

# To make room for changes

– Peace strategies from women organisations in Bosnia and Herzegovina



**KVINNA TILL KVINNA**

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT PROJECTS

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The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation addresses the needs of women in areas affected by war and armed conflict. The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation cooperates with women's organisations in Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Georgia, Israel/Palestine, Jordan, Kosovo, Lebanon, Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro and in Syria.

To Make room for changes – Peace strategies  
from women organisations in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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**THE KVINNA TILL KVINNA FOUNDATION** would like to express our deepest and warmest gratitude to everyone who has participated in the realisation of this report, especially to the women's organisations and the individuals that agreed to be interviewed. They have generously shared their experiences and their opinions and have patiently answered numerous calls for additional information.

We would also like to convey our gratitude to past and present partners in Bosnia and Herzegovina who were not interviewed for this particular report but who throughout the years have informed and inspired us with their knowledge and work.

## Room for change – a Room of One's Own

**FOR A PERSON** to become an active and responsible citizen they require both knowledge and time for reflection. They also need access to forums; places where people meet to discuss experiences and values and places where they can test their arguments. Having that – they can form strategies.

Throughout the centuries men have always created such places for themselves. They have everything from cafés and squares to universities and sports clubs. If women are to become active citizens they must acquire the same “privileges”.

In her novel *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf strived to show the limited opportunities for women to develop and express themselves as intellectuals and authors. She saw a room of one's own as a prerequisite for becoming a thinking person. But reality is somewhat different: Many women have no room of their own or own time and are thus prevented from pursuing intellectual and political activities.

Women's capacity is questioned and they are prevented from taking part in and shaping the agendas that determine how society is organised. In particular, they are omitted from the core issues such as war and peace, security policies, traditionally regarded as the man's domain. One of the core concepts when founding the Kvinna

till Kvinna Foundation was for us and the women who had just witnessed the horrors of war in former Yugoslavia to break these patriarchal patterns. The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation's contribution to women on the Balkans would provide them with the resources to create room to assemble and organise.

After ten years of cooperation with the women in Bosnia and Herzegovina we now wish to highlight the strategies they are using to win back a normal life and prevent a new war from breaking out. It is striking that the key element in their work is access to their own space.

Shortly after the end of the war, women from all over the country assembled to what they called Room for Conversations. There and then they formulated what was required for the country to avoid another war.

Women must have the opportunity to shape the future on their own conditions. They are entitled to be respected and taken seriously. For this they require a room of their own. Women in Bosnia and Herzegovina have shown that Virginia Woolf was right: within the rooms lies the will power to change. The purpose of this report is to show how changes in Bosnia and Herzegovina have taken place. We hope, with their patience and knowledge, they succeed in making Bosnia and Herzegovina, one of the new countries in Former Yugoslavia, into a society where everybody can live in peace and gender equality.

*Kerstin Grebäck*

SECRETARY GENERAL

THE KVINNA TILL KVINNA FOUNDATION

# Introduction

“Women’s empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power, are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace”.

BEIJING PLATFORM  
FOR ACTION

**IN MANY ARMED** conflicts around the world women are taking initiatives towards peace. Many times the initiatives are based on solving problems, keeping contact with people across conflict lines and creating meeting places. This was certainly the case with the women the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation began supporting during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. After the war, women’s organisations started to take shape and women have since organised themselves for the development of society, democracy, human rights and peace in many different ways. The women’s organisations are today a strong part of civil society in the country.

When actors from the international community discuss the problems facing Bosnia and Herzegovina and how to solve them, they take hardly any account of women’s reality and the work done by women’s organisations. With this report the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation wishes to highlight the work that has been done and is still being carried out by women’s organisations. We want to show the political and social force that emanates from women’s organisations and the strategies used in their work.

Women are deprived of the right to take part in peace negotiations and in forming peace agreements. This was also the case with Bosnia and Herzegovina. When the Peace Accords were signed in Dayton

in December 1995 not one woman from Bosnia and Herzegovina was present in the room. No women were involved in deciding the future of the country. This failure becomes even greater bearing in mind that just a few months earlier in September the UN Conference on Women’s Rights was held in Beijing, China. At the conference, governments adopted the Beijing Platform for Action. This document was a forward-looking strategy on what was required to strengthen the role of women and women’s rights. One of the areas identified was Women and Armed Conflicts. The declaration itself states: “*Women’s empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power, are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace*”.<sup>1</sup>

The exclusion of women is the same all over the world. But this does not prevent women from acting and demanding to be included and from presenting solutions for achieving peace. In Israel and Palestine women make up the majority of peace organisations even though they are seldom allowed to participate in official negotiations. In Liberia women gathered in their hundreds for the 15th in a series of Peace Agreements demanding to participate, crying out for peace and justice in their homeland. Some of them managed to actually attend the talks, but only as observers with no voting rights.<sup>2</sup> In Kosovo women are mobilising and demanding their right to participate in the negotiations regarding the status of Kosovo (April 2006), at the time of writing only one woman is included in one of the negotiating delegations.

As human beings women have the right to participate in decisions on peace and democracy. It is also, as stated in the Beijing Platform for Action, a precondition for building peace. This was confirmed yet again in 2000 when the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security and reaffirmed “[...] *the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace-building, and stressing the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security, and the need to increase their role in decision-making with regard to conflict prevention and resolution*”. According to Resolution 1325 the international community should also “*support local women’s peace initiatives*”.<sup>3</sup> Another thing stated in the resolution, which very much affects the possibilities for local women’s participation, is the demand for a good gender balance within international community actors. This report clearly shows the importance of this.

There will be no progress, for the international community efforts or for the sustainable development of the war-affected country itself without the participation of women. For women and women’s organisations to be able to participate in building peace and democracy they need not only moral and financial support, but also security and visibility. The international community has a great responsibility to provide this. The first is to perceive women and women’s organisations as actors, politically active agents who need to participate in all decision making.

With this report The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation is showing the example of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Since we have supported women’s groups and women’s organisations in former Yugoslavia since 1993 we have both knowledge and good contact with several organisations in the area. In Bosnia and Herzegovina we have supported organisations from the outset and we have seen them develop into what they are today.

Another reason for us to focus on Bosnia and Herzegovina when writing about women’s organising is the strong presence of the international community in the country. We want to show the good and bad examples of the interaction between civil society, women’s organisations and international actors.

Without the presence of the international community in the country there would be small possibilities for a civil society to develop. Upholding peace and democracy is dependent on this presence. Having said that, we want to problematise the way in which the international community is interacting with civil society. One problem is the neglect in seeing women, women’s activists and women’s organisations, as actors to be reckoned with. This means giving information to women, collecting information from women, inviting women to meetings and making sure that they actually can participate. Another problem is the short-term ways in which many democracy and peace activities are carried out by the international community. The campaigns of international actors tend to compete with activities carried out by women’s organisations. This problem is multi-faceted. If campaigns are mainly



“[...] the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace-building, and stressing the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security, and the need to increase their role in decision-making with regard to conflict prevention and resolution”.

UN SECURITY COUNCIL  
RESOLUTION 1325

carried out by the international organisations with a lack of local ownership, the likelihood of a lasting result is minimal. Another side of the problem is that women’s organisations will have difficulty in carrying out their work and setting their own agendas. Since international organisations have much better resources they tend to dominate the public debate. And of course, women’s organisations are dependent on funding from international agencies and have to apply for money to carry out what the donors want to donate money towards.

A strong civil society and democracy is crucial for sustainable peace. Most of the peace and reconciliation work in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been carried out by women’s organisations. The women’s meeting places created by women’s organisations have become very important. For many women they were the only space where they could feel completely safe. The experiences of violations – be it in the private or the public sphere – increases the general sense of insecurity among women and prevents them from participating in the reconstruction process. These safe meeting places, women’s centres, also deal with matters of hatred and distrust between the ethnic groups. In this environment women manage to deal with difficult matters, their fears, and the possibility of coming to these places breaks the isolation many women face. The psychosocial support provided by women’s organisations, the dialogue starting there, is vital for the healing process. This is basic peacebuilding.

Women’s organisations are gaining support for democracy among the population. They are motivating people to use their

vote and to vote for non-nationalist candidates. They are holding politicians and decision-makers accountable, thus diminishing the gap between “ordinary” people and decision-makers. Women’s organisations are promoting, using and testing the limits of new laws and they are informing people about their rights. They all emphasise the importance of reaching out into all parts of the country and they make great efforts to meet and empower women in rural areas. People from all groups and parts of the country have to participate in order for peace to respect the rights of all. Non-discrimination against women has to reach into every corner of society.

The report is based on interviews with women’s organisations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, from both the Federation and Republika Srpska. The interviews were mainly carried out during November and December 2005. The organisations work politically on the issues of peace, democracy and human rights. Many of them started just after the war ended and several of them are the ones that the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation has had most contact with over the years: Buducnost in Modrica, Centar za Pravnu Pomoc Zenama (Center of Legal Assistance for Women) in Zenica, Duvanjske in Tomislavgrad, Forum Zena in Bratunac, Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly (hCa) in Banja Luka, United Women in Banja Luka, Horizonti in Tuzla, Zena BiH in Mostar, Most in Visegrad, Lara in Bijeljina, Zenski Centar in Trebinje, Zene Zenama in Sarajevo, Global Rights in Sarajevo and Women & Society in Sarajevo. They are all marked on the upcoming map and there is a short description of each organisation in Appendix 1.

The structure of the report is as follows:

It is divided into 8 separate chapters, each one dealing with a specific aspect of the women's organisations' strategies to help women take part in shaping their society.

CHAPTER 1 provides a brief background to the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

CHAPTER 2 briefly outlines how and why the women's organisations started – why the women thought they needed to organise themselves and to start NGOs.

CHAPTER 3 discusses the importance of meeting places.

CHAPTER 4 describes how women crossed the conflict borders in order to create contacts and rebuild trust.

CHAPTER 5 documents the work of women's organisations to consolidate the democratic system in their country by empowering women to participate in society.

CHAPTER 6 shows how women's organisations have worked to strengthen legal security, including educating law enforcement officials on women's rights.

CHAPTER 7 documents in depth how women's organisations have worked with one of the most serious security threats facing their society – violence against women.

CHAPTER 8 documents the work of the women's organisations in advocating equality and non-discrimination in formal decision-making processes.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATION

<b>EUFOR</b>	European Union Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina
<b>EUPM</b>	European Police Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina
<b>hCa</b>	Helsinki Citizens' Assembly
<b>IDP</b>	Internal Displaced Person
<b>IFOR</b>	Implementation Force
<b>IPTF</b>	(The UN) International Police Task Force
<b>NGO</b>	Non Governmental Organisation
<b>OHR</b>	Office of High Representative
<b>OSCE</b>	Organisation of Security and Cooperation in Europe
<b>SFOR</b>	Stabilisation Force
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Programme
<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>UNMIBH</b>	United Nations Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina
<b>UNHCHR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner of Human Rights

# Background

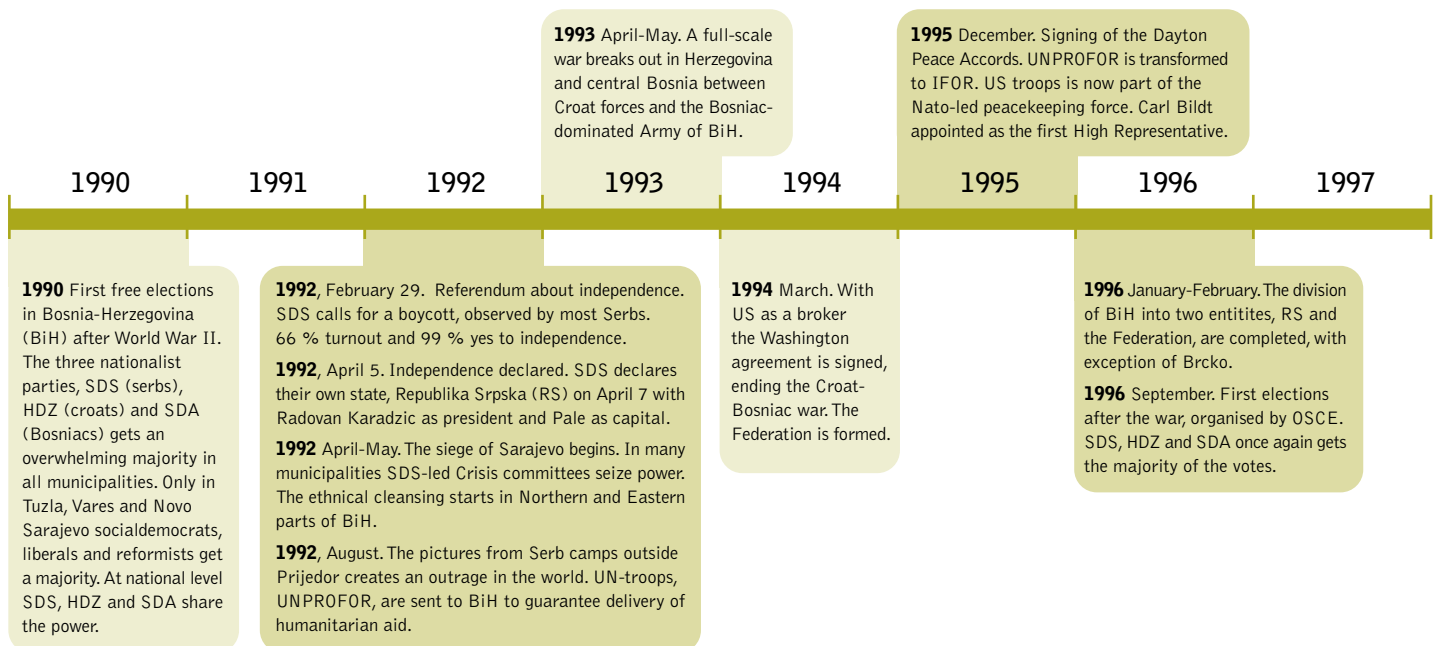
## CHAPTER 1

**BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA** was one of six republics that constituted the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The country was made up of a number of ethno-national<sup>4</sup> groups which, to varying degrees, corresponded to the different republics. No republic in Yugoslavia was as demographically mixed as Bosnia and Herzegovina. The main national groups of Bosnia and Herzegovina were Bosniacs (Bosnian Muslims), Bosnian Serbs, and Bosnian Croats.

Following the death of President Tito in 1980 came a period of severe economic and

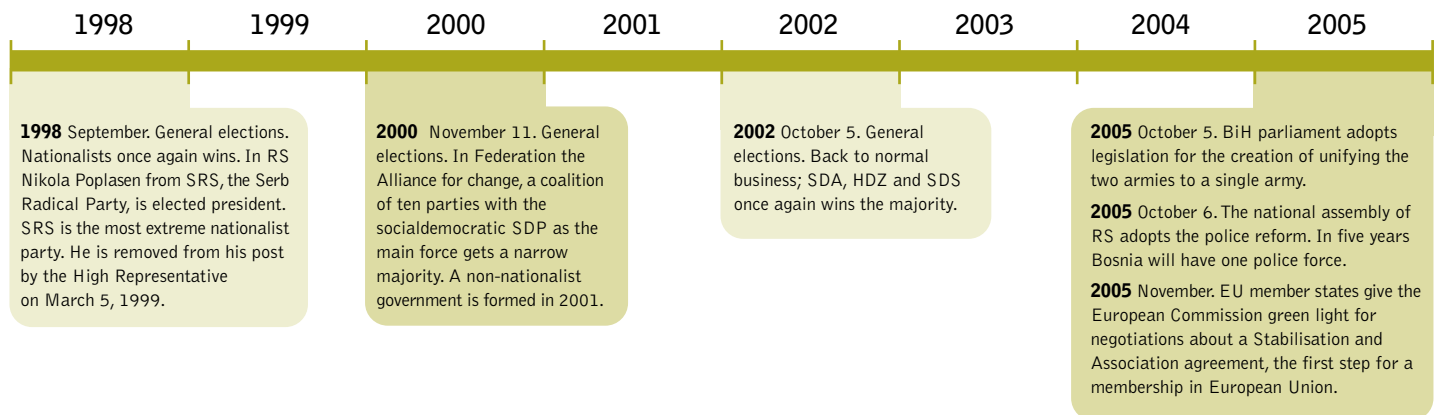
social crisis, with a lack of open discussions about the past and with no democratic tradition. The recession was followed by a political tug of war on the course to be taken in the democratisation and decentralisation process. Exacerbated by a rising nationalism and a more forceful articulation of the ethnic political and economic interests of its constituent republics, Yugoslavia split. The first multi-party elections in Yugoslavia in 1990 resulted in victory for the nationalistic parties, with Slovenia and Croatia proclaiming their independence, followed by Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992.<sup>5</sup>

The war broke out in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1993. The warring parties committed gross human rights violations, including the most serious war crimes, such as genocide and systematic rape. The nationalistic war strategies were to a large



extent based on the creation of ethno-national homogenous areas, through the expulsion of people of “wrong” ethnic groups. More than half the population was either internally displaced or refugees.

