

Gender and conflict in the Western Balkans

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Question

How have structural gender inequalities changed during and after the various conflicts in the Western Balkans? To what extent do legacies of gender based violence during conflict continue to impact social relations?

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1. Overview

Ethnic wars in the Western Balkans had a parallel in 'gender wars' – and both were instrumental in fostering competitive, conflictual and antagonistic perspectives of social relations (Hughson, 2012). This report provides a brief summary of gender relations and (in)equalities in the Western Balkans, in particular, how they have been influenced by the violent conflicts following the breakup of Yugoslavia. It discusses gender stereotypes and the portrayal and treatment of women and men in Western Balkan societies; gender-based violence during conflict and its legacy; women's agency in the region; and women's rights and participation post-conflict. Much of the literature focuses on Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia – and the report reflects

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this. There is a companion piece to this report which focuses on gender norms and indicators of gender equality in the Western Balkans¹

In the lead up to the conflicts in the region, there was a re-patriarchalisation of Yugoslavian society and a reductionist portrayal of gender roles. The concept of 'militant masculinity' placed males in the role of violent warrior, capable of fighting ethno-national wars, and women in the role of biological reproducers or nurturers of the nation (Berna, 2014; Haug, 2013; Hughson, 2012).

Gender-based violence

Women's bodies and war narratives: Sexual and gender-based violence is often enabled by gendered narratives that portray women's bodies as territory, to be 'protected' by men of their 'own side' and attacked and conquered by the 'enemy' (O'Reilly, 2016). Nationalistic governments used sexual victimisation of 'their' women to strengthen gendered narratives of 'their endangered nations' (Korac, 2016). In Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), the rape of Bosnian Muslim women by Serb forces took on symbolic meaning as a site of 'ethnic cleansing' (Todorova, 2011).

Legacy of sexual violence: Survivors of sexual violence during the various wars often experience trauma and social exclusion, and subsequent problems of poverty, unemployment and lack of health care (Hughson, 2014; Zajović, n.d.). Survivors also feel discriminated against in terms of compensation and access to social benefits, with veterans receiving greater attention and resources (O'Reilly, 2016; Hughson, 2014). Since survivors of sexual violence are primarily women and war veterans are mainly men, the implications are gendered (Hughson, 2014).

Experiences of wartime rape are often marginalised and silenced (Todorova, 2011). In Kosovo, for example, the issue of wartime rape rapidly and completely disappeared from public discourse after the war (Di Lellio, 2016). There is also silence with regard to sexual violence against males, as this goes against the patriarchal and militarist narrative (Korac, 2016).

Addressing the legacy of mass rape, including children born from inter-ethnic violence, is considered essential for future reconciliation (Todorova, 2011). In BiH, it is also considered necessary for establishment of an inclusive *Bosnian* national identity (ibid).

Domestic violence: The number of women who experience domestic violence has reportedly increased as a result of the violent conflicts (Korac, 2016), aggravated by post-conflict tensions and greater intolerance and discrimination of minorities and marginalised groups (Berna, 2013).

Women's agency

The gendered propaganda in the lead up to and during the Yugoslav wars, and the ensuing acts of violence, stimulated the mobilisation and leadership of women throughout the region. They sought in various ways to counter nationalism and militarism in their countries and to seek accountability for widespread human rights violations (Di Lellio, 2016). Women across the Western Balkans also formed transnational networks, within the region and internationally. From

¹ Browne, E. (2017). *Gender norms in the Western Balkans* (K4D Helpdesk Research Report no. 58). Birmingham, UK: GSDRC, University of Birmingham.

the early 1990s, they engaged in analyses, activism and lobbying concerning the gender-power aspects of the conflicts and patterns of gender-based violence (Korac, 2016).

In some contexts, women's rights and activism experienced a general backlash in the aftermath of conflict with the decline in the mobilisation of international women's networks on wartime sexual violence (Di Lellio, 2016). There have still been notable successes in the Western Balkans, however – in particular the establishment of the Women's Court, through the efforts of a diverse range of women's groups from throughout the region. The Court, which is designed and staffed by women, provides a space for women's voices and for their testimonies (O'Reilly, 2016).

