Taking courage from the women of Bosnia and Herzegovina

By Swanse Hunt and Mirsad Jacevic

The nature of violent conflict has shifted in recent decades, from the domain of states to internal struggles embroiling non-combatants in prolonged instability. Civilians – particularly women – aren’t only primary victims, they’re also experts. Yet our model of security still relies on engaging hard line politicians or those who hold the guns – and, in some cases, both. Although Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has made women’s participation in peace and security a priority, most policymakers don’t seek them out and thus overlook key insights that would enable more effective intervention and reconstruction.

In contrast, the concept of “inclusive security” calls for all stakeholders to be represented in peace processes. Research by scholars such as Anthony Wain St. John shows that participatory agreements are more sustainable and just; as countries rebuild from the consequences of violence, peoples’ can’t be represented solely by those responsible for the devastation. Specifically, we’ve been aided by the power of women to prevent war, resolve it, and restore their societies.

Bosnia and Herzegovina exemplifies this. The women with whom we’ve worked over the past twenty years were the one constituency that consistently reached across ethnic lines, bearing sniper fire to mobilize for a peaceful future. Women told us of a long history of coexistence and intermarriage among Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks (Muslims). Before the war, they said, they celebrated each other’s holidays. Ethnic identity was not salient, not relevant to everyday life. As Tuzla engineer Alenka Savic said succinctly: “This was not our war.”

Because most women understood the real causes of the war – greed and power lust of nationalist leaders – they were the first to bridge the conflict divides, co-ordinating in networks such as Zona 21. When necessary, they edited by candlelight and, despite shelling, distributed a free monthly magazine. Zona 21 became an outlet of hope for besieged citizens. Groups like theirs (we know of about forty) emphasized a common identity as mothers, daughters, and sisters rather than identifying with schisms manipulated by those who profit from war.

Women had a better sense than the international community of what was happening in their country. In June 1996 they organized a conference titled “Women Transforming Ourselves and Society,” the first gathering after the war to include participants from throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina. The organizers, planning for a hundred, but thongs more showed up. Thirty-five percent risked checkpoints and retaliation to come from Republika Srpska. For most, it was their first encounter with “the other” after the war, but, though the scars ran fresh and deep, women had the courage and foresight to join hearts and minds to develop tangible plans for long-term social healing.

One priority was education. It was crucial to revive the integrated school systems and develop a curriculum emphasizing tolerance. No one listened, and a generation later the OSCE is still fighting to reverse “two schools under one roof.”

Then in July 1996, activist Beba Hadicic and others organized the first commemoration of the genocide of Srebrenica. More than 4,000 survivors filled a Tuzla sports stadium to hear assurances of help from Queen Noor of Jordan. Emma Bonino of the European Commission, one of Argentina’s Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, and a representative of President Clinton. As early as 1996 Vice Chair of the Association of Mothers of Srebrenica Kada Hotic, declared that Annex 7 of the Dayton Agreement – a provision related to refugee return, which the international community had heralded as a great victory for human rights – would never be implemented. How could refugees return to areas still controlled by police forces that a year before had been committing atrocities to create “ethnically pure” enclaves?

There are a hundred more examples of how women could’ve enriched both the peace process and substantive outcomes of our intervention in Bosnia and Herzegovina. And there have been a thousand examples globally since. Too often, we observe how the contributions of half the population are dismissed as “women’s issues” rather than the stuff of war and peace. In short, whether in Korea, Congo, or Colombia, we must expand our security paradigm as we confront global challenges that lie ahead.

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