The war ended with the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement in December 1995 and after three and a half years of war the situation was devastating both in material loss and human suffering. Out of a population of 4.4 million, 100,000 were dead or missing. Women had been subjected to mass rape, two thirds of the industrial potential and half the homes and social welfare state facilities were demolished, half the Bosnian population was displaced, the poor and uneducated rural population (mostly women, children and elderly people) fled to the cities. In December 1995, 1.2 million Bosnian citizens were refugees.<sup>6</sup>



The Dayton Peace Agreement lay the foundation for the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was mainly an all-male event, as was the decision-making during the war. No women from the country took part in the peace negotiations and the negotiations ended up with a gender-blind peace agreement and constitution.<sup>7</sup>

The Peace Agreement effectively divided the country into two parts, more or less reflecting the last front lines of the war. The two ‘entities’, as they are called, are the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is mainly made up of Bosnian Croats and Bosniacs and internally divided into 10 Cantons, and the Bosnian Serb Republic, ‘Republika Srpska’, mainly made up of Bosnian Serbs. In addition to the two entities there is the self-governing ‘District of Brcko’, a small District created separately in 1999 through international arbitration.

The Dayton Peace Accords are comprised of a General Framework Agreement for Peace followed by annexes dealing with: Military Aspects of the Peace Settlement (1A), Regional Stabilization (1B), Inter-Entity Boundary Line and Related Issues (2), Elections (3), Constitution (4), Arbitration (5), Human Rights (6), Refugees and Displaced Persons (7), Commission to Preserve National Monuments (8), Establishment of Bosnia and Herzegovina Public Corporations (9), Civilian Implementation of Peace Settlement (10), and International Police Task Force (11).<sup>8</sup>

One of the main objectives of the Dayton Peace Accords was to create new multi-ethnic and democratic institutions from a war-torn society and to ensure respect for fundamental human rights and freedoms and the rule of law.<sup>9</sup>

The fragile peace was upheld by NATO led peacekeepers (IFOR, later called SFOR) and international police (IPTF). However, the situation continued to be very tense for a long time with continuing incidents of violence, harassments and human rights violations reported also years after the war ended. The NATO peacekeeping force was in 2004 replaced by a smaller European Union led force (EUFOR) and the IPTF was replaced by a European Union police force (EUPM). In addition to the domestic institutions, the Dayton Peace Agreement also established the institution of the Office of the High Representative (OHR), which is the international community’s representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina with the responsibility and mandate to oversee the civilian aspect of the peace agreement. The OHR has wide-ranging powers, for example to impose decisions where the local authorities are not able to agree. In some respects the extensive powers of the OHR means that Bosnia and Herzegovina in effect has been an international protectorate.

There was a massive presence of international organisations in the country right after the war. As well as the OHR there were also the UN mission, UNMIBH, various UN special agencies and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) – each with a different mandate and role in the reconstruction of the country. OSCE was for example mandated to get the election process running and working. Added to these were the many international donor and humanitarian organisations.

The situation confronting women and men after the war was overwhelming. The soldiers had fought to win and after the

war many of the men felt bitterly defeated and asked themselves what really had been gained.<sup>10</sup> Many of the women had become widows and had missing family members; many were survivors of rape and sexual violence; severe traumas were common; a large number of women continued to be exposed to violence since men's violence continued at home.

The fall of the former Yugoslavia with all its institutions and norms had not only symbolic but also very concrete repercussions. Socialist Yugoslavia before the war did not have a well-developed civil society or tradition of civil organising outside of the party structures. Therefore almost no one in the country had experience of civil society and NGO work. Many of the methods and ways of working had to be developed by those who after the war decided to organise themselves for various reasons.

However, some women began organising themselves in the early 1990s in reaction to the threat of war.

*“In the autumn of 1991 women in Sarajevo protested against the war. “We are women – not nationalities, generals, or murderers!” they shouted [...] A few days later hundreds of women from Croatia and Bosnia set out for Belgrade, where they were to be met by women from Serbia. They were all supposed to go together to the headquarters of the Yugoslav People’s Army. The women had only one weapon in their hands: small photographs of their sons [...] The generals, finally realising that women after all amounted to half the population, roughly prevented them from meeting. Soldiers blocked the road to Belgrade and the women returned to their homes humiliated.”<sup>11</sup>*

Slavenka Drakulic wrote after this event that women needed to define their aims for themselves, and that the common denominator should have been more than wanting to get their sons home, *“It should have been a call for peace”*. And others said that women fell victims, not only to nationalism but to their lack of organisation and political vision, a product of forty years of life under communism.<sup>12</sup>



# Organising for Peace

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## CHAPTER 2

“[After the war] we had a feeling there were borders between us – most women had no chance to have contact with their families in other places [...] We wanted to have the life from before the war. [...] and we wanted to be able to say hi to anyone in the street regardless of nationality. The main goal was to open our town again. At that time we were nationally divided. We wanted freedom of movement!”

STANOJKA TESIC, FORUM ZENA, BRATUNAC.

**AFTER THE WAR** many women in Bosnia and Herzegovina felt, and still feel, a strong desire to participate in rebuilding their country. This was matched by a frustration of being excluded from decision-making forums. They knew that reconstruction requires their input and expertise, that it is not enough that only men from the warring parties participate.

So facing the challenges women started to organise themselves for change. The exact reasons for getting together varied depending on locations and contexts, professional backgrounds and ease of communication,

but what all groups shared was a common will to address concrete problems affecting their communities. Many of the women who started the organisations had been active in different ways during the war when confronted by situations of extreme need and suffering. They had organised distribution of food, medicine and clothing, cared for the most vulnerable and coordinated schooling for children. Some organisations also started during the war.

Since the country’s infrastructure had been almost completely destroyed, their work initially was chiefly focused on providing services such as legal aid, health care and psychosocial support, that in normal conditions would be provided by the state.

One big problem for the many people who fled or were forced from their homes was the lack of personal documents such as ID cards, birth certificates, marriage licences, school diplomas, employment records and property ownership documents. These documents were vital in order to be able to exercise their rights. Several organisations decided to open legal aid centres as a reaction to difficulties and obstacles for people to exercise their legal rights. One of them was Centar za Pravnu Pomoc Zenama (Center of Legal Assistance for women) in Zenica. Jasminka Dzumhur, lawyer, and founding member of the organisation, describes the situation as follows: “*The government, during and directly after the war, did not have the capacity to provide support for vulnerable groups, and the majority belonging to vulnerable groups were women. After the war there were many problems like divorces, lost husbands, displaced persons, returnees, women who*

*were left alone with children, no employment and no money and that was the reason we decided to strengthen women. [...] We recognised that many women were not able to enjoy their rights due to the lack of documents etc., so we decided to create an organisation to assist them in legal issues and in that way make their life easier.”*

Many people were traumatised because of what they lived through during the war. They were in great need of some form of counselling and psychosocial support to process their traumas. This again was something the state did not have the capacity to address and where women’s organisations stepped in to fill the void. *“During the war we started to help women and children refugees [primarily from the Srebrenica area] that had come to Tuzla and we could see that the women were depressed and sleep deprived, which made it difficult for them to connect with their children. They clearly needed psychological help.”* MIRA VILUSIC, HORIZONTALI, TUZLA

In a period of increasing poverty and high unemployment some women also saw the opportunity to start organisations and formalise their work to generate some form of income through the funding from international donors.

Women’s work was and still is invaluable for restoring a sense of normality in their communities, effectively identifying daily problems and needs of women and finding ways of addressing these problems. At the same time they stress that they did not have any specific focus or long-term plans in the beginning. They lacked knowledge about civil society and how to organise. *“We didn’t have a focus at first, but we*

*“We were in a kind of ghetto – wanting to get out, to communicate [...] to show that there were people here who thought differently and who were against the war. But we couldn’t do it by ourselves, only together with other people.”*

LIDIJA ZIVANOVIC, HCA

*just couldn’t accept the situation”,* says Dubravka Kovacevic from the Most organisation in Visegrad.

From the outset, women’s organisations have had contacts with women and women’s organisations in other parts of the country. After the isolation and propaganda that dominated throughout the war there was a strong need and desire to meet with people who had been on the other side – to hear about their situation, exchange information and discuss common problems. It was clear that regardless of nationality or religion, women faced the same type of problems, i.e. exclusion from the power structures of society, violence, discrimination, poverty, trauma etc. and they could achieve a lot more if they worked together.

Since the country was highly politicised and the politics were dominated by nationalist propaganda, most women’s NGOs initially made a point of staying out of the party political sphere. However, their cross-border initiatives clearly defied the ruling parties’ nationalist propaganda and ideology. Women’s organisations have been involved in many different issues in the ten years that have passed since the war ended. Due to the very unstable and volatile situation of the post-war society they



“Yes what can we do?  
That is the central question.  
If no one asks us, we have to  
act ourselves to create the  
society we want to live in.”

STANOJKA TESIC,  
FORUM ZENA, BRATUNAC

were constantly faced with new problems and new situations and were forced to adjust, improve and invent new strategies. “*Learning is a way of life. It inspires us not to loose ourselves; it is a permanent investment and constant endeavour to find a comprised solution acceptable for everyone.*” NUNA ZVIZDIC, ZENE ZENAMA, SARAJEVO<sup>13</sup>

Regardless of the initial declarations, women started to organise not only to meet each other but also to create and develop the space around them according to their needs and abilities. While one of the main reason given for starting an organisation was to have a space to meet, very soon those spaces developed into the organisations tasked with offering assistance to the women members of the community. Developed at local level and focused on responding to the most acute problems, they were not perceived as political institutions. Nevertheless their role as the instrument of change was and still is invaluable.

They have worked on conflict resolution in order to bridge the divisions between the ethno-national groups and for safe return and reconciliation. When violence against women turned out to be a huge problem, the women’s organisation focused on finding ways of dealing with it and initiated changes in the law and training of law enforcement officials. When the problem of human trafficking surfaced they became very engaged in fighting it and they have done much to improve the situation for victims of trafficking. Generally, women in the aftermath of the war were extremely poor

without an income of their own and in response many organisations began initiating income-generating projects; the low level of women’s participation in public life led to efforts to lobby for changes of election laws and quotas as well as education for women politicians and attempts to mobilise women voters.

“*First we offered legal assistance to women. Then we noticed that many women who came to us were victims of domestic violence. We discovered a lack of legislation on domestic violence so we tried to lobby to change the law. But there were no female politicians in the Parliament to support such a change so we started to work and support female politicians. Now the law has been passed we need to train the police on the law and the doctors on how to fill in the certificates prescribed by the law.*”

A WOMEN’S ORGANISATION IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA<sup>14</sup>

From initially being organised in loose networks of friends and acquaintances with a more or less ad-hoc approach to the problems, they are now professional organisations. Having moved from being seen as traitors to their ethno-national groups for interacting with and helping women from ‘other’ groups as well as being considered spies or inconvenient by the authorities, today there are several examples of partnerships between women’s NGOs and local authorities and institutions on a variety of issues.

The women’s organisations should not only be seen in the light of their development or the achieved results within the spe-

cific areas in which they have been active. Women's organising has made a very significant contribution to the development of a civil society in Bosnia and Herzegovina and play an important and even leading role in sustaining it, holding authorities and political parties to account.<sup>15</sup> Of course women who organise themselves to create change and who challenge the prevailing nationalistic and patriarchal power structures face many obstacles and problems. It has not been an easy or self evident way forward. It has been filled with fear, resistance, threats and doubts both within and from society.

However, because of the will to change and be an equal part in rebuilding the country many have fought on. As Stanojka Tesic put it at a meeting in Bratunac in Republika Srpska where women from the village met for coffee and questions were raised about common issues like the lack of work and the lack of political action: *"Yes what can we do? That is the central question. If no one asks us, we have to act ourselves to create the society we want to live in."* STANOJKA TESIC, FORUM ZENA, BRATUNAC<sup>16</sup>

# Making Room for Change

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## CHAPTER 3

"We did not have any space to meet, drink coffee and talk. In 1995 there were no women in the streets, cafés or restaurants. We wanted to be able to meet, go to a restaurant, have normal clothes, even our husbands started to ask us to behave differently and not to go out.

[...] Our wish was to have a place – our place - where no one could disturb us, just to sit and have coffee and talk."

DUBRAVKA KOVACEVIC, MOST, VISEGRAD

**THIS QUOTE COMES** from a woman who had arrived as an internally displaced person (IDP) to the small isolated town of Visegrad, a place she had never visited before. She had previously lived in a slightly more urban area of the country. According to her, the biggest problems experienced by women in small towns were that they could not take part in the most common everyday activities such as going to cafes or restaurants to meet with friends. She says that in the conservative climate that prevailed in the area, women who went unaccompanied by a man to a restaurant or café would be regarded as "cheap" or as a "bad" woman, and they would often be harassed by men. The situation felt like a prison, and more

than anything the women wanted to break the isolation. "*We didn't want to be in a frame of tradition, we wanted to go outside and see more.*" DUBRAVKA KOVACEVIC, MOST, VISEGRAD

Men on the other hand had their given gathering points and full access to public places, where they could meet others, go for coffee and discuss matters that concern them. It was a somewhat implicit, or rather explicit, claim that public space was for men while women should stay at home. Women IDPs were often extremely isolated since they did not know anyone in the new area and by staying at home they did not make any new friends.

Changing this is what women's organising is all about. It is about a strong will to gain access to the public arena where they can participate on equal terms as men without limitations or restrictions, or for that matter without being harassed or disturbed while doing it.

The conservative values that often rise to the surface in the build up to and after conflicts are used to strengthen the national identity and purity. In the 1990s the role of women changed, the task of patriotic women was no longer to build socialism through their labour but to regenerate the nation by motherhood.<sup>17</sup> The shift to conservative norms often bears direct consequences for women since these values usually influence the views of women's position in the family and society, as well as of their rights. For example, it often leads to various restrictions and limitations of women's rights and freedoms, like increased control of their clothing, of where they are allowed to go and how they should behave and choose to live their lives.

The motive force for women to create a separate space for acting is directly related to women's subordinated position in society. Women are nowhere near being represented to the same extent as men in the decision-making structures; the participation and visibility of women in public life in general is very small. In short, it means women only have limited possibilities to make their voices heard since they do not have full access to the public arenas where men are. They are therefore forced to seek alternative ways to become engaged – and this arena is within civil society, where most of women's activism takes place today.

Therefore a common activity, both during and after the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, was to create meeting places for women. First and foremost the purpose was to have a place to meet and to break their isolation. A place where they would feel welcome and safe and where they could speak freely. This could take place in somebody's home, or somewhere where they could meet without being disturbed. Increasingly, as organisations were formed, these activities moved into the premises of women's organisations and women's centres. One woman who lived in Sarajevo during the war said that *"I missed air more than food"* explaining that the women's organisation Zene Zenama gave her that air. The meeting places also served other purposes. In a conservative society, which after the war had become more restrictive and in which women's freedom of movement was rather limited, it became a strategy in itself to have separate meeting places for women. Women's gatherings were seen as something harmless (women drinking coffee or sew-

**"To give women the space to meet is vital. In these spaces we exchange experiences, learn from each other and become empowered. This is a pre-condition for us to claim our right to participate in building up a functioning society."**

STANOJKA TESIC, FORUM ZENA, BRATUNAC

ing or knitting together), but in fact they served a far more practical and important purpose. It was a way to get women out of their homes, and a way to provide a platform for them to act, which carried with it a great potential to eventually create momentum for social and political change.

Therefore, in the initial phase, women's meetings were usually presented as a simple wish "to go out and meet friends and drink coffee". Stressing this more social than political character of organising was helping women to get a legitimate reason to leave their homes for a couple of hours. It was also a way to reach more women. It seems however that a political agenda was present from the outset. *"To give women the space to meet is vital. In these spaces we exchange experiences, learn from each other and become empowered. This is a pre-condition for us to claim our right to participate in building up a functioning society."* STANOJKA TESIC, FORUM ZENA, BRATUNAC

## **Challenging national identities**

The meeting places also served as a refuge from the nationalist environment. The dividing lines of the war had been the ethno-national affiliations so this became the most important identity marker for the

“Our approach to peace is based on an individual approach; peace building has to start within ourselves”.

NUNA ZVIZDIC, ZENE ZENAMA, SARAJEVO

people, and a strong tie to keep the group together and create a feeling of belonging. Demarcation lines created by the war continued to define the political reality in the post-conflict situation. Whether they liked it or not people were forced into these identities in order to survive the war and they had to keep them also in the post-conflict situation. It was difficult to voice any opposition to these categorisations. Persons from mixed families for example were often forced to flee or had difficulties finding their place.

