

## **Impact of EU peace policy on regions in crisis and conflict**

### **Reflections by Osnat Lubrani**

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The organizers of this panel asked me to reflect on the impact of EU policy decisions to act or to abstain from action in conflict situations, and the potential consequences of action versus inaction, generally, and specifically on women. The response of course varies depending on the specifics of the conflict situation we are talking about. Let me offer several points:

As a UN representative I find it important to underline that any policy decision to intervene or not intervene should be guided by obligations to protect and uphold human rights standards and other international legal and political commitments. In context of our UNIFEM's work to foster women's empowerment and gender equality, we emphasize government obligations under the CEDAW convention in particular, as well as other human rights conventions and instruments, including UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security.

The sad reality is that implementation of international law is increasingly hindered by the slowness of decision-making by the international community to take action through the UN Security Council. Slowness of action or inaction can translate into unacceptable cost in terms of loss of life, violence, including rape of women and girls used as a weapon of war, as we have seen in too many "modern" conflicts. In reflecting on intervention versus non-intervention, we must consider not only the need to protect the rights of women, but also the rights of women to influence and shape those international decision-making bodies towards making them function better. And that requires work at different levels (grassroots as well as high political level), using different strategies (advocacy, capacity building)

Reflecting on the Balkans wars, much has been written and analyzed on the failure of the international community to intervene at the right time or in the appropriate way to prevent a tragedy of such tremendous scale. This case in history is also a European

tragedy, and EU member states have done and should continue to reflect on errors committed and draw lessons from opportunities missed to stem the violence and save more lives. The massacre at Srebrenica is the saddest example of how inaction is also action—and that there is no such thing as neutrality in an extreme time of war.

We live in times when the human rights norms and standards are at greater risk of being compromised. In the face of organized political elements that instigate acts of violence targeting innocent civilians including countless women whose lives, livelihoods and often basic personal freedoms, we also see fierce counter-reaction that too often justifies cutting corners when it comes to upholding human rights. Never has it been more crucial to assert human rights principles and refuse to allow these to be watered down or compromised under any argument.

The costs of intervention versus non-intervention in Europe can be debated, but we also need to look at the costs of inclusion versus exclusion of those with a stake in peace from being shapers of the solutions, especially women. There is no doubt that if more women had been involved in hammering out peace accords such as Dayton, Oslo, etc. these accords would have worked better. I can give specific examples of what I mean by this later on in the discussion, but if you permit me, rather than delve into the past, I would now like to draw the discussion into the present and the future.

The European Union is preparing to assume greater responsibilities for supporting post-conflict countries of the former Yugoslavia to advance on a path of economic development and peace that can eventually pave their entry into the EU. In Kosovo, UNMIK will be replaced by European Union presence. The EU continues to play a critical role also in Bosnia-Herzegovina as well as in Serbia. What can the EU do to serve gender justice and ensure processes ahead take into account the perspectives and priorities of women?

- 1) The policy directives of the European Union on gender equality are strong and clear. However, they do not sufficiently cover all important areas of importance to the gender equality agenda (the emphasis is on labour market). As always, the challenge is in the implementation. The strong focus on implementing economic

and structural reforms can impact women unfairly, and are also detrimental to peace - .not only are women particularly affected by high unemployment, but also unemployment particularly of youth can lead to instability and extremism which may fuel increased violence against women. Strong attention on such reforms must be matched by an equally strong focus on building up the infrastructure that can deliver basic services that are of special importance to women.

- 2) Adopting directives on gender equality is important, but not sufficient. Strategic investment is needed in ensuring their effective implementation, with a focus on raising awareness, educating, building capacities of institutions with a view to both, technical and human resources, as well as ensuring appropriate funds.
- 3) The mechanisms of the EU often give precedence to support for governments. In Serbia, for instance, women activists have pointed out the misjudgement by the EU in neglecting focus on civil society, who feels threatened and marginalized. At the same time, civil society including women's organizations play an essential role, particularly in periods of crises and conflicts; when governments are still weak and there are problems of corruption, transparency and bringing war criminals to justice. These organizations are key in both, providing services and holding governments accountable.
- 4) EU must not only talk the talk, it must walk the walk by ensuring that women are included in peace making and peace building processes; by supporting initiatives aimed at increasing women's political participation and advancement of gender equality and women's rights – which is also a critical key for achieving sustainable peace.
- 5) I spoke earlier about how “inaction” is also an “action”. In South East Europe, EU accession and peace building processes and also dependent on embedding a culture of respect for human rights and women's rights. The EU must not remain passive in the face of government inaction to advance women's rights. Such “inaction” will be tantamount to regressive action against women, where gender equality will not keep up with all the reforms that are taking place as part of EU accession.