

Exit from war: Syrian women learn from the Bosnian women's movement

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Abstract

A five-day conference was held in Sarajevo in February 2014 designed to be an exchange of experience between two social movements - active and organized women in Bosnia-Herzegovina and counterparts from women's organizations emerging in war-riven Syria. Organized by the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, the meeting coincided with an early stage of peace talks in Geneva between the Assad administration and its armed opposition, in which context WILPF, UN Women and others were pressing for the representation of women and women's interests at the negotiating table.

The 1992-95 conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina, like the war in Syria today, drew many women into humanitarian work and peace activism. Now they recounted how, postwar, impeded by constitutional deficiencies resulting from peace negotiations at Dayton, Ohio, from which they had been entirely excluded, Bosnian feminists had been engaged for two decades in a losing struggle for transitional justice amid maladministration, economic failure, corruption and continuing male violence.

Popular protests against the government of Bosnian-Herzegovina, simultaneously occurring in the adjacent streets of Sarajevo, signalled clearly to the Syrian visitors that if they did not strategize right now to play an active part in the forthcoming state-building process, they would be driven to renew their own protest movement, the Arab Spring.

Keywords: Bosnia-Herzegovina, constitution building, peace negotiations, postwar, protest, Syria, transitional justice, war, women's movement

It sometimes seems as though social movements are doomed to discontinuity. On the time dimension, they flower and die. We speak, for example, of three successive but separate 'waves' of feminism over the last hundred years, with intervals in which the movement lapsed. In 2011 we watched the Occupy movement against austerity and economic injustice surge in scores of cities and countries, only to stall. Things learned are forgotten, then recalled and taught anew. In the spatial dimension too, movements are often discontinuous - trans-localism and trans-nationalism are achieved, not given.

Transmitting experience: an inter-movement conference

As if to defy this law, a five-day conference was held in Sarajevo from 10-14 February this year that aspired to pass the torch from one social movement to another, to keep a flame alive to warm a new generation in a new place. It was

organized by the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.¹ WILPF's belief was that activist, organized women, survivors of the current war in Syria, might have something useful to learn from activist, organized women of Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH), with their experience of war and its cessation, of living with an unsatisfactory peace agreement, and pursuing elusive justice in an impoverished and unequal post-conflict world.



Image 1: Madeleine Rees, Secretary-General of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (left) with Barbro Svedberg, project manager of WILPF's 'MENA Agenda 1325'. All images by Cynthia Cockburn

¹ <<http://www.wilpf.international.org/>> The conference was funded by the OAK Foundation, Kvinna till Kvinna of Sweden, and Norwegian Aid (NORAD).

Writing in October 2013, Madeleine Rees, secretary-general of WILPF, described her thoughts on the initiative this way.²

Regardless of the outcome of the conflict, the crisis in Syria will leave the State in a long reconstruction period. It is critical that the tragic mistakes of the BiH post-conflict reconstruction process are not repeated...The first step is to make sure women are ready and able to meaningfully participate in any peace negotiation process, and that they have a framework for a transitional model for justice and development which will help the state to move from conflict to sustainable peace.

The questions that would need to be addressed in a post-conflict Syria, she believed, would include the following. From women's perspective, what would be 'justice' for the wrongs they experienced in the war? What mechanisms could government introduce to ensure they receive it? How should the return of refugees to their homes be handled? How were economic and social rights for all to be secured, including, of particular importance to women, appropriate and attainable health care, employment possibilities, education for their children? How could NGOs support a new government in these measures? Above all, is male violence against women, rampant during the conflict, liable to continue? In what forms? What measures of protection and prevention of women and children would be needed?

Alongside WILPF, some other international non-governmental organizations participated in the conference planning, including MADRE,³ based in New York, and the Swedish Kvinna till Kvinna (KtK) ⁴, long active in the Balkan region, and together they identified and gathered to the event an impressive range of Bosnian women's organizations. The forty-three Bosnian women who attended included representatives of Women to Women (*Žene Ženama*) of Sarajevo, *Vive Žene* of Tuzla, Association BiH Woman (*Udruženje Žena BiH*) of Mostar, *Budućnost* of Modriča, Foundation United Women Banja Luka (*Udružene Žene Banja Luka*), *Forum Žena* of Bratunac, Association of Women "Lara" (*Organizacija Žena "Lara"*) of Biljelina and Medica Women's Therapy Centre Zenica (*Udruženje "Medica" Zenica*) and *Infoteka*, also of Zenica.⁵ These organizations have in many cases been at work since, or even before, the end of the war in 1995, and many of their activists see themselves as feminists.