The women’s organisations could provide an alternative to the dominating system of national identities, which allowed women to emphasise other identities than the ethno-national categories such as being women, mothers, workers, civilians, widows, friends – identities that could be just as strong as any ethnic, national or religious identity. The safe meeting places gave the visitors space and time to formulate themselves, who they were, what was important in life and what they wanted and needed.

Women shared common experiences with each other just by the fact that they were women. Most of them shared experiences of discrimination in society and family, they realised quite quickly that they had far more connecting them as women

than separating them on the basis of ethnicity, nationality or religion. All had experiences from the war specifically connected to their identity as women and civilians. Deprivation of power and a feeling of being subjected to a conflict that largely saw women as just one more commodity was a common experience for women on all sides of the conflict. This can explain why women’s organisations very early on after the war started to have contacts with women and women’s organisations on ‘the other side’, or why women’s centres often became meeting places for women belonging to different ethno-national groups. *“It was important for us to create a safe place for all women no matter who one might be, returnee, internally displaced person or domicile.”* JADRANKA MILICEVIC, ZENE ZENAMA, SARAJEVO

Zene Zenama was one of the first organisations after the war with the direct aim of creating a safe haven for all women. They see it as a necessary step and strategy to reconcile and make peace.

*“I spoke about my experiences with two Serb women here and I forgot my fear. That is peace.”* A BOSNIAC WOMAN COMING TO THE WOMEN CENTRE OF ZENE ZENAMA IN SARAJEVO.

Women’s organisations have continued over the years to challenge ethno-nationalistic values even during very difficult circumstances. NATO bombings against the Federation of the Republic of Yugoslavia caused by the conflict in Kosovo increased the nationalistic rhetoric in neighbouring Republika Srpska. During these difficult circum-

stances United Women organised a roundtable in Banja Luka, Republika Srpska. The tension was very high, high school youth, manipulated by ultra-nationalist right oriented political parties, demolished offices of foreign consulates, UNHCR and other foreign offices and almost all international personal had left. Despite this, United Women went through with the roundtable and put topics like national hatred, violence and reconciliation on the agenda, defying the risk of threats and allegations of being traitors. According to the organisation the discussions were very constructive and the participants at the session felt that Slobodan Milosevic had a great responsibility for what was happening in Kosovo. A second session on the same topic was held in Mrkonjic Grad, where ultra-nationalistic political parties were very strong. This time around 20 women participated and it was the first time that the organisers experienced direct attacks; they were told that they were betrayers of the Serbian people and exponents of the “criminal” international community.<sup>18</sup>

### Freedom from fear

The meeting places provide a sense of security from the post-conflict reality that was still perceived as very unstable and potentially dangerous. Many women did not, and still sometimes do not, feel safe and secure in the public spaces where they are at risk of being exposed to pressure, insults and harassment and sometimes even threats just because they are women. It should be kept

in mind that many suspected war criminals are still moving around freely.

The notion of safe space takes on an even deeper meaning when considering that many women are not even safe in the private sphere – in their lives, in their homes – due to violence against them from their husbands or other close male relatives. After conflict it is common for interpersonal violence and men’s violence against women to increase.<sup>19</sup>

The meeting places were often organised as women’s centres that offered a variety of activities and services, such as education, legal aid and psychological counselling. The centres became very important where women could regain hope and strength to control their lives and become actors outside their homes. Psychosocial support was often a priority, especially during the first years after the war. *“Our approach to peace is based on an individual approach; peace building has to start within ourselves”*. NUNA ZVIZDIC, ZENE ZENAMA, SARAJEVO

After the war it was evident that many women suffered trauma which hindered them from living their life to the full and as whole human beings. For the women’s organisations it was clear that this was something that they had to address in order for women reconcile and participate in rebuilding society. One organisation, Horizonti in Tuzla, describes as quoted earlier how they began their work after seeing that the displaced traumatised women who came to Tuzla from Srebrenica could not connect with their own children due to depression and sleep deprivation.

“I spoke about my experiences with two Serb women here and I forgot my fear. That is peace.”

A BOSNIAC WOMEN COMING TO THE WOMEN CENTRE OF ZENE ZENAMA IN SARAJEVO.

“We had continuity in our work offering information concerning the right to return, their right to the movable property and real estate and so on. It was a necessary step, because the state and its government agencies weren’t ready to give valid information regarding return, and the procedure was aimed at being complicated to de-motivate, from the start, all those who want to return.”

ZENE ZENAMA, ANNUAL REPORT 1998

Trauma and psychosocial support is an important aspect of the reconstruction process. Experiences of great loss, violence, humiliation, hate and lack of trust in other people threaten to destabilise the reconstruction efforts. Dealing with the past and with the traumas is a precondition for society and the people to function properly, and the costs of not dealing with trauma could be devastating, for the individual and society alike. Unfortunately reconstruction is usually understood only as the physical and economic re-building of a country.

The Zene Zenama organisation in Sarajevo has for many years worked with creating safe spaces for refugees and returnee woman. In 1997 the psychosocial support team started its activity in the region of Sarajevo canton. They worked in mixed areas with displaced persons, refugees and domiciles. Life was insecure due to the difficult economic situation, the high percentage of frustrated population and due to the fact that all families carried mental and physical wounds from the war and the conflict was

just under the surface. Zena Zenama’s team aimed to analyse and work through the war and post-war traumatic experiences, including the loss of loved ones and homes. They also worked to neutralise the influence of many stress-related factors such as separation of families, the uncertainty of return to their previous homes, men’s violence and the feeling that their lives were temporary.<sup>20</sup>

Through research conducted by the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation in 2001, 85 per cent of women in the survey said that the war had had a negative effect on their family life and 62 per cent claimed that their husbands had changed negatively.<sup>21</sup> This points to another serious problem in most reconstruction efforts – the limited trauma services for men. Not dealing with these issues increases the risk of further violence at home and in society, child abuse and drinking due to the post-traumatic effects on men.

### **Creating space for return and reconciliation**

The process of return was probably the most difficult part of the reconstruction process in post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina. Many people in areas that had been exposed to ethnic cleansing during the war were not welcoming the return of the displaced population. It was not uncommon for returnees to be harassed or even violated if they entered the towns which were now dominated by another ethnic group. Because of these security concerns, most re-

turnees refrained as much as possible from moving around, or going from villages into towns which were often dominated by another ethno-national group.

Women's organisations conducted activities to build trust and eventually friendship between women from the different groups and to include the returnee women into the structures and activities of the organisation. The support given to the returnee women could be anything from going to visit them in their houses or villages, or more actively giving different kinds of support in their daily lives, such as accompanying them to institutions and local authorities or to schools with the children, or just do shopping together. They created spaces where refugees and returnees could tell their stories, their fears, raise questions and receive answers.

The return process was slow and in 1998 when figures showed that 800,000 people were still displaced Zene Zenama decided to educate mediators in the local community in villages throughout the country to help the process. The education focused on local problems such as property, education, security, local democracy and human rights violations.<sup>22</sup> *"We had continuity in our work offering information concerning the right to return, their right to the movable property and real estate and so on. It was a necessary step, because the state and its government agencies weren't ready to give valid information regarding return, and the procedure was aimed at being complicated to de-motivate, from the start, all those who want to return."* ZENE ZENAMA, ANNUAL REPORT 1998

*"It was important for us to create a safe place for all women no matter who one might be, returnee, internally displaced person or domicile."*

JADRANKA MILICEVIC, ZENE ZENAMA, SARAJEVO

After the ceasefire between Croats and Bosniacs in March 1994, the Mary Stopes International organisation began to establish women's centres in Mostar together with local women. The city had been severely hit by the war and was divided into two parts, where the west part became Croat and the east Bosniac. Women from all over the area visited the centres where they could speak freely about their experiences and concerns about the future. In the beginning the centres aimed at building bridges between domiciles and refugees, which later turned to building bridges and tolerance between returnees and those who stayed in the city during the war. One woman who had returned in 1996 to the Mostar area said that at the time she was afraid to go out, no one said hello to her in the street, her children were not allowed to go to school and her husband was dead. Stope Nade, the "local section" of Mary Stopes International in Mostar, contacted her and took her to one of their centres where she could get support.

There are many testimonies from returnee women saying that they would not have dared to return or stay in the places of return if they had not had access to the women's centres. They explain how the



“In the beginning it was difficult even to speak to people, but we succeeded and now [after so many years] it is easier and there is trust among us, and now we enjoy real cooperation.”

NADA STJEPANOVIĆ, MOST, VIŠEGRAD

greatest sense of security in many ways came from the contact with women of the other ethno-nationality, rather than from the security provided by the police and peacekeeping troops.

It should be stated however that suspicion and insecurity in many places went both ways. The meeting places between women of different ethno-national groups also reduced the suspicion among the domicile (and refugee) population about the returnees coming back. Horizonti in Tuzla realised that not only refugees and IDPs needed help but also domiciles. The refugee thought that the domiciles had everything as they still had their houses; the domiciles thought that the refugees got it all – electricity, water and food. In 1996 they organised meetings to reduce the tension between the groups.

The Forum Zena organisation works in the town of Bratunac in eastern Bosnia, in the Srebrenica area, the scene of one of the worst war crimes. When the return process started in that area, a bus with Bosniac women, potential returnees, came to Bratunac to visit their pre-war homes. The bus was attacked with rocks and stones by Bosnian Serbs, who lived in the town. After this incident the women in Forum Zena decided to do everything in their power to prevent

such a thing from happening again and to show the returnees that not all people in the town were aggressive nationalists.

Twice a month representatives from the organisation went to places in the Federation, in the other entity, where many of the IDPs from Bratunac were living, to make contact with them and to build trust and start to create dialogue. They brought coffee and food and packed as many women as possible into the cars and then went for lunch with the IDPs and thus slowly began to rebuild trust between the groups.

Twice monthly the trip was reversed and they went to pick up the IDP women and brought them to Bratunac. There they had lunch and met with local women as well as receiving help and support to visit their former homes. In some cases their homes were totally destroyed, in other cases displaced Bosnian Serbs lived in their old homes and Forum Zena tried as far as possible to get the women to meet and to create an understanding for each others situation. Their work for returnees and reconciliation is now widely acknowledged and in 2005 they were invited to an international conference “Prevention and Peace” – fight against poverty in Padova, Italy.

When the return process began, the divisions between the different nationalities were still very deep. Most returnees who had the courage and will to return essentially only resettled in the villages far away from town and very few returned to live among the majority population. There were effectively no communication or interaction between the areas and the mechanisms from the war continued in peace time.

The Most organisation in Visegrad in Republika Srpska went to Bosniac returnee villages to encourage dialogue and reconciliation. Quite often the Bosnian Serb women in town asked if they could come along to see a friend from before the war. The women did not dare to go by themselves for fear of threats from people in the town or villages. Neither did they dare to invite their former Bosniac friends to their home for the same reason. To go with a women's organisation was viewed as safer. They could say to people that they were doing humanitarian work which was far more acceptable, and perceived as more neutral than having personal contact and socialising with people from the 'other' group.

Building up trust and contacts with returnees is often a long process requiring persistence and patience which Nada Stjepanovic from Most confirms, *"In the beginning it was difficult even to speak to people, but we succeeded and now [after so many years] it is easier and there is trust among us, and now we enjoy real cooperation."*

# Crossing Borders

## CHAPTER 4

“I couldn’t accept hating somebody because of their name – I wanted a normal life. Why should we be divided when we have lived so long together?”

DUBRAVKA KOVACEVIC, MOST, VISEGRAD

**THE FRAGILE PEACE** in the country was upheld by NATO peacekeepers (IFOR/SFOR) and UN police (IPTF). However, the situation continued to be very tense for a long time. During the first years human rights abuses continued, including harassment and intimidation of minority groups and sometimes even murder. Police, municipal and government officials could play a direct or indirect role in the violations. The war had collectively traumatised the population, and hostility, fear and distrust was reinforced by propaganda in local media controlled by the political parties.

Freedom of movement was extremely limited and it was difficult, and could be dangerous, for minorities to travel in some parts of the country. In 1996 Western diplomats criticised NATO for not fulfilling its mandate and ignoring provisions in the peace agreement, including ensuring freedom of movement for civilians throughout the country.<sup>23</sup> The right to move freely was also undermined by the system with separate registration plates on cars for Repub-

lika Srpska and the Federation. This system made it easy for police and others to spot and harass visitors from the other entity which increased the fear and tension.

The fact that there was hardly any flow of information between different parts of the country made people even more isolated. There was no radio or newspapers and not even the telephone worked over the entity lines. In all areas, the media subjected people to propaganda and prejudice.<sup>24</sup>

Several of the women’s organisations remember how human rights activists, NGO representatives and journalists faced intimidation and threats if they attempted to promote inter-ethnic/national/religious dialogue or criticise the nationalist leadership. The peace agreement had established the rights for displaced persons and refugees to return to their pre-war homes but the return process was widely obstructed by government and law enforcement officials.

In an overall assessment of the situation in the country Carl Bildt, the High Representative for the implementation of the peace agreement on Bosnia and Herzegovina, said in July 1996 that the progress of people’s daily life was often staggering and that the politics that drove the war were still prevailing. He also criticised the parties for failing in their commitment to respect human rights. “*Of particular concern is the pattern of either encouragement or tolerance of ethnic harassment [...] This causes the country to continue to drift apart in a development that is contrary to the declared aim of re-establishing a multi-ethnic society.*” CARL BILDT THE HIGH REPRESENTATIVE FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PEACE AGREEMENT ON BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA<sup>25</sup>

Despite the situation, women activists contacted each other across ethnic and national borders and arranged meetings and gatherings immediately after the war. On a few occasions, where it had been possible, the contacts had already been taken or maintained during the war.

Many outside observers at the time did not think it was even remotely possible to move across entity lines and/or cooperate with other ethno-national groups. When asking women's activists what made them take these contacts despite the obvious difficulties and risks involved, the answer is often that it was simply a natural thing to do, or if not natural then at least recognised as absolutely necessary in order to resurrect some sort of normality after the war. *"It's easy because we are part of the same country! We are together and in any case we must live together. And before the war there were a lot of mixed marriages and people had relatives everywhere. A clear distinction must be made between politics and ordinary people."* JASMINKA DZUMHUR, FOUNDING MEMBER OF CENTAR ZA PRAVNU POMOC ZENAMA, ZENICA.

To contact people from the other ethno-national group was a clear statement against the ideology of the war and the ongoing political propaganda. *"I couldn't accept hating somebody because of their name – I wanted a normal life. Why should we be divided when we have lived so long together?"* DUBRAVKA KOVACEVIC, MOST, VISEGRAD

*"Women cross borders because we are in the same situation. Not employed and we wanted to speak to other women. They were our friends before the war.*

*"Of particular concern is the pattern of either encouragement or tolerance of ethnic harassment [...] This causes the country to continue to drift apart in a development that is contrary to the declared aim of re-establishing a multi-ethnic society."*

CARL BILDT THE HIGH REPRESENTATIVE FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PEACE AGREEMENT ON BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

*We "ordinary people" want to socialise with each other."* MERIMA DŽANKOVIC, DUVANJKE, TOMISLAVGRAD

Many of the women felt a strong frustration because of the isolation that they had lived under during the war, both in terms of access to information as well as the very restricted freedom of movement. They wanted to break that isolation. Women from one organisation say that they were seeking contact with women on "the other side" because they were curious and simply wanted to know how life was for them. One woman from Visegrad said: *"there was a total lack of information – no newspapers, no radio, no bus line – it felt like a prison, so we went to the local UNHCR office and said 'We are women and we want to have contact with other women – to see how they live'"*. A women working there got involved and helped them to come into contact with a group of women in the other entity, not too far away. This meeting led to several more meetings, and soon there was a formal cooperation, the first one being a joint training course on reproductive health.

Almost all women's organisations stress the important role that especially OSCE, but also UNHCR, played during the first

Everything I read or saw on TV – at that time in both entities – was always a dooming shadow, always talking as if we again would have war. They were fighting all the time. It gave the impression that war just stopped for a while, but will continue again. There was no hope. But this conference gave me hope. If we are strong maybe we can change this society, and I still believe that women in Bosnia and Herzegovina are the only hope for Bosnia and Herzegovina as a state – to remain a state and not have war again. Male politicians have spent all their credits and they haven't done anything."

MARA RADOVANOVIC, LARA, BIJELJINA

years after the war in providing transport for women who wanted to meet people in the other entity. Travelling under the protection of international organisations was during the first years practically the only opportunity they had if they wanted to travel across the borders. This support should not be seen as merely physical protection and transport, but also as essential in enabling the exchange of information between different parts of the country and making it possible for women's organisations to discuss and make plans for a collective action to rebuild the country.

However, several of the women defied threats and their own fear and travelled in their own cars. Women from Horizonti, Tuzla, remembered how they travelled in the car during the night to Republika Srpska and how afraid they were. At the same time they recognised that the only solution for the future was to work together.

