

/ The Networking: The Key to Peacebuilding and Organizing for a better Future

by Igballe Rogova

Igballe Rogova is co-founder and Program Director of the rural women's group «Motrat Qiriazhi» in Kosovo. She is a leading figure of the women's movement in Kosovo and an internationally renowned women's rights advocate. In 1999 Igballe co-founded Kosovo Women's Network, a coalition of women's organizations that work on joint advocacy campaigns on behalf of Kosovar women. As part of her work with «Motrat Qiriazhi» and Kosovo Women's Network, Igballe has assisted and mentored thousands of women and girls from all ethnic minorities in Kosovo. Igballe won the Women of the Year Award by the International Network of Women's Organizations, based in San Francisco, and Lydia Sklevicky Prize for innovative work with women's groups awarded by Mamacash, The Netherlands/Open society Foundation, Croatia/Global Fund for Women, USA.

Personal:

Two weeks ago, women's NGOs from Ex-Yugoslavia met in Zagreb (Croatia) to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Women War Victim Center from Zagreb.

There were other NGOs who celebrated their tenth anniversary: Autonomous Women's Center in Belgrade, Medica-Zenica from Bosnia, Center for the protection for the women and children-Prishtina, Swedish organization Kvinna Till Kvinna.

It was a very emotional event since we were recollecting our memories of the last ten years of Networking together.

While in our countries men remember the war with heroism feelings, we women talked about peace activities we organised together all these years.

My memories came back at the time we, Kosovar Albanians were fired from our jobs (1990) but we didn't sit and do nothing: we organized, so the civil movement started.

My memories came back at the ten years of living in fear in a country where oppression was the language, caused by the Serbian Regime.

My memories came back at the police check points all over Kosovo, and whenever we carried food, books and medicines,(strongly forbidden by the police), each time I would think: 'This is it, they will find them and I will be taken in jail!»

My memories came back of the men being beaten in the street just because they are Albanians!

And of the big wall between Albanians and Serbs living in Kosovo.

In the mid 90's, me and a Serbian friend started to break physically this wall by going to Albanian and Serbian caffeterias together, until Serbian police threatened both of us for this act.

Then I found a space to get energy and support: International Women in Black meetings in Serbia.

Women from all over Ex-Yugoslavia joined hands against the war in Bosnia, against the regime!

I was attending regularly these meetings even though back in Kosovo, the daily papers had in their front pages articles about me being a traitor, co-working with the Serbian Regime!!!

But I didn't care. I needed these gatherings. It helped me in my work with the women in the villages. It helped me not to feel as a victim in an oppressed country.

It helped me not to hate the Serbian people living in Kosovo but to hate the Serbian Regime.

My memories came back at the years 1996-97, when all over Serbia were organized protest to bring Millosevic down. But the International Community didn't support this protest, so after three months protesting outside, in the cold, the protesters gave up.

My memories came back at the time of Nato bombing, when we were hiding from police. My Serbian neighbours were mobilised to throw out Albanians from their homes.

In the evenings we would sit in the dark, being silent and then the telephone would ring, night after night. Our Serbian sisters from Belgrade called to check how we were doing.

And then, my Serbian neighbour found out we were hiding, she reported us to police and they came in anger and threwed us out from our house so then we had to go by train to the no man's zone, between Kosova and Macedonia: BLACE.

Tens of thousands of Albanians were waiting in Blace, in the rain, with no shelter, no food or even water, to enter Macedonia.

Finally after the International Community gave money to Macedonian Government we were allowed inside Macedonia.

We started working in Cegrane camp where over 40.000 Albanians from Kosova were sheltered.

Then Lepa, our friend from Belgrade came to visit us in Macedonia. When she came with us in the camp, to see what we are doing, she had to pretend she is Maria from Italy.

After the bombing stopped we returned home in Kosova to find burned villages, massacred people, missing people, raped women.

General:

Kosovar women started organizing in the early 1990's and worked very closely with the local parallel government that resisted the persecution of the Kosovar Albanian population by the authoritarian regime of Slobodan Milosevic. When war started in ex-Yugoslavia, we became part of the regional women's networks that raised their voices against the war and provided help to women and refugees in those very hard times. When the war came to Kosova, women's rights activists became refugees themselves, but never stopped working with women and for women, this time in refugee camps in Macedonia and Albania.

We greeted joyfully the decision that put Kosova under a UN administration. The UN was to us the revered international organization that developed and passed key documents that stipulated women's rights and promoted their integration in all levels of decision-making. But, when we returned home we were, unfortunately, disappointed by the UN Mission in Kosova (UNMIK). We were eager to work with the international agencies in developing effective strategies for responding to the pressing needs of Kosovar women, but most of those agencies did not recognize that we existed and often refused to hear what we had to say on decisions that affected our lives and our future. Some of the international staff came to Kosova thinking that this is an extremely patriarchal society where no women's movement can flourish. And there were those who wanted us to do all the groundwork for them: find staff and offices, set up meetings and provide translations, but were not interested in listening to us and acknowledging our expertise. They had their own plans and their ready-made programs that they had tried in other countries and did not want to change their plans to respond to the reality of our lives. Instead of dedicating all our energy to helping women and their families put together lives shattered by war, we expended effort in fighting to be heard and in proving to UNMIK that we knew what was best for us, that women in Kosova were not just victims waiting to be helped – they could help themselves, as they did in the past, and they could be key and effective actors in building their own future.

The UN Security Council adopted the resolution 1325 concerning the role of women in peace-building and negotiations concerning peace and conflict resolution. With this resolution we are expected to hold our governments accountable.

In Kosova, the government is UNMIK. Despite the fact that the UN adopted this resolution, women's representatives and women's groups in Kosova continue to struggle in order to have any voice or involvement in post-conflict decision making. We have been «fighting» for over three years to persuade the UN administration in Kosova and many international NGOs and international institutions, that we should be recognized as we have great experience and knowledge in peace-building and in communicating across borders and boundaries in difficult and dangerous circumstances.

Personal:

My memories came back at the time after the bombing when US organization offered us a huge amount of money if we worked on a reconciliation project. We refused the money by answering: «Money can not buy reconciliation. It will come in our time, in our way!»

General:

Our work with groups across ethnic lines is not recognized by the UNMIK or OSCE. And our advocacy on behalf of ethnic groups in certain issues has been clearly rejected. This is because it is a local initiative, whereas UNMIK and OSCE behave as if only they had the authority to work on this and to take ownership. They don't want initiatives independent of them and their control. They want us to believe that only with international money can we make changes. This again means, that women's vital role in peace-building is being ignored, in order that international institutions and individuals can claim credit for actions which have far less effectiveness because they do not come out of genuine community impulses or genuine cross-ethnic contact.

In summary, the UNMIK and OSCE in Kosova, formally in writing, in reports and in speeches promotes the role of local women in decision making regarding conflict and security issues. However, our experience is that this has not been matched by any genuine action. We see a failure to invite and include us in vital meetings particularly at high level.

But we did not give up. We raised our voice. We met with UN officials, wrote letters, went to meetings to present our ideas, knowledge and expertise, we talked to donors and built alliances with those international organizations in Kosova and abroad that genuinely saw and related to us as partners in the common efforts to advance women's cause in our country.

This is part of an on-going multi-layered struggle that women's groups in Kosova have been engaged in during the last four years, a struggle to be part of the decision-making process from day one, a struggle to get better organized and become more effective, a struggle to take the place we deserve in shaping our life and the future of our society.