitis found that it was in the best position to integrate trans* and intersex issues—and people—in the broader LGBTI rights agenda and movement. From its initial support group and organising work, Bilitis is now engaging in strategic litigation for gender recognition. The group’s long-term goal is to gather a pool of cases that can be used as the basis to propose a new law on gender reassignment.

Bilitis is also engaged in research and awareness-raising in the lesbian, bisexual, and trans* women’s communities about taboo topics, such as violence within lesbian couples, and date-related violence involving trans* women. This activity is being implemented within an EU-funded project in which Bilitis is one of nine EU partners. “The project enabled us to create new linkages with very vulnerable groups, such as lesbian/bisexual women who are victims of domestic violence, and prostituting trans* women who are victims of violence in the streets,” explains the group.

**Like-minded allies**

Over the years, Bilitis has significantly strengthened its alliance with other LGBTI organisations and groups in Bulgaria. It has used the opportunity of coordinating the annual Pride event to build solidarity and collaboration between various groups and organisations. This has led to, among other things, joint advocacy initiatives.

A key ally is the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (BHC), which is considered the leading human rights player in Bulgaria. Bilitis and the BHC undertake monitoring of legislation and its impact on LGBT people. BHC is also partner in the new alliance for a national plan for LGBTI rights. In 2014, in relation to the EU Elections, Bilitis also formed a new alliance with the NGO Interethnic Initiative for Human Rights. This alliance initiated a national campaign for hate-free elections, aiming to increase the awareness of the candidates for the European Parliament of issues faced by people who are marginalised on the basis of difference from the Bulgarian majority: ethnicity, sexual orientation, religious belief, disability, or refugee or migrant status. As a result of Bilitis’ campaigning, four MEP candidates from Bulgaria signed the ILGA-Europe Come Out Pledge to work in support of LGBTI rights if elected. One of them is now in office and Bilitis’ collaboration with him continues.

Similarly, Bilitis has developed new collaborations with groups focused on fighting racism, xenophobia, misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia. The results include joint political protests, such as an anti-fascist protest in February of this year calling on the Sofia Municipality to ban the traditional Lukov March (a pro-fascist event named after the Bulgarian General Lukov, who supported the Nazi regime) and another in May directed at the Ministry of Justice and calling for revisions in the Hate Crime Law to include homophobic and transphobic motives.

**Initiating dialogue**

Despite all efforts of the LGBTI rights movement in Bulgaria, no legislative change has occurred. This is true for other human rights issues as well: political turbulence and conservative governments have thus far proved too great a barrier for progressive change. The partnership with the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, however, has given Bilitis better access to politicians: the groups cooperate in lobbying for the development of a national plan for LGBTI equality. Bilitis now meets with all major political parties, except the far right, to discuss current human rights policies and their impact on LGBTI rights, the gaps, and the parties’ programmes to address these gaps. Bilitis and BHC have developed a briefing paper showing the deficiencies in current national policies and legislation, and making recommendations towards enforcement of justice for all.
Over the last five years, Bilitis has developed a relationship of collaboration with the local government in Sofia, which has led to an increasingly smooth preparation for the annual Pride event and adequate security measures. However, in 2014, when the Head of the Security Department of Sofia Municipality attempted to severely restrict the route of the Pride march and the planned open-air exhibition, Bilitis, in collaboration with the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, did not hesitate to appeal both decisions in the Sofia Administrative Court. Although the Court rejected the appeal, arguing that there was no formal ban of the demonstration or the public event, the litigation was successful in re-opening negotiations which ultimately led to consensus on an acceptable alternative.

**Influence beyond the movement**

Bilitis has managed to grow its donor base. In 2009, when Mama Cash began funding the organisation, Bilitis had four institutional donors, only one of which supported it beyond the costs of Pride. By 2013 the group had eight donors, four of which funded activities other than Pride. Bilitis currently pays four staff members part-time. A big achievement for the group was its success in securing funding for staff costs from two other donors, ILGA Europe and the American Embassy in Sofia, in addition to Mama Cash. Bilitis has explored different models of staffing the organisation. The group found that there were few people with the necessary skills and willing to work as a full-time Executive Director. “Given the political context in Bulgaria, becoming a ‘professional NGO worker’ is not attractive, let alone for a lesbian organisation, in the perspective of career development,” explains the group.

The organisation is operating with a model of active board members and other volunteers. Each gets paid a (small) part-time salary for their work. No one is dependent on this income: everyone has employment elsewhere. “Such a diverse team gives us access to a range of spaces,” says Bilitis. “We speak in those spaces as members of an LGBTI organisation, as well as in our capacity as communication expert or engineer. This gives us credibility and influence in a range of spaces, which we would not have if one or two full-time, dedicated staff members would have to undertake this.” Bilitis sees this as a key factor in the organisation’s opportunities to influence beyond the movement. Since January of this year, Bilitis has also appointed a manager on LGBTI rights and movement building, whose role is to identify and engage young LBT women activists, to organise capacity building events for them, and to involve them as volunteers in everything the organisation does. This has enlarged Bilitis’ pool of volunteers and further strengthened linkages with the community.

**Role of Mama Cash**

Bilitis sees Mama Cash’s financial support as its main source of sustainability. Bilitis feels that Mama Cash’s provision of core support over multiple years allowed it the opportunity to reflect, plan, and commit to a multi-year strategy. The organisation developed its first Strategic Plan in 2011. In 2013 it started developing a fundraising plan, with the aim of seeking more diversified support, especially for core costs.

The group values Mama Cash’s understanding of the need to use funds for operational costs, and the flexibility of its grant, allowing Bilitis to adjust its strategies and invest in emerging needs. The core support Bilitis receives also enables it to raise other funding: Bilitis’ organisational budget has increased from some €5,000 euro in 2009 to around €40,000 in 2013. Mama Cash funding provided Bilitis with the credibility to act as the fiscal sponsor for the Sofia Pride Committee and to receive funding on behalf of the Committee. Most importantly, explains the group, the grant from Mama Cash, as a general support grant, has allowed Bilitis to experiment, to pilot new things, such as its national level advocacy work, the trans* and intersex support work and strategic litigation. Both are key areas of focus for Bilitis today.

Bilitis also values the support of Mama Cash in building the capacities of its staff and board. For example, Mama Cash facilitated participation of a Bilitis board member in the 2011 CREA Sexuality, Gender and Rights Institute which helped deepen the group’s analysis of the connections between gender, sexuality, and rights. Following the Institute, Bilitis held a
workshop to share what was learned at the Institute and reflect on its relevance for the LGBTI rights movement in Bulgaria.

From 2009 to 2015, Bilitis received a total of €150,000 from Mama Cash.

[This story of change is based on documents Bilitis submitted as part of Mama Cash’s monitoring and evaluation during the grant periods; progress review conversations conducted over skype; and an interview with Monika Pisankaneva of Bilitis. All quotes are Monika’s. The original case study was researched and compiled by Esther Vonk.]
Mama Cash
PO Box 15686
1001 ND Amsterdam
The Netherlands

T +31 (0)20 515 87 00
F +31 (0)20 515 87 99
E info@mamacash.org
I www.mamacash.org /
      www.mamacash.nl

Bank: IBAN NL88INGB0000000528