The women's activist Klelija Balta, now working for UNDP in Bosnia and Herzegovina, underlines that these meetings were very important. By exchanging information with each other about what was going on in different parts of the country they challenged nationalistic propaganda. She explains that when the women first started to meet they agreed to write to each other and to check with each other whenever there was anything in the media that could stir up tension or deteriorate the situation, since media continued to be very polarised and full of propaganda after the war.

### Room for conversation

Nothing illustrates the act of cross border cooperation better than the women's conferences held shortly after the war ended. The organisation hCa organised a conference in Zenica on June 6–9, 1996 entitled *Room for Conversation*. It was one of the first times that women from Republika Srpska and from the Federation met in an organised way and 53 women from 32 organisations from different parts of the country participated.

It was not an entirely easy thing to pull off so soon after the war ended in 1995. The scars and the memories were still fresh and these types of meetings provoked a lot of resistance among people. People would ask women attending the conference "why do you meet with [Serb/Bosniac] women, whose husband's killed us?"

The purpose of the conferences was simply to establish contact and to discuss problems that were common to all women,

regardless of nationality or religion. Lidija Zivanovic, one of the organisers, says *“the important thing was that these women wanted to establish communication and cross borders”*. She also believes that this was the time when the women fully began to realise that they had not been part of the war in the sense that they did not start it or make any decisions about it, and that women were not represented in the negotiations, neither before, during or after the war.

The aim was also to develop ideas and strategies for the future in order to work jointly for a democratic, multi-ethnic and unified country and to improve women’s participation in decision making processes and the respect for women’s human rights. After the conference the participants signed a letter urging international organisations and government bodies to improve the positions of women and ensure women’s participation in building a new society.

About six months after the first conference, in December 1996, a second *Room for Conversation* conference was arranged, this time in Banja Luka in Republika Srpska and it was the first time women from the Federation came to Republika Srpska for a conference. A third conference was held in July 1997 in Mostar. There were other women’s conferences as well, but the unique characteristics of those mentioned here is that they were entirely initiated by women from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The choice of venues was symbolically important as all of these places in one way or another symbolised intolerance (Zenica not in the same degree as the other cities).

Interestingly enough, almost all who did not participate in these conferences said it was impossible to meet in those places right there and then.

The difficulties that had to be overcome in order to organise these conferences are clearly shown by this example from Lidija Zivanovic: *“For the first time 30 women from the Federation came to Banja Luka. It was a problem to present to the public that such a conference would take place in Banja Luka. I decided to invite President Biljana Plavsic, not because I wanted her to come, but because I wanted the highest authorities to know [about the conference]. I also asked for approval from the Ministry of the Interior and from the police. I passed through several interviews and they told me at the end that I didn’t need approval for such a meeting because it would be held in a closed space. Permission was only needed for meetings outside. But I insisted on approval. We chose to organise the conference in a hotel which at that time was owned by a representative from the Serb Radical Party. This was also a good strategic step because it would attract great attention if something happened in their hotel and in their space. [...] I was of the opinion that it was less dangerous to organise everything publicly than to do it in smaller scale or secretly. [...] I can’t estimate now how dangerous it was but the indication of just how dangerous it was was perhaps in the people I met who refused to communicate with me and participate because they thought it was dangerous”* LIDIJA ZIVANOVIC, HCA

“Crossing entity borders and taking part in public reunions in another entity was heroic.

Ten years ago one had to be extremely brave to go to Sarajevo and meet people there. We were afraid of saying where we were going and how we were meeting people of other nationalities to discuss politics of that time.

Those hard times, fears and memories are still very fresh.

Putting up with all the accusations of being a traitor or a foreign spy was one of the hardest experiences.”

GORDANA VIDOVIC,  
BUDUCNOST, MODRICA

The conferences led to calls for laws to be “harmonised with international and democratic standards”; calls for the setting up of specific programmes for marginalised groups (refugees, disabled persons, families of victims of war, elderly people); and that civil society must be included in the reconstruction of the country.

The conclusions about education were particularly interesting since this topic is very much at the centre of the political battlefield. The conference demanded that education should not be influenced by political interests and differ depending on which ethno-national group you belong to. They wanted “one school” where children were taught the same history that did not recycle the division between people into the next generation.

Many of these recommendations from 1996–1997 are still relevant and, ten years on, the government bodies are just beginning to succeed in developing unified laws. The conference in Banja Luka took place after the first post-war elections were held and a working group for analysing the election law was established. They were going to make proposals for amendments in the election rules in order to have more women in the upcoming municipal elections.

Apart from the actual conference conclusions, the conference(s) resulted in deeper communication and networks between the women who participated. Many women felt encouraged and started to get involved and to organise themselves. One participant expresses her experience as follows: “*It was really wonderful!! It was the first time I saw people from both entities who agreed on everything. Women from the Federation*

*had exactly the same problems as women from Republika Srpska and they agreed on how different problems should be solved. Maybe that made an even greater impact on me because it was right after the war and it gave me hope that we can do something together! Everything I read or saw on TV – at that time in both entities – was always a dooming shadow, always talking as if we again would have war. They were fighting all the time. It gave the impression that war just stopped for a while, but will continue again. There was no hope. But this conference gave me hope. If we are strong maybe we can change this society, and I still believe that women in Bosnia and Herzegovina are the only hope for Bosnia and Herzegovina as a state – to remain a state and not have war again. Male politicians have spent all their credits and they haven’t done anything.”* MARA RADOVANOVIC, LARA, BIJELJINA

Just after the conference in Zenica in June 1996 the organisation Zena 21 organised *Women Transforming Themselves and Society* a large women’s conference in Sarajevo to which they invited people from the international community and women from the whole region. The agenda was similar to the Zenica conference and included issues concerning family, women’s participation, education, health and legislature. They also brought up the importance of speaking out about the widespread sexual violence and rape which so many women had been exposed to during the war.

Women’s activists point out that in these conferences and in women’s meetings language is never a problem. In Bosnia and Herzegovina language is being used

as a political tool to stir up and maintain ethno-national divisions – what language and alphabet should be used, and in what language documents should be printed etc. This problem is a construction since the three languages referred to are so similar that many people say the only difference is dialectal. Due to the ethno-national divisions during the war the language was divided into Bosnian, Croat and Serbian. For the women who started to meet in conferences and meetings right after the war, this language question “is just not an issue”.

These meetings across the entities were not looked upon very sympathetically by the authorities and by the ruling political parties. In fact, very often women put themselves in great danger by travelling to the other entity or by just meeting or cooperating with somebody from the other ethno-national groups. Especially in the beginning they were often accused of being traitors or spies, and they were not seldom harassed and excluded in their local community.

Lidija Zivanovic from the hCa organisation says that in the beginning it was much easier to get out of Banja Luka than to get back in again after a seminar or a meeting. After the women’s conference in Sarajevo for example, the names of the women from Republika Srpska attending that conference were published in a newspaper which led to some of them even losing their jobs. Another woman, while thinking back at those

first years after the war ended, remembers:

*“Crossing entity borders and taking part in public reunions in another entity was heroic. Ten years ago one had to be extremely brave to go to Sarajevo and meet people there. We were afraid of saying where we were going and how we were meeting people of other nationalities to discuss politics of that time. Those hard times, fears and memories are still very fresh. Putting up with all the accusations of being a traitor or a foreign spy was one of the hardest experiences.”* GORDANA VIDOVIC, BUDUCNOST, MODRICA

It was not without obstacles women engaged in work crossing the entity lines. Although it might in some respects be considered easier for women since a majority of them had not taken part in the actual fighting, a great deal of courage was required to go through with meetings, conferences and cooperation. The general climate in the country naturally affected the women as well and the women’s meetings were not without mistrust and suspicion.

Some of the women describe the great apprehension they felt in the beginning when they were to cross the borders for the first time. The emotions were very strong in terms of fear as well as distrust and doubt. What made it possible was their focus on the future, on the common practical problems that faced them all and the feeling that the only solution was to work together.



# Opening Doors for Activism

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## CHAPTER 5

**“If we really want to turn Bosnia and Herzegovina into a modern country of equal opportunities we have to act preventive”**

GORDANA VIDOVIC, BUDUCNOST, MODRICA,  
EXPLAINING THE AIM OF AWARENESS RAISING ACTIVITIES.

### **Strengthening civil society and raising rights awareness**

The women’s organisations learnt at an early stage that rights awareness among women was very low, and that women were more likely to become victims of violations and discrimination and that they did not know how to claim their rights. To break this negative circle the organisations realised that they had to act. From the outset they have aimed to reach out and spread information and knowledge. Most well-established organisations assist less developed sister organisations, and there is a widespread acknowledgement that a change in women’s position in society cannot be achieved without including all women – in rural as well as urban areas.

Some organisations have made spreading of knowledge and support their main mission. Zene Zenama in Sarajevo has worked around the country for years supporting

women’s groups and helping them to organise to give them as much influence in their local community as possible. Zene Zenama has worked a great deal with educational support to new women’s organisations and encouraging the formation of new women’s groups and organisations in isolated and “difficult” areas. They emphasise the importance for non-governmental organisations to formulate their own demands and are convinced that an independent civil society throughout the country is a prerequisite for a successful democratic process.

Essentially all women’s organisations in Bosnia and Herzegovina are implementing different types of awareness-raising activities. They organise public discussions, roundtables and seminars; they appear in the media, spread information leaflets and organise campaigns about various aspects of women’s rights, such as economic rights, social and health rights, the right to live a life free from violence and discrimination, and the right to participate in all decision-making. Roundtables in particular are often used, and a method that has served a dual purpose, to give information to the participants but also to have them participate actively in the discussions.

The women organisations stress that an important step is to spread knowledge to women who do not have access to news or information, particularly women in rural areas who are very isolated. Many returnee communities are situated in villages outside of towns usually inhabited by another ethnographic group, which adds to their marginalisation and isolation since there is very little contact between different groups.

The Most organisation in Visegrad describes how they try to break the isolation of rural women by clarifying new laws and

explaining their rights. On returning from a conference or a meeting they visit the villages surrounding the town to share with the women the information they received at the meetings – about events in other parts of the country, campaigns by women’s organisations or about new laws and regulations that concern women. They always try to explain things simply and concisely.

There are also several activities aimed at raising women’s self esteem in order to encourage them to take a greater part in public life. In 1999 the hCa organisation initiated a project entitled To Be Seen To Be Heard with the specific aim of strengthening women in rural areas and small communities and increasing their participation in public life. An informal women’s network was set up as part of this project, currently consisting of more than 160 activists, members of NGOs, political parties, government institutions and religious and cultural organisations from sixteen cities in Bosnia and Herzegovina.


The media was quickly identified as a crucial tool to get their organisations’ message across and improve people’s awareness. However, they learnt that the use of media is a double-edged sword since it is also one of the main proponents of the negative gender stereotypes and prejudice against women. Hence the media is not just being seen as a channel. Media workers have become a direct target since their attitudes, values and priorities influence people’s perception of women in society in general. To fight negative gender stereotyping the organisation Lara has initiated a network of female journalists to advocate for a more gender sensitive media reporting, to challenge gender stereotypes and to work towards improving the visibility of women in the media. This

network will work closely with women’s organisations in the forthcoming elections in 2006 and provide coverage to women candidates in an attempt to promote gender equality issues.

## **Strengthen economic independence**

Despite the peace, unemployment and poverty spread in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Many men had been killed during the war or had gone missing and there were many divorces, which led to a dramatic increase in households headed by single women. At the same time women have been hard hit by unemployment and the international programmes set out to cope with the problem have in some cases been discriminating towards women. A study from 1997 revealed that emergency employment programmes implemented by the World Bank, ILO and other bilateral donors focused on public works mostly aimed at employing demobilised soldiers. This resulted in more work opportunities for men.<sup>26</sup> On top of this women are often paid less than men for the same work.

Women’s organisations address these problems in different ways. They organise educational programmes for women such as language and computer courses, and various vocational trainings like hairdressing, sewing, typing etc. to increase the chances for women to get a job and become more competitive on the labour market. In Mostar, the organisation Stope Nade arranged meetings for women to discuss what they should do to get a job. Discussing possibilities and ways to apply for and find work strengthened the participants’ self esteem. This made it easier to go out and look for



jobs and several of the participants also managed to find work. Just after the war, the organisation Zena BiH started work therapy based on knitting. Women travelled long distances to take part in this activity which gave them something meaningful to do and a place to meet and talk.

The activities of women's organisations tend to serve several purposes. The courses, for example, served as a way to get women out of their homes to meet other women. Very often the organisations mixed women of different nationalities in order to facilitate contacts between the groups. The courses were also empowering women to learn new things.

To combat women's poverty, several organisations also initiated various income-generating programmes. Many women's organisations are active in this area through organising workshops on setting up business and assisting women to apply for credits. One example is a project in Bratunac in eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina where Forum Zena organised lectures together with the Agriculture Institute on strawberry and raspberry farming, targeting unemployed single mothers so that they could become self supportive. Eighty-four women, 60 Bosniacs and 24 Bosnian Serbs, passed the course and 24 received grants to start up small businesses. The women earned some income from this and later formed a farming collective where they shared freezing facilities to facilitate the manufacture process of the berries.

As in many other cases, the project combined several purposes. This region has witnessed a good deal of tension between returnees, IDPs and domiciles so the organisation made sure that women from each

group were included in the project. This helped them get to know each other and to avoid allegations of favouritism of one or the other group.

Women's organisations also brought to public attention discrimination of women in the economic sphere. For example, property was often required as collateral in order to be granted micro-credit loans. However, property in Bosnia and Herzegovina is often registered to men, not women so women's NGOs called on micro-credit donors to consider this and adjust their programmes to accommodate women.

As well as addressing women's poverty through lectures about, and support for, women's income-generating activities, women's organisations also monitored the government's and international institutions' macro-economic policies, and analysed the effects of these policies on women. One such example is the analysis conducted by Centar za Pravnu Pomoc Zenama in Zenica in 1999–2001 of the privatisation process of the Bosnia and Herzegovina economy. The Centar highlighted the fact that women were affected by this process more negatively than men. Women were more often made redundant, no matter how long they had been employed, and they seldom received proper compensation. On completing this analysis, Centar za Pravnu Pomoc Zenama demanded that the institutions in charge conduct a similar gender analysis of the privatisation process.<sup>27</sup>

One example from United Women in Banja Luka illustrates the link between economic independence and participation. Within the framework of a "democratisation project" funded by an international donor they asked women living in villages

around Banja Luka what they needed. The women replied that they wanted to have their houses rebuilt or cows. The organisation did not have the means or capacity to build houses. They agreed however to give the women cows, although being a bit hesitant about it, feeling that maybe they cheated the donor somewhat because they could not see a completely clear link between democratisation and giving cows to women. Before long they realised that there was indeed a clear connection. The fact that the women became owners of the cows (one cow to one woman) gave them increased economic power in their families, which meant that they also gained increased power in the community as a whole.

### **Taking back control over woman's body and sexuality**

The struggle for gender equality and for women's equal participation with men in public and political life must also address the issue of reproductive health rights. Reproductive health is central when it comes to a woman's ability to plan her life and to participate fully in society. Women's organisations in Bosnia and Herzegovina took an early lead on this issue, organising lectures on reproductive health and other health issues, very often combined with the possibility of basic medical check-ups.

After the war people were in great need of health care, but a large number of medicine staff had fled the country. Women's health was not a priority. At this time, in 1996, the Stope Nade organisation started a medical project to improve women's health by taking cervical smear tests<sup>28</sup> and giving information to women about women's health, including family planning and

contraceptives. The tests gave women an opportunity to ask "private" questions which they would normally not raise at an ordinary medical check-up. It was sometimes difficult to reach refugee women since they were ashamed of going to a gynaecologist if their husbands were not present. In their eyes, the only reason for going to a gynaecologist was if you had new man. So going alone would insinuate that you had been unfaithful. However the smear testing project opened the door for women to go to gynaecologists since the project was about cancer and women had received information beforehand. They also had the possibility of joining a group with other women who they knew so that they would feel safer and less ashamed. Stope Nade also arranged a seminar for medical staff from both the Federation and Republika Srpska. This provided participants with the opportunity to share knowledge and experience over entity borders and they stressed the importance of communication between the medical professionals from all ethno-national groups. These types of meetings were, and still are, very important in improving and building up a functioning health system in the country.<sup>29</sup>

Reproductive health rights are more than just a health issue. Throughout history societies have tried to control women's sexuality, often by restricting access to women's reproductive health facilities, and by doing so exposing women to serious health risks as well as poverty, and indirectly weakening their possibility to fully participate in the public sphere. This can be seen in various examples from all around Bosnia and Herzegovina. One organisation for example that educated women in reproductive health were accused of being traitors and being

"Generally we think that the international community should trust local initiatives and local organisations much more. Most of the money that the international community gives to Bosnia and Herzegovina goes to international organisations. The largest democratisation projects are implemented by international organisations, and they will never achieve results. Somebody who comes here contracted for short-term work is not as interested in making real long-term difference as we are."

