The Role of Women’s Activists and Organizations in Post-Conflict Kosovo

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The Role of Women’s Activists and Organizations in Post-Conflict Kosovo

submitted to
Professor Lisa Koch

by
Olivia Carusi

for
Senior Thesis
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This thesis examines the role of civic organizations to advance women’s rights in Kosovo after the conflict in the late 1990s. Following the Kosovo-Serbia War, Western state building missions came into Kosovo to support Kosovo’s independence and help guide them on a path toward developed statehood. However, those missions brought with them patriarchal leaders who marginalized women’s voices and neglected to enshrine women’s rights. As a result, local actors and organizations stepped up to improve the lives of Kosovar women. Kosovo Women’s Network (KWN), and their member organizations, is one of the most successful civic actors in Kosovo, working locally and nationally to help women. I begin by describing a brief history of Kosovo, the conflict in the 1990s, and the pivotal role of women during the independence movement. Next, I discuss the shortcomings of Western state building missions to advance women’s rights, and the response of women’s activists. Finally, I finish by spotlighting the pivotal work of KWN and their member organizations. After years of marginalization, civic organizations and women’s activists in Kosovo deserve to be highlighted for the work they have done to improve the lives of women across Kosovo.
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To my friends, you know who you are. You’ve seen it all. Thank you for standing with me, always.
Introduction

Amid growing international conflict between Russia and Ukraine, Israel and Palestine, and China and Taiwan, the needs of countries viewed as less strategic have been overlooked by Western powers. Kosovo, a small country in the Balkan region, is an example of a state that has maintained a strong relationship with Europe and the United States, but is often ignored in mainstream media. Since the late 1990s, Kosovo has been recovering from a war with neighboring Serbia over its independence. With support from United States and the EU, Kosovo has declared independence and built several institutions pivotal to a functioning democracy. That being said, Kosovars have been frustrated by the stagnant process. They are still quarreling with Serbia, and feeling forgotten by Western actors.

Feeling forgotten, and being forgotten by the West is a pervasive issue for Kosovo, particularly Kosovar women. Following the conflict with Serbia, where sexual violence was used as a weapon of war against Kosovar women, Western peace building missions neglected to include women’s voices. Up until that point, Kosovar women had played a large role in the fight for Kosovo’s independence, organizing protests and referendums on behalf of the independence movement. Peace building missions sent from the United Nations and the EU brought with them patriarchal leadership, and shut out key women’s activists from the creation of their own country.

Sidelined by Western actors, Kosovar women’s activists did what they do best, creating a network of women’s organizations to advocate for their rights. These local organizations and activists have had a direct impact on the advancement of women’s rights in Kosovo. They stepped up when peace building missions fell short, ensuring that women’s needs are heard throughout the country. The work of organizations such as the Kosovo Women’s Network
(KWN), Action for Mothers and Children (AMC), Ura Sociale, and the Kosovo Women’s Fund (KWF), deserves to be spotlighted and recognized as a successful case in women’s activism.

In the late 1990s, tensions between Kosovo and neighboring Serbia boiled over into full scale conflict. Since the 1980s, Kosovo had been seeking full independence from the Serbian controlled Republic of Yugoslavia.\(^1\) Despite major ethnic differences between ethnically Albanian Kosovo and Serbia, Serbia was resistant to give up Kosovo due historical and national ties to the land.\(^2\) Serbian President Slobodan Milošević was resistant to the idea of Kosovar autonomy, passing several reforms to restrict the rights of Kosovar-Albanians. He shut down schools, prohibited the purchase of land, and expelled Kosovar Albanians from their jobs.\(^3\)

The war began in February 1998, and lasted until June 1999. During the two year conflict, an estimated 13,500 people were killed or went missing, and nearly 90 percent of Kosovar Albanians were displaced from the region.\(^4\) The end of the conflict is credited to a large NATO bombing campaign that struck Serbian forces in the beginning of June.\(^5\) At the time, the international community supported Kosovo’s independence movement, and came to their aid during the war.\(^6\) Following the end of the conflict, the United Nations, EU, and United States sent missions into Kosovo to assist with the state building process.\(^7\)

Kosovo officially declared independence in 2008, but has faced many setbacks with being fully recognized and maintaining peace with Serbia. Kosovo is often referred to as a

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\(^2\) Nikitin.