Gender relations and women's rights in the post-conflict context

The dominance of national politics and the myriad of transitional and post-conflict challenges in the Western Balkan countries have pushed issues of gender equality, the human rights of women and implementation of related legislation to the margins (Simić, 2015; Haug, 2013).

The persistence of patriarchy and gender-stereotypical roles: A key obstacle to women's progress and inclusion is the persistence of patriarchal social norms and attitudes and traditional views of gender roles in society (Simić, 2015; Haug, 2013). Studies show that education in many Yugoslav successor states, for example, continues to convey traditional value systems (Korac, 2016).

Without addressing structural constraints (e.g. patriarchal values, dominant structures of power, social relations that exploit and marginalise women, constructions of masculinity) legislation and gender mainstreaming can be implemented without actually leading to any constructive transformation of gender relations (Björkdahl & Selimovic, 2015; Simić, 2015; Berna, 2013).

Socioeconomic life: The Yugoslav successor states have been undergoing difficult transitions not only from conflict, but also from communism to a market economy. Economic insecurity and the legacy of war have created an even deeper gap between genders (Korac, 2016; Hughson, 2012). Gender gaps in labour market participation rates and in pay are key problems in the region (Nikoloski and Adnett, 2015; Berna, 2014).

Peace agreements: Not a single woman participated in the peace process that preceded the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995 (Mlinarević, Isaković and Rees, 2015) or in Kosovo's negotiation team in the status talks between Serbia and Kosovo (Haug, 2013). This marked absence of women has implications for society as a whole; and for women as a group and their ability to be recognised as agents of change in later processes (Mlinarević, Isaković and Rees, 2015). Subsequent discussions on constitutional reforms in BiH have also excluded women. In addition, gender-related issues, such as domestic violence, health care, education and employment, have not been factored into a carefully planned transition in post-war BiH. (ibid)

Political life: Women's access to political leadership and participation in decision-making is often constrained by expected gender roles (Simić, 2015). In BiH, there has been a conservative backlash for women in politics in the aftermath of the war (Björkdahl & Selimovic, 2015). The number of women in decision-making roles has declined well below the levels of socialist Yugoslavia (Björkdahl & Selimovic, 2015), despite the existence of a quota system. In Kosovo, however, the quota system has contributed to increasing the participation of women in decision-making roles (Haug, 2013).

It has also been argued that the dominance of ethnic considerations in political life in post-war BiH has relegated women and gender issues a lower priority (Hughson, 2014). This is reportedly also an influence in Macedonia, where attention to Albanian and Macedonian ethnic groups in political representation is said to have marginalised other groups within the individual ethnic group – in particular, women (Risteka, 2011).

2. Gender and ethnic conflict in the Western Balkans

Gender is often a crucial dimension shaping social and political processes before, during and after violent conflict (Di Lellio, 2016). At the same time, gender equality can be significantly affected by conflict and turbulent political situations (Haug, 2013). In Kosovo, for example, 'gender equality has been closely interconnected and intersected by the Serbian-Albanian conflict, the rise of new nationalist discourses, and the dispute over state status' (Haug, 2013, 148). It has also been affected by the domestic responses to these processes (ibid).

Gender differences are tied to other socially constructed differences (Hughson, 2012). Ethnic wars in the Western Balkans had a parallel in 'gender wars' – and both were instrumental in fostering competitive, conflictual and antagonistic perspectives of social relations (ibid). Ethnification is closely linked to re-traditionalisation and re-patriarchisation of Western Balkan societies (ibid). It is argued that notions of femininity and masculinity and norms of sexuality combine to produce ethnicity, which became a powerful catalyst for war mobilisation throughout the former Yugoslavia (Di Lellio, 2016).

Given the close ties between gender and ethnic wars, gender reconciliation and ethnic reconciliation are inseparable (Hughson, 2012). The deconstruction of structural power relations related to war making is important for both gender relations and peacemaking (ibid).

The perception and portrayal of gender roles

The traditional patriarchal value system in the Western Balkans has been an ongoing factor in the region (with the exception of the period of socialism). It influences the position of women and men in societies (Duhaček, 2015; Berna, 2014).