MARA RADOVANOVIC, LARA, BIJELJINA

“Women make up more than 50 per cent of the population. We could give them [international community] the core problems and offer them a door to reach into society.”

AZRA HASANBEGOVIC,  
ZENA BIH, MOSTAR

against their ethno-national group because they educated women about contraceptives to avoid unwanted pregnancies. In the eyes of the authorities this would lead to fewer children being born and threaten the future of their ethno-national group.

Women’s rights is a very sensitive topic that often reaches the core of political and nationalistic rhetoric. The situation is made worse by the fact that religious leaders often interfere in political life, and strongly advocate more conservative values, or as one woman put it: *“Our three different religious organisations are against women, they would like to force women to stay at home and be quiet. They have no problems agreeing on that point – they totally agree. They are all against abortion and condoms etc. because they need soldiers for their purposes!”* MIRA VILUSIC, HORIZONTI, TUZLA

There are several examples of doctors working at public health institutions who refuse to perform abortions out of fear of being targeted by politicians and religious leaders. However, the very same doctors will carry out the abortions in secret at private clinics. Given the fact that abortion is legal in Bosnia and Herzegovina this must be regarded as a serious violation of women’s rights. In addition, forcing women to seek help in private clinics means that an additional economic burden is placed on them.

### Marginalisation by the international community

*“Women make up more than 50 per cent of the population. We could give them [international community] the core problems and offer them a door to reach into society.”*

AZRA HASANBEGOVIC, ZENA BIH, MOSTAR

Women’s organisations come into contact with all kinds of women through their different activities, and outreach work – refugees, returnees, domiciles facing different living conditions in cities and rural areas.

They actively seek information about the situation in order to make correct analyses of the needs and priorities. One example is the Lara organisation who conducted a door-to-door project in villages around the town of Bijeljina to ask women about their life situation and about their problems. They followed this up with designing projects and informing the local politicians.

By showing the women in their area that they are genuinely interested in their situation, the women’s organisations gain the trust of the women and receive a great deal of information that is often hard to come by in any other way, for example about corruption, security issues and everyday life problems.

Despite having extensive knowledge of the situation, problems and needs of ordinary people, access to a good deal of information and contacts, many women’s organisations feel that international organisations working in the country rarely regard them as a resource.

The hCa organisation in Banja Luka had for example implemented a project on tolerance and non-violent communication in schools in Republika Srpska. They had worked for a long time educating both teachers and children, and they had prepared a training manual. When the OSCE later initiated an educational programme, they never built on the experience of the organisation who had worked with this issue for such a long time. *“Most policymaking organisations exclude civil society from*

*influencing their policies. We don't need to be directly included but they should build on the experience and knowledge that already exists [to give us space] – they never do that.”* LIDIJA ZIVANOVIC, HCA, BANJA LUKA

Another example of how the international community fails to consult women in a reconstruction programme in the eastern part of the country again comes from Forum Zena in Bratunac where an international organisation planned an income-generating project. They consulted the local village councils about the people's priorities but nobody considered the fact that there were no women represented on these councils. Single mothers in particular were excluded despite being the largest group in that area. The project was therefore planned without necessary information from the single mothers about what they needed. The women's organisations wondered why they were not contacted beforehand, since that would have helped achieve a successful result.

*“Generally we think that the international community should trust local initiatives and local organisations much more. Most of the money that the international community gives to Bosnia and Herzegovina goes to international organisations. The largest democratisation projects are implemented by international organisations, and they will never achieve results. Somebody who comes here contracted for short-term work is not as interested in making real long-term difference as we are.”* MARA RADOVANOVIC, LARA, BIJELJINA

Although the international community emphasises local ownership of projects they often forget to consult all the groups within society, in particular women's groups. This

kind of exclusion undermines the empowerment of women and threatens to strengthen discriminatory structures. Several women point out that when the international community fails to invite and consult women and women's organisations they also send a signal that women's voices and knowledge is not important.

At the same time, when international organisations do contact women's organisations to get information they very rarely give any feedback in return leaving a question mark over whether their knowledge was used or if it was just a visit out of obligation, to be able to say that they had been there, but without any real intention. *“They always ask us about our strategies, priorities and activities, but they never say what their strategy is and what they want to do. Probably they still do not recognise us as relevant actors with whom they should harmonise their strategies.”* LIDIJA ZIVANOVIC, HCA, BANJA LUKA

There are also examples of how the international community indirectly undermines a strong civil society by inviting and paying individual activists in their personal capacity instead of inviting them as representatives from their organisations. *“It seems they want to push NGOs aside by extracting people from NGOs. You see logos of UNDP or Gender Centre on the booklets and promotional material but never logos of NGOs. We get in a position of having to choose between what is less bad for us. Our visibility and our chances for sustainability could increase if we could be contracted as an NGO.”* ALEXANDAR ZIVANOVIC, HCA, BANJA LUKA

*“Most policymaking organisations exclude civil society from influencing their policies. We don't need to be directly included but they should build on the experience and knowledge that already exists [to give us space] – they never do that.”*

LIDIJA ZIVANOVIC,  
HCA, BANJA LUKA

# Building up Legal Security

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## CHAPTER 6

“Bosnia and Herzegovina could be a lesson learnt for other places. It is extremely important to have legal professional help immediately after the war. For example, if you have a missing husband you won’t get a pension. Families had to pronounce people dead in court in order to receive the pension. It’s a moral dilemma: how can I say that my husband is dead if I haven’t seen his body or know he has been killed? Through our work we have seen that it is crucial to have both legal and psychosocial support.”

JASMINKA DZUMHUR AND AMIRA KREHIC,  
FOUNDING MEMBER OF CENTAR ZA PRAVNU POMOC ZENAMA, ZENICA

**IN POST-WAR** Bosnia and Herzegovina the capacity of the state to ensure legal protection of all its citizens was very limited due to the breakdown of the country’s institutions and administration and the fragmentation of the legal system. Furthermore, the respect for human rights was very low, and wasn’t high on the political agenda. As well as the fragmented legal system, regulations and laws changed so quickly that it was nearly impossible for ordinary people to exercise their rights if they did not have assistance from lawyers. The enormous human rights violations on the civilian population during

the conflict had a huge impact on women. However, while the crimes committed against women during the wars in former Yugoslavia were known and condemned by the international community, the situation of women after the war was not as well known or widely discussed. Many women had been victims of war crimes, in particular rape and torture, and after the war they had to struggle with psychological trauma and stigmatisation. Still to this day very little has been done by the authorities to provide legal and psychological assistance to these women and very little has been done to ensure compensation. Many women had become widows and had lost family members. The situation of women was made worse by the fact that many did not own any family property and could not find employment.

Women’s organisations immediately recognised the particularly difficult situation of women. As a reaction to the insufficient response of the official institutions to ensure legal security and give adequate support to individuals, women established organisations to provide free legal aid. Given the widespread poverty, free legal assistance was very important in order for women to reclaim property, identity documents or get their pensions and other benefits. Women who went through divorce received help to claim their share of the property after the divorce however many were not aware of this right.

Many people were displaced from one part of the country to another but their lives were still intertwined with the part of the country they had left. It was often not clear under which jurisdiction a case should fall. Laws and regulations could be completely different depending on in which part of the

country you lived.

In order for IDPs to receive their pension or unemployment benefits or get hold of personal documents such as school diplomas and property documents, it was necessary to have information from and contacts in both entities. *“There was no central registry on state level and everything was scattered in different places so we had to get it for them”*, explains lawyer, Jasminka Dzumhur.

Lawyers giving legal assistance to women in one place of the country thereby needed to have contacts with counterparts in other parts of the country since it was not possible for people to travel to get the documents due to the security risks or general fear of what could happen. This cooperation between lawyers *“happened spontaneously because we were working on the same things, although separated by nationality and entity lines”* explained Gordana Vidovic from Buducnost.

The Centar za Pravnu Pomoc Zenama in Zenica organisation describes how difficult it was, and how they would spend hours just finding legislation for one case because of the complicated system. This was the reason they organised a conference in 1997 with lawyers from both the Federation and Republika Srpska where they discussed issues such as the right to return, property claims and labour rights. *“We submitted letters and conclusions to all important organisations and said we NEED an umbrella legislation. We must have one unified law. There were no limits to the discussions, no talks about entities. If you look at our conclusions, it would be the same conclusions now.”* JASMINKA DZUMHUR, ONE OF THE FOUNDERS OF CEN-

TAR ZA PRAVNU POMOC ZENAMA, ZENICA

In relation to almost every concern they worked on, women’s organisations realised that they could not do their work properly and push for changes unless there were proper laws in place, a functioning legal system and if women didn’t know their rights and how to claim them. In order to improve the rule of law in the country the women’s organisations chose to address these issues. For example, at the beginning of their work, right after the war ended, there were no laws against men’s violence against women in the family or to ensure women’s equal participation in decision-making and non-discrimination at the workplace. Trafficking in human beings for sexual exploitation was not on the agenda and “non-existent”, hence there was no legislation.

Women’s organisations have had a direct impact on the number of legal changes related to men’s violence against women. A huge success is that domestic violence was defined as a criminal act in the new criminal codes. Perhaps the most important law to have been passed thanks to the advocacy of women’s organisations is the Bosnia and Herzegovina Gender Equality Law (passed in 2003). The initiative was financially supported by the Finnish Government, but the drafting of the law was by large a domestic initiative, with much assistance from the UNHCHR and in close cooperation with the Deputy Minister for Human Rights and Refugees and the two Gender Centres.<sup>30</sup> The law defines equal rights for women and men in private and public life and prohibits any gender-based discrimination (direct or indirect) as well as criminalising gender-based violence. The law is regarded

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JASMINKA DZUMHUR,  
ONE OF THE FOUNDING MEMBERS  
OF OF CENTAR ZA PRAVNU POMOC  
ZENAMA, ZENICA



“almost nobody knew that they had the right to return or get property back in the other entity”

THE ORGANISATION MOST, VISEGRAD.

as one of the best gender equality laws in the world. However, it still needs to be implemented and other laws are to be harmonised with this law.

The women’s organisations have cooperated with each other and managed to utilise each other’s experiences in the respective entities. They have strived to ensure that the laws passed in the different parliaments are harmonised with each other in order to improve cooperation as well as the protection of victims. The very fragmented legal system and the many levels of decision-making makes it very difficult to lobby and to work together for legal change. The adoption of these laws is therefore a great victory for the women’s movement.

A cornerstone in women’s organisations’ efforts to strengthen legal security for people has been the extensive work to inform women of their rights according to international human rights law and the Bosnian legislation. Much of this work has been carried out in the legal aid centres and through various public events, such as workshops, roundtables and media campaigns where women’s organisations have introduced and educated women and men on international and domestic laws that protect women’s human rights. Centar za Pravnu Pomoc Zenama in Zenica has for instance a column in a newspaper where they answer readers’ questions about laws and rights.

A large part of this work has also been carried out through outreach activities in rural areas to reach marginalised women who would not otherwise have access to this kind of information. Thanks to these outreach activities, women all around the country have been informed about new laws and regulations, responsibilities of in-

stitutions, and rights of the individual.

One concrete example comes from Most in Visegrad who describe how they, for the first time and years after the Dayton Peace Agreement was signed, learnt about the provision that gave displaced people not only the right to return to their pre-war homes, but also the right to get their property back. They say that: “*almost nobody knew that they had the right to return or get property back in the other entity*”. With the new knowledge they travelled to villages around their town to inform people about the Dayton Agreement and what it meant for people’s lives. Based on this experience they realised they had to study the peace accord and adopted laws so that they could claim their rights and also to help others do likewise.

Women’s organisations also maintain the role of civil society to hold authorities and politicians accountable for what they do in order to uphold the rule of law and counteract abuse of power and corruption. Women’s organisations use the laws, taking up cases of men’s violence against women, trafficking in human beings and discrimination at work, and bring these cases to court. They follow their clients to court and give support throughout the process to make them feel safe and strengthened. In this way many cases are challenging old stigmas attached to men’s violence against women in the family and rape. Women’s organisations also use the laws in their advocacy work as has been the case with the new election law where they have tried to make the authorities live up to their obligations and harmonise it with the Gender Equality Law.

Women’s organisations also carry out extensive monitoring of the implementation of laws. This could concern follow-up reports

of violence or discrimination reported to the police by women to see what action has been taken by the authorities. Many organisations also keep statistics of the number of reports and cases in court. Women's NGOs also collect information from women victims of violence on how they have been met by officials on duty, and challenge decisions that are not correct. One such example is the Lara organisation who took a case to court regarding a young woman who had illegally lost her job because she was pregnant. They won the case.

As well as the day to day monitoring of officials and institutions, women's organisations also produce comprehensive reports on the status of women's human rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina looking at a wide range of areas such as men's violence against women, women in public and political life, women and health, women and education. At the same time as the government handed over its report to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women in 2004 describing what they have done to implement The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the women's organisations handed over a shadow report, giving their views.

When the women activists noticed that law enforcement officials such as police, judges and prosecutors were not aware or did not care about the laws that protected women's rights they offered training to these institutions. Several women's organisations work with this type of training. These educational activities targeting officials are important since they make the official response to various problems in society more adequate. This is also an effort that in the

long run increases citizen trust in the legal system and the responsible institutions.

Jasminka Dzumhur, one of the founders of Centar za Pravnu Pomoc Zenama who also began educating police officers on violence against women and trafficking, says that her daughter had had a visit in school by one of the trained police officers who was now informing the students about the exact same issues – violence and trafficking. For her this shows the success of their activities.

In 2005, after a great deal of effort, the Office of the High Representative and the government bodies agreed on a police reform to create one unified police force in Bosnia and Herzegovina, replacing the system with two forces, one in each entity. This was seen as a great success and a step forward, away from the ethno-national divide which threatens the stability of the country. However, women were excluded from this process despite their extensive experience and knowledge on legal security and the problems people face in cities and rural areas throughout the country. They demanded to be involved in the process but it fell on deaf ears, despite UN Security Council Resolution 1325 specifically calling on all actors involved to adopt a gender perspective and to involve women in reforms related to the police and judiciary. The Lara organisation says that the reform is good in many ways and a step forward, away from a police force for the nationalistic parties rather than for the people. But at the same time they are disappointed.

*“The Office of the High Representative organised the police reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina and they didn't include any women. It's unbelievable really. If they had consulted women's organisations they*

*“The High Representative decides to only invite leaders and then it will only be men. The police reform was yet another example. By doing so he gives the power to men and marginalises women. He's saying that Bosnian women are not important.”*

NADA GOLUBOVIC,  
UNITED WOMEN, BANJA LUKA

“The things we chose to do were always our choice. We could choose to be quiet, or to join them [corrupt officials or criminal gangs], or to speak out. We chose to speak and encourage other people to do the same.”

RADMILA ZIGIC, LARA,  
BIJELJINA

would have received good recommendations because the information is based on the real situation of people.” MARA RADOVANOVIC, LARA, BIJELJINA

United Women in Banja Luka also expresses the same frustration and stresses the signals the exclusion of women sends out. *“The High Representative decides to only invite leaders and then it will only be men. The police reform was yet another example. By doing so he gives the power to men and marginalises women. He’s saying that Bosnian women are not important.”* NADA GOLUBOVIC, UNITED WOMEN, BANJA LUKA

Many women’s organisations also view the role of the international community in legal reform as somewhat problematic. They argue that the international community has been too selective in its approach to the subject. While stressing the importance of the rule of law and the importance of legal reforms in line with European standards, the most influential international organisations present in the country – notably OHR, OSCE, EU – have given very little public support to, for example, the efforts to ensure implementation of the Gender Equality Law, or as Gordana Vidovic, Buducnost, puts it: *“The international community does not respect the Gender Equality Law at all and it is the most visible obstruction [for the implementation of the law]! We have sent several statements. For example saying that the Office of the High Representative does not live up to the standards set in the Gender Equality Law. But we never get a reply.”* NADA GOLUBOVIC, UNITED WOMEN, BANJA LUKA

The latest example of this was the draft of the new Election Law, where any notion of gender equality was ignored despite there being a legal obligation to draft this law in line

with the Gender Equality Law. Although the international community was monitoring this process closely there was no comment or pressure in public about the fact that the Election Law should be harmonised with the Gender Equality Law. The process is still ongoing at the time of writing.

