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### **Role of libraries in enhancing status of women in post-war societies: the case of Kosovo**

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#### Abstract:

Today peace is perceived as an absence of all forms of violence. Violence against women is interconnected with all forms of abuse against citizenry and shall be regarded as an issue of security within society. A capability of a state to provide safe environment for its citizens is no less important than its ability to protect its borders.

The impact of conflict on women in Kosovo had been tremendous. According to the data collected by the UNMIK Gender Office, and the UNFEM, ethnic-Albanian women have limited access to health care, education and employment opportunities. Many rape victims being stigmatized by their communities due to the prejudices of the traditional culture that also influence the domestic violence to stay a taboo. Women are underrepresented in every aspect of the political-administrative system, where the area of education and libraries is of no exception: men occupy most of the positions in libraries, managerial and professional alike.

The traditional community structures influence information deficiency in the Kosovo communities, where women often rely on TV and their husbands and male relatives

for the information. Libraries are not regarded as prime sources of knowledge; moreover, the war put many rural libraries – Albanian and Serbian alike - in the devastating conditions.

At the same time, libraries, especially in the rural areas, provide a ground for a start of an important dialog between the communities torn apart by the ethnic conflicts. Moreover, they are often the only free sources of education for a community, having the potential to become public educational centers. By being a source of information outside the traditional clan and family structures and, thus, insuring information literacy in the communities, libraries will support and enhance status of women in Kosovo.

[Practical steps are introduced in the annex.]

The World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 (1) defined women security issues as the most vital of providing citizenry with conditions for development. Directly related to the issues of legal protection and economical freedom, they are originated in the economical, spiritual, ethical values of the environments where women live. To address the issues of women security one must see the place women take within the social environment, and understand whether this environment provides any means for the women to be heard.

Kosovo is a small landlocked territory in the Balkan Peninsula. The *resident* (living in Kosovo) population is estimated to 1,9 million, 88% of which are defined as ethnic Kosovo Albanians (2) with women representing 52% of the total population (3). Between 1974 and 1989 the region was an autonomous republic in Yugoslavia. The removal of autonomy in 1989 resulted in increasing of ethnic violence against Kosovars that took forms of massive shelling of Albanian settlements, massacres, forced migration and executions (550 mass grave-sites were discovered (4)). Since June 1999 the UN Interim Administration Mission (UNMIK) governs Kosovo.

The library tradition goes back in Kosovo to the 16 century, when the first library was open in Prizren in 1513 (5). By the beginning of the 1990-s the system of public libraries was well developed and included 183 libraries (6). However, after the conflict only 118 of them survived, with the total number of school, special and public libraries and archives that were destroyed reaching 175 (7). About one and a half million of books was brought to the paper factory or burned (7). The remaining libraries were left handicapped with the stock being destroyed, lost, or having little or no relevance to the current population needs (8). What is worse, for more than a quarter of century formal library schooling in Kosovo has been absent. As a result less than 3 percent of the total Kosovo population use the public libraries today, with the larger half being women (9).

While the war affected the lives of all Kosovars, women suffered consequences and abuses different from those imposed on men<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> For statistical findings on status of Kosovo women refer to the report: UNIFEM, UNCT, KWN (2005). *Voice of Women*. UNIFEM: Pristina, Kosovo.

The military culture refers to sexual abuse of women as "standard operating procedure" (10). The abuse of Albanian women by the enemy goes back as far as the conflict itself. According to the human rights analysts, the "systematic rape" of Albanian women in concentration camps during the 90-s was an effective strategy to humiliate and defeat the men as well as to terrorize a population (4). Many Kosovo women testified that they fled because they feared that Serbian forces would rape again.

After the conflict the rape victims, humiliated as enemy and as women by the attackers, often were rejected by their own communities, which regarded them as living evidence of the male defeat. Fearing social and physical persecution by their own people, unwilling to take risks of involvement in the lengthy prosecution of the International Criminal Tribunal, and trying to avoid re-traumatizing from telling the strangers about the intimate pain, many women did not report their military or domestic abuse. The available findings (11) present only a relative number, with an indicator of total 23%, or one of four women being exposed to the violence.

Women also had to deal with violence experienced against their loved ones. In absence of the male family members, their daily workload increased dramatically. The weakening of the societal structures in the post-war society exposed them to the increasing domestic abuse. Many parts of Kosovo society are rooted in the century-thick traditional family model, where extended family - for a woman it is a family of her husband or father - provides most social support. While on one hand a family gives a degree of protection for a woman, on the other - it increases her vulnerability and leaves her defenseless before the male-dominated hierarchy.