In the lead up to the conflicts in the region, there was a re-patriarchalisation of Yugoslavian society and a reductionist conceptualisation and portrayal of gender roles. Gender representations during the wars were in sharp contrast to former Yugoslav media representations of women and very different from what many former Yugoslavs perceived as their reality (Hughson, 2012). The discourse of the nationalist regimes portrayed women's emancipation as an 'unnatural' effect of the socialist system (Haug, 2013).

The concept of 'militant masculinity' placed males in the role of violent warrior, capable of fighting ethno-national wars, and women in the role of biological reproducers or nurturers of the nation (Berna, 2014; Haug, 2013; Hughson, 2012). In Kosovo, for example, the engagement of women was framed within the context of helping and sacrificing for the sake of the country (Haug, 2013). Women in the region were obligated to remain in their communities and endure the war atrocities, without any opportunity to exercise non-traditional roles (Berna, 2014). They were portrayed in the media and by politicians as powerless victims (Haug, 2013; Hughson, 2012).

Such gendered and sexualised metaphors and propaganda were used to construct essentialist national and ethnic identities (Haug, 2013). They contributed to the militarisation of societies,

mobilisation of populations for war, and violence against women (Di Lellio, 2016; Korac, 2016; Hughson, 2012).

The wars reinforced gender stereotypes, traditional views of the role of women, and the influence of religious traditionalism (Berna, 2014). In Serbia, the political regime and army involved in the break-up of Yugoslavia reinstated Serbian traditional 'family values', which negatively impacted on women's human rights and gender equality (Duhaček, 2015). In Kosovo, the political leadership that emerged from the war promoted masculine ideas of 'valour' and 'patriotism' (Di Lellio, 2016). Gender stereotypes have persisted since the end of the conflicts, which has undermined movement toward gender equality (Di Lellio, 2016; Berna, 2014). Gender relations have also been persistently patriarchal (Bobić, 2012).

Women's bodies and war narratives

Sexual and gender-based violence is often enabled by gendered narratives that portray women's bodies as territory, to be 'protected' by men of their 'own side' and attacked and conquered by the 'enemy' (O'Reilly, 2016). In the Western Balkans, women's bodies were equated with ethno-national 'territories' (Korac, 2016). Women were routinely subjected to sexualised violence during the various armed conflicts (ibid).

Nationalistic governments used sexual victimisation of 'their' women to strengthen gendered narratives of 'their endangered nations' and their territories (Korac, 2016). The sexual abuse of women in war was used to foster gender-power systems that underpin the processes of militarisation and war violence (ibid).

Throughout the 1990s, women in Serbia were perceived not as citizens but as biological reproductive material, in relation to their ethnic belonging (Duhaček, 2015). This made women vulnerable to the risk of mass rape (ibid). In the case of Kosovo, representations of Albanian men were limited to dangerous sexual aggressors, preying on Serbian women (Di Lellio, 2016; Haug, 2013). Media campaigns concerning cases of rapes of Serbian women by Albanian men in Kosovo were instrumental for the war and national mobilisation (Hughson, 2012). Albanian women were labelled as baby factories, representing a danger to the Serbian nation (Di Lellio, 2016; Haug, 2013). The high birth rate amongst Albanians was portrayed as an act of sexual aggression against Serbia (Di Lellio, 2016).

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the inter-relationship between ethnicity and gender was exploited by Bosnian Serb nationalists, who drew on patriarchal traditions and violent militarist tactics (Todorova, 2011). Women became a specific target for sexual violence by enemy forces. The widespread use of mass rape against Bosnian Muslim women was one of the tactics deployed by Serb forces to intimidate and terrorise the Muslim population (ibid). From an ethnicist patriarchal perspective, the rape of Bosnian Muslim women took on the symbolic meaning as a site of 'ethnic cleansing' (ibid).

Throughout wartime in the region, a woman's body became a haven of survival – not of personal survival, but of the survival of a nation and, moreover, of an ethnicity (Berna, 2014).

Legacy of sexual violence

Addressing the legacy of inter-communal mass violence and the reintegration of survivors of mass violence is a key challenge in post-conflict societies. This is particularly the case with

women who were raped and the children that were born as a result of these rapes (Todorova, 2011).