Together with many other organizations that were not represented at the Sarajevo conference, these organizations and their activists constitute a

² <<http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/madeleine-rees/syria-women-peacework-and-lesson-from-bosnia>>

³ <<http://www.madre.org>>

⁴ <<http://kvinнатillkvinna.se/en/>>

⁵ Where no English translation of an organization's Bosnian name is given, it is because they themselves do not make use of an English version.

practised and articulate women's movement in Bosnia-Herzegovina, albeit one that is somewhat institutionalized.⁶ Many are old enough to remember the formal - if not fully delivered - gender equality of the Yugoslav past. Some bring with them memories of the autonomous feminism that flowered for some years in major Yugoslav cities during the 1980s. Here and there, even during the war, indeed prompted by the war, projects had sprung up in Bosnia-Herzegovina that were consciously feminist. Some had survived and continued into a period of advocacy and campaigning for post-war justice for women.

Syrian participation in the conference had been prepared in two meetings in Beirut to which WILPF had brought Syrian women during the autumn of 2013. An open invitation to Syrian women's organizations for applications to attend the conference had followed, generating the diverse group that eventually travelled to Sarajevo. Some of the women came from regime-controlled areas, some from those held by the Free Syrian Army and other opposition groups, yet others from scattered refugee camps in Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon and Iraq. No way, in the midst of war, could they have met each other on home ground.

Four women came from the Syrian Women's League (*Rabitat al-Nisa'a al-Soriyat*),⁷ based in Damascus, a venerable organization that began life in 1948 as the women's wing of the Syrian Communist Party. Nawal Yazeji told me that its work back then had been disseminating the Party's ideology to women, while featuring gender equality and women's rights within the Party. It has always promoted secularism, opposed the *hijab*, and encouraged girls' education. The League's eventful history involved splitting from the Stalinists and then surviving pressure to disband, as the Ba'ath Women's Federal Union became the only expression of women's interests tolerated by the Assad regime. Attending the UN's Fourth World Conference of Women in Beijing in 1995 and espousing the resultant Platform for Action had given the Syrian Women's League a new, and now fully autonomous, feminist impetus.

⁶ Bosnian feminists do not agree among themselves as to whether these organizations and their activists, along with others that were not involved in the Sarajevo conference, may be said to constitute a contemporary 'women's movement'. I choose to term them such, in the belief that movements are of many kinds and, what is more, they shift in composition and character over time. The present movement in BiH lacks a mass base of mobilized individual feminists but comprises many organizations co-operating for social, juridical and constitutional change in women's interests. For an account of Bosnian feminism as I encountered it in the course of an empirical study in 2012, see Cockburn, Cynthia 'Against the odds: sustaining feminist momentum in postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina', in *Women's Studies International Forum*, No.37: 26-35. 2013.

⁷ The League describes itself as follows: 'The Syrian Women's League is one of the oldest women's organizations in Syria and one with influence with human rights organisations, the international community and secular segments of the civil society. The Syrian Women's League has a number of qualified gender specialists and provides a clearly feminist and legalistic, constitutional and institutional perspective to a transition process in Syria. Many of their members have previous experience of working in Government positions, and had an important role of monitoring, advocating and critically analysing the Syrian implementation of CEDAW.'



Image 2: Nawal Yazeji of the Syrian Women's League.

Some of the other Syrian women's groups and associations gathered in Sarajevo for the conference differed considerably from the League and its partners, in style and in politics. There was a wide age range, with a majority being young - in their twenties and thirties. Several women were actively involved in support work with refugees - for instance Majed Sharbajy of Women Now (*al-Nisa'a Ala'an*),⁸ and Muzna Dureid of Refugees Not Captives (*Lajiaat Lasabayaa*).⁹ These and other women were also involved in Soriyat for Development (*Soriyat min ajl al-Tanmiya*)¹⁰ which serves to maintain links between humanitarian work in refugee camps over the borders in all Syria's neighbouring countries. Although many women spoke of having been swept into the Syrian 'revolution', its moment in the Arab Spring of 2011, their women's movement was as yet fragmented and exploratory, as that of BiH had been in the period of Yugoslav disintegration.

