

If women are left out of peace talks

Gorana Mlinarević, Nela Porobić Isaković and Madeleine Rees

The exclusion of women from the process of making peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina has diminished the prospects for sustainable peace. When will we learn that no peace can be sustainable and just without the active and meaningful participation of women?

The narrative of war commonly portrays women as victims only, taking away their agency and leaving them voiceless in the reconstruction of their country. However, women's experiences as victims of violence and women's active participation in peace making and peace building are not mutually exclusive, and both aspects need to be recognised when negotiating peace.

During the peace process that preceded the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995 not a single woman participated, whether as lead mediator, witness, member of the negotiation team or signatory.¹ This absence of women in the formal peace process has had concrete consequences both for the society as a whole and also for women as a distinct group in the society and their ability to be recognised as agents of change in later processes.

In Dayton, the space at the negotiating table was open only to men who had the power of armed forces behind them. Under the pretence of securing human rights, those male elites succeeded in agreeing the formula for the division of territory. Today,

BiH is paralysed by the dysfunctionality of the central state apparatus and the ethno-nationalistic politics that are the common drivers for the two entities created by Dayton.² There has been no serious attempt by the domestic political elite to include women's perspectives in discussions regarding constitutional reforms, nor were women able to get support from the international community involved in facilitating these talks. The rationale – or excuse – is that women are *de facto* included through participation in BiH political and institutional life, including their membership of political parties. However, the reality is different, and women are not sufficiently or adequately represented.

The absence of women during peace negotiations is not unique to BiH. In 2012 UN Women published a review of 31 peace processes, showing that only 4% of peace agreements had women as signatories. More recently, at the Geneva II peace talks for Syria, despite support from states and international NGOs and the existence of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) on

September 2015

www.fmreview.org/dayton20



Michal Poturovic/mojprijedor.com

'Mothers of Prijedor' at a demonstration marking International Day of the Disappeared, 30th August.

women, peace and security,³ Syrian women were kept out of the peace talks. Not only is this patently an affront to international legal obligations but it is also quite simply a tragic waste. Yet, when prominent women's international and local Syrian organisations asked the UN to ensure the inclusion of women in the Syrian peace negotiations in 2014, they were told that the "political situation is complicated". We know that. But the solution is not to perpetuate the divisiveness that led the country into war in the first place. Research clearly shows that the only peace treaties that have brought sustainable peace are those which have been drafted with the participation of women and with the clear inclusion of a gender analysis in drawing up the framework for the conclusion of conflict, for transition, and for the future path of the nation.⁴

Creating space for inclusion and participation

Sharing women's experiences concerning peace negotiations and post-war life has become an imperative for feminist peace activists in order to create spaces for women's meaningful inclusion and active participation in the making of peace. Since

2013 a number of women's organisations and women activists in BiH, facilitated by the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, started to work to counteract the exclusionist mentality of the political elites through an initiative called 'Women organizing for change in Syria and Bosnia and Herzegovina'. The starting idea was that the hard lessons learned by Bosnian women – both during the war and afterwards – need to be analysed and used to develop new, improved strategies for the active and meaningful participation of women in peace processes. This knowledge could be shared with other women in similar situations so that mistakes can be avoided and good practices considered and contextualised. At the same time, the opportunity is being used to find new paths towards the creation of a women's movement grounded in feminist principles in BiH that will be able to act beyond the ethno-nationalistic politics of division.⁵

The women activists from BiH identified successful stories but also many failures over the past 20 years. Most of the failures can be traced to two things: firstly, a flawed peace agreement, the purpose of which was to end the armed conflict but which did not contain the necessary elements for creating

sustainable peace, and, secondly, the fact that women and civil society had no part in negotiating that peace.

During the war, women were actively engaged in addressing the consequences of the violence and in activities vital to the survival of communities; they provided assistance to internally displaced people and to women victims of sexual violence; they went to work – braving snipers and shelling – to keep factories working; and some worked on cross-community dialogue in the midst of war. Yet there was no mechanism to carry those experiences across into the formal peace negotiations. The UNSCR 1325, which called for the active and meaningful participation of women in all phases of peace building and peace making, was adopted five years after the end of the war in Bosnia.

After the war women continued organising, some to demand the truth about missing family members, others to demand inclusion of women in formal politics. Some women also led the difficult process of return, often to sites where many of them had lost their close family members or been victimised themselves. They were the ones with hands-on experience of what it would take to make the return a sustainable one – not just the return of property (which was the main focus of the international community) but also access to economic, social and political rights.