Survivors of sexual violence during the various wars often experience trauma and social exclusion, and subsequent problems of poverty, unemployment and lack of health care (Hughson, 2014; Zajović, n.d.). Trauma can be transferred to new generations (Hughson, 2014). Many female survivors were also left without close male relatives and without economic or social support (Di Lellio, 2016). Female survivors of war-time rape and sexual violence in BiH, for example, often feel the State neglects their existence and fails to address its responsibilities towards them (Hughson, 2014).

Survivors also feel discriminated against in terms of compensation and access to social benefits, with veterans receiving greater attention and resources (O'Reilly, 2016; Hughson, 2014). Since survivors of sexual violence are primarily women and war veterans are mainly men, the issues of treatment and choices are clearly gendered (Hughson, 2014). In addition, survivors may prefer compensation in the form of reparation that addresses wartime abuses and acknowledges the tremendous wrong that they experienced, rather than a payment in the form of a social support benefit (Mlinarević, Isaković and Rees, 2015).

Experiences of wartime rape are also often marginalised and silenced (Todorova, 2011). In Kosovo, for example, the issue of wartime rape rapidly and completely disappeared from public discourse after the war, with society entering a phase of denial (Di Lellio, 2016). The question of gender-based sexual violence thus continues to undermine Kosovar society (Haug, 2013). Many survivors were forced to keep silent by patriarchs and older women, who acted as 'custodians of tradition' (Di Lellio, 2016). This silence went alongside the reproduction of stereotypical gender roles, with men as responsible for policing behaviour and women for upholding social mores (ibid).

There is also silence with regard to sexual violence against males. Speaking about raped men within a patriarchal context is considered to emasculate not only the victims themselves but also the notion of the nation and the state by eroding the very gender-power system upon which it is built (Korac, 2016). Lack of acknowledgment on the part of local feminist anti-war activists of the diversity of men's experiences of the war, and of men's victimisation by war, represents a missed opportunity for pushing for more radical challenges to patriarchy and gender-power relations (ibid).

Addressing the legacy of mass rape, including children born from rape, is considered necessary for future reconciliation (Todorova, 2011). In BiH, it is also considered necessary for establishment of an inclusive *Bosnian* national identity (ibid). There are many issues related to the children born from rape. Questions relate to Bosnian society's response to the children born out of inter-communal violence: are they Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim), like their mothers, or Serbian, like their fathers? Are they 'the enemy within'? (Todorova, 2011). In Kosovo, some rape survivors also had babies, with some choosing to give up their children (Di Lellio, 2016). The local media often published stories with headlines that labelled the children as 'bastards', undermining the security and dignity of women once again (ibid).

Domestic violence

The number of women who experience domestic violence has reportedly increased as a result of the violent conflicts (Korac, 2016). Domestic violence is considered to be the most widespread

form of violence throughout the Western Balkans, aggravated by post-conflict tensions and increased intolerance and discrimination of minorities and marginalised groups (Berna, 2013). Victims of domestic violence have limited access to justice and proper protection, with most services provided by women's groups and funded by international donors (Berna, 2013). Despite legislation countering domestic violence, there is poor implementation (ibid). In addition, governments in the region have not engaged in public awareness campaigns on domestic violence (ibid).

For further discussion on domestic violence in the Western Balkans, please see K4D helpdesk report, no. 58 on Gender norms in the Western Balkans.

3. Women's agency

The gendered propaganda in the lead up to and during the Yugoslav wars, which contributed to mobilisation in the war effort, also stimulated the mobilisation and leadership of women throughout the region. They sought in various ways to counter nationalism and to seek accountability for widespread human rights violations (Di Lellio, 2016). In Serbia, for example, women's NGOs took the lead in resisting nationalism and opposing the militaristic and patriarchal practices of the Milosevic regime, as part of their policy of taking responsibility as citizens (Duhaček, 2015; Irvine, 2013). The activity of women's groups and networks in Serbia has increased the chances that social capital will be stronger among women (Berna, 2013).