⁸ Women Now is a project of *Soriyat*, see <<http://www.soriyat.org/>>

⁹ <<http://www.facebook.com/Lajiaat.Lasabayaa>>

¹⁰ <<http://www.soriyat.org/>>

The prompt: a new round of peace negotiations

The key issue for the Syrian women, as foreseen by WILPF in bringing them together, was their relationship to peace negotiations. In the summer months of 2013 the beginnings-of-the-beginnings of moves to end the conflict in Syria were initiated by the then UN peace envoy to Syria, Kofi Annan. The first round of talks in Geneva, later known as 'Geneva I', progressed neither far nor fast. But by now women in many countries are well-informed advocates of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, reaffirmed in Resolution 2122 of October 2013, that obliges member states to recognize that women have unique experience of war and gender-specific interests in peace, and that they must be enabled to play an active part in peace processes, including negotiations.¹¹ So a mobilization began to get Syrian women and their interests represented in Geneva. The presence of women in the talks would, it was believed, not only serve to represent women's gendered interests but also afford a foothold to civil society as a whole. Bronagh Hinds, member of the Women's National Commission of Northern Ireland and former Deputy Chief Commissioner of the Equality Commission in Belfast, who attended the Sarajevo conference, explained there, 'Women are more than women and have the right to be so... Women know what exclusion is, and so can lay a pathway for the inclusion of other groups'.

In December 2013, some weeks after the Syrian women met for the second time in Beirut, as mentioned above, WILPF and Human Rights Watch (HRW) brought representatives of the Syrian Women's League (*Rabitat al-Nisa'a al-Soriyat*), the Syrian Women's Network (*Shabaket al-Mara'a al-Soriya*)¹² and the Center for Civil Society and Democracy in Syria (*Markaz al-Mojtama'a al-Madani wa al-Democratiya fi Soria*)¹³ to a 'side event' at the Human Rights Council session in the Palais des Nations in Geneva. It was a high-level affair, attended by the Deputy UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Executive Director of UN Women and, signally, by Lakhdar Brahimi, the UN and Arab League Special Envoy to Syria who was to be the key mediator in the forthcoming peace negotiations. The Syrian women forcefully made the case for their inclusion in the talks. Brahimi mouthed agreement with this idea in principle, but failed to propose concrete mechanisms for achieving it.

The women, by contrast, now set out in writing what 'inclusion' could mean. As 2013 closed, a group of international NGOs (they were WILPF, HRW, KtK, Oxfam, ICAN¹⁴ and Democrashe¹⁵) working in close consultation with Syrian

¹¹ < <http://www.unfpa.org/women/1325.html> >

¹² < <http://www.swnsyria.org/> >

¹³ < <http://www.ccsdsyria.org/> >

¹⁴ ICAN, the International Civil Society Action Network, is a US-based NGO whose mission is to support civil society activism in promoting women's rights, peace and human security in countries affected by conflict. It works particularly through helping to bridge the divisions between activists and the policy community. It is mainly active in the Middle East and North African region. < <http://www.icanpeacework.org/> >

civil society partners, produced a 'five-step approach' to achieving the representation of women and women's interests in the next phase of the peace process, the anticipated 'Geneva II' round of negotiations.¹⁶ The first of the five steps was **inclusion of women in formal delegations** - and they should be women sensitive to gender issues and committed to equality. The second was **an independent women's delegation**, to act as a third party and represent the voice of diverse and inclusive civil society. Third, **gender experts and expertise** must be provided to inform negotiators on all agenda items in the talks. Fourth **briefings on gender issues** should be prepared to guide the mediators and delegates. And finally, an **Independent Civil Society Forum** should be set up, with a fair representation of women. Based in Syria, it should ensure the full participation of a range of Syrian civil society organizations committed to peace, human rights, good governance and equality. This was considered specially important because the choice of Geneva as the site of the negotiations put them far out of reach of ordinary active and engaged Syrians back home on the ground.

Already a group of 60 Syrian women and men, convened by the Coalition of Syrian Women for Democracy (*Tajamo'o Soriyat min ajl al-Democratiya*) had looked ahead to the nature of a future peaceful Syria, debating and drafting principles for a woman-friendly Constitution.¹⁷ Their proposal contained specific and clear provisions for full equality between women and men, in the family and in the state. It gave precedence to international instruments, such as the Convention to Eliminate all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), over national laws, in order to protect against abusive interpretations of rights on the pretext, as they put it, of 'cultural specificity' - meaning religious or social 'traditions'. Indeed the women's draft constitution specified complete separation between religion and politics in a future Syria. It also included a 30% quota of seats for women in legislative, executive and representative bodies, with 'aspiration' to eventual parity. Eighteen women's organizations had subsequently signed up to and agreed to promote this document's principles.

¹⁵ Democrashe is an NGO co-founded by Bronagh Hinds in the wake of the Northern Ireland Belfast/Good Friday Agreement of 1998, the year she received the UK 'Woman of Europe' award. The aim of the organization is to advance women's leadership in politics, civic society and peace-building at home and abroad.