## Fight against corruption and organised crime

*“From the very beginning of our work, we dared to criticize political decisions and issues such as minority rights, corruption and criminal acts committed by the highest political officials. Maybe it does not look like a big deal right now, but back then no one dared to say anything against official authority.”* GORDANA VIDOVIC, BUDUCNOST, MODRICA

Many of the women organisations say that corruption and organised crime are the two most serious problems in the country. Stanojka Tesic from Forum Zena in Bratunac says that there were only so called war heroes in the municipality after the war (in many cases they could even bribe themselves into the positions). These men had a lot of power and influence on what was going on in the municipality, for example the reconstruction of people’s homes. During the house reconstruction phase they were involved in negotiating the reconstruction in their municipality with donors, and what happened in this town was that *“only the powerful men who ruled the town could say who could have a house and who could not. They would force women – often widows and single mothers – to cook or to have sex with them in order to get a house or other help. And the worst thing was that nobody knew where or how we could com-*

*plain to the international community”.*

A recent example of how the mafia tries to undermine the rule of law is from the town of Tuzla where a young girl came to Horizonti after having been severely raped. It turned out the rapists were two mafia members in the town. The rape had been in a public place, but no one dared to intervene due to the background of the two men. The staff at Horizonti were the only ones addressing the case and spoke out about it, even though many of the staff members were afraid. They received threats and great resistance from the perpetrators and their contacts. The perpetrators lawyer who had good political contacts questioned Horizonti's work and asked how they could push this girl and that they themselves were going to jail. Despite the resistance, Horizonti continued taking the case to court and the girl was very brave speaking out about what had happened. Horizonti say that the police gave them great support during the case and in the end they won. By bringing the case forward they not only strengthened the girl, but also managed to challenge the influence of organised criminal gangs over the rule of law and prejudice about rape. However, they say that many in the community still think that the girl is to blame since she went to the discotheque where the rape had taken place.

After this experience Horizonti realised that they had to develop strategies on how to address these types of cases and how to protect themselves from organised crime. They are planning to contact other women's organisations who have had similar experiences.

Women's organisations' work against trafficking in human beings is worth a spe-

cial mention since it has very much been a fight against organised crime, which has also been one of the priorities for the international community. It is organised criminal networks that manage the trafficking of women and run the night clubs. Women's organisations were among the first who began to talk about the problem and who also pointed out the connection with organised crime and corruption. Mara Radovanovic, Lara, one of the anti-trafficking activists in Bosnia and Herzegovina says: *“When I ever have a chance to speak to women about trafficking, and what we think about it and why we are doing that work, I always underline that trafficking is part of organised crime which has a very large and negative impact on the whole of society [...] We were the first to say openly in the media that trafficking is organised crime!”*

In general, many women's organisations point to the fact that corruption is very widespread when it comes to the response of the authorities to (sexual and violent) crimes against women. There are several examples where the male perpetrators manage to bribe police officers or prosecutors in order to get away lightly. In Bijeljina for instance after evidence of bribery the Chief of Police was replaced and the same happened to the Public Prosecutor. Despite this, several women's organisations have taken on cases where the mafia have been involved, challenging the power and influence of organised criminal networks.

*“The things we chose to do were always our choice. We could choose to be quiet, or to join them [corrupt officials or criminal gangs], or to speak out. We chose to speak and encourage other people to do the same.”*

RADMILA ZIGIC, LARA, BIJELJINA

# Challenging Violence in Society

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## CHAPTER 7

“Peace in the family have an impact on peace in the street and peace in the country.”

LJILJANA CICKOVIC, ZENSKI CENTAR, TREBINJE

**VERY EARLY AFTER** the war the women’s organisations realised that men’s violence against women in the family was a big problem. Men’s violence against women had of course existed before and during the war but it was not until after the war that the real picture started to surface. In fact, the extent of the problem took many by surprise.

After the war there were a lot of weapons around, remaining in the possession of most adult men despite the occasional amnesty. These could be used to control female family members. During the war women gained more power over decision-making in the family and many men returning from the fighting had difficulty accepting the increase in women’s self-esteem. Violence against women was (still is in many areas) widely accepted as traditional, cultural or as a result of men’s war-traumas. Violence against women was rarely believed to occur at a serious level, when it did it was believed to be the result of alcohol or due to mental illness.<sup>31</sup>

The organisations that began to organise legal assistance after the war believed that they would mainly deal with issues such as reclaiming of property, ID documents (and other personal documents), as well as helping refugees and displaced persons to exercise their rights. At the beginning, these issues were indeed the main problems for women seeking legal assistance. But soon the women’s organisations were increasingly approached with other requests; most of the requests for legal aid were about men’s violence against women. “*We were surprised by the violence. We always knew that it existed but not to this extent and before it was always kept in the private sphere [not in public].*” BERJANA ACKAR, CENTAR ZA PRAVNU POMOC ZENAMA, ZENICA

Organisations working with educational and psychosocial programmes saw the same patterns, and were equally surprised by the number of women who spoke out about the problem.

Most of the organisations were not at all specialised in violence, they organised themselves with the aim of responding to other social problems. When they realised that violence was such a big problem, they adjusted their activities to address this human rights abuse. This meant that the organisations realised that they needed to increase their own knowledge and began educating and training their own staff in order to be able to increase their legal aid services and psychological support programmes for women victims of violence. They saw this work as essential since men’s violence against women is directly linked to the status of women in society. The violence restricts women to fully enjoy their human rights, including the right to participate on

equal terms as men in public and private life. Violence isolates and violates women and sustains an unequal power structure. There are great costs to be paid for violence for society as a whole; the fact that so many citizens are restricted to participate fully is not only a human rights problem but also a democratic problem.

Horizonti, in Tuzla, who started working with psychosocial support during the conflict, remembers how big the stigma attached to men's violence against women was in the beginning, how difficult it was for women to speak out about it, their feeling of shame and self blame. Some women even thought that it was normal to suffer violence from a husband. "*It was the assumption that the man was the most important member of the family*" says Mira Vilusic, Horizonti. It was not until they had built up enough trust and felt safe during the sessions that the stories started to come. Horizonti now organises group sessions where the participants support each other. In the group they realize that they are not alone and not to blame.

Today Horizonti notices a great change in attitudes; women sometimes even publicly speak out about being survivors of men's violence against women in the family, which would never have happened ten years ago. They and many other organisations started to break the silence, organising public debates, roundtable discussions and media activities to put men's violence against women on the agenda.

In the early stages several organisations opened SOS lines in order to give an opening for women who did not have the possibility of getting to a women's centre. But

many women are still not ready to go and ask for help personally and they can anonymously contact the SOS line for help and assistance. The notion that the woman brings disgrace to the family if she talks about the violence, not the man who beat her, is still common today (2006).

However, it soon became clear that it was very difficult to help women who were victims of men's violence and who came to the women's organisations for help because the legislation covering domestic violence was either non-existent or severely insufficient. The help and assistance that the women's organisations could offer was often reduced to direct and short-term assistance and, in some cases, shelter for a short while. Long term solutions, including legal measures against the perpetrators of violence were not available, or in the words of one lawyer, Gordana Vidovic, Buducnost: "*We couldn't help women who were victims at home because laws at that time were not sufficient so we realised we must change the laws.*"

For example, domestic violence was only categorised as 'disturbance of public order' and not as a criminal act. This meant, if there at all was any reaction from the authorities, that both the man and the woman were held responsible and blamed. The only possibility to press charges against the perpetrator was if the woman had very serious injuries from the violence. Apart from that the only legal assistance the organisations could provide was to assist the women victims of violence if they wanted a divorce. Other support provided by women's organisations includes temporary refuge in shelters and psychological support.

“In the beginning it was shameful to talk about women and problems they face because people said we don’t have any violence here, it’s not important”

DUBRAVKA KOVACEVIC,  
MOST, VISEGRAD

Shelters are of utmost importance in assisting women victims of violence, or in the words of Gordana Vidovic, Buducnost: “*it was impossible to help women victims of domestic violence emotionally or legally without providing them with a safe place to stay. The main goal of the shelter is to provide women and children with safety, solidarity and psychotherapy during their stay*”. Women’s organisations have had to fight a lot of prejudice and lack of understanding in the importance of shelters. It has been very difficult to get funding and support from the authorities.

The shortcomings of the legislation brought women’s organisations even closer together, advocating for legal changes with regard domestic violence. Women’s organisations from all over the country came together to discuss what to do and set out determinedly to advocate for legal reforms to protect and support women victims of violence. This step from local response on individual cases of violence against women to the broad cooperation between organisations from both entities to advocate on the political level to adopt new legislation was mentioned by many interviewed women as the turning point in the development of their organisations. The organisations planned and worked (and still do) to raise awareness of violence against women among the broader population, including in schools. A seemingly endless number of public discussions, workshops, poster and media campaigns have been organised, and various types of informational material has been produced.

Men’s violence against women began to be perceived as a serious human rights violation that needed to be addressed by the state in accordance with their responsibility

to protect its citizens. The women’s groups contacted politicians about the necessity for legal reform in this field. They even drafted the proposals for the new laws themselves. To begin with, the main priority was to create legislation that would actually regulate domestic violence as a criminal act. The first law that was passed to address this was a new criminal law, which included domestic violence (In Republika Srpska 2000 and in Federation 2003).

During the course of the advocacy for new laws the women’s organisations realised another problem: there was very little interest among most of the male politicians to engage in this human rights violation. It turned out that most of the male politicians did not regard men’s violence against women as a problem, or at least not as a problem that concerned them, the politicians, or society as a whole. Women’s organisations were often dismissed and were told either that the violence did not exist or that it was not a serious problem. The issue became controversial also on another level as it challenged the notion that the violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina was isolated to the other groups only. The discussion about violence against women had exposed the fact that there were actually problems also within the ethno-national homogenous communities, something that was strongly contested by many in the ruling nationalist parties. “*In the beginning it was shameful to talk about women and problems they face because people said we don’t have any violence here, it’s not important*” DUBRAVKA KOVACEVIC, MOST, VISEGRAD

The experience from contacts with women politicians was different. Many of them – regardless of their political affiliation – tended to support the demands from

the women's organisations on this issue, which became a very clear illustration of the fact that women and men might not define social and political problems in the same way, or even identify the same issues as problematic. But there were not enough women politicians to push the issue through; the great majority of politicians were (and still are) men.

The conclusion was that there was a great need for more women in the political parties – not only from the gender equality perspective, but also from the perspective that political deliberations are never neutral but reflect the values of the people who hold political positions. The women activists realised that any advocacy efforts for better protection of women victims of violence had to go hand in hand with advocacy to increase the number of women in political parties. The same problem was noticed when it came to the international community; usually it was easier to get support from women working for any of the international organisations than from male officials in those organisations.

Since 1996, several laws regulating men's violence against women have been passed. Domestic violence is now regarded as a criminal act; there are laws regulating rights within the family, including property and ownership rights. The latest law on the matter includes provisions to remove the offender from the home. All in all, the legislative framework has improved the protection of human rights in the country, and significantly improved the security of women victims of violence.

However, the institutions responsible for dealing with this problem were lagging behind the legal developments. Although the

laws had been changed, responsible institutions, including police officers, were not informed of the changes, or simply did not care about them.

Many women who turned to women's organisations for help would tell the organisations about the inappropriate attitude of police officers who had come to the scene. The women were reporting that the police had not cared to interview them in private, or that they did not take complaints seriously or that they had openly taken sides with the abusive husband. The same inappropriate attitude or lack of understanding of the problem was also common among prosecutors and judges, or officials from the centre for social work.

When realising the shortcomings in the implementation of the laws, many women's organisations offered to train institutions' employees on the new laws and about the nature of the problem. First trainings were mainly developed and conducted for the police, since they usually come first to the scene of the crime and later on they addressed health, social care institutions and other legal professionals. The experience from these trainings has been very positive and they are very much appreciated. The trainings have over the years developed into methodologies to enable training to practitioners all over the country.

The organisation Medica from Zenica gives training to institutions and capacity builds local NGOs. Through their project *A Multidisciplinary Approach to Combating Violence against Women* they educate professionals throughout the country from relevant institutions, such as police, judges, prosecutors, NGO representatives, journalists, social workers and medical workers,

"It was impossible to help women victims of domestic violence emotionally or legally without providing them with a safe place to stay. The main goal of the shelter is to provide women and children with safety, solidarity and psychotherapy during their stay".

GORDANA VIDOVIC, BUDUCNOST:



“We have achieved a lot by making other people accept that women’s human rights are a concern for society as a whole – if you violate women’s human rights you undermine the respect for human rights for everyone.”

MARA RADOVANOVIC,  
LARA, BIJELJINA

in a gender-sensitive approach to violence against women. They organise the trainings in different municipalities and the completed training programme often leads to the various actors in the municipality formally agreeing to cooperate with each other on this issue.

All the information and awareness-raising efforts addressed to politicians, the media and general public have produced results. Apart from the legal changes that have been achieved, the problem of violence against women has increasingly become recognised as a problem in society. After several years of work, there is a greater awareness among organisations about the problem and the issue is no longer as much of a taboo as it was in the beginning. This change is reflected in the increased visibility of the cases of violence – there are more calls to SOS lines, run by women’s organisations compared to the late 1990s. The number of women who report violence to the police, and those who are ready to take their case to court are also increasing.

*“We have achieved a lot by making other people accept that women’s human rights are a concern for society as a whole – if you violate women’s human rights you undermine the respect for human rights for everyone.”* MARA RADOVANOVIC, LARA, BIJELJINA

There is also a visible change of attitude among government institutions, for example the Republika Srpska government donated money to two shelters in the Republika Srpska. The fact that United Women in Banja Luka after this decision managed to collect 1,700 signatures in two days from

the citizens of the town demanding that the city council include the shelter into the town budget, shows that more and more people recognise this issue as a public concern. Their actions resulted in money being allocated by the city council to finalise construction of the shelter along with a pledge that the running costs will indeed be included in the budget (from 2006).

After many years of lobbying the local institutions in Banja Luka have agreed to sign a memorandum of understanding about cooperating in terms of providing assistance to women and child victims of violence, with specific responsibilities of each signing party and regular meetings. A similar memorandum of understanding has also been agreed in other municipalities. Several organisations point out that increased cooperation can be seen, particularly with the police after they approved trainings provided by women’s organisations. It often results in regular meetings and in closer cooperation on specific cases.

After intensive lobbying, four women’s organisations signed an agreement with the Republika Srpska Gender Centre to cooperate over a common SOS number (1264) throughout Republika Srpska. However, women’s NGOs are aware that there is still much to do in terms of legislation, education and information and, not least, in terms of changing the attitudes among people about this problem. Despite the many achievements of women’s organisations, society still places violence against women in the non-problem category. Local authorities do not take their responsibility to provide adequate protection, such as shel-

ters, for women victims of violence. There are too few shelters for domestic violence in relation to the scope of the problem. The majority of shelters are financially dependent on foreign donors.

Criticism from the women's movement is also directed at the international community as it does not pay enough attention to men's violence against women in the family. At the beginning of their activities women's organisations felt for example that the international community could have done more to put pressure on the legislative bodies or political parties to introduce legislation regarding this widespread human rights violation which so many women were facing in their everyday life. The women's organisations were not alone with this opinion. In 2000 the Gender Coordination Group<sup>32</sup> criticised OHR for not paying more attention to the problem of men's violence against women. The same criticism was directed to IPTF for their lack of focus on the issue, despite the fact that a large number of the violent crimes that they dealt with were gender-based violence such as domestic violence.

At the same time the international community put a lot of energy in combating another type of violence against women, i.e. trafficking in human beings. Several of the organisations say that the strong focus on trafficking tends to overshadow other forms of violence against women. Not to say the efforts to combat trafficking and support trafficked girls and women are not important and welcomed, but why not as much effort is put into fighting other forms of violence as well. As Berjana Ackar from

Centar za Pravnu Pomoc Zenama in Zenica puts it: *"Only trafficking is a big issue but it is only because of its links to organised crime and foreign citizens [nobody really cares about the women]"*.

In a report in 1998 Oxfam stated that there seemed to be little being done by the international community to fight or even to address the issue of violence against women: *"This despite international provisions that clearly state that violence against women constitutes discrimination, and mandates that instruct the organisations to pay careful attention to gender issues. For many, "gender" equals "women issues" equals "psychosocial". Despite the preponderance of women amongst the displaced population and the obvious indicators that domestic and other violence against women is probably going to increase, this issue is frequently considered as secondary to the "real work" of "real" human rights violations."*<sup>33</sup>

### Fighting slavery

*"...We have a women's paper that covers topics avoided by other media. Our women journalists decided to find out more, in depth, about trafficking in human beings in our country. Contacting police stations and attending trials they got a hold of a lot of information. We heard stories from police officers, for example about a raid against a bar where they found eight women forced to have sex with visitors. We read the women's testimonies and got their full story. We were very surprised, that this could happen here, where we live! That a man can hold eight women as slaves! They were isolat-*

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BERJANA ACKAR, CENTAR ZA PRAVNU POMOC ZENAMA IN ZENICA

“...We have a women’s paper that covers topics avoided by other media. Our women journalists decided to find out more, in depth, about trafficking in human beings in our country. Contacting police stations and attending trials they got a hold of a lot of information. We heard stories from police officers, for example about a raid against a bar where they found eight women forced to have sex with visitors. We read the women’s testimonies and got their full story. We were very surprised, that this could happen here, where we live! That a man can hold eight women as slaves! They were isolated, he never spoke to them and they were not allowed to use the phone or contact the outside world. We got very upset and felt that we had to do something.”

