

Kosovo: missed opportunities, lessons for the future

Lesley Abdela

The dogs of small war

The speed with which international affairs switched from the relative tranquillity that characterised the Cold War to incipient anarchy and untrammelled aggression has taken most of us by surprise, leaving us much to reflect upon in terms of dashed hopes for sustainable and lasting peace. Pandora has reopened her box and let loose the dogs of small war.

One important consequence of all these changes has been an explosion of bush wars (with more to come) and a loss of belief in the art of diplomacy. Some of these wars can be loosely identified as tectonic plate wars, breaking out after decades of rigid rule, as in the Balkans; others are more straightforward power-plays, whether in the form of outright attacks on divided units as in Chechnya and East Timor, or of rivalry over Kashmir.

A mushrooming of small wars ahead implies a mushrooming of post-conflict reconstruction efforts. The experience in the Balkans with post-war reconstruction can provide a significant contribution to further learning, as much learning still needs to be done from the messy, poorly conceived, and chaotic manner in which the outside world stepped in and tried to help in the 1990s. Among the most important lessons that transpired is the need to include women fully in peace building. But as shown in ALNAP's latest annual report, there are serious difficulties in achieving this.¹

Becoming an actor in Kosovo's drama

Getting there

I first 'parachuted' into Kosovo with the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in the immediate aftermath of the

NATO campaign. Being an actor in the drama is an eye-opening experience, and one that is impossible to gain at a distance. One of the lessons that became most obvious to me as a result of my involvement is that women must stop being added on as an optional extra, bolted on as an afterthought or half-day excursion to a West End play, and must instead be an integral part of the peace-building process. Organisations such as International Alert have launched campaigns like 'Women Building Peace: From the Village Council to the Negotiating Table' which explicitly set out to place women 'at the heart of reconstruction and reconciliation'.

My first-hand experience in conflict and post-conflict situations started in 1993 when I was a journalist in a Bosnian war zone, in the Bihac enclave. I conducted over 300 interviews with Bosnians, Serbs, and Croats. Then, from August to December 1999, I was seconded by the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office to be Deputy Director for Democratisation for the OSCE in Kosovo. This was in the dramatic immediate aftermath of the NATO campaign against Milosevic's forces. At the invitation of the British Council in Freetown, I followed this with a ten-day visit to Sierra Leone in November 2000 to carry out an initial needs assessment on gender and governance in the uncertain and still-troubled aftermath of the diamond-and-drug-fuelled conflict.

For three years I had discussed with NATO/SHAPE (the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe – NATO's training school for military and civilian personnel), the British Ministry of Defence, and representatives of NGOs how to improve coordination and cooperation between formal and informal sectors in conflict and post-conflict situations – and how to include women as well as men in decision making and planning.

I arrived in Priština as part of the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (known by its acronym UNMIK) at the end of August 1999, 14 weeks after the NATO bombing had ended. From my office on the seventh floor of the OSCE Mission headquarters, a former bank, I could see the ruins of the main police station, shattered by a NATO precision bomb, though Priština was not as badly damaged as other places. People sat out at cafe tables in the warm sunshine. Among the indigenous Kosovar Albanian population there was a strong sense of optimism. People had reopened shops and cafes and were rebuilding their homes with remarkable speed (when they could get the materials to do so). To my surprise, there did not even appear to be problems of

law and order. I felt safer walking around Priština in the evening than walking around London. There were plenty of local women walking around shops and cafes in the evenings.

A squandered honeymoon

By the time I left Kosovo in December 1999, however, UNMIK had squandered its honeymoon period, producing few results and acting in a cumbersome, clumsy, and bureaucratic manner. The United Nations was responsible for running the municipal governments, while the OSCE was supposed to be training Kosovar administrative staff.

By mid-October, it had become clear that the international community was fast losing credibility. Tales of intimidation and shoot-outs between rival criminal gangs had become part of everyday life. The crime rate increased dramatically and women were regularly getting kidnapped (an estimated five a week from Priština). I no longer saw women out after dark because by then they were too afraid. I heard reports from reliable sources that lack of sufficient and properly trained international police meant that, near the Albanian border, girls as young as 16 were being snatched from their beds for forced prostitution.

‘Women came last – after everything else came women’

Despite an absolute immensity of warnings signalling that the overwhelmingly men-dominated international missions were getting things wrong, the women of Bosnia and Kosovo remained excluded from any concrete involvement in negotiations, post-conflict reconstruction planning, and policy making, and even from the democratisation process itself.