¹⁶ 'Ensuring the effective participation of women and women's rights in the Syrian peace and mediation process: a five-step approach', Working Paper prepared by WILPF, ICAN, Human Rights Watch, Kvinna till Kvinna, Oxfam, Democrashe. Based on Consultations with Syrian civil society partners. 28 December 2013.

¹⁷ Coalition of Syrian Women for Democracy, *Looking for a Democratic Constitution*, Damascus, Syria, 2013. Online at < http://www.wunrn.com/pdf/syria_1.pdf > accessed 6 March 2014.

Peace negotiations: “Geneva II”

Meanwhile, the prospect of actual, renewed, peace talks between the Assad government and its armed opposition revived early in 2014. A continuation of the summer's negotiations, 'Geneva II' was to begin on 23 January. The women's first step for inclusion began, however, not in Geneva but in New York. A week before, on 17 January, WILPF's Gender, Peace and Security Programme,¹⁸ with its office in New York, achieved a meeting for Syrian women with the UN Security Council.¹⁹ They briefed the thirteen member state representatives on the situation of women in the Syrian conflict and a key point in their advocacy was the right of women to participate meaningfully in Geneva II.

Back in Switzerland, in the week of 20 January, WILPF and others organized an alternative summit, 'Women Lead to Peace', hosted by the Graduate Institute of Geneva. It was attended by eighty women from many countries, not a few with recent experience of war and peace-processes. Women from Guatemala, Sri Lanka, Western Sahara and Northern Ireland, as well as from Bosnia-Herzegovina and Syria, contributed to the discussions. Advantage was taken of the presence of the Syrian participants in Geneva to organize meetings for them with UN officials and foreign diplomats there.

While the women were conferring in the Geneva Graduate Institute, the long-awaited official peace talks began in nearby Montreux. Anticipating the moment, the United Nations agency UN Women had earlier flown into Geneva forty-seven Syrian women, some representing women's organizations inside Syria, more from refugee centres beyond its borders. However due to unfortunate planning and timing, most of them had been obliged to return home before the talks actually began. Only ten now flew back again as a 'continuation committee' to maintain a presence in Geneva during the talks. It was clear that these official negotiations were going to be a mannish affair. And indeed, it turned out that present at the meeting in Montreux were male international leaders - John Kerry, US Secretary of State and Sergei Lavrov, Russian Foreign Minister - while representing the warring sides were politicians and military commanders of the Assad regime and the opposition. The women who were included in these official delegations, one or two on each side, observers reported, did not identify themselves as holding any brief for women and had no speaking roles. The Syrian 'continuation committee' could do nothing but wait in the wings. A few determined women took banners and placards, the day the talks began, and went up the mountain to picket the negotiations.

¹⁸ < <http://peacewomen.org/>>

¹⁹ < <http://www.whatsinblue.org/2014/01/arrria-formula-meeting-on-womens-participation-in-resolving-the-syrian-conflict.php>>

The Syrian regime and war

To return now to our Sarajevo conference the following month, between 10 and 14 February 2014, it just so happened that the Geneva II negotiations reconvened this very week. And there could have been no greater contrast in style of encounter. While the war fighters were spending these days in unmitigated animosity, concealing as much as possible of their 'hand', conceding nothing, the Syrian and Bosnian women, a thousand miles east in Sarajevo, were generously eliciting each others' stories, looking for common ground and imagining shared strategies.

The Syrians informed their Bosnian counterparts about the onset of their war. It had begun with arrests and shootings in response to the protests of 2011, followed by a rapid escalation of weaponry, they said.²⁰ The regime had armed Alawites and Shias, aggravating relations with the 60% of the population that is Sunni. An estimated 100,000 had died already, and more than nine million been displaced.

The story of Najlaa Alsheekh, a young woman participant, now a refugee in Turkey, was not uncharacteristic of the personal accounts women gave. She comes, she says, from the village of Izaz in the extreme north of Syria. Not far from Aleppo, it is about 8 kilometres from the Turkish border. But recently Najlaa, now married, with two young sons, had been living in Daria, a suburb of Damascus. She is clearly a born activist, and was one of the first women to join the demonstrations of 2011. Then her husband was seized and detained. Next her father, a vulnerable and disabled man, was arrested as he followed a coffin at a friend's funeral. Unable to bear seeing him in captivity, wounded, in ragged underwear, she was obliged, she said, to humiliate herself to secure his release. Her husband she could not find.