MARA RADOVANOVIC, LARA, BIJELJINA<sup>34</sup>

*ed, he never spoke to them and they were not allowed to use the phone or contact the outside world. We got very upset and felt that we had to do something.”* MARA RADOVANOVIC, LARA, BIJELJINA<sup>34</sup>

During the war and in particular in the aftermath of the war, trafficking in human beings became a huge problem in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This was largely due to a combination of a high presence of the international community in the country that increased the demand for sexual services and discrimination of women, weak legal system, weak border control, corruption and widespread presence of organised criminal gangs.

Trafficking in human beings for sexual exploitation was first brought up in a wider scale at an IPTF training in 1998. The Council of Europe and UNHCHR organis-

ed a trafficking conference in December the same year where representatives from ministries, institutions, international organisations attended as well as Bosnian women organisations who already had come across cases in their work. From the beginning women’s organisations worked together with these other actors to put an end to slavery, ensure protection for survivors and hold perpetrators accountable.<sup>35</sup>

Very quickly it became apparent that trafficking, like other forms of violence against women, could not be effectively combated without proper legislation and awareness among the responsible institutions about the nature of the problem and the rights of the victims. Women’s NGOs, together with international agencies, in particular the UNHCHR, pushed for new legislation based on the UN Convention against Transnational Organised Crime signed by Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2000 in order to protect the women falling victims to this crime, and legislation to criminalise the people involved in trafficking. The new law was adopted in 2003. Also in this field much progress has been made and Bosnia and Herzegovina has today very good legislation on trafficking although the implementation still leaves much to be desired.

It did not take long until organisations developed information and awareness raising campaigns at the same time as they demanded long term solutions to the problem, including legal remedies. They have also conducted training for law enforcement and other governmental institutions to inform them about the human rights approach to trafficking and to advocate for the protection of the rights of the survivors.

Lara began assisting survivors of trafficking in 2000. They offer shelter for these women. They use their network of women in the city and in the rest of the country to support the survivors in terms of health, psychosocial support and legal support. Lara also stresses the need to have good translators and knowledge about the situation in the countries of origin in order to be able to meet these women and girls in an adequate way.<sup>36</sup> They train high school, professionals and visit schools. Today they also bring along a police officer so that the police can answer questions from the pupils as well. The aim is to increase youth's trust in the police so that girls who are violated dare to turn to the police for help.

The fact that international civil and military personnel go to brothels has made the efforts to hold perpetrators to account and to stop trafficking more difficult. Mara Radovanovic from Lara has noticed how the presence of the international community has affected attitudes in Bosnia and Herzegovina, now it is for example more acceptable than before the war for men to go to prostitutes. She has also seen how trafficking in human beings affects society.

*“Trafficking and prostitution has altered people’s perception of reality. It distorts the whole community. Sex trading is not only a crime against the individual. It is also a threat to our attempts to build up a democratic society after the war.”* MARA RADOVANOVIC, LARA, BIJELJINA<sup>37</sup>



# Participation in Decision-making and Agenda-setting

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## CHAPTER 8

“Big changes are needed now, to get more women in the government but also other men. Many people don’t believe in the political system today, and therefore they do not vote. We hope to break this circle. It is the base for change. And many of those who don’t vote are women.”

MARA RADOVANOVIC LARA, BIJE LJINA

**AS EARLY AS AT THE FIRST** women’s conferences women’s organisations demanded to be included in the decision-making process. It was their sense of alienation from the events and decisions that had taken place, including a sense of injustice based on their insight that they had not been allowed to take part in shaping their future that was driving them. Like Jadranka Milicevic, Zene Zenama, puts it: “We were aware that women were excluded in the peace processes and that women needed to be included from now on”.

The peace negotiations in Bosnia and Herzegovina presented an opportunity to deal with discrimination on all grounds and to emphasise that gender equality is a precondition for a successful democratic

development and a just and sustainable peace. However, the international community and the warring parties failed to do so. The Dayton Peace Agreement lacks a gender perspective which influences women’s lives and possibility to participate. There is no focus on gender or on development of civil society. There was no explicit mentioning of women or women’s needs and interests, which signalled that woman’s rights or gender equality was low priority in the reconstruction that was to follow.

Usually, in most peace negotiations, it is the warring parties that negotiate the peace (as a way to stop the fighting). And since the warring factions almost exclusively are made up of men, it means that it is almost exclusively men who participate in the peace negotiations. Civilians or representatives of civil society are rarely allowed to take part in the negotiations. And since women were mainly civilians during the conflict it means they were excluded from this process. “*We must have women in decision-making positions. [...] Unfortunately in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as in many other, especially transitional countries, women are not actors and subjects of peacebuilding and war prevention policies and processes. They weren’t asked when the Dayton peace agreement was made or when general politics were designed [...].*” NADA LER, WOMEN AND SOCIETY, SARAJEVO

It is a cornerstone of democracy for all citizens to participate on equal terms. Most of women’s engagement in society has taken place within civil society. However, any influence that women may have in or from civil society can never be equivalent to participation in the formal decision-making structures. Women’s organisations

in Bosnia and Herzegovina have worked to achieve an equal participation of women in the country's decision-making and legislative bodies and by doing so they have also strengthened the entire democratic system by striving to achieve a truly representative democracy. *"The most logical argument is that you must include more than half of the population."* DIANA SEHIC, GLOBAL RIGHTS, SARAJEVO

*"The first reason we decided to work on women participation in politics was because we thought it was a natural thing for women to also make decisions, not only men"* MARA RADOVANOVIC, LARA, BIJELJINA

The first election after the war was a great disappointment with regard women's participation – both in terms of the number of women who voted and in terms of the women who got elected.

Only one out of 43 seats went to a woman (2.38 per cent) in the Bosnia and Herzegovina House of Representatives.<sup>38</sup> In addition, it was the same 'old' political parties – the three main nationalist parties, SDS, HDZ, SDA, that had been in power during the war – that won the election. Many women felt alienated and questioned whether any change was really going to come about.

As a reaction to this dismal result, the women's organisations, in close cooperation with OSCE, advocated for a change to the Temporary Election Rules that a gender quota should be introduced with the aim of increasing the number of elected women in legislative assemblies. The '7.50 Rule' as it was called stipulated that each candidate list must have at least three persons of the opposite sex among the first nine candidates, and so on until the end of the list.<sup>39</sup>

The women's organisations stress the very important support that they got from OSCE on this issue. In 1997 the OSCE democratisation department initiated the Women in Politics programme based on close cooperation with women's activists. The programme also acknowledged the importance of the visibility of women and their accomplishments.<sup>40</sup> Several of the organisations also point out that the persons within OSCE who supported them were women genuinely interested in the issue of women's equal participation in decision-making.

Women's activists realised that in order to be able to change things they must encourage more women to use their right to vote. Therefore, one of the first tasks was to talk to women about the importance of voting. This work was usually also combined with very hands on education in how to vote and the way the whole voting and election system works. However, some organisations underline that it was not always easy, people faced so many other problems like access to food and health care. These acute daily problems took a lot of time and energy, leaving little space for other important issues like elections.

Ahead of the election in 1998 women from 14 organisations throughout the country mobilised under the campaign *Nas je vise* ("There are More of Us"). The name referred to the fact that women constituted more than half of the population and that they therefore really could influence the outcome of the election if only they would go and vote. It was the first campaign that women's organisations organised at the state level. During the campaign over 13,000 women from urban and rural areas as well as from refugee camps were edu-

*"The most logical argument is that you must include more than half of the population."*

DIANA SEHIC, GLOBAL RIGHTS, SARAJEVO

cated by 58 trainers in all kinds of places: factory halls, schools, health and cultural centres. They were informed about the coming election, about the voting lists and the right of women to vote and the right of being elected. The campaign made women feel strong, it made them realise that they together actually can make a difference, that their roles and voices are important.<sup>41</sup>

The OSCE supported the campaign financially and also logistically, by covering costs for meetings of the coalition and local coordinating offices. This support was vital. The election in 1998 resulted in 26,19 per cent of the seats in the Bosnia and Herzegovina House of Representatives being taken by women.<sup>42</sup>

Many efforts were put into reaching out to the rural areas. As mentioned earlier women living here were often very marginalised. There was also widespread acknowledgement that the rural areas were absolutely crucial for ensuring peace in the country. It was in the rural areas that the war had been the most damaging, and the people in the rural areas who had done most of the fighting and been promised the most by the nationalist politicians. Therefore, there was almost a sense of urgency to include rural women in all activities carried out by the women's organisations. *"We need to go into villages! We need to reach the rural women and convince them that they need to vote for women, not only for nationalist parties, to show that they have options. But [we should not do it] like political campaigns, but talk to them in a relaxed manner. Many women there don't have radio, TV etc. They have no information. We should produce a brochure that is easy to read, with true stories. We MUST reach into villages!"* AZRA HASANBEGOVIC, ZENA BIH, MOSTAR

This strategy – to focus on women in rural areas – is still an integral part of the work of the women's organisations to this day.

In the following election on the state level that took place in 2000, the women's organisations built on the experiences from the previous election in 1998. But while the main focus in 1998 was to persuade more women to vote and take a more active part in political life, the focus for the 2000 campaign was somewhat extended to advocate stronger for more women on executive and legislative positions and for including gender quotas in the first Permanent Election Law in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

A significant difference from the previous election was that the candidate lists this time were 'open', meaning voters could choose their preferred candidate on the lists. Compared to the election results of 1998 the number of elected women fell to 17.9 per cent. The explanation is widely regarded to be the open lists because with a system of open lists the personal election campaigns matter more. And for personal election campaigns funding is crucial, and women candidates did not have even near the same amount of money as male candidates, and thus did not have the same visibility in the media and in poster campaigns as men. Another factor that must be mentioned is that most political parties have policies of not allowing separate personal campaigns, something which most women candidates have respected in contrast to many of their male colleagues.

The role of the media and the importance of women candidates being visible in order to be elected is stressed by hCa and United Women in Banja Luka. They have worked for nine years to increase the number of women in politics and the number of wom-

en using their right to vote. Their tireless work has given results. In the local election in 2004, 35 per cent of the seats in the municipality were taken by women, an increase of 17 per cent since last election.

*“You cannot vote for somebody who is invisible. We have strengthened women politicians and worked to get them to reach out to the public. We have set up radio programmes and TV shows in which women have participated. Our media programmes and open meetings focus on people’s everyday life, not the nationalistic propaganda which the campaigns of the nationalistic parties are full of.”* NADA GOLUBOVIC, UNITED WOMEN, BANJA LUKA<sup>43</sup>

During the years hCa and United Women have arranged many open meetings, tribinas, about women’s human rights and many women politicians from the various parties have come to discuss these issues. Parallel to this they have trained and supported women politicians. The aim is to empower women from all the parties to work across party lines promoting and strengthening women’s human rights. The participants have now created a coalition promoting women’s rights and equality.

*“The women politicians have put welfare on the political agenda.[...]They talk about problems concerning our economy, as opposed to other politicians who only speak about nationalism.”* NADA GOLUBOVIC, UNITED WOMEN, BANJA LUKA<sup>44</sup>

Several of the women’s organisations also work with the empowerment of women politicians. In a society where women are not expected to become involved in politics there is a great deal of resistance to and prejudices against women politicians. Also, women politicians often meet a lot of oppo-

sition and discrimination even within their own political parties. They are seldom considered for any higher positions in the party and they are often taken off candidate lists if they become too popular and gain a lot of support.

The work to strengthen women politicians is usually based on building particular skills, such as public speaking, conducting press conferences and speaking to the media, and organising election campaigns. Education about women’s human rights is usually also included in the trainings. The aim is two-fold. On the one hand it strengthens politicians in their role and within their respective political parties. On the other hand, the aim is to form a critical mass of women politicians who will advocate for women’s rights regardless of political affiliation.

By targeting women from different political parties who would normally never have any reason to work together – due to the ethno-national divisions in the country and the fact that they started to cooperate – stands in stark contrast to the leaders of the nationalistic parties. The results of these efforts and the method of working are very positive. The women who have undergone these trainings do indeed cooperate with each other across party lines on issues regarding women’s rights. The women’s organisations also serve as a resource to the women politicians, and assist them in drafting laws or preparing argumentation.

However, providing training to women politicians no matter what political party they represent also enfolds a dilemma. By strengthening a woman politician, one also indirectly strengthens the political party that she represents, which in the worst case

*“The women politicians have put welfare on the political agenda.[...] They talk about problems concerning our economy, as opposed to other politicians who only speak about nationalism.”*

NADA GOLUBOVIC,  
UNITED WOMEN, BANJA LUKA



“The proposal not only reveals how little the involved parties care about the The Gender Equality Law. If adopted it also decreases the possibilities for women to influence politics.”

KLELIJA BALTA, MANAGER OF THE REGIONAL UNDP BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA GENDER PROJECT

might be a political party that advocate un-democratic values or values detrimental or hostile to women’s rights and position in society. ”*I usually have a dilemma with women politicians we work with in nationalist parties. My dilemma is: are we supporting them as individual politicians or their parties? I want women in politics but I don’t want nationalists. We support three sides in our work, building their capacities, and I am not happy with that. [...] Actually they have capacities and skills that they can use in both ways. They advocate gender equality for women but they are at the same time marginalised in their [nationalist] parties.*”

LIDIJA ZIVANOVIC, HCA, BANJA LUKA

Women’s organisations have continued to prioritise work connected with elections and have planned several activities for the forthcoming elections in 2006. Women’s organisations lobby intensively for equal representation of women and men on the candidate lists.

After the Gender Equality Law was passed in 2003, women’s organisations have advocated for the Election Law to be harmonised with the Gender Equality Law, which clearly states that men and women should be equally represented in public and political life. Women’s organisations also refer to the country’s constitution which clearly prohibits discrimination, including gender-based discrimination. There is great concern among women’s groups since the drafted proposal isn’t in line with these regulations. Together with 145 NGOs hCa and United women have proposed amendments to the draft proposal and sent to the House of Representatives in the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina. “*The proposal not only reveals how little the involved parties care about*

*the The Gender Equality Law. If adopted it also decreases the possibilities for women to influence politics.*” KLELIJA BALTA, MANAGER OF THE REGIONAL UNDP BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA GENDER PROJECT<sup>45</sup>

Despite some progress in the legislative framework regarding gender equality, the fact is that women in Bosnia and Herzegovina are still to a large extent excluded from the formal decision-making process in the country. Of course, the ones who bear the main responsibility for this must be the domestic authorities in the country.

However, many women’s organisations also argue that part of the blame must be put on the international community. Since the international community has such an extensive influence over the country’s development and is so deeply involved in legal reform it can influence and support the calls for gender equality and gender sensitive legislation had it wanted to. After all, many women’s activists argue, the international community is tasked to support the building of a stable democracy and a lasting peace in the country, and the issue of gender equality definitely falls within that mandate.

Several of the women’s organisations also think that the international community has too lenient an approach to nationalist parties, and towards the extreme male dominance of these parties. “*We don’t think there are any women involved in the work of the High Representative, they discuss everything within a small group of people, all of whom are men.*” DUBRAVKA KOVACEVIC, MOST, VISEGRAD

Even if there is an understanding of why the international community speaks to the nationalistic parties who are elected representatives of the people, many are puzzled

that there does not appear to be any more in-depth analyses of what and who these parties represent, bearing in mind that almost half of the population did not vote and that there are discriminatory structures which make it difficult for women to participate on equal terms.

*“The international community is talking and compromising with the wrong people because their partners are SDS, SDA, HDZ [...] All the politicians who are so-called democratically elected are the same faces we saw during the war. They are democratically elected because the international community recognised them as partners in negotiations from the outset. And then [after the elections] the international community asks the population why they vote for these people. But it’s very interesting because less than 50 per cent of the people vote, so can we really say that these politicians are representatives of the people who live here?”*

LIDIJA ZIVANOVIC, HCA, BANJA LUKA

A point often made by women’s organisations is that the male dominance of the political parties is a remnant from the power structures of the war, and that it is virtually impossible for anyone who was not part of these structures to get into the parties, especially women. In this sense, many women argue that pushing for gender equality in politics indirectly means breaking the dominance of power elites from the war and their concentration of power on the political arena. If 50 per cent of the positions were granted to women, much of the power structures would be broken.