At the OSCE conference on gender held in Vienna in June 1999, Martina Vandenberg of Human Rights Watch warned the OSCE in no uncertain terms of the urgent need to reform:

The OSCE region is one of conflict. These conflicts and the complex reconstruction issues they leave behind have a profound impact on women’s lives. Many women in these conflicts have lost male members and find themselves heads of households for the first time. Other women have faced rape and torture at the hands of state or non-state parties to the conflict.

Discrimination against women during the reconstruction period is legion. Our experience with the OSCE indicates that field personnel urgently need

a tremendous amount of training on human rights – with special emphasis on women’s human rights ... Women’s absence from leadership positions within the OSCE as well as the failure to include women’s human rights in the OSCE is reflected in the lack of reporting on women’s human rights flowing in from field missions in Bosnia, Croatia, Tajikistan, FYROM/ Macedonia, and elsewhere.

(Vandenberg 1999)

As one Bosnian woman leader interviewed by Human Rights Watch said bitterly, ‘Women came last – after everything else came women’.

Mistakes repeated in Kosovo: the male-as-leader culture

Where were the women?

One year after this report was written, the same mistakes were to be repeated in Kosovo. With one exception, all senior posts in the OSCE and the UN missions in Kosovo were held by men, most of whom had got there through traditional male hierarchies. The most senior individuals had been government ministers, while many had a background in military or diplomatic service. None had any substantial gender-awareness training or experience.

During my time in the field with the OSCE in Kosovo, I realised that this exclusion of women from the senior decision-making structures of the OSCE and United Nations, combined with the very damaging gender ignorance/blindness of the senior men posted to these missions, were key contributing factors to the chaotic and costly mess that ensued in the civilian reconstruction process. The men in the United Nations and the OSCE missions were deeply imbued in an old-fashioned, male-as-leader culture that was clearly ignorant of the female majority and therefore particularly ill-suited to face the imposing challenges ahead. At roundtable discussions I attended, top UNMIK and OSCE officials regularly and earnestly discussed what percentage of Serbs and other ethnic groups and ‘minorities’ should be represented on judicial, political, and public bodies, without ever mentioning the inclusion of women.

I pointed out this discrepancy repeatedly, stressing that hundreds of documents had been drafted emphasising the importance of incorporating women fully in peace-building and reconstruction processes. For example, an early paragraph in the unanimous Security Council adoption of Resolution 1325 (2000) states:

Reaffirming the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace-building, and stressing the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security, and the need to increase their role in decision-making with regard to conflict prevention and resolution ... urges Member States to ensure increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional, and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict.

In addition, I also pointed out that the UN Global Platform for Action recommended that at least one-third of decision-making positions at all levels of politics and public life be women. And in September 1999, Elisabeth Rasmusson, one of the few women in the upper ranks as Deputy Head of OSCE Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Madeleine Rees, a lawyer with the OSCE in Sarajevo, organised a meeting in Sarajevo for the explicit purpose of discussing lessons learned about the exclusion of women in the OSCE Bosnia Mission.

Too complicated to include women?

I returned to Priština to remind the men at the OSCE Mission that the post-mortem of Bosnia Herzegovina had shown that it had been a serious error not to include women properly in the first elections and that at the second elections there had been a specific stipulation that at least one-third of candidates should be women. And yet, in a spectral echo of what must have been received wisdom in Bosnia, the men in the OSCE in Kosovo justified excluding women by saying that the situation was ‘complicated enough without having to think about representation of women as well’, and that women in leadership posts would be ‘alien to local culture and tradition’. It was precisely the savage, musket-driven consequence of this ‘local culture and tradition’ we were all there to help put right.

In a further display of their biased awareness of reality, these ‘liberal’ male Europeans added that in any case ‘no women in Kosovo are interested in participation in politics or public life’. In believing this, these men showed an unacceptable ignorance of the fact that – as in other former communist countries – many Kosovan women of all ethnic backgrounds were well educated and were qualified professionals in all fields, including medicine, engineering, and teaching. For instance, Luleta Pula, the Albanian Kosovan leader of a social democratic party, told me that in 1990 she headed the 60,000 women-strong wing of the LDK (Democratic League of Kosovo) Party.

She pointed out that ethnic Albanian Kosovan women had been very active for ten years or more in running the alternative society under the Serbs. Kosovan women also told me that they had been involved in running 'underground' municipalities and judiciaries. Kosovan women had risked – and even lost – their lives working as language assistants and advisers to the OSCE Verification Mission prior to the NATO bombing.