One night she saw security forces closing in around their home. Dragging her family in their nightclothes across neighbouring roofs, she slipped the noose and made her way to her parents' home in Aleppo, joining other family members. It was August 2012. Aleppo too was under continual bombardment. When the windows of their home blew in and covered them in splintered glass, they moved on once again, crammed together in a small car, this time to Izaz, the very village where her life had begun. Held by the Free Syrian Army, the village was shelled by regime forces. On a night in which eighty people were killed, a barrel bomb smashed their balcony to the ground, carrying her son with it. At first they told her, 'he's dead'. 'When I heard that I all but died myself', Najlaa says. Miraculously, he was not - but injured. She decided now their only recourse was to leave Syria. Driving the children and her brother, she sought out her aunt and uncle from a hospital where they were being treated, and set off for the border. With one passport between them, she smuggled the entire family

²⁰ For a 'timeline' to the Syrian civil war see <<http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/syria-conflict-timeline-34-months-civil-war-1433301>>

across the border, and found herself, as she told me, 'in a place where I didn't even know how to say "hi!"'



Image 3: Najlaa Alsheekh (left) of Kareemat, with Muzna Dureid of the Syrian Humanitarian Relief and Development Institute Najda-Now and Refugees Not Captives, and (right) Marijana Dinek, Foundation Bosnia-Herzegovina Women Initiative.

During all these phases of war-affliction, Najlaa had been caring for the displaced people around her. Now in the town of Kilis, in south-eastern Turkey, she set up a small project to empower refugee women, obtaining craft materials, teaching knitting and sewing, finding a market for their products. It was as a representative of this small humanitarian NGO, Dignified Women (*Kareemat*)²¹, a project of the Syrian Non-Violence Movement (*Alharak Alselmi*)²² of which she is a member, that she applied to attend the Sarajevo conference.

²¹ Dignified Women (*Kareemat*) is a project of the Syrian Non-Violence Movement (*Alharak Alselmi*), see footnote 19.

²² The Syrian Non-Violence Movement (*Alharak Alselmi*) are grant-aided by the Sigrid Rausing Trust, whose website at <<http://www.sigrid-rausing-trust.org/Grantees/Syrian-Non-Violence-Movement>> says of the movement, 'Founded in April 2011, the Syrian Non Violence Movement (SNVM) is a collective of Syrian activists committed to a non violent approach in realising change in Syria. Its members advocate a non-violent transition to democracy and aim to ensure,

The Syrian women, as they recounted such war-stories to the Bosnians, often harked back to 'our revolution' of 2011, their moment in the Arab Spring. The street protests so cruelly swept into armed conflict, had been, they said, 'a strike for dignity' against forty years of overbearing rule by Assad father and son. The protests had been non-sectarian. They had opposed all oppressions, by one religious group of another, of poor by rich, of women by men. Women had been active and visible for the first time. Najlaa told the Bosnian women, 'We didn't know what organization was before that'. Another woman added, 'There was no women's movement at that time. We had to be present in the revolution or not at all'.

However, these stirrings of women's self-expression - feminism even - and mutual support and organization in and around the protest movement in 2011, had been crushed by the fighting. Women's interests have been eclipsed, they said, and their lives torn apart. They have new and heavy responsibilities - nursing the injured, supporting the bereaved, seeking the disappeared. And they must live with grief for what is already lost. Militarization has led to ever deeper masculinization of Syrian society and, with it, greater misogyny. Religion is more strongly emphasized due to extremists entering Syria in support of both sides in the conflict. There has always been polygamy in Syria, but today, many more girls are being sold into early marriage, both as a source of desperately needed cash and to 'keep them safe'. More and more as the conflict heightens, Syrian society is investing honour in women, so that men's weapon of choice for humiliating enemy men is the harassment and humiliation of 'their' women. Rape is increasingly common and is deeply felt as stigma, so that women are silenced. Wearing the *hijab* has become a norm that women are penalized for flouting. 'It's ever harder to go out of doors without head cover and a man,' one young Syrian participant told the conference. Religion, another concluded, is 'the regime's trap for us'. For the most part they were strongly rejecting any hint of 'sectarianism', saying 'We are just Syrian, nothing else'. And they stressed the importance of resisting any social and political arrangements qualified by the term 'having respect for culture', which invariably means repressive of women.

The Bosnian peace moment: the Dayton framework

Alternating with the stories from Syria, the conference heard accounts from Bosnia-Herzegovina. There had been several attempts by international actors, the Bosnian women told them, to mediate peace in BiH before the accord they brokered at Dayton, Ohio, in December 1995.²³ The 'Vance-Owen Plan' of early 1993, sponsored by UN Special Envoy Cyrus Vance and European Community representative Lord Owen, was the only one of these to attempt to salvage some

both now and in the future, that all the parties involved in the process of change adhere to international humanitarian law and other international human rights standards.'

