

# Kosovo Women's Political Activism for Greater Representation: Bridging the Gap between Gender and Peace Processes

by Jeta Krasniqi



At the United Nations (UN) 4th Global Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, Hillary Clinton, who was then the United States' First Lady and would later become Secretary of State and one of the first women to run for the office of US President, passionately declared that "human rights are women's rights.... And women's rights are human rights, once and for all".<sup>1</sup> This powerful message, delivered in the background of an emerging post-Cold War world

order, held a strong promise for change, envisaging a new global agenda for gender equality and women's human rights.

The Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action, signed by 189 countries and endorsed by numerous NGOs from different parts of the world, established an important link between women, conflict resolution and peace. The Declaration was based on the principle that: "Local, national, regional and global peace is attainable and is inextricably linked with the advancement of women, who are a fundamental force for leadership,

<sup>1</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, *Remarks to the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women*, Beijing, 5 September 1995, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/exhibits/show/womens-rights/wr-hr-keynote>.

*Jeta Krasniqi is a consultant serving as an Expert Advisor to the Kosovo Government on the EU-facilitated negotiation process between Kosovo and Serbia. Mrs. Krasniqi is also the deputy chair of the Governmental Commission for the Verification and Recognition of Conflict-related sexual violence victims during the War. She is a member of the MWMN. This article is part of a research project produced within the framework of Kosovo Research and Analysis Fellowship, supported by the Kosovo Foundation for Open Society. This commentary is published with the support of the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network (MWMN), an initiative launched by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and implemented by the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and Women in International Security (WIIS) Italy. The views expressed in this commentary are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Network or the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.*



conflict resolution and the promotion of lasting peace at all levels".<sup>2</sup>

This conviction would especially resonate with delegates coming from countries in conflict or on the verge of it, and those who had long played an active role in fighting for peace and human rights. Amongst them were also ten women delegates representing Kosovo's "parallel institutions"/ government-in-exile and civil society, who directly contributed to the Beijing Platform for Action.

### *Kosovo women's political activism on the rise*

In 1989, Kosovo's autonomy was revoked on the initiative of Slobodan Milošević, known as the "Butcher of the Balkans" and Serbian Communist leader who would later become the first European head of state prosecuted for genocide and war crimes in Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia. In the aftermath of that decision, women activists and politicians in Kosovo played an active role in raising awareness against the systematic oppression of the Kosovo Albanians and the atrocities committed against the civilian population by Milošević's state apparatus. Their activism would stretch beyond the borders of Kosovo: they would engage in public actions and lobbying campaigns seeking peaceful resolution of all conflicts in the former Yugoslav region and beyond.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations, *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*, Beijing, 4-15 September 1995, point 18, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/node/1901>.

Their mobilisation also aimed to fight the discrimination and Serbian cultural racism against Albanian women.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the Serbian media would portray Albanian women of Kosovo "as washing machines or breeders of 'mice'", while their babies were labelled as "biological bombs".<sup>4</sup>

Women in Kosovo took to the streets "at times as mothers, sisters, daughters, many other times as oppressed Albanian citizens and activists of women's human rights".<sup>5</sup> According to Nita Luci and Linda Gusia, "being visible was not just about claiming public space but also demonstrated to the international community a new emancipated nation where women take to the streets and be active citizens".<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Nicole Farnsworth, *History is Herstory Too. The History of Women in Civil Society in Kosovo, 1980-2004*, Pristina, Kosovar Gender Studies Centre, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Majlinda Behrami, José Carpintero Molina and Nicole Farnsworth, *A Seat at the Table. Women's Contributions to and Expectations from Peacebuilding Processes in Kosovo*, Pristina, Kosovo Women's Network, 2021, p. 24, <https://womensnetwork.org/?p=3349595>.

<sup>5</sup> Elife Krasniqi, "Same Goal, Different Paths, Different Class: Women's Feminist Political Engagements in Kosovo from the Mid-1970s until the Mid-1990s", in *Comparative Southeast European Studies*, Vol. 69, No. 2-3 (2021), p. 313-334 at p. 329, <https://doi.org/10.1515/soeu-2021-0014>.

<sup>6</sup> Nita Luci and Linda Gusia, "Our Men Will Not Have Amnesia: Civic Engagement, Emancipation, and Transformations of the Gendered Public in Kosovo", in Sabrina P. Ramet, Albert Simkus and Ola Listhaug (eds), *Civic and Uncivic Values in Kosovo. History, Politics, and Value Transformation*, Budapest/ New York, CEU Press, 2015, p. 199-220 at p. 206, DOI 10.1515/9789633860748-012.