Fearing isolation and blame, having no support from the outside of the family, abused women often accepted their subservient position, themselves influencing domestic violence to become the best-concealed form of socially unacceptable behavior.

Conducted within the context of the violence on ethnic grounds, the abuse of Kosovo women sprang from the perception of them as property of their families, husbands, or communities and had tendencies to increase in the post-war environments as a result of the economic crisis, dismantled social structures, and war trauma. While during the conflict women survived rape and casualties, before and after the war many of them had to face sexual, physical and emotional abuse, influenced by the limited or no education possibilities, restriction on movement and lack of choice about marriage.

The issues of women were in part silenced in Kosovo by the influences of the political regime. To the outside world they first became known through the images of ethnic violence, the coverage of which began with the 1998 massacres in Drenica.

After the NATO bombing in 1999 the Serbian forces withdrew from the territory and the first international organizations came to conduct the Kosovo reconstruction. Primary interlocutors with the outside world, the internationals were those who continued to shape perceptions of images of Kosovo women.

Having externally influenced and prepared agendas and coming first in contact with the military and/or para-military structures, the internationals had very little or almost no chance to understand the realities of women's problems.

As a result, the agencies that worked with the women issues, invested in the process that was only partly grounded in the real needs of the local women and their

communities. Some of the gender issues have been in the state of stagnation that only recently began to unwind thanks to the efforts of those who realize the importance of involvement of the locals in the process of rebuilding their own lives<sup>2</sup>.

The lack of knowledge about the Kosovo women's life, and the subsequent objectification of their problems was a basis for the internationals to perceive and portray the Kosovo women as victims. Their images, underlined by the media, rarely went beyond the portraits of refugees, waiting wives, and objects for the men pleasure, having only relative connection with the reality<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, the intervention was for the large part a cause for Kosovo to become known as the "new market for trading in women's bodies." (4)

At the same time women activists, who advocated women issues in Kosovo for more than a decade, were realizing the unexpected freedoms and opportunities the war paradoxically brought to them.

They began to be involved in politics at the highest level – the opportunity opened by the fact that prior to 1999 the whole Albanian community played a "parallel" role in the political decision-making process in Yugoslavia. They started NGOs, which would deal exclusively with the women issues; they went on publishing; they began making public appearances – all which was impossible before.

Possessing the unique knowledge of the culture and the local communities, these women were the key sources to co-operate with during the reconstruction, and yet, they stayed marginalized.

The first contacts of women activists with internationals for the most part did not go beyond doing the trivial tasks or the groundwork for the peacekeeping agencies. Disappointed and often resentful toward the most internationals, who as a rule dismissed or duplicated their work, women activists developed their own rules of engagement with the international community in order to get funds, support, and in some cases prevent the outsiders from doing harm. However, it cost them a great deal of time and efforts<sup>4</sup>.

Today there are more than 300 NGOs (13) dealing exclusively with the women issues. The Kosova Women Network that sprang out of the activities of the *Motrat Qirizi* (organized in 1989), *Lejenda* (1996), *Aureola* (1996), and *Elena* consists of 70 organizations and operates beyond the borders of Kosovo.

And yet, the importance of involving the women into the process of rebuilding life in Kosovo is only partially realized by the internationals, as well as the local agents that often expect women to be loyal to their communities and thus, conceal violence that is considered a private issue. At the same time the images of silent and distant

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<sup>2</sup> For more on the humanitarian assistance in Kosovo see:  
Mertus, J. (2000). Kosovo: uprooted women and children. In Mertus, J. *War's offensive on women*. (37-52). Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press.

<sup>3</sup> For more on the media and stereotypes of Kosovo women refer to:  
Del Zotto, A. (2002). Weeping women, wringing hands: How the mainstream media stereotyped women's experiences in Kosovo. In *Journal of Gender Studies*, 11(2), 141-150.

<sup>4</sup> For more on Kosovo women activism refer to:  
Berry, J. (2004). *Rising up in response: Barriers to activism*. Boulder, CO: Urgent Action Fund. Available on line at <http://www.urgentactionfund.org/home1.html>

bystanders and helpless victims continue to shape misconceptions about the reality of Kosovo women today.

And it cannot be otherwise due to the fact that there are **almost** no effective mechanisms in the largely rural Kosovo that would allow voices coming from grassroots level to be heard by the outside world. “Almost” because there actually is a strong potential that unfortunately is being neglected at the moment.