²³ < http://www.ohr.int/dpa/default.asp?content_id=380 >

kind of unified country with culturally diverse citizenry.²⁴ Other initiatives, and ultimately the General Framework Agreement for Peace that issued from Dayton, were predicated on territorial separation of the warring nationalist movements.



Image 4: Nela Porobić and Gorana Mlinarević, Bosnian participants at the conference.

The Dayton process had been a notable example of what Madeleine Rees, who was the local representative in Bosnia of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights from 1998 to 2005, calls 'the mediaeval narrative': an unwinnable war can only be ended by negotiation between armed warriors.²⁵ No other parties to peace are relevant. Thus, civil society - loosely definable as the many associations and organizations, small and large, created by citizens and expressing their multiple interests, outside the market and separately from the state²⁶ - had no presence and voice in the process that ended

²⁴ < http://www.partitionconflicts.com/partitions/regions/balkans/peace_process/05_05_02/>

²⁵ < <http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/madeleine-rees/syrian-women-demand-to-take-part-in-peace-talks-in-geneva>>

²⁶ For conceptualizations of civil society see Keane, John (1998) *Civil Society: Old Images, New Visions*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. And, as Nela Porobić told the Syrian women, 'The space we failed to insist on at Dayton was never recovered later'.



Image 5. A session chaired by Bronagh Hinds of Democrashe, N.Ireland.

Bronagh Hinds spoke of the highly unusual, and commendable, Northern Ireland peace process in which she had been closely involved. It had included multi-party talks and a long process of consultation in which community groups and others had been able to formulate and express views.²⁷ The lack of such inclusiveness had been the more deleterious in BiH due to the fact that the peace-making process was simultaneously a country-building process. Dayton *constituted* the future country and its signature institutions. It created a state of two almost autonomous 'entities', the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina, in which the constituent peoples were Bosniaks (Muslims) and Croats, and the Republika Srpska (RS), the constituency of Serbs. Each ethnic group was considered a 'minority' in the 'other' entity and, along with people of other identifications and none, they lacked equal rights. Although, under pressure from the European Court of Human Rights, certain modifications were later

²⁷ For equality and inclusion aspects of the Northern Ireland peace process see Campbell, Beatrix (2008) *Agreement! The State, Conflict and Change in N. Ireland*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

made to this undemocratic system, it remains hostage to an ethnic paradigm that does not reflect the sense-of-self of many ordinary citizens.²⁸

The Dayton peace agreement effectively recognized only one reason for the war: internal ethnic rivalries. Economic factors, including competition for markets, infrastructure and the resources of the former Yugoslav state, the personal ambitions of unscrupulous leaders, and the concurrent reshaping of East and Central Europe consequent to the disintegration of the USSR - such things were not part of the thinking. The negotiators heard only the nationalists' narrative. In short, the Bosnian peace was negotiated between men for whom the key motive was to stay in power and achieve control over the maximum amount of land and resources, ideally rid of any but their 'own' people. Thus, although the right of 'return' of refugees and internally displaced people was assured in the peace arrangements, in practice returning to your old home in an area now dominated by those who had driven you out was costly, uncomfortable and potentially dangerous.

Apart from its arbitrary racism, the Bosnian women explained, the constitutional structure of Bosnia-Herzegovina is overly complicated.²⁹ At state level there is a bicameral legislature and a three-member (ethnically-specified) Presidency in which each has a power of veto. The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is further divided into ten cantons, each with its 'parliament'. There are besides 74 municipalities in the Federation and 63 in the RS, each with its own local government. Furthermore, a unique district, Brčko, with its own constitution, courts and local government, belongs to neither entity. Full rights do not hold even across municipal and cantonal borders, let alone those that separate the entities. As one woman told the conference, 'Everyone has minority status somewhere, and some have it wherever!' The lesson was driven home to the Syrians by Lena Ag, secretary-general of Kvinna till Kvinna, 'Above all, don't let peace negotiators decide on a constitution for you!' ³⁰

28

< http://eudo-citizenship.eu/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=203:european-court-of-human-rights-rules-against-bosnia-and-herzegovina/ >

²⁹ < http://www.ccbh.ba/public/down/ustav_bosne_i_hercegovine_engl.pdf >

³⁰ KtK stress that only equal representation of women at each step of the way from peace to war can prevent a relapse into conflict. For evidence from Armenia, Azerbaijan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq and Liberia, as well as Bosnia, see their publication Selimović, Johanna Mannergren et al (2012) *Equal Power- Lasting Peace: Obstacles for Women's Participation in Peace Processes*. Johanneshov, Sweden: Kvinna till Kvinna.