The complete exclusion of women from the democratisation process was highlighted by the fact that Dr Bernard Kouchner, the then special representative of the UN Secretary General in Kosovo, appointed the 17-person Kosovan Transitional Governing Council with not a single woman on it.

'Never as pushed aside as we feel now'

Frustrated and puzzled by the fact that the men at the top of the international community continued to ignore the voices of Kosovan women, I sent out a note asking if any women's NGO representatives would be interested in attending an exploratory meeting to discuss women's political empowerment. Around 30 women from 16 local women's NGOs and international organisations came along. This included representatives from rural women's networks, and from Serb, Roma, and ethnic Albanian communities.

We held a series of meetings with the purpose of working together to develop a programme of activities to increase women's participation in politics and public life. Each meeting was attended by an increasing number of women from NGOs across the province and from the Albanian, Serb, and Roma communities, as well as from the wings of political parties – the LDK and the UCK (Kosovo Liberation Army) and from international organisations.

Some 60–80 women from 22 Kosovan NGOs across the province attended the meetings, and they told me that these meetings were the first time that Kosovan women's NGOs had been able to come together to work on anything. Igbal Rugova, leader of Motrat Qiriazi, an umbrella of four rural women's networks said: 'The international community has marginalised us women in a way we never had been before. We have never felt as pushed aside as we feel now.'

Prompted by the frustrations of the Kosovan women, a UN colleague and I sent a fax to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan to ask him to intervene. As a direct consequence, three Kosovan women NGO leaders were invited to meet with Annan and Kouchner, who

agreed as a result that UNMIK would in future hold regular consultations with women NGO leaders. Three women were subsequently invited to join the new joint interim governing group, and six women were appointed to the new interim transitional council.

The diamond ceiling

An unexpected consequence from the actions outlined above affected me directly: I was fired from the Mission for breaking protocol by sending a fax requesting Kofi Annan to intervene. I had been 'uncollegiate'. The fax was considered a 'major breach of protocol' by the men in senior posts. It had embarrassed the male hierarchs of the OSCE in Kosovo. As a result, the Dutch Head of Mission told me a few weeks later to leave Kosovo. Ironically, when I heard the news, I was away for ten days in Russia, working on a prior contract training future women leaders. I was told through e-mail not to return.

I have published two books on women in the workplace, *Breaking Through the Glass Ceilings* and *Do It! – Walk the Talk*. Yet I had not realised how precarious a place a sole woman higher up in the hierarchy is in if the men around and/or slightly below her find her presence disturbing. Ruefully, I'm thinking of calling this less examined phenomenon 'the Diamond Ceiling': at that height in the 'company' you can buy diamonds if you wish, but you had better buy them fast.

Trading places

One root cause of the exclusion of women from senior posts is the way in which international organisations function and the way they recruit and promote their personnel. Before each mission, horse-trading takes place between nations for prestige posts. Foreign Offices play games harking back to Richelieu or Rome. One Italian diplomat told me that he had, over a period of years, happily backed Denmark, The Netherlands, France, and other countries in their bids to put their men in place, with an eye on calling in the favour down the line.

Thus, senior posts in peace missions are subject not to finding the best and most appropriate person with the character and outlook for the job, but rather by Buggins' turn and trading places. And, once in place, hierarchy is all. No matter how ill-suited for the job the person mandated by his country may be, he (and, as I have pointed out, it is overwhelmingly 'he') can and does veto any ideas from lower down without any fear of mutiny in the ranks. Mission 'junkies' want to

junket off to Aceh, if it blows further, or Madagascar if the civil war continues, or ... The wretched and immoral concept of collegiality – a conspiracy of *omertá* (the code of silence practised by the Mafia) regarding your colleagues and especially your bosses – clicks seamlessly into place.

Of course the mere inclusion of more women in the post-conflict reconstruction processes is not enough to ensure a smoother ride towards a rebuilt polity and economy. The very structures that somehow arrive like a flat-pack from Mission control to the field have yet to manage to fit the place and circumstance.

Problems resulting from poor or inadequate pre-planning and inappropriate senior personnel are further compounded by the fact that a most vital ingredient, communication, is hard to come by when it is needed the most. Let me provide an example. One day, in September or October 1999, I saw a distraught Kosovan woman outside the UN police headquarters in Priština. Three UN police officers were telling her to go away, mocking her. I went up and asked what was happening. One of the police officers said:

'This is a crazy woman – ma'am. She has come to us three days running. She says her family is being nasty to her. We keep telling her that's nothing to do with us and she should go away. She's just a crazy woman.'