In March 1998, when war was looming over Kosovo, around twelve thousand women with loaves of bread gathered in Pristina. They marched towards the villages in the Drenica regions where whole populations were being kept under siege by the Serb military forces. The Prekaz massacre had taken place a few days before, carried out by the so-called "Special Anti-Terrorism Unit of Serbia", laying bare the brutality and ruthlessness of the Yugoslav and Serbian forces towards Albanians. The marching women chanted "Bread for [the women and the families in] Drenica", aiming to convey a message to the international community about the atrocities committed against the civilian population in Kosovo by the Serb regime.<sup>7</sup> They were stopped by the Serb police, yet their resistance was only reinforced. As part of the International Women in Black movement, they would even protest in the streets of Belgrade against the Milošević regime.

The 1990s activism of women would have an immense impact on the fight for peace and human rights in Kosovo, paving the way for the next generation of women activists who would follow. They also fought the prejudices crafted by Serbian politicians against Albanian people in general and Albanian women more specifically.

### *The continuous fight for participation and representation*

As the case of Kosovo in the 1990s highlights, women's participation in

<sup>7</sup> Serbeze Haxhijaj, "Bread for Drenica: When Kosovo Women Marched to Break a Serbian Siege", in *Balkan Transitional Justice*, 15 March 2023, <https://balkaninsight.com/?p=1026541>.

conflict prevention and resolution can improve outcomes before, during and after conflict.<sup>8</sup> This is of course the responsibility of the parties involved in such processes, from the national institutions and domestic political actors to the international mediators who facilitate and/or mediate these processes. Indeed, since 2000, the Security Council has adopted 10 resolutions on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) which, amongst other things, call for women's participation in peace processes. Yet more often than not, women are excluded from the formal peace processes.

In the case of Kosovo, the fight of women for representation and participation has been a long one. There have been successes and setbacks which have showcased the complex interplay between national and international actors. As it was observed, "the explicit or implicit neglecting of the gender dimension found in international and national institutions towards gender mainstreaming and towards practical compromises with the local women's movement has proved to be a significant factor hindering the achievement of major inputs in certain fields, such as in the peacebuilding dimension and the status negotiation".<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) website: *Women's Participation in Peace Processes*, <https://www.cfr.org/womens-participation-in-peace-processes>.

<sup>9</sup> Ana Vilellas Ariño and Gema Redondo de la Morena, "An Approach to the Kosovo Post-War Rehabilitation Process from a Gender Perspective", in *Quaderns de Construcció de Pau*, January 2008, p. 21, <https://escolapau.uab.cat/img/qcp/qcp02i.pdf>.

During the war, the bodies of tens of thousands of women became battlefields, targets of conflict-related sexual violence used as a weapon of war and instruments of systematic ethnic cleansing by Serbia.<sup>10</sup> Yet this topic was not tabled at any of the negotiation processes.

Despite such gendered violence and women's mobilisation for peace during the conflict, in the talks on the Interim Agreement for Peace and Self-Government in Kosovo, the Rambouillet Accords (1999), there were no women signatories, no women mediators, no women witnesses, and women made up only 3 per cent of negotiating teams.<sup>11</sup> Against this backdrop, women activists mobilised to find venues for making their voices heard and ensure their presence.<sup>12</sup> They would send letters to Martti Ahtisaari, the UN Special Envoy for the Kosovo Future Status Process, and even organise a number of meetings with him articulating their demands and expectations.<sup>13</sup>

Later in 2011, a new process of negotiations between Kosovo and

Serbia started under EU facilitation. This time, the technical process of the negotiations was led by a woman in her capacity as the Deputy Prime Minister, Edita Tahiri, and women were part of the negotiation teams, even though in much lower numbers than their male counterparts.<sup>14</sup> The question lingered: Was this enough?

### Lessons learned

Based on the dismal data concerning women's participation in these peace processes, the question is: How can we ensure greater participation of women in formal negotiation processes? How can we ensure that these processes integrate a gender perspective? By looking at the experience of peace processes between Kosovo and Serbia, a few important lessons can be identified.

First, there is a number of actors who determine the extent to which gender participation and incorporation of a gender perspective in peace processes are ensured. These include, at the national level, in the countries or parties participating in the talks, the negotiating teams, government institutions, opposition parties, civil society and media, among others; and at the international level, the parties directly involved in the negotiation process, such as the facilitator or

<sup>10</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Kosovo: Rape as a Weapon of "Ethnic Cleansing"*, March 2000, <https://www.hrw.org/node/257328>.