Image 6: Nela Pamuković, Croatian Center for Women Victims of War ROSA (left) with Lepa Mladjenović, Autonomous Women's Centre, Belgrade.

The pursuit of post-war justice

The Bosnian women tried to help their Syrian counterparts foresee the prospects for post-war justice. How could they ensure that impunity does not prevail, as in so many countries after war? The experience of BiH in this respect had been mixed. On the one hand, as Lepa Mladjenović, feminist activist and therapist from Belgrade, pointed out, we should celebrate the fact that the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia has not only defined rape as a war crime for the first time, but convicted a number of men as perpetrators of war-related rape, the first time this act has been penalized in the thousands of years human society has been beset by war. On the other hand, the Court's justice is woefully incomplete. The ICTY tried only the most notorious cases, a tiny proportion of indictable offenders. The judicial system of Bosnia-Herzegovina was left to deal with the remainder - but only eighteen cases had so far been heard. Even those eventually convicted had been observed to serve relatively short sentences. With remission, these men soon walk free again, recognizable to those they abused.

What could be done to prevent such an experience in Syria, as and when the guns are silenced? The Syrian women affirmed the efforts they are making to document crimes, but also stressed the difficulties in the way of this. How to get death certificates, medical reports, tissue samples in the chaos of war? However, the Bosnian women repeatedly stressed that judicial settlement is not the only

face of post-war justice. The phrase 'transitional justice' is often used to flag up the need for something more than sentences delivered by courts.³¹ For instance, apologies count for something. And reparations are vital. Payment must be made to survivors for the harms they have suffered, whether it is rendered in money or in support services, such as health and social care, and free education for children. Security forces that have been implicated in crimes must be visibly reformed, and confidence in them restored. Memorialization of crimes is psychologically important. Truth commissions may help understanding, healing and acceptance. The Bosnian women stressed that little of this had been achieved in their country, nineteen years from the conflict's end.

Meantime, new victimizations have been growing year by year: trafficking in women, enslavement of women and girls in brothels, debt bondage. So women's rights need not only to be instituted in law but also backed up by gender-fair political representation. Gorana Mlinarević pointed out that though the state is signatory to the CEDAW, its provisions are by no means respected. And though the constitution provides for a 40% quota in women's political representation, the level achieved in BiH today is only 25%.

Furthermore, economic wellbeing must be considered an aspect of transitional justice. People victimized in war deserve a healthy and equal economic environment in which to recover a sense of normalcy, the feeling that a 'fair' life with a prospect of a liveable future has replaced the dead end of war. Misgovernment and corruption, together with the effects of the world financial crisis since 2008, had brought economic ruin and very high levels of unemployment to BiH. What is more, women observed, the political parties that went on to govern BiH, being for the most part those that had fomented the war, shaped their economic policy to appease the men who had fought at their behest, the 'veterans', sustaining their post-war income at a level considerably higher than that of non-combatants. Bosnian women have been short-changed.

Drawing closer, resolving tensions

It was the practice during the five days of our conference for the Syrian and Bosnian 'teams' to meet separately each morning. For one thing, this helped them to work on relationships with each other, the quality of which was sometimes neglected or trampled upon in the busy exchanges with the other side during the main sessions. Soon after the start of the conference it had become clear that a degree of tension existed between the highly diverse Syrian participants. For instance, some suspected their elders of compromise. Simply surviving under two generations of Assad rule suggested a degree of compliance with the regime, they felt. There were differences in relation to the armed conflict. We have seen that one belonged to the Syrian Non-Violence Movement, *Alharak Alselmi*. But others had doubts about the word 'reconciliation' - they

³¹ <<http://ictj.org/about/transitional-justice>>

wanted peace, yes, but they also hungered for 'victory'. One woman said, 'I would carry weapons to end this regime'.



Image 7: Majed Sharbajy, Syrian Education Centre and Women Now.

