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Rebuilding Bosnia and Herzegovina One Woman at a Time - Women for Women International Reaches Out to Those Affected Conflict

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- Drea Knufken - WNN - Women News Network



-Albanian family flees post war 1996 - photo Svetlana Bahchevanova-

“Put simply, how women fare in a society is an indicator of the direction that society is taking.” - Zainab Salbi.

What happens after a war is over? The glamour and glory, if there was ever any, is gone. The men are dead or out of the country, families are torn apart, and the economy is in shambles. And, more often than not, women are the ones left to clean up the mess.

The Bosnian War, a conflict among many, was evangelized by a U2 song and a documentary campaign. Despite the war's pop-culture appeal, the war was all but forgotten by the media shortly after it ended in 1995. More than 100,000 people had been killed; around 55,000 of them were civilians, and a large amount of that number was comprised of women and children.

After the end of the Bosnian War in 1993, the women of Bosnia and Herzegovina had years of mass rape, sexual slavery and forced impregnation polluting their recent memories. Rape estimates, which incredibly are still subject to local political bias, remain unreliable to this day, but could be in the tens of thousands (including unreported rapes). Many of the region's men either left or were killed during the war leaving a subsequent shattered economy—in 1997. Unemployment was at 40% and the country's GDP was half of what it had been in 1990. All this was left in their daughters', wives' and mothers' hands. According to Women for Women International, “sixty percent of all houses in Bosnia and Herzegovina, half of the schools and a third of the hospitals were damaged or destroyed...70 percent of farm equipment and 60 percent of livestock were destroyed.” Humanitarian aid had moved on, but it was too early for long-term redevelopment.

Bosnia and Herzegovina's women were left with nothing after the conflict. Luckily, Women for Women International specializes in just that kind of situation. In 1993, Women for Women fieldworkers in Bosnia and Herzegovina started educating, training and assisting local women in rebuilding their societies. This involved signing women up for a year-long program which provides emotional and financial support, access to capital, job skills training and leadership education. Over time, almost 10,000 women signed up for the program in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Success stories followed soon after. Zejneba Sarajlic, a 42-year-old mother who witnessed entire families disappear from her Bosniak village of Bratunac, was given a new opportunity to support her own family with microcredit in 1997. She used her credit to buy a cow, the first step towards starting the successful dairy business she now runs. Igbala Gabela, who lived in eight different places during the three-year war, now supports her entire family with her sewing business, grown on microcredit, and teaches other women special sewing techniques.

These women are just a couple of examples of the success Women for Women has had with this program. Today, Bosnia and Herzegovina's situation is far from perfect—human trafficking, unemployment and corruption remain major problems. At the same time, the 87-member staff, all-Bosnian staff at the country's Women for Women office has helped 23,242 women rebuild their lives, their towns and their country. They've distributed more than \$3.6 million in loans in 55 different communities, supporting businesses ranging from knitting to carpentry. They also serve women through their human trafficking shelter in Sarajevo.

Now zoom out those statistics to include every other country that Women for Women has helped. These are the conflict-ravaged countries like Rwanda, Iraq and Colombia. Worldwide, the organization has served more than 93,000 women in various conflict-torn countries and distributed over \$25 million in loans. It's not unusual for women in the program to step into leadership positions within their villages, rebuilding their civil societies by playing an active role in village development, starting businesses and mentoring other women.

How did this nonprofit manage to achieve such phenomenal success? As their name indicates, through other women. Donors agree to sponsor a woman for \$27 USD/month, creating a sisterhood that includes communication through letters. This simple donation helps women in need (the sisters on the receiving end) access to micro-capital for small business development and skills with literacy education. The sisters on the donating end get the perk of making a new friend, learning directly about the dynamics of conflict recovery and staying in touch with their sister as she progresses through her program.

According to founder Zainab Salbi:

“In 2006, Women for Women International facilitated the exchange of more than 70,000 letters between sponsors and their sisters. The stories the women share help to educate sponsors about the dynamics of conflict, injustice, and social exclusion, while inspiring many to become active in their own communities on behalf of the women and the challenges they face.”

Zainab Salbi says that she still gets goose bumps when she thinks of a speech she heard at a Women for Women International graduation in Bosnia and Herzegovina:

“Sherezada, a 15-year-old girl...spoke in front of her mother and her mother’s newfound friends. ‘I listened to my mother and her friends talking with excitement about letters from their sponsor sisters and I admired these wonderful women who learned about my town recently and who support emotionally and materially women they have never seen. Who knows, maybe one day God will give them opportunity to meet and build an invisible bridge from the USA to Vares, a bridge made of life and friendship. Thanks to these women...women in my town started to wake up.’”

Women for Women International’s phenomenal success was recently publicly recognized as they received the Conrad N. Hilton Humanitarian Prize. Fans of the women in these programs can become sponsors and purchase gift items, such as knitwear made in Bosnia and Herzegovina, directly from the Women for Woman website at: WomenForWomen.org

- Drea Knufken, of WNN - Women News Network, is a journalist writing for human rights, gender equality and women’s advocacy. Bulgarian photographer, Svetlana Bahchevanova, has exhibited her work in Europe and the United States in galleries and museums and has been published by numerous major newspapers, agencies and magazines such as International Herald Tribune, l’Humanitie, Soar, Pravda, Biography, Reuters and Associated Press. -

Sources for this article include the International Criminal Tribunal, UN studies, YouTube, Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children, IMF studies and Women for Women International’s website and newsletters.

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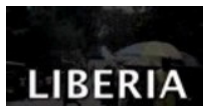
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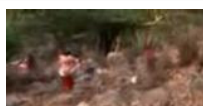
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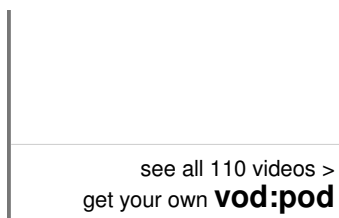
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