

Problems or partners?

Working with women to rebuild the Balkans

by Rachel Wareham and Diana Quick

Why have post-war reconstruction initiatives treated women as passive recipients of aid rather than as active partners?

Massive resources have been deployed in Kosovo as the UN Interim Administration in Kosovo (UNMIK) and the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe have spear-headed reconstruction. How can NGOs and the donor community learn to work with local women and their organisations and facilitate their incorporation into decision-making structures?

These questions are at the heart of a gender audit commissioned by the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children and The Urgent Action Fund. Released during the Beijing Plus 5 conference in June 2000, it considers the extent to which women's social, economic, educational and political participation has been encouraged in both 'informal' civic fora and organisations, and at formal levels of power.

UNMIK has a mandate to oversee the development of democratic self-governing institutions. The gender audit found that few women have been appointed to key decision-making positions in these nascent institutions. UNMIK has tended to work with selected male power brokers and thus disempowered community leaders, local NGOs and wide sections of the community. Funding has been channelled through favoured umbrella groups, distorting the growth of local grassroots women's groups. UNMIK's work culture (involving duplication of effort, rapid turnover of international staff, inadequate planning, overdependence on international 'experts' and lack of transparency) has impeded trust and good working relations with Kosovars.

Further findings included:

- Though health care professionals have been sensitised to sexual and gender-based violence,

the focus has been on city hospitals to the detriment of the primary health care needs of women in rural areas.

- In education, UNMIK has focused on rebuilding damaged schools but given little priority to girls' attendance. High drop-out rates for female pupils as a result of the post-war economic situation have not been addressed.
- The delay in establishing a functioning legal system has effectively allowed some existing laws to remain in force, or allowed customary law to take precedence over statutory law.
- Women have been offered such gender-stereotyped training as hairdressing and sewing, rather than in wider skills proposed by local women's NGOs.
- Prostitution has increased due to the international presence. Despite regulations, trafficking has continued and prostitutes have sometimes been arrested.

67 year old Hamidu Aldzië, a Muslim Bosnian refugee, tells Bridget from the 'Women for Peace' group: 'I want to go back, to smell the land where they burnt my farm.'



The extensive set of recommendations called for:

- international agencies to ensure a more acceptable gender balance in their staffing arrangements and enforce codes of staff conduct
- documents to be available in Albanian and Serbian, with translation facilities improved (rather than holding English-only meetings in which few women can participate)
- training for less formally-educated women and encouragement of flexible working hours to ensure their economic participation
- greater funding for projects targeting women: while these may seem simple and have the 'disadvantage' of only being able to soak up small amounts of donor money, they have enormous political potential to promote peace and stability.

What has changed since the report was issued?

Responding to local and international lobbying, UNMIK has started to address issues of violence against women and trafficking. However, progress towards greater transparency and inclusion of local actors has been mixed, driven by the enthusiasm of individual staff members rather than by formal policy guidelines. Listening to and including local women in decision making is yet to make it onto the agenda.

There are still very few local counselors experienced in violence-against-women issues in Kosovo and none with professional qualifications in rape counselling. Services provided by such institutions as the Center for Protection of Women and Children and the Women's Wellness Centre are not accessible to many women as they exist in a limited number of locations. A recent decision to cut public sector health workers, including 'social nurses' being trained under a UNICEF project, will have a severe negative impact as these women provided counselling, support and effective intervention in countless cases of domestic violence, incest, date rape and potential violence against children and newborns.

Only two departments in the new administrative structure fostered by UNMIK have women co-heads. International organisations continue to exclude women. Local women complain that UNMIK and other

international agencies are reluctant to 'hear the truth' and quick to label them as harridans if they openly complain during meetings. Despite having indicated in advance a desire to meet local women's organisations, no meetings were arranged for a Security Council delegation which visited Kosovo in May 2001. Only at the very last minute, with less than 48 hours notice, were selected local women

invited. Despite constantly declaring a commitment to work towards a tolerant, secure multi-ethnic society in Kosovo, UNMIK has not recognised that often the strongest and most experienced partners best equipped to achieve this vision are local women activists.

Other UN agencies have a better record of working with local women. UNIFEM has set up fora through which local women and international actors can exchange views and experiences. It has gained the trust of local women, produced influential research reports¹ and provided leadership training for women in local government. UNHCR has emphasised women's needs through its Kosovo Women's Initiative, funded by the US government. Implemented largely by international NGOs, KWI has slowly evolved ways of valuing local women's interaction and heeding their opinions. Unfortunately, KWI funding is running out and may not be renewed. UNHCR plans an evaluation of the KWI in late 2001.

The progress of UNMIK in promoting women's equality has been limited because of the way that the mission was planned and initial budgets drawn up. While particular departments and individual staff members have tried to move UNMIK to address gender issues, they have generally been unable to overcome the constraint that resources were not allocated at the start and that plans simply did not include women. The key lesson from Kosovo is that gender has to be included in the plans and in the budgets at the very outset of any post-conflict reconstruction programme.

Rachel Wareham is a freelance consultant. Email: rachelwareham@hotmail.com. Diana Quick is Director of Communications at

the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children: www.womenscommission.org. Email: diana@womenscommission.org

This article builds on information contained in *Gender audit of reconstruction programmes in South Eastern Europe* by Chris Corrin, Urgent Action Fund and The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, June 2000. Downloadable at: www.theirc.org/wcrwc/reports/downloads.html

UNMIK has not recognised that often the strongest and most experienced partners ... are local women activists.

See also *Getting it right?* by Kvinna til Kvinna, a Swedish funding organisation supporting women's groups. Downloadable at: www.iktk.se/english/index.html.

1. *No Safe Place*, an assessment on violence against women, and *Women at Work*, an assessment on women and the economy, UNIFEM, April 2000, are available in English but neither have yet been published in Albanian or Serbian due to budgetary constraints.



Women at the Peace Table
UNIFEM. 2000. 58pp. ISBN 0 9679502 0 1. Free. Limited stocks available. Contact UNIFEM at 304 East 45th Street, 15th Floor, New York, NY 10017, USA. Also online at www.undp.org/unifem/resour.htm

See also *Building a Women's Peace Agenda*, based on discussions at the May 1999 Hague Appeal for Peace Conference. 2001. 74pp. Contact Hague Appeal for Peace, c/o IWTC, 777 UN Plaza, New York, NY 10017, USA. Tel: +1 212 687 2623. Email: hap@haguepeace.org.