In Kosovo, women organised throughout the 1990s as part of a parallel Kosovar society in opposition to Serbian authorities (Irvine, 2013). They were able to apply this experience to the task of reconstruction after 1999 (ibid). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, a number of women's groups formed during the war with the aim of helping women by providing psychological support and counselling (Simić, 2015). Such support continued after the war. These organisations have also since the end of the war sought to counter domestic violence, trafficking of women, gender discrimination and gender inequality (ibid). As a result of women's civil society efforts, BiH adopted its first Gender Equality Law in 2003, which acknowledged for the first time the problem of gender-based violence and gender discrimination in the country and obliged the state to take action to protect women's human rights (ibid). Women in BiH have also pushed to ensure that newly emerging political structures in the post-conflict period paid attention to women's concerns (ibid).

Women across the Western Balkans also formed transnational networks, within the region and internationally. From the early 1990s, they engaged in analyses, activism and lobbying concerning the gender-power aspects of the conflicts and patterns of gender-based violence (Korac, 2016). They were instrumental in drawing attention to rape and other forms of sexual violence, gathering evidence on these crimes, and pushing for their inclusion within definitions of war crimes and crimes against humanity (Di Lellio, 2016; Korac, 2016; Irvine, 2013). The first written accounts and analyses of the rape of women in Bosnia and Herzegovina were disseminated by local feminist groups in 1992-1993 (Korac, 2016). Women in Kosovo were later able to amplify their activism by linking to numerous reports of rapes in Bosnia and Herzegovina that were receiving relatively greater attention, particularly with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (Di Lellio, 2016).

In some contexts, women's rights experienced a general backlash in the aftermath of conflict with the decline in the mobilisation of international women's networks on wartime sexual violence (Di

Lellio, 2016). In Kosovo, for example, survivors and their advocates stopped raising the issue of sexual violence in public (ibid). The support that the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) wartime political leadership had given to women activists waned, reportedly as there was no longer a need to use the narrative of the suffering of women to strengthen the national cause (ibid). Instead, women advocates in post-war Kosovo received threats and were undermined by public opinion campaigns (ibid).

There have still been notable successes in the Western Balkans, however – in particular the Women’s Court. A diverse range of women’s groups from throughout the region worked together and successfully pushed for the establishment of a Women’s Court, which involves all former Yugoslavia countries. In contrast to existing Tribunals, the Court is designed by women, staffed by women and involves the full participation of women. It provides a space for women’s voices and for their testimonies of the injustices and various forms of violence they have experienced during war and peacetime (O’Reilly, 2016).

The Women’s Court, which began operation in 2015, is considered to be a more empowering process for victims and survivors than participation in the traditional war crimes tribunals. It offers a ‘feminist approach to justice’ and symbolic recognition of war-time gender-based violence (rape for nationalistic purposes; male violence against women; political repression of women human rights defenders). It is argued that it has, however, failed to capture the many other aspects of women’s wartime roles and identities (O’Reilly, 2016). Women were not solely victims in war. Several thousand women in BiH, for example, volunteered to serve in the national armies and militias, adopting combatant roles (ibid).

4. Gender relations and women’s rights in the post-conflict contexts

The widespread adoption throughout the region of international conventions and national legislation that address gender equality and gender perspectives has been inadequate in countering discrimination against women in public and private spheres. The dominance of national politics and the myriad of transitional and post-conflict challenges in the Western Balkan countries have pushed issues of gender equality, the human rights of women and implementation of related legislation to the margins (Simić, 2015; Haug, 2013). Despite more than a decade of powerful and dedicated activity in civil society and significant organisation on national and international stages, women have occupied few positions of formal decision-making authority in the various post-conflict contexts throughout the Western Balkans (Irvine, 2013).

Lack of enforcement of gender equality provisions is due in part to the existence of legal and political systems that have not sufficiently defined acts of gender discrimination or built an effective legal framework to successfully prosecute offenders (ibid). It is also due to the need to integrate a gender perspective into all aspects of the social fabric of society, including in the educational system (Duhaček, 2015; Hughson, 2014). A key obstacle to women’s progress and inclusion is the persistence of patriarchal social norms and attitudes, traditional views of gender roles in society and conservative ideologies (Simić, 2015; Haug, 2013).

The persistence of patriarchy and gender-stereotypical roles

The reconfiguration of gender roles has been one of the biggest challenges in the post-conflict transition period in the Western Balkans, in particular transforming, diversifying and highlighting a variety of roles for men and women (Berna, 2014).

