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Spheres of Influence: Women in Post-War Bosnia-Herzegovina

Topic of Research and Countries Visited

I traveled to Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina to interview (primarily) women who are active in various spheres of political and cultural life in Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH), and to gather publications relevant to this research that are not readily available outside of BiH.

Relevance and Contribution to Field

The significance of women's roles since the Bosnian War (1992-1995) in NGOs, in particular, has been noted by researchers. There remains a need, however, for a comprehensive study of women in all spheres of contemporary public life and the influence of the changing roles of women on post-war development(s).

Approach and Research Methodology

In BiH, I visited the village of Gracanica and observed the work of a local NGO, Osmjeh, and an American NGO, Builders for Peace. In Tuzla I met with the Director of IPAK. In Sarajevo, I spoke with a host of women (and men) working in NGOs, journalism, the arts, and I attended relevant lectures at the week-long conference that was taking place in Sarajevo to commemorate the ten-year anniversary of the massacre at Srebrenica. In addition I made the acquaintance of European colleagues who are working on related projects. I also made contact with the Director of the NGO Srcem do mira, although we were unable to meet at the refugee camp in Kozarac. It will take me considerable time to read the materials I obtained and to absorb the information gathered at interviews. However, preliminary observations follow.

Summary of Research Findings and Preliminary Conclusions

Women's roles have expanded considerably since the war. Although women in BiH were previously engaged, in the cultural centers and in the arts, their roles in other spheres have changed significantly. NGOs, which essentially did not exist before the war, evolved at first from peace and refugee organizations, headed primarily by women. Women continue to head most of the NGOs that deal with women's and family issues, and this is the focus of most NGOs. The problem, which has been noted by other researchers, is that a division exists (or persists) between this power in NGOs, wielded by women, and the influence in government and business, which is held primarily by men. There are reasons for this dichotomy (including the pre-war traditional culture), but my particular interest (an outgrowth of my previous work) is to identify obstacles to the empowerment of women and their full integration into government and commerce.

In previous research in this area, I noted the reluctance of women heads of NGOs to identify obstacles to their work in other sectors, especially government. They complained that they must compete with other NGOs and that there is a center versus periphery issue that results in an inordinate amount of donor aid going to the capital Sarajevo (a complaint I heard again this summer in Tuzla). But when I asked the

Director of IPAK in Tuzla whether their work in the villages to empower young women and to encourage them toward work and/or higher education met resistance from a perhaps increasingly conservative, more traditionally Islamic, view of women's roles, I was told that everyone in the villages supports development and recovery—it does not matter who works or gets a better education (man or woman). This assessment does not reflect the latest data, of course.

In the “Star Report” (Star Pilot Research of the STAR Network of World Learning BiH, funded by USAID) of 2002, the percentages of women receiving all levels of education in rural and suburban areas had dropped in comparison to pre-war levels (even if the percentage of women receiving a higher education in urban areas has risen, as they are more free than the employed male “bread winner” to pursue further education). When I asked the same question of the editor of the independent news weekly *Dani*, she did not mince words. She recalled that after her husband was killed in the war, she received a call from a local Islamic group offering her financial support—if she would take the veil and attend classes in religious education. She noted that since she had an education and was employed, she had a choice. But of the war widows in Sarajevo after the war, only 1.7%, she stated, had a higher education (this belies pre-war figures but reflects the exodus from Sarajevo of educated women during the war and influx of refugees from rural areas). Women who were impoverished, uneducated single heads of household did not have a choice.

Despite the undoubted comfort and support that religious groups have offered Bosnian women (particularly war widows and/or refugees)—a point some colleagues who work in the refugee camps insist upon—it must be recognized that constraints resulting from the acceptance of this support, self-imposed or not, have affected the ability of women in BiH to rebound from the crushing blows of the war.

Suggestions for Future Research

Experts (with knowledge of Bosnian culture and language) should receive support for work on the ground that can honestly assess the functioning of NGOs, rather than relying on the genre of the annual report alone. Women in all spheres of life in BiH should receive greater attention, both as victims of the war and as a promising source for renewal in BiH.

Recommendations for the US Policy Community

With the passage of time since the Bosnian War, “donor fatigue” has led to a sharp decrease in the number of existing NGOs (I am aware but do not address here other issues, such as greed and incompetence, that may have led to their demise). For those NGOs that remain, a fight for limited resources has affected their ability to function “freely”; that is, to confront openly troublesome issues that impede their work, which I have given example of above, but which might, the staff feels, give an impression of the situation on the ground that would only make their organizations less attractive to donor organizations in Europe and the USA. They feel pressured to succeed, to submit annual reports that indicate their successes—a situation reminiscent of the impetuses and abuses of managed care in the health-care industry.

The fact is that corporate parameters of success do not dictate levels of aid that NGOs and groups receive from other (politically and religiously motivated) sources, and what should be particularly troublesome to the US government is the struggle for the “soul” of BiH. Bosnia is one country where good will toward the US exists, if it is waning, and reflects the well-managed peacekeeping mission of the US military in the early years

after the war. This “capital” should not be squandered, and we relinquish the “soul” of Bosnia to extreme religious conservatives at our peril.

Other suggestions include:

1. Revisit/rescind the Dayton Peace Accords. The partition of BiH remains an outrage to the majority of citizens, and most pertinent to this particular study, obstructs the repatriation/resettlement of women and children languishing in refugee camps. It is an overall drain on the economy and obstructs development, perpetuating the impression/reality that BiH is an unstable country and bad investment.
2. Continue to support the best of the NGOs, which foster the growth of businesses run by and employing women and other roads to empowerment.
3. See to the arrest of Karadzic and Mladic—one very “inexpensive” way to foster good will toward the US and the West in general.
4. Make aid to the seats of male power, in government and commerce, contingent on an all-out attack against corruption. Women would then be more willing and able to take their seats at the political table, and this could only be a good thing, in general, for the growth of democratic and moderate principles in BiH.