I asked them if it had occurred to them that she may well have returned despite them telling her to go away because she was desperate for someone to help her. At the very least they could advise her which agency in Priština could offer assistance and possibly counselling. They said they had no idea where to send her or how to find out.

I asked an experienced UN police peacekeeper in Kosovo to tell me why UN missions often go so wrong. His response mirrored the frustrations of other competent professionals angered by the organisational mish-mash:

'No clear sense of purpose; muddled and contradictory goals and objectives crafted by amateurs, implemented by incompetents, and defended by bureaucrats whose sole purpose in life is to move up the food chain. Make no waves, admit no mistakes, accept no responsibility, and demand no accountability. Appearance is everything; never mind the substance. Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain.'

In late 2000 I received an e-mail from a relatively new Mission member in Kosovo. She wrote:

There have been a lot of mistakes and problems in the Kosovo deployment (mostly from the civilian side) – coordination and communications between agencies and organisations being one of the most outstanding.

This lack of communication, combined with gender ignorance/blindness within the Mission in Kosovo, had a wide variety of negative consequences for women.

Sex trafficking

Along with drugs, sex trafficking has become a huge, criminal trade whereby women are forced into prostitution whenever clients with cash can be found. This involves the transport of women and girls across state lines, and, like with the drugs trade or the illegal cash flows from Russia to banks in the Mediterranean region, it helps to maintain fuzzy borders in south-east Europe to facilitate this movement of human beings.

The following is taken from a report in *The Times* dated 5 February 2000:

The women, some as young as 16, are held captive by gangsters, often Albanian, and forced to sell sexual favours to troops and businessmen in the nightclubs opening around Kosovo. In the past Kosovo was not a destination for the east European sex trade, which began with the collapse of communism in 1991, but the presence of a 45,000 strong army has proved an irresistible draw.

In one bar just outside Pristina, near the HQ of Russian forces, 12 young women were rescued in early February. Their duties included dispensing sexual favours to Russian and American K-For troops and other foreign clients. The girls, who were rescued by the International Organisation of Migration (IOM), were said to be terrified.

Barely four months after the international forces arrived, the Kosovan population began to feel impeded rather than liberated. A woman NGO leader summed up the mood:

‘You “internationals” are polluting our air and clogging up our roads with all your white vehicles,’ she said. ‘You refuse to employ us as professionals in your organisations. There are thousands of you. You all make promises but we neither see action from you nor do you provide us with funds to get on with things ourselves.’

How could matters be improved? Some suggestions

What would be the best structures and vehicles in future post-conflict situations to fulfil tasks of strengthening democracy, human rights, free media, good governance, and society based upon law and order and the mainstreaming of gender in all activities?

Even though missions write excellent evaluation reports about lessons learned, this knowledge is either not passed on to the next mission, or simply not incorporated. The exclusion of women by senior males in the Kosovo Mission happened despite repeated strong warnings and reports about attitudes to women on previous OSCE missions.

There are three ways in which matters can be improved:

- Post-conflict elections should be crafted to ensure the inclusion of women. There should be, for instance, a format mandating that at least 40 per cent of all candidates be women. In elections with list systems there could be alternate men and women's names on the lists of candidates. These mechanisms are both democratic and inclusionary.
- It is crucial to ensure that women have fair access to resources. It is pointless to 'empower' women and pass protocols, directives, resolutions, or statute laws without providing the ancillary funding required to make the changes operational and effective.
- Co-ordination, co-operation, and understanding between formal and informal sectors need to be dramatically improved. The military, NGOs, international institutions, politicians, and local populations are all key stakeholders in producing a satisfactory outcome. The lack of interface and co-ordination among them must be addressed urgently.²

Other recurrent problems that are not directly addressed in this paper but that nonetheless require attention include the following:

- The military and the large international organisations such as the United Nations tend to be contemptuous of the hundreds of little ants – 600 or more NGOs were active in Kosovo even in the early post-conflict days.
- The small NGOs are disdainful and increasingly critical of the large, over-funded, and endlessly ineffectual bureaucracies.
- NGOs are often suspicious of the military.

- In Kosovo, the NATO military with their well-practised, well-thought-out command and control structures were confused and annoyed by the *ad hoc* ('chaotic') work culture of the hundreds of NGOs and by the cumbersome structures of the United Nations and the OSCE.