The rural libraries are the only institutions in Kosovo that are spread widely enough through the territory to provide means for the social dialog, to spread the knowledge and education opportunities to the most distant places of the territory. They are the only social and educational institutions in the rural areas, quite often bearing double responsibility of being a community and a school library. In the country where 80% of the population lives in the rural areas, this fact gains even greater importance. Before those forces that have power to destroy out of greed, stupidity and paranoia realize it, the libraries shall be protected and used to bring communities together. They shall be seen and used as practical mechanisms for engaging local people in community capacity building for successful application of the local and international experiences to the everyday realities through a two-flow information exchange. They are the institutions for the adult education and establishment of the dialog between diverse ethnic groups.

It is crucial to recognize that in every society the situation of women and citizenry in large consists of two realities. One is “mythological reality” – build on political, ideological and socio-cultural images and needs. The other is “empiric reality” - factual, independent from any outside influences and grounded into everyday survival.

“Mythological reality” is the way society looks at women under influence of all the tendencies and points of view provided by politics, ideologies, economical needs, gender, political, ethical, religious and other issues.

“Empiric reality” is the experience of women, or the actuality of the day-to-day survival of them and their families. While the mythology of women's situation stems mostly from the outside world, the everyday reality is purely theirs.

We must never lose the site of the duality of any assessment of the women issues in any society, be it New York or Prishtina or any place in between. When outside organizations come in contact with the concrete women in concrete place, they cannot help, but view and assess mostly from a mythological platform, unless they have some knowledge and experience of the everyday life of the women they encountered. On the other hand, for the locals they interact with, the entire outside world is also a myth, since they have little knowledge about the experts or organizations with whom they come into a contact.

As the result there is a gap in communication and understanding that, if not approached, is in danger to become an abyss.

The gap can be lessened by the information. And in rural Kosovo public libraries with a skilled and familiar (almost a part of the family) staff can be irreplaceable tools for women to access the information needed.

Only when this potential of rural libraries is realized, they can become the places where issues of violence against women are recognized and dealt with. In the areas where there are no places for community gathering, rural libraries can provide a place for issues of relationships between men and women and different ethnic groups come to the surface, where through education and dialog the roots of violence can be understood.

After having met the challenges of loss, pain, and hardships, the women of Kosovo have a range of remarkable experiences, deep emotions and enduring relationships brought forth by their lives. The traditional role of women as mothers, partners, wives and citizens form the backbone of Kosovo, as it does in all human societies. Thus, direct input of local women is clearly invaluable.

However, the conventional economic analyses that are based on micro-economic indicators, or gender/political/social affairs office assessments that are guided by major international legal and political documents, would inevitably fail to comprehend, and even to recognize this input.

The conflict in Kosovo dismantled the fabric of the society, making it grow in clusters that are more and more separated from each other, having parallel existences. It is impossible to bring out a change in a place that is torn apart - change to the social order comes only as a result of a united effort of the diverse elements. Uncoordinated efforts of external and local actors often clash as the result of the two above-mentioned realities.

While the international assistance helped to rebuild many libraries and to install technologies in some of them, there were shortages of vision and lack of seeing the problems as a whole. Some book donors used Kosovo as a dumping ground, sending books totally irrelevant to the needs of the local people. These books became an expansive waste, drawing on the preservation and space. A great thought to provide the population with the access to the EBSCO databases via library consortium turned out to be a careless investment: right before the free five-year subscription is over almost none of the faculty at the leading Kosovo school - University of Prishtina - knows about such a service. Let alone students, librarians, and the general users, who for the most part, not provided by the managerial staff either with the instructions or a password to access the source, or have a slight idea what a database can be used for.

However, the biggest problem of the catastrophically under-funded and badly staffed Kosovo libraries is rooted much deeper. Conflict related, the destruction of libraries in Kosovo was not as much military, but cultural. There is a loss of a social image of the library, of the cultural and historical meaning of the institution, a loss that can only be replaced by the realization of the library potentials as a vital social point to influence people's life.

The fact that not only Serbs were destroying books, but Albanians did also (8), is a clear indication of the extent to which both groups were manipulated from the outside. From the beginning of the 90-s we witness not only the process of destruction of

cultural items, but the culture itself, that became silenced or diminished by the propaganda of the nationalists' symbols.

This gains further significance by the fact that the Kosovars (as many other rural people in East European countries) traditionally perceive the library in its traditional sense, as cultural “temple”, rather than information outlet. The destruction of books was directed to the distraction of memory, not the products of the information exchange, destruction of the social space where the present day reality found its meaning.