Failure to engage with gender issues

Many of the problems that arose after the war could have been avoided had there been more serious political engagement – involving women's civil society representatives and gender-competent advisors – during the peace talks. Domestic violence, trafficking, health care, education, employment – these are all gender-related issues and should have been factored into a carefully planned transition in post-war BiH. Instead, issues recognised as being 'serious' and of ethno-national interest (such as education) or of particular importance for the political economy (such as employment and health care) were used to consolidate both ethno-nationalistic and neoliberal positions. Jurisdiction over these issues had already been divided between

the different ethno-nationalist elites at Dayton, without addressing any of the discriminatory or gendered aspects of these.

On the other hand, the issues recognised as exclusively 'women's issues' – and therefore not of particular importance for power or resources redistribution – were ignored at Dayton and left to be dealt with by women's organisations. The classic example is domestic violence, the least ethno-politically sensitive issue. BiH women were given space to tackle this, and the male political elite did not interfere substantively given that domestic violence portrays women as victims not as power holders or decision makers; although the causes of domestic violence were not addressed adequately, new and improved laws on domestic violence were passed, driven by women NGOs and carried into parliament by women MPs.

The issue of wartime sexual violence, however, remains a heavily politicised question. Nationalisms seek to profit from a narrative of the atrocities committed by others to "their women". This objectification and commodification were reflected in the way in which the peace process evolved, in particular in relation to access to justice. Instead of embracing an approach to address and ameliorate the situation of survivors that seeks also to have a broader, transformative impact on society, the reaction of parts of the elite has been at best ambivalent, at worst co-optive. Some of the issues raised by the women's groups related to the question of transformative redress. The response, however, was to 'grant' a form of compensation that was more a social support benefit than reparation to address wartime abuses, effectively forcing women into becoming dependent on social welfare. Even this form of compensation was not given to all survivors but only to those who live in the Federation and who fulfil a set of (problematic) criteria.

Consequently, over the past 20 years Bosnian NGOs have had to develop considerable expertise when it comes to provision of services such as medical assistance and psychosocial support. Official institutions, meanwhile, such as centres

September 2015

www.fmreview.org/dayton20

for mental health care and centres for social welfare, have done little or nothing to improve their capacity for provision of support and services. As a result, survivors today get support only through the NGOs, which remain dependent on foreign donor support to continue their vital work.

There is an inherent link between the way in which such services have been 'outsourced' and the achievement of real justice. The formal justice aspects of post-war BiH that were created (the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, etc) have provided a framework for criminal accountability but have failed in terms of providing comprehensive justice. The understanding of justice has been too narrow, confined to the prosecution and conviction of perpetrators (and in the beginning these were also the demands from the victims themselves).

Establishing these formal justice mechanisms, however, should have been complemented by paying real and serious attention to social and economic rights, and the post-war reconstruction of BiH should have been supported by a transformative transitional process. The identification of what was needed could only be done by an inclusive process, and the absence

of women made the failure inevitable. This continues to pose a challenge, as the space lost at the negotiating table has proven impossible to regain.

Gorana Mlinarević g.mlinarevic@gold.ac.uk
 Researcher, Gender of Justice Project,
 Goldsmiths, University of London.
www.gold.ac.uk/genderofjustice

Nela Porobić Isaković nporobic@wilpf.ch
 Project Coordinator, Women organising for
 change in Syria and BiH, Women's International
 League for Peace and Freedom.
<http://womenorganizingforchange.org/en>

Madeleine Rees mrees@wilfp.ch
 General Secretary, Women's International
 League for Peace and Freedom.
www.wilpfinternational.org

1. UN Women (2012) *Women's participation in peace negotiations: Connections between presence and influence*, p4 <http://tinyurl.com/UNWomen-peace negotiations-2012>
2. The Dayton Peace Agreement created a decentralised Bosnia and Herzegovina, dividing the country between two entities, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska, with a weak central government.
3. www.refworld.org/docid/3b00f4672e.html
4. See for example Paffenholz T (2014) 'Civil Society and Peace Negotiations: Beyond the Inclusion–Exclusion Dichotomy', *Negotiation Journal*, Vol 30, Issue 1, pp69-91.
5. The reports from all discussions can be found at <http://womenorganizingforchange.org/en/events/retrospective-exercise/>