The military, which have extensive training resources, may be able to assist NGOs and civilian consultancies with pre-Mission training in team building, planning skills, logistics know-how, and simulation exercises. At the same time, NGOs may be able to help train the military in developing a greater understanding of communication between military and civilian personnel in order to better interact with and assist the civilian population, including women and men, different ethnic groups, and so on.

Addendum and concluding remarks

The following article appeared in *Business Week* online on 23 May 2002:

First Lady Laura Bush made headlines when she took to the airwaves of Radio Free Europe on May 21 to urge the women of Afghanistan to play a major role in the reconstruction of their battered nation. Mrs. Bush isn't alone. She was echoing a growing school of thought among foreign policymakers that the key to fostering democratisation and economic development, especially in impoverished Muslim and African nations, may lie in the empowerment of women.

In state after state plagued by civil war or ethnic cleansing, thousands of men have been killed. That has left women as the majority of the population. And it sometimes means there's no one else to shoulder the leadership role in both politics and economic development in what are often conservative, patriarchal societies ... The statistics can be stunning. In Bosnia, 67 per cent of the population is female, and the figure is 70 per cent in parts of Kosovo. Women and children account for 80 per cent of refugees. And the men who don't get killed often live abroad and send money home.

The good news is that several ... NGOs – some run by women – have been focusing for years on helping women with such issues as political involvement and microeconomic projects. And the experience has paid off. 'NGOs run by women are more successful than NGOs run by men', says Joseph Presel, a former American ambassador to Uzbekistan. 'There has been fairly rapid and measurable success. It's not readily apparent but is very much the case.'

But despite this potential for leadership, women in Kosovo were for the most part left out of the post-conflict reconstruction process. Among other things, women lacked equal access to:

- administrative power;
- participation in all levels of the democratisation processes;
- planning, implementation, and monitoring of policies;
- funding and resources.

As a result, women did not enjoy the same respect as male survivors of conflict did – men wounded in conflict are perceived as heroes, while women raped in conflict are seen as shameful and are expelled by their communities. In addition, the needs of (thousands of young) widows have been overlooked, and women continue to lack equal access to retraining and employment opportunities.

Neither men nor women should be allowed to be deployed on an international mission as civilians, police officers, or military personnel unless they can prove as an entry qualification that they have attended a minimum of three days' training in gender sensitivity and gender mainstreaming – and this must include Heads of Missions and Heads of Departments. Clear evidence that an individual lacks gender awareness should be grounds for refusing promotion or redeployment until this has been remedied or the person removed.

Acknowledgement

The full report on which this paper is based, *Kosovo – Opportunities Missed, Lessons Learned*, can be requested from tim.symonds@shevolution.com free of charge.

Notes

- 1 The Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Assistance (ALNAP) is an inter-agency forum working to improve learning and accountability in the international humanitarian system. ALNAP (2002) Section 4.3.4 on Gender Equality found the following:
 - While most agencies now have gender-equality policies, they are clearly not being translated into practice. Gender-analysis tools and training appear to have been largely ineffective in the face of highly resistant bureaucracies. The exception is UNHCR (June 2001), where structural barriers

to gender equality such as cultural norms and practices are analysed in depth.

- For the most part agency reports, while themselves critical of a lack of gender analysis, do not adequately analyse how interventions might be improved. Again, the focus is on what happened, and not on why it happened.
 - The ActionAid summary report (2000) comments that gender issues tend to be de-prioritised in emergencies and tend to be confused with initiatives targeted toward women. Targeting women may result in immediate impact but does not necessarily address structural and rights issues, which is one important objective of a gender-equality approach.
 - In the reports that do consider gender equality, poor practice and failure to mainstream gender adequately appear to be the norm, even in interventions that were successful overall.
- 2 Better forward planning needs to go into any civilian responses in the future, and I recommend Schoenhaus (2002) on this extraordinarily important matter.

References

- ALNAP (2002) *Humanitarian Action: Improving Performance Through Improved Learning*, ALNAP Annual Report, London: ALNAP.
- Schoenhaus, R.H. (2002) *Training for Peace and Humanitarian Relief Operations: Advancing Best Practice*, Peaceworks Reports 43, Washington, DC: United States Institute for Peace (available free of charge from usip_request@usip.org).
- Vandenberg, M. (1999) Keynote address at the OSCE Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on Gender Issues, Vienna, 14–15 June, www.osce.org.