The real threat for the libraries lays in the prospects of replacement the partly-lost cultural values by the ideology of the market, the values of the foreign world that can be as damaging for the Kosovo society, as the ideology of its aggressors. The gap is too obvious not to be concerned about: while during the conflict the human values were replaced by the morals and principles of war, the meaning of war diminished as soon as the killing was over.

If protected and seen as effective mechanisms of change - educational structures, channels for social communication and cultural institutions that hold the most vital human values - libraries can and must be directly involved into the process of changing lives of Kosovo women and thus the entire Kosovo society. They can become places to challenge the present image of a Kosovo woman, and bring solutions to turn away from the grip of the oppressive traditions as well as from the mainstream media images that have debilitating effect on our vision of women in rural areas. They can also be mechanisms to lessen tensions within and between communities, eliminating the main difficulty in the process of Kosovo reconstruction.

As leading Kosovo feminists lobby for the reform of the electoral law in favor of women, only 5% of rural women take part in the community meetings (3), and if they do, they had to first ask the permission of their "Albanian", or traditionally oriented husbands. 99% of these women, having completed secondary (equivalent to the American high school) education, are unemployed and daily involved into the housekeeping and taking care of older relatives (3).

While some women believe in their traditional role and seek to gain moral authority and respect as mothers - the role that has much less importance in the developed world - their wish is considered “backward” and “subservient” by the western-oriented feminists.

However close, the realities of different women not only “analyzed” on the separate basis, but grow to be separated, as the gaps among women, divided by the social, geographical and ethnic lines, grow bigger, affected by the lack of communication, scarcity of educational opportunities and shortage of institutions for the social dialog.

It is vital to understand that the issues of women security in Kosovo are the issues of security for their families, issues of revival of the cultural and human values, issues of the safety and of the secure future for their children – those issues that seemingly are extremely local, but in reality have undeniably global resonance and can be resolved only when the voice of every member of the society is heard.

I would like to conclude by emphasizing once more that subject of citizens and women security transcends the boundaries of geography or political structures.

Women are oppressed in every part of the world today. Daily they are traded, sold, humiliated, killed. But so are men.

We live in the reality where violence is not only accepted, but also sustained and reproduced in order to keep in power war ideologies, the reality where freedom is only a paradox to cover many types of the modern human slavery. Historian W. Durant calculated that there have been only 29 years in the whole human history during which there was no war underway (12).

The issues of women as well as men security are not a set of static relationships that gain mythical significance, as the truth lies undisclosed. They are the lived experiences, the reality that changes from day to day. While it is a family, community or a state responsibility to protect citizen's security, it is an individual, who is directly responsible for her or his own life.

Understanding of the concept of peace comes through the understanding of the human values, those, that make us all human, that make us a part of the humanity. We all relive these values through the story of our life, our character, through our individual and common destiny. We are the part and means of the culture we live in, and to make it peaceful we need to speak a language that will enable us not only understand each other, but be compassionate toward our pains and suffering. Only then are we able to stop being manipulated as servants of the state or ideology and see ourselves as humans, as independent agents of our lives.

And throughout that huge territory where there are no other information sources except for limited and highly subjective views that are provided by the traditional male dominated family structures, rural libraries can (and should) be the first stepping-stones for women on their way to their rightful place in the new Kosovo.

### **Annex:**

Below there are practical suggestions to be introduced to the Kosovo Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sports to improve the situation of women security with the use of libraries.

1. Invest attention and funds to the revival of the rural libraries, as those that have most outreach capacity for the population.
2. Spread the educational sources among libraries that discuss the concepts and experiences of violence directed on women in Kosovo and other places in the world. Spread information about the relief organization and remedies available for the victims.
3. Open legal corners to educate the population about their rights, and the rights of women. Refer the population to the free legal practitioners working in the area.
4. Disseminate literature of the Kosovo writers, women and men to discuss the common experiences of people to establish the channels for communication between the groups of different ages, and ethnic backgrounds. Spread the literature about experiences of women in similar situations – Bosnian, Chechen – for the locals to learn and apply their methods of survival. Open the literary centers and societies in the libraries.



5. Within the libraries equipped by the modern ITs open the computer literacy courses and establish income generating and skill training projects for the children, and especially for the young girls. Spread the educational sources such as a free database [Mapping the World of Women Information](#) via CD-ROMs wherever the Internet connection is non-available.

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