

Women in Bosnia Finding Strength

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Emsuda Mujagic, a keynote speaker at the FOR/USA's national conference last year, is a woman with a vision. She is a Bosnian who survived the Trnopolje concentration camp and who is now determined to make a difference in the lives of women. Earlier this year, she invited me to Sanski Most and Palanka, both in northwest Bosnia, to facilitate a series of healing and empowerment seminars.

During several weeks we worked with almost 40 women. All were Muslim women refugees from other areas of Bosnia. The despair is palpable; because the war developed between close neighbors, friends and fellow citizens in multiethnic Bosnia, betrayal and shattered trust add to the suffering. The seminars focused on healing and community building, with the hope that participants will continue to meet with each other and reach out to isolated women in their towns. We shared exercises in self-esteem, and developed listening and conflict management skills for home and community.

Some survivors, like Emsuda, have found a mission that moves them from depression to mobilization on behalf of others. Senka devotes her life to the recovery of traumatized children; Dr. Azra, a pediatrician, treats an endless stream of children and families in the medical clinic; Gima organizes services for the elderly. These women are the lucky ones. Other women remain deeply depressed, some suicidal, many isolated as refugees in cities where they lack connections or social support.

The challenges of recovery are both personal and structural. On the

personal level, women have endured unimaginable victimization, cruelty, loss and dislocation. Due to the collapse of the civil society, medical and psychological resources for healing are strained and often unavailable. Because the women are refugees, trusted neighbors and family members are not present for healing support. People in the community, equally traumatized and overburdened, are not accessible to share the psychological weight of grief and loss. Additionally, the women find it overwhelming to repeat their stories and especially delicate to reveal the rape and sexual abuse of the war years. Nightmares are common. Many participants in the workshops cope by distracting themselves by day, but are haunted each night by the repressed memories. For recovery, professional or peer support would ease the burden; the development of new friends would help to soothe the loneliness and the broken trust.

On the structural level, many women face strain and hardship by caring for families alone in an economy with an unemployment rate of 90%. There are goods in the market, but no money for purchases. They live in unfamiliar surroundings with scant belongings. There is little transport and as yet no restored telecommunication. The government cannot provide civil services, decent housing, income-generation projects or job training. NGOs are present largely in the biggest cities, but much less so in Sanski Most and the surrounding villages. UNHCR is overburdened. And the fear of renewed violence casts a long shadow over the reconstruction process.

At the seminar's conclusion, the women of Sanski Most developed a vision of establishing a women's center for resources, referral and counseling. Emsuda and a small committee will refine the vision and draft a proposal, with the hope of attracting local and international aid to fund the Center. They are determined to recover their lives and not let violence have the last word. We in the international community must make sure they are safe from

war. We must once more say, with equal determination, “never again” to genocide. This is our gift to the healing process for all the people of Bosnia.