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, conservative, patriarchal views about gender roles and the portrayal of women as mother and housewife are held by all religious communities, which undermine efforts at gender equality (Simić, 2015). Despite progress in legislation guaranteeing equality between men and women, deep-rooted, patriarchal stereotypes persist (Björkdahl & Selimovic, 2015; Simić, 2015). This is reflected in unequal opportunities for women, higher rates of unemployment and the under-representation of women in most public areas, including in politics and in the security sector (Ibid; Hughson, 2014). In Kosovo, it is also argued that the persistence of patriarchal values and discriminatory attitudes toward women undermines progress made in establishing legislative frameworks for gender equality and prevents equal access to markets and goods (Dauti and Zhllima, 2016; Haug, 2013). Men continue to dominate the top-level parallel Kosovar-Albanian political and social structures, despite women having engaged in much activism (Haug, 2013).

Studies show that education in many Yugoslav successor states continues to convey war-time divisions and traditional value systems (Korac, 2016). In Albania, for example, a gender analysis of elementary school textbooks found evidence that the education system reinforces gender stereotypes, representing boys as leaders and high achievers and girls as caretakers (Dauti and Gjermeni, 2013). The education system also fails to critically address gender regimes and roles that lead to war violence, which hinders transformations from violent to peaceful societies (Korac, 2016). This is a more general problem in the Western Balkans. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, war-time narratives are given prominence, which excludes recognition of pre-war and post-war periods and the gendered structures of inequality that enabled gendered violence and discrimination to emerge and endure (Porobić Isaković and Mlinarević 2016; cited in O'Reilly, 2016).

At the national level and across the entire Western Balkans, attention needs to be given to challenging structural constraints – socioeconomic, gender-based violence, patriarchal values, dominant structures of power, social relations that exploit and marginalise women, and constructions of masculinity for young men (Björkdahl & Selimovic, 2015; Simić, 2015; Berna, 2013). It is also necessary to challenge the 'status subordination' affecting many women survivors of violence by positively revaluing their identities (Fraser, cited in O'Reilly, 2016). Without such transformations, legislation and gender mainstreaming can be implemented without actually leading to any constructive transformation of gender power relations (Björkdahl & Selimovic, 2015). A reformed education system is one area that could be used as a long-term strategy for gender equality (Duhaček, 2015).

Socioeconomic life

Although women in socialist Yugoslavia lived in a patriarchal society, they also participated in a socialist culture which granted them certain important human rights and freedoms. They were granted rights of divorce, abortion, contraception, employment and education (Simić, 2015). Prior to the dissolution of the country, over 40 per cent of women worked full time, fostering economic independence (ibid). This status, economic and social condition of women has changed in the post-war period (Berna, 2014).

The Yugoslav successor states have been undergoing difficult transitions not only from conflict, but also from communism to a market economy and from single party rule to pluralist democracy (Simić, 2015; Hughson, 2012). Their economies remain weak, with poor conditions of everyday life (Hughson, 2012). Economic insecurity and the legacy of war have created an even deeper gap between genders (Korac, 2016; Hughson, 2012). The transition and restructuring of employment in the new market economies in the Western Balkans have contributed to large and increasing gender gaps in labour market participation rates (Nikoloski and Adnett, 2015). The gap is particularly large in Kosovo, Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (ibid). This gender unemployment gap is driven in part by an education gap and by discrimination and traditional stereotypes of female workers (ibid). The gender pay gap is a key problem in the Western Balkans, estimated to range from 20 percent to 39 percent (Berna, 2014).

For further discussion on women and work, please see K4D helpdesk report, no. 58 on Gender norms in the Western Balkans.

Peace agreements

There was hope among women's organisations in the Western Balkans that the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security in 2000 would have a positive impact on the region (Irvine, 2013). Women's organisations seemed well positioned to use UNSCR 1325 as a tool to leverage increased participation and to improve the status of women in their post-conflict countries (ibid). The resolution also provided a key policy framework for integrating women and gender issues into transitional justice processes and mechanisms (O'Reilly, 2016).