As the five days passed, we saw them gradually drawing closer, laying their differences on the table, finding a shared language. They paid attention to Bosnian women when they said, with long experience of working across ethnic divisions, 'See yourself as human first and foremost'. They heard Mirha Pojskić, a psychotherapist formerly of Medica Women's Therapy Centre in Zenica, urge them to recognize common ground in pain and loss: 'everyone is subject to trauma'. This spirit began to infuse the discussions. Majed Sharbajy had been imprisoned for seven months. She said now, 'I saw my guards as human in the end. That was important to me.' And Marcelle Shehwara told us, 'I know who killed my mother. I watch them. I know their daily lives. I want to get over the thought that they are devils. I want to know them as humans. The fighters asked me, "Do you want us to kill them for you?" And I told them, "No." When the war ends, then I will get closure.'

On the last day we heard a Syrian woman say, 'In Syria we so like to attack each other. Personally I need to work on that. We need to start accepting each other, respecting each other even if we disagree. We have seen that modelled here in Bosnia.' And Nawal, *doyenne* of the Syrian Women's League, said thoughtfully, in the final session, 'This has tested my ability to learn from the younger generation. If I am open to them, I myself am young.'

Another aspect of the conference organization fostered this bonding between the women across challenging differences: respect was accorded to emotions as well as thoughts, to feelings as well as analysis. The organizers, with long experience of feminist methods, had set aside a room to which participants could repair at any moment, taking a break from the tough debates to enjoy "wellbeing" sessions run by feminist therapists. Sarah Abu Assali told me she had found here in Sarajevo, for the first time in a long while, the capacity to weep, and the knowledge that her tears were understood and valued. Another gift, providing a feeling of being in touch with each other, well-connected and well-understood, was skilled and sensitive three-way language interpretation between Arabic, Bosnian and English.

The Bosnian street protests

The Syrian women, telling their stories, constantly referred back to women's presence in the 'revolution' of 2011, their moment in the Arab Spring before nonviolent uprising was brutally crushed by the regime and turned into civil war. Bosnian women had no such history to tell. There had been quiescence in the Yugoslav years until interference by the international monetary institutions in the eighties, bringing unemployment and discontent, had opened the door to nationalist politicians greedy for wealth and power. Their war had been one not of popular uprising and repression but of ethnic 'cleansing' by Serb and Croat nationalists against Muslims, and against each other.



Image 8: Sarajevo

What now gave heightened meaning and a degree of excitement to our conference was that, during the week before we arrived in Sarajevo, and even now as we spoke, protests were taking place in the streets outside. And not only in Sarajevo - similar scenes were being reported from Zenica, Tuzla, Mostar, and from Banja Luka and Prijedor in the Republika Srpska. Here was something entirely fresh for BiH - undifferentiated citizens, on their feet, opposing the authorities with no nationalist agenda. Were we living in a Bosnian Spring? Several of the Bosnian participants in our conference were doubling at night as protestors, and ferried back news to us. They participated in the first 'plenum' of the Sarajevo street, a thousand-strong, in a hall made available to them by the cantonal authority. Women had been well represented, they told us. They were fully half of the organizing group, and a third of the forty or fifty protestors who took the microphone. Many more speakers waited to be heard on following nights.

At this first plenum, our colleagues reported, important demands were formulated and agreed. The protestors called on governmental bodies at all levels to resign - as the Sarajevo canton 'parliament' already had. They called for governments of 'experts' to replace them until elections due in October. They should be non-partisan, and consult with the people's plenum. The salary structure of parliamentarians and public officials should be revised, pay and perks drastically cut - nobody should receive more than half the average individual's earnings. An end to corruption. The protestors called for a reversal

of the privatization process - big firms and utilities should be returned to public ownership. Finally, there should be an independent commission of enquiry to look into the burning of buildings in the protests: Why had the police and fire brigade not staunched the fires? Were *agents provocateurs* behind the violence? The women who reported all this to us were emphatic that what they had heard had not been expressions of individual rage. There was analysis backing every demand.

The Bosnian conference participants clearly felt that the rebellion we were witnessing on our TV screens at night, relayed first hand by them each morning, was the clinching argument in their advice to their Syrian friends. The Bosnian political system had been a stitch-up between rival nationalisms - militaristic, patriarchal and corrupt - reducing ordinary people, and especially women, to impotence and penury. Learn the lesson, they warned their Syrian sisters. If civil society doesn't get a say in shaping post-war Syria, if sectarianism is allowed to dictate the reconstruction, before long you too will need another revolution.



Image 9: Sarajevo

And so the Syrian women packed their bags and left for the airport, saying goodbye not only to their new-found Bosnian friends but to each other, as they scattered to their war-torn towns and villages in Syria and refugee camps beyond its borders. As they went, I heard one call out to the Bosnians waving

them off, 'We have learned a lot from you. And be sure that in our turn we shall pass it on to other women when the next war comes along!'

About the author

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