*“People in Bosnia and Herzegovina were so disappointed after the war. Ordinary people who were against the war – even if they had been forced to take part – expected the international community to*

*punish the war lords, and that normal citizens would be chosen to make peace. But instead the international community supported the war lords and nationalist parties. I don’t know how they expect those who started the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina to make peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It’s really stupid. But they did it. [...] Ordinary people said ‘OK they started the war, which we didn’t want, and didn’t like, and didn’t take part in; we just tried to save our lives and our families, and now it’s over and it’s our turn to show what we know’. Today ordinary people don’t believe or trust the international community or local politicians. In the beginning most people trusted the international community.”* MARA RADOVANOVIC, LARA, BIJELJINA

## Setting the agenda

The exclusion of women from the decision-making structures in society is not only a problem in terms of unequal representation. It is also a problem because it has consequences for the agenda-setting in society, what issues that will be discussed in public and eventually make way to decision-making agendas. This also has repercussions for democracy. Decisions are being made which affect a large part of the population who have not had the opportunity to voice their opinions. Decisions that are made may not be of any relevance to large parts of the population, but merely support the agenda of the nationalistic parties. Women’s organisations have experienced this several times.

However, women’s organisations have challenged this fact. As we saw with the case of men’s violence against women, many organisations were met with suspicion and

### The number of female ministers after the national election 2002:

- On state level there is one female minister out of nine.
- The Republika Srpska government has two female ministers out of 16.
- The Federation government has two female ministers out of 16.

### The number of female mayors after the local election in 2004:

- In Republika Srpska there are two female mayors out of 62.
- In the Federation there is one female mayor out of 79.

SOURCE: GENDER CENTRE FB&H

even harassed because they brought problems to public attention that were not in line with the official position of the ruling political parties. Forum Zena in Bratunac spoke out about the social problems and poverty people were facing in the community because of the war and got the reply “everything is OK in Republika Srpska so what is your problem?” The organisation was even accused by the authorities for being traitors and of being unpatriotic because of their complaints.

Women’s organisations have never stopped speaking out about problems they see in society. The organisation Lara in Bijeljina has arranged a weekly meeting since 2001, Coffee with the Mayor, which is basically about inviting representatives from the municipality to come to the women’s centre to answer questions from women and listen to their concerns. They began having the meetings on Wednesdays since it was the “sports evening” which enabled women to have a “free evening”. These meetings not only give women a chance to speak directly to the politicians and authority representatives, but the meetings also contribute to a greater political accountability in the town. Several campaigns and protests have emanated from these meetings, and Lara has become a strong force in the municipality that the local politicians rarely dare to completely ignore. In addition, the evening question time with the women has become such an important platform for anyone who wants to achieve something in the town that politicians themselves ask to come there to meet with the women.

As previously mentioned, organisations use the media to provide the public with information. This could be in the shape of

concerted campaigns on certain issues, for example men’s violence against women. Most organisations also try to organise radio programmes where they inform people about their activities, including conclusions from roundtable discussions on various topics. Women’s organisations also organise trainings for journalists on how to write about certain topics, such as violence against women or human trafficking, and how to analyse news and write about news in a gender-sensitive manner.

The international community plays an important role in agenda setting. Because of its great influence in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina, how it formulates its agendas matters a great deal (political, economical, developmental and otherwise), as well as where it gets its information from and what it bases its analyses on.

One representative of a woman’s organisation explains how for some years the international community had different priorities for each year, for example ‘the year of return’, ‘the year of reconciliation’, ‘the year of youth’. And the organisation had to adjust to these priorities in order to get funds for their projects, but as Nada Golubovic, United Women, points out this was almost absurd since “*every year is the year of everything for ordinary people*”.

Sometimes the international community has been an obstacle for women’s participation, as in 1999 when the status of Brcko was to be decided. Together with women from Brcko, United Women and hCa organised a public session: Arbitrage Decision in Brcko. Brcko District – what does it mean?. While they were preparing for the session the local OSCE office considered that it was too early for women in Brcko to

discuss the problem as the arbitration had not yet been brought up so citizens of Brcko should not discuss it. United Women and hCa argued though that the citizens have the right to hear what had been written by the Arbitration Commission as well as of the meaning of Brcko district. Eighteen women from all the ethno-national groups were present at the session. Nobody turned up from OSCE's local office despite promises to come and inform.<sup>46</sup>

Many women's organisations also say that it has mattered greatly whether the representatives of the international organisations have been women or men. For example, women officials have generally been more interested and sympathetic to issues regarding women's human rights and gender equality. And conversely, most male officials tend not to think about these issues, nor do they take in a gender perspective into the programmes. Several women's organisations mention specifically the late 1990s when there was a woman (Elisabeth Rehn) as Special Representative of the Secretary General within the UN Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina, and a woman (Elisabeth Rasmussen) as Head of the OSCE Democratisation Department, and a woman (Madeleine Rees) as Head of Office for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

*"One mistake by the international community when Elisabeth Rehn left her office was that women's issues were no longer on the agenda. At one donor conference just before she left they talked about the enormous resources that would be given to the Gender Offices but after she left no one*

*cared. The government was ready but there was no longer any pressure from the international community."* GORDANA VIDOVIC, BUDUCNOST, MODRICA

The organisations almost unanimously describe this time period as the one when they have received most understanding and most support from the international community, not only in terms of understanding for their demands but also because they were consulted more on general issues important for the country.

This latest point is important, and something which is often mentioned, that women's organisations want to participate in the political and social reforms taking place and those facing Bosnia and Herzegovina in the future, such as the police reform, constitutional reform and setting up of a truth commission.

Since the international community has a leading role in these processes they have the power to invite various societal actors and to demand from the local authorities to ensure a more gender equal and fully representative delegation.

*"The fact that demands of local women's organisations were largely ignored by the international community, especially the Office of the High Representative, shows the absence of a true willingness by the international community to assist in the democratisation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This also exemplifies a lack of strategy among actors to contribute in creating a local environment where voices of both women and men would be equally valued."* ALEKSANDRA PETRIC, UNITED WOMEN, BANJA LUKA

*"One mistake by the international community when Elisabeth Rehn left her office was that women's issues were no longer on the agenda. At one donor conference just before she left they talked about the enormous resources that would be given to the Gender Offices but after she left no one cared. The government was ready but there was no longer any pressure from the international community."*

GORDANA VIDOVIC, BUDUCNOST, MODRICA

# Conclusions

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“In order to achieve real peace you must eliminate all reasons for conflict, all factors that can create conflict, including discrimination. And in that sense any anti-discrimination work or equality work must be regarded as being peace building.”

JASMINKA DZUMHUR, ONE OF THE FOUNDERS OF  
CENTAR ZA PRAVNU POMOC ZENAMA, ZENICA

**MUCH MORE THAN** signing a peace agreement is required in order to reach sustainable and just peace. In this report we have put forward the work women’s organisations in Bosnia and Herzegovina have carried out supporting the transformation from a war time and non democratic society towards a more functioning society with respect for human rights and non discrimination.

There is a clear link between democracy and peace. We believe that a non democratic society, with human rights violations, is more likely to erupt into war. Bosnia and Herzegovina has gone from a socialist non-democratic society that collapsed in a war to what it is today – on the road towards democracy. Building peace and democracy takes time and a pluralistic debate and a strong civil society are as crucial for this process as the rule of law and free and fair elections.

Women’s organisations in Bosnia and Herzegovina are working to prevent a new conflict from emerging and for sustainable

peace, which coincides with their work for democracy. They have a deep rooted strategy to reach sustainable peace in their activities. These strategies go across the country, out to the rural areas and cross war time created lines building trust and confronting war created fear and hatred. It is also enabling refugees to return home. The peace factor is fundamental in working against men’s violence against women. Work against violence is reducing violence in society, counteracting discrimination, fear and hatred and enhances security for all. It also strengthens respect for human rights. The women’s organisations have addressed hatred and fear through psychosocial support, thus enabling reconciliation. They have addressed discrimination through advocating new laws and educating people on the laws and human rights. They have strengthened the political system by putting forward new important issues and through supporting women politicians and they have put demands to their politicians, expecting them to deliver what the people want. This is building a society that people want to live in.

This road has not been natural or self-evident for the women. It is a long row of strategic choices made day by day in the interaction with both the Bosnian society and the international community.

As we have shown in this report, when international community actors interact with women’s organisations great results are produced. The OSCE support to women that needed security, legitimacy and transportation in the time just following the war is one example. Another was the case with the pre-election campaigns “Nas

Je Vise” working to get more women in politics. This was also the case in promoting and funding work leading to the adoption of the Gender Equality Law and the anti trafficking law. Women’s organisations and the international community agencies was working alongside and supporting each other.

It is shown here that in order for the international community to see and interact with women’s organisations there need to be women in the international agencies, women in high positions. It seems as if women tend to listen to women to a larger extent than men. And women in the NGOs find it easier to be in contact with women in the international community. In order to be trustworthy in emphasising the importance of Gender Equality to the national politicians the international community also needs to have an equal gender balance within its own organisations.

In spite of the examples mentioned above, women’s organisations have concrete cases where they felt that the international community had let them down. Vital information has not been collected from the organisations or given to them. The most serious problem is, however, the fact that women’s organisations are not acknowledged as important actors and partners. They are all too often not invited to meetings or given opportunities to have a say about processes led by the international community. Added to this is that many important issues put forward by the women’s organisations, issues identified by them and of importance to society in general, are not acknowledged by the international community.

“We are strengthened because of exchange of experience with other people: to share my knowledge and experience and opinion and my sense of freedom with other people. To show all women how they could be – professional, educated, free and to have the possibility to participate in political life and make decisions. And we really included many many women in our work! We work together, and together we have lobbied and changed many laws.”

AMIRA KREHIC, ONE OF THE FOUNDERS  
OF CENTAR ZA PRAVNU POMOC ZENAMA, ZENICA

The international community actors choose, to a large extent, with whom they interact. Even though the ruling political parties after democratic elections turn out to be nationalists, the international community has to interact with them because they are elected and in order to hold them accountable. But the international community cannot limit its contacts to the decision-makers on the highest level. Civil society also has to be included. In a conflict-affected society with a very fragile democracy, supporting an active civil society is even more important. When the international community actors support and interact with women’s organisations it strengthens them, they are legitimized which gives them more power also in interaction with the national decision-makers.

International actors have to acknowledge the knowledge that women’s organisations have regarding societal needs and problems in order to find solutions to these problems. There are different ways of addressing dif-

ferent problems and the best ways have to be found in a dialogue between the various actors. Many times the problems are best solved by the people living in the country, by NGOs and the political parties, with strong moral and financial support from the international agencies. The divide between what the international community can and shall do and what the NGOs can do has to be found in dialogue. The organisations need to both be invited to influence the agenda set by the international community and be involved in actual processes hosted by the international community. This is decisive for the fulfilment of the goals set up by the international community itself, as well as for achieving peace and democracy. It is also time for the international community to acknowledge the discrimination of women as a security threat, a human rights violation and as undermining democracy. In the words of Jasminka Dzumhur – gender equality work must be regarded as being peacebuilding.

During the work with this report it has become all too clear that women's organisations have contributed to the democracy development on several levels. On the question of whether their work has strengthened the peace process in Bosnia and Herzegovina, they all agree and feel very strongly that their work has made and still makes a great difference. *“We are strengthened because of exchange of experience with other people: to share my knowledge and experience and opinion and my sense of freedom with other people. To show all women how they could be – professional, educated, free and to have the possibility to participate in political life and make decisions. And we really included many many women in our work! We work together, and together we have lobbied and changed many laws.”* AMIRA KREHIC, ONE OF THE FOUNDERS OF CENTAR ZA PRAVNU POMOC ZENAMA, ZENICA





# Recommendations

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THE RECOMMENDATIONS ARE TAKEN FROM THE  
INTERVIEWS WITH THE WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS

## Recommendations from the women's organisations to the international community

- Support us in our work to build democracy. We are here to stay, it is our future.
- Trust and acknowledge our competence – we know the country the best and therefore how to work.
- Arrange regular meetings with us.
- Involve us in project planning.
- Give us the possibility to influence your policies.
- Let us women take part in discussions on ALL topics including issues regarding peace and security.
- Have more women in your own organisations, also on high level positions. It will support us in our work for the advancement of women's human rights and gender equality.
- Implement UN Security Council resolution 1325. Give us a place at decision-making levels where you are in power to do so.
- See and acknowledge the work we do
- Support us in our work – do not compete with us in doing things that we all ready are doing.
- Support the NGO sector, see us as important and necessary advisors and discussion partners.

## Recommendations from the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation to the international community

- Demand that women – activists as well as politicians – are involved in peace and democracy processes.
- Assume that there always are women's organisations worth consulting.
- Support women's organising both morally and financially.
- Be in contact with and support women's organisations all over the country, including in the rural areas.
- Support women's organisations in their efforts to make politicians and decision makers accountable. Local ownership in peace and democracy processes is assured by the civil society.
- See and acknowledge women's organisations work to strengthen democracy and human rights.
- Make your mandates known among the local population so they know who to turn to regarding different issues.

### **Information that the women's organisations want to give to the international community**

- Our view of the situation in the country.
- Our knowledge about women's situation.
- Our observations of the status of human rights.
- Our knowledge about everyday problems facing civilians, such as discrimination, non-functioning or non-existing laws and misuse of power by authorities and politicians.
- Our analyses of security threats in the society, including violence against women.
- Our experience and facts about corruption and war profiteers.
- Our understanding and expertise of the situation of refugees, IDPs and returnees.
- Our suggestions to solutions and measures to improve the situation.

### **Information that the women's organisations want to receive from the international community**

- Information about who the international actors are and what they do.
- Information about the international actors' mandates and what they are accountable for.
- Information about how they can be contacted.
- Information about on-going and upcoming reform processes (which the international community is involved in).
- Information about how the international community describes the situation in the country, including security concerns.
- Information about women's situation, laws, budget expenditures, in other countries.
- Information on all (international law) documents Bosnia and Herzegovina has signed. It is likely that the international community has better knowledge on this than local authorities and politicians.
- Feed back on how international actors has used information given by women's organisations and if it has lead to any action.

# Apendices

67	Organisations that were interviewed for this report
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## Organisations that were interviewed for this report

**Buducnost, Modrica** Buducnost started in 1996. They work, among other things, to increase women's participation in public and political life, with legal aid and against violence against women, including providing shelter for women victims of domestic violence.

**Centar za Pravnu Pomoc Zenama (Center of Legal Assistance for Women), Zenica** Centar za Pravnu Pomoc Zenama started in 1996. They work among other things with legal aid and legal advocacy to strengthen women's rights and the rule of law.

**Duvanjke, Tomislavgrad** Duvanjke started in 2000. They are among other things arranging meeting places for women from different ethno-national groups at their women's centre.

**Forum Zena, Bratunac** Forum Zena started in 1999. They are among other things providing meeting places for women from different ethno-national groups and work to increase women's participation in public and political life.

**Global Rights, Sarajevo** Global Rights is an international organisation and opened its office in Sarajevo in 1997. They are a human rights advocacy group that partners with local activists to challenge injustice and amplify new voices within the global discourse.

**Helsinki Citizens' Assembly (hCa), Banja Luka** hCa started in 1996. They work among other things on strengthening civil society and the respect for human rights, including advocacy and capacity building to increase women's participation in public and political life.

**Horizonti, Tuzla** Psychological centre started in 1994 and changed its name to Horizonti in 1999. They are among other things offering psychotherapy and psychosocial support to women.

**Lara, Bijeljina** Lara started in 1998. They work among other things with advocacy work to strengthen women's human rights – including promoting women's participation in public and political life and fighting trafficking in human beings.

**Most, Visegrad** Most started in 1998. They work among other things on awareness-raising about women's rights and promoting women's participation in public and political life and providing meeting places for women from different ethno-national groups.

**United Women, Banja Luka** United Women started in 1996. They work among other things with legal aid and legal advocacy to strengthen women's rights and the rule of law, and promote women's participation of women in public and political life.

**Woman & Society, Sarajevo** Women & Society started in 2003. It is a research, policy and advocacy centre. They promote women's rights on national, regional and global level as well as advocacy for gender sensitive democratisation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

**Zena BiH, Mostar** Zena BiH started in 1994. They are among other things working against violence against women, including trafficking, and they arrange awareness raising activities about women's human rights.

**Zene Zenama, Sarajevo** Zene Zenama started in 1997. They are among other things working with empowerment and capacity building of women's organisations throughout the country.

**Zenski Centar, Trebinje** Zenski Centar started in 2001. They are among other things working against violence against women and giving lectures about reproductive health.

**Klelija Balta** Klelija Balta is a founding member of the organisations 'Vive Zene' and 'Amica Educa'. She is now Gender Programme Manager at UNDP Bosnia and Herzegovina. (At the time of the interview.)

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32. The Gender Coordination Group was founded within the framework of the Office of the High Representative in 1999. It was the first joint initiative of the international community to address gender issues. The mandate was to promote gender equality in Bosnia and Herzegovina through co-ordination of gender programming within the international community.
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The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation addresses the needs of women in areas affected by war and armed conflict. The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation cooperates with women's organisations in Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Georgia, Israel/Palestine, Jordan, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro and in Syria.

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