Women were generally absent from peace processes in the Western Balkans, reflecting worldwide trends. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, women were actively engaged in addressing the consequences of the violent conflict (e.g. providing assistance to victims of sexual violence and internally displaced persons, working on cross-community dialogue). After the war, women continued organising in some instances to demand the truth about missing family members or to demand inclusion of women in formal politics (Mlinarević, Isaković and Rees, 2015). There was, however, no mechanism at the time to carry those experiences across into the formal peace negotiations (UNSCR 1325 had yet to be implemented) (ibid). Not a single woman participated in the peace process that preceded the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995 (ibid). This marked absence of women has arguably had concrete consequences for society as a whole and for women as a group and their ability to be recognised as agents of change in later processes (ibid). Subsequent discussions on constitutional reforms have also excluded women. In addition, gender-related issues, such as domestic violence, health care, education and employment, have not been factored into a carefully planned transition in post-war BiH. They were not considered by decision-makers to be 'serious' and of ethno-national interest and were thus to be dealt with separately from Dayton and the transition (ibid). Domestic violence, for example, considered to be an entirely ethno-politically neutral issue, has been left to be dealt with by women's organisations (ibid).

There were also no women in Kosovo's negotiation team in the status talks between Serbia and Kosovo, despite the reliance by women on UNSCR 1325, which had then been adopted (Haug, 2013). Men considered the status talks to be their exclusive domain and they took precedence over 'women's concerns' (ibid). It is argued that international actors fostered this form of discrimination, discussing larger political issues only with Kosovar Albanian male

representatives. Some justified this by pointing to Kosovo being a traditional and patriarchal society (ibid).

Political life

The inclusion of women in political processes has been a challenging struggle (Haug, 2013). Women's access to political leadership and participation in decision-making is often constrained by expected gender roles (Simić, 2015). At the same time, women's participation in decision-making is considered to be critical in challenging patriarchal structures and promoting inclusive decision-making (Dauti and Gjermeni, 2013). The presence of women in decision-making is poor throughout the region.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, there has been a conservative backlash for women in politics in the aftermath of the war, with the number of women in decision-making roles declining well below the levels of Socialist Yugoslavia (Björkdahl & Selimovic, 2015). Legislation to promote gender equality and the introduction of a quota system (election candidate lists must contain at least 30 per cent women) and gender mainstreaming have contributed to a general increase in the participation of women in political life (Björkdahl & Selimovic, 2015; Simić, 2015). However, the overall share of women in decision-making and in leadership positions remains low (ibid). In addition, women in politics are often slandered, considered as 'window-dressing' or pawns for a specific political agenda (ibid).

In addition to suffering from a conservative backlash, it has also been argued that the dominance of ethnic considerations in the Dayton Accord and political life in post-war BiH has relegated women and gender issues a lower priority (Hughson, 2014). This is reportedly also an influence in Macedonia, where attention to Albanian and Macedonian ethnic groups in political representation in the Ohrid Framework Agreement is said to have marginalised the other groups within the individual ethnic group – in particular, women (Risteka, 2011). They have been placed in inequitable positions compared to men of the same ethnic group (ibid).

In Kosovo, the quota system (legislative gender quota reserving 30 per cent of the seats on the lists of electoral and assembly candidates) has contributed to increasing the participation of women in decision-making roles (Haug, 2013). Kosovo and Macedonia are tied in having the greatest number of women deputies in Parliament and Municipality assemblies in the Western Balkans (ibid). In Serbia, the proportion of women as deputies in the Serbian parliament (33.6 per cent in 2012) compares favourably with most democratic political communities in Europe (Duhaček, 2015). Women remain underrepresented, however, in executive and legislative power at central and regional levels (Babović, 2016).

In Albania, women remain in the minority in political participation (Dauti and Gjermeni, 2013). There are also regional challenges. Women's representation in local decision-making is very low in poor, rural, and mountainous local governments, which supports the argument that structural barriers affect women's involvement in local politics (ibid). Thus, improving the participation of women in local decision-making also requires diminishing the gap that exists between regions (ibid).

For further discussion on women's political participation in the Western Balkans, please see K4D helpdesk report, no. 58 on Gender norms in the Western Balkans.

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