

Creating Dialogue in a Landscape of Conflict in South Eastern Europe

LISE BJERKAN

Cet article examine l'impact d'un projet développé par le Stability Pact Gender Task Force qui a comme objectif de donner du pouvoir politique aux femmes pour changer fondamentalement la culture politique de l'Europe du Sud-Est. Le projet a remplacé les politiques du conflit armé, la ségrégation et l'exclusion par des politiques de paix, de co-existence et de dialogue.

The Stability Pact Gender Task Force (SP GTF) has worked for the political empowerment of women as a means to fundamentally change the political culture of South Eastern Europe since its very beginning in 1999. It was established as a result of an appeal to the leaders of the Stability Pact in July 1999. More than 150 women leaders from 13 countries—both Eastern and Western European countries—signed this appeal. The women signed on behalf of women political party groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), trade unions, academia, parliaments, and even governments. The most important part of this appeal was that women asked for an active partnership role in the Stability Pact. After a lot of lobbying the SP GTF was established under the auspices of the OSCE in Sarajevo in November 1999.

Peace in this region is still not secured and the relatively recent armed conflicts in Kosovo, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYR Macedonia) and Southern Serbia parallel the difficult negotiations between Serbia and Montenegro about the future of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The SP GTF promotes the active and equal involvement of women in conflict prevention and in the efforts to establish peace and reconciliation. Essential to this process is the replacement of the politics of armed conflict, segregation and exclusion with the politics of peace, co-existence, and dialogue. The SP GTF has concentrated its efforts on three pillars:

- increased public awareness of women's political participation in elections and political processes in general;
- reform of existing electoral systems and legislation

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where needed to promote women's political participation;

- establishment governmental institutions to promote gender equality and improve and strengthen existing mechanisms.¹

The SP GTF project called "South-east European Women's Role in Conflict Prevention, Resolution, and Post Conflict Dialogue" is based on the idea that peace can be built through development (local projects aimed at empowerment on various levels, including national) and that conflicts can be solved through dialogue. As part of the project, an international expert mission consisting of gender/peace-activists, researchers, and representatives of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), visited areas where peace is considered fragile and talked to women belonging to different ethnic/religious/cultural groups who either are, or are in danger of being, in conflict. The purpose of these meetings was to encourage and initiate dialogue and exchange of experience across ethnic, religious and/or cultural boundaries. The role of the members of the international expert mission was to listen and give support and advice to the initiatives taken during the meetings. Further, the mission members were in a position to share with the local women their own experience from various projects related to peace, reconciliation, and poverty reduction, and, by doing so, put these women's particular situation into a broader context, giving them an idea of how women elsewhere are working to alleviate the consequences of conflict and poor living conditions. When the women elaborated on their various difficulties they are facing, they were encouraged to think of and discuss among themselves what *they* can do to help solve their own problems. The only condition given was that they be open and willing to work with women from other communities/ethnic groups/nationalities. In this way, the project promotes a culture of dialogue and tolerance.

The first phase of the project took place in Kosovo and FYR Macedonia in the second half of May 2002. The second phase, which was located in Southern Serbia and



Meeting with Roma women in the outskirts of Podgorica.

Montenegro, took place in mid September 2002. In the visited areas, the international expert mission arranged a series of meetings with representatives of the respective local ethnic/religious/cultural groups. The meetings were followed by a national meeting with five representatives from each of the previously held individual meetings. Local politicians, representatives of the OSCE, and diplomats also participated. While the purpose of the individual meetings was to map specific needs among the separate groups, the national meeting was arranged in order to give the groups the opportunity to meet and agree upon common efforts and needs. Ultimately, these field missions culminated in a regional conference in Montenegro during the last weekend of October 2002 where participants from the national meetings in Kosovo, FYR Macedonia, Serbia, and Montenegro were invited to present concrete project ideas and proposals for national and international donors. This was the first opportunity for many of the local women to speak out in public and discuss their common future with women of different ethnic, religious, or cultural origins.