<sup>11</sup> Pablo Castillo Diaz et al., *Women's Participation in Peace Negotiations: Connections between Presence and Influence*, UN Women, October 2012, p. 4, <https://www.un.org/shestandsforpeace/node/1379>.

<sup>12</sup> Nicole Farnsworth, *History is Herstory Too*, cit.

<sup>13</sup> For more details please see: Kosovo Women's Network, *Letter to Mr. Marti Ahtisaari, UN Special Envoy for the Future Status Process for Kosovo*, 8 March 2006, <https://womensnetwork.org/?p=3334512>; and Regional Women's Lobby in South East Europe (RWLSEE), *Chronology of RWLSEE Key Meetings & Activities*, 27 September 2020, <https://rwlsee.org/?p=2696>.

<sup>14</sup> Based on an analysis covering the period 2011–2017, the Kosovo negotiations team had 90 members out of which only 14 were women. For more details see: Balkans Policy Research Group (BPRG), "The Brussels Dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia. Achievements and Challenges", in *BPRG Policy Reports*, September 2020, p. 104, [https://dialogue-info.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/BPRG\\_DIALOGU-I-BRUKSELIT\\_ENG.pdf](https://dialogue-info.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/BPRG_DIALOGU-I-BRUKSELIT_ENG.pdf).



mediator and others international actors supporting the process. Their influence is largely determined by their power of decision-making and/or their power to determine the course and the outcome of the negotiating process.

Second, despite the forward-looking international framework that calls for greater gender representation, the design and goals of the very peace process (what the negotiations aim to achieve) determine to a large degree the set of topics and issues that become part of the conversation. In the case of the EU-facilitated Kosovo–Serbia dialogue, for example, for any topic to become a part of the negotiation, preliminary consent of both parties was – and still is – required. The Kosovo institutions in different stages of this process attempted to integrate topics which dealt with issues related to war reparation or dealing with the past – topics which were articulated by women's groups as priorities;<sup>15</sup> yet consent by the other side (namely, Serbia) and at times even from the mediator were not there.

Third, the importance of women's participation and integration of a gender perspective is underestimated, if not disregarded. Relatedly, there is a lack of understanding that having more women in the process does not per se mean that the process has a gender lens.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> For more please check: Majlinda Behrami, José Carpintero Molina and Nicole Farnsworth, *A Seat at the Table*, cit.

<sup>16</sup> "Women should be included at all levels in negotiations to formulate and implement peace agreements, and [...] the provisions of peace agreement should be designed with

To be sure, other factors – such as the period and the circumstances or conditions under which the peace negotiation takes place – also play an important role.

### *The way forward*

The emergence of women in Kosovo politics has been a long, painful process. Yet the legacy and the path paved by Kosovo's women through their political activism during the war and the following post-war years, whether as part of political parties or civil society, has never faded.

Newer and older generation of women activists alike continue to leave their mark and make their voices heard, and initiatives take place highlighting the importance of the Women, Peace and Security agenda and women's role in peace processes, including those of the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network – of which Kosovo women are part.

It is well known that peace processes are imperfect; yet, as research has widely shown,<sup>17</sup> there is a significant correlation

the particular status and situation of women in mind and, where appropriate, include special provisions for women." Christine Bell, "Women and Peace Processes, Negotiations, and Agreements: Operational Opportunities and Challenges", in *NOREF Policy Briefs*, March 2013, p. 1, <https://noref.no/insights/publications/themes/gender-and-inclusivity/Women-and-peace-processes-negotiations-and-agreements-operational-opportunities-and-challenges>.

<sup>17</sup> Theodora-Ismene Gizelis, "Gender Empowerment and United Nations Peacebuilding", in *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (July 2009), p. 505-523, DOI 10.1177/0022343309334576. For more information please see: CFR website: *Women's*



between the positive and sustainable outcome of peace negotiations and women's participation in them.<sup>18</sup> For all deficiencies and constraints of peace processes, the experience of Kosovo is a solid testimony to how important ensuring inclusiveness through greater participation of women and the gender agenda is.

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*Participation in Peace Processes*, <https://www.cfr.org/womens-participation-in-peace-processes>.

<sup>18</sup> Thania Paffenholz et al., *Making Women Count - Not Just Counting Women: Assessing Women's Inclusion and Influence on Peace Negotiations*, Geneva, Inclusive Peace and Transition Initiative and UN Women, April 2016, <https://www.inclusivepeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/report-making-women-count-en.pdf>.

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Via dei Montecatini, 17

I-00186 Rome, Italy

Tel. +39 066976831

[iai@iai.it](mailto:iai@iai.it)

[www.iai.it](http://www.iai.it)

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