Experiences from the Field

The Fafo Institute for Applied International Studies was invited to participate in one of the international expert missions. As I had experience with gender development work from South and Southeast Asia, and also from working with minorities in Norway and abroad, I was selected as the representative of Fafo AIS in international expert mission to Southern Serbia and Montenegro.² In this article I share some of our findings from this mission.

During the national meetings in Southern Serbia and Montenegro, Sonja Lokar, chair of the SP GTF and head of the missions to Kosovo/FYR Macedonia and Serbia/Montenegro addressed the participants by saying:

Conflicts should be solved through development and dialogue—not through wars. Through this project we have managed to bring women together; women who previously hardly talked to each other; women who would otherwise never have met each other; women from different ethnic groups who, through dialogue, have realized that to a great extent they share not only problems, but also preferences, opinions, dreams, and visions. It is no use crying over spilt milk. If we want to be free citizens of this world, we need to have civilized politics and we cannot use men's way of solving things—we need to use women's ways.

Southern Serbia

The SP GTF chose to hold meetings in Bujanovac in Southern Serbia as the area is considered relatively unstable with a high risk of potential conflicts. Local elections had recently taken place in Bujanovac, in fact, the first elections after the passing of new legislation requiring that 30 percent of the seats be held by women. As a result, there are currently six female representatives on the municipal council: four Albanians and two Serbs. The meetings in Bujanovac were held at the OSCE community centre established approximately a year ago specifically to bring people from different ethnic groups together and facilitate dialogue. It is located opposite the OSCE-trained local police force that consists of both men and women. The OSCE community centre has three managers, one from each of the local ethnic groups, Roma, Albanians, and Serbs.

The first meeting in Bujanovac, was held with 20 Serbian women who were all well educated and among them were journalists, teachers, nurses, and a lawyer. Some of them were politically active and/or involved in non-governmental organization (NGO) work. The second meeting was held with Roma women. About 30 were present, most of whom had little or no education (at most some had attended school up to fourth or fifth grade but 50 percent were illiterate). The majority were unemployed, as was also often the case with their husbands. The third and last meeting in Bujanovac was with Albanian women. Of the 22 women who were present, the vast majority were highly educated and had jobs in the areas of education or health.

Unemployment was a major problem faced by all of the women, regardless of ethnic origin. However, the Roma, a marginalized minority, seemed worse off in terms of job prospects and financial situation. Their lack of education

combined with prevailing prejudices and discrimination make it hard for Roma to find jobs. As such, poverty is a significant factor in the lives of the Roma, even prohibiting them from sending their children to school as they cannot afford to pay for the transport. The Roma children who do go to school often cannot speak Serb. This is an additional barrier for Roma children and it increases their risk of dropping out early. The Roma women also said they are treated as second-rate citizens and are never taken seriously by the local authorities. One woman put it this way: "Nobody understands us and nobody listens to us. The doors are closed for Roma." The Roma women emphasized their appreciation of the opportunity provided to them to gather and speak freely about their problems. They explained it was their first opportunity to do so.

Both Roma and Albanian women identified the lack of recognition of their respective mother tongues: Romany and Albanian, especially in the school system, as a continuing problem. The Albanian women commented on the lack of media in the Albanian language as well as the lack of books in Albanian in the local libraries.

Discrimination with regard to infrastructure was another area of tension. One Albanian woman reported that in the Albanian and Roma part of her village there were no telephone lines and the roads were in a bad condition. In the Serb part, however, there were telephone lines and running water. She referred to another village where Serbs and Albanians live together divided only by a narrow road. In that village, the Serbs also have telephone lines and running water while the Albanians do not. Frustrated she asked, "How can it be that in one part of the village they have water, while in another part they do not?"

The Albanian women demonstrated awareness of the new political climate in which the Albanian population in Southern Serbia, for the first time, was included in local political governments on equal terms with the Serbs. The Roma also had a woman candidate at the recent local election. Unfortunately, she did not have sufficient support from the Roma and was therefore not elected. The international expert mission stressed the importance of all the groups being represented in decision-making bodies and encouraged them to support their candidates at the next election.

At the conclusion of the meeting with the Albanian women, Lokar remarked that the women were not talking from the position of victims and that there had been no mentioning of revenge: "Now, you are responsible for the Serbs. You have to think in a civilized way and overcome old hatred. What we need now are new play-rules and dialogue."

The Serbian women also recognized the importance of their active involvement in their community and their collaborative work with the Albanian and Roma women as well as the newly-elected women in the municipality.

Montenegro

In Montenegro similar meetings were arranged with the "Montenegrin" women (women who support the idea of an independent Montenegro), Serb women (who support a continued federation with Serbia), Roma women (some of them internally displaced persons or refugees), refugee women, and Albanian women.

With the exception of the Roma women, most of the women we met in Montenegro were highly educated and a large number were also actively involved in politics. Yet, they all faced challenges with regard to unemployment and they all worried about the lack of opportunities for the younger generation.

The Roma women in Montenegro talked about particular problems such as the consequences of bearing children at a very young age, poor health, inadequate living conditions and limited access to education. Most of the women were married when they were 12-14 years old, and often, by the age of 16 or 18, already had one or two children. Early childbirth often causes health problems among the women when they get older. This is particularly serious as Roma women rarely see gynaecologists. The lack of running water in their homes does not allow for proper hygiene that can also result in health problems.

One of the Roma women described living with her husband in Bosnia and Herzegovina before the war. When war broke out they fled to Kosovo with their one-year-old child. They stayed in Kosovo for four or five years, until the war caught up with them, and again they fled—this time to Montenegro. They have been living in



Ms. Branka Vlahovic opens the first meeting in Montenegro.



Meeting with Roma women in Bujanovic.

other people's houses for ten or eleven years. Today they have six children. Neither she nor her husband works. She would have liked to see all her children go to school but they could not afford to buy them the necessary clothes, shoes, or books.

During our meeting with refugee women from Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo, the women discussed specific problems encountered by refugees in Montenegro, such as high unemployment, lack of official documents, lack of citizenship, and lack of community and government support. One of the Serb refugees from Croatia expressed her frustration: "We were expecting some support from Croatia, but we do not get any of the things we ask for. Not even documents. We have no real status here. Requests to return are not answered. Neither my husband nor I have a job."

A woman who worked as a university professor in Sarajevo said she considered herself lucky because she was accepted as a professor at the university in Niksic even without documents. The only solution to conflicts is to be in dialogue and in a higher degree of involvement of women. She had arrived in Montenegro as a refugee seven years earlier. She is a single parent living with her daughter who still does not have a legal identity. Neither Bosnian nor Montenegrin, her daughter did not qualify for a scholarship from the government in Montenegro. She emphasized the difficulties in obtaining the documentation required to prove one's identity.

A Bosnian woman married to a man from Montenegro explained that after ten years in Montenegro even her

mother-in-law still considers her a refugee. She married in 1973 and lived in Bosnia with her husband and their children until the war started. In June 1992 they came to Montenegro. She has asked the people she used to work for in Sarajevo for papers, but they claimed she had no rights to receive such papers. These papers are important also with regard to pensions and other social benefits. Without papers the refugees cannot prove their rights. This is a huge problem especially for adult and elderly refugees.

A refugee from Croatia arrived in Montenegro in 1992. For the last seven years she has been married to a local man yet is still, officially, considered a refugee. She described the problems she and her family have faced with regard to the papers and documents they left behind, and asked how long one needs to live in Montenegro to become a resident and get proper identification papers. Total strangers now live in their home in Croatia. The woman exclaimed: "People who live in somebody else's house should at least pay the owners some rent! Now they live there for free while we have no money. This is a huge problem."

Dialogue Across Barriers

The situation in the areas covered by this project is currently one of transition, lack of stability, ethnic hatred, inequality, discrimination, unemployment and poverty. Sustainable and positive changes to this environment can only be made if all groups in the respective communities are given a voice and encouraged to be actively involved.