\(^3\) Nikitin.


\(^6\) PBS.

\(^7\) PBS.
“frozen conflict,” struggling to advance on the international stage and gain traction with EU accession. There is still a large Western presence in contemporary Kosovo with economic and military aid from the EU and the United States, but Kosovo has often felt overlooked by Western politicians. Kosovo’s government has been critical of the EU for not being firm enough on Serbia, who remains resistant and combative to Kosovo’s independence. Kosovo-born popstar, Dua Lipa, has used her platform to draw attention to the small country, but still Kosovo’s current situation gains little attention from Western media.

Kosovo has developed a strong civic community surrounding the rebuilding Kosovar society and institutions. Local organizations and activists work closely with Kosovar politicians to formulate policies relevant to their citizens. This has been particularly successful in the advancement of women’s rights in Kosovo, which received little attention from Western peace building missions in the early stages of the country’s development. Kosovar women played a pivotal role as organizers during the independence movement, and expected to be involved in state building discussions surrounding the future of Kosovo. However, Western missions like European Union Rule of Law Mission (EULEX) and the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), shut out women’s voices and neglected to ensure women’s security in post-conflict Kosovo.

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10 Majlinda Behrami, José Carpintero Molina, and Nicole Farnsworth, “A Seat at the Table” (Pristina, Kosovo: Kosovo Women’s Network, April 23, 2021), https://womensnetwork.org/publications/a-seat-at-the-table/.
In response to the marginalization of women’s rights by EULEX and UNMIK, activists created their own civic organizations to help Kosovar women.¹¹ Most notably, the Kosovo Women’s Network (KWN), works across Kosovo to provide support for women. KWN is a conglomeration of 146 member organizations that provide education, healthcare, and therapy for women. Member organizations also work closely with survivors of sexual violence for legal counsel.¹² KWN has developed a strong relationship with Kosovar government to draft policy relevant to women’s issues. The work of KWN deserves to be recognized as an exemplary case in the impact local organizations can have on the advancement of women’s rights in Kosovo.¹³

When Western missions failed to protect the security of women, local activists stepped up to ensure that women’s voices would not go unheard in Kosovo.

The next three chapters will walk through the role of women’s activism before, during, and after the conflict in Kosovo. I start by laying out the history of the tension between Kosovo and Serbia, and the role women played in the independence movement. Next, I discuss relationship between UNMIK, EULEX, and women’s activists. Women were excluded from post conflict discussions, and as a result, were forced to find alternative ways to make an impact on women’s rights. Finally, the third chapter will spotlight key member organizations from the KWN, and the work they are doing in contemporary Kosovo.

Chapter One: The Kosovo War and the Role of Women’s Activists During the Conflict

A Brief History of Kosovo-Serbia Tensions

Kosovo’s history is a story of constant occupation by an outside force. For more than four centuries, the Ottoman Empire ruled Kosovo and all of the Balkan region.\textsuperscript{14} The Kosovar Independence movement dates back to Ottoman rule. In 1389, Kosovar and Serbian soldiers fought against Ottoman forces in the “Battle of Kosovo.”\textsuperscript{15} Despite being defeated, this battle became a key part of both Serbian and Kosovar national mythology. Kosovars remembered the battle as a historical milestone in their independence movement.\textsuperscript{16} Serbs, have the same nationalistic connection to the battle, but they feel that Kosovo was a key part in the fight, and therefore a cherished piece of Serbia.\textsuperscript{17} The Battle of Kosovo represents how Serbians and Kosovars have two different readings of their history. Serbia is unwilling to let go of Kosovo because they believe that Kosovo is part of Serbian national mythology. Kosovo views their history as a constant fight for independence, first against the Ottomans, then against the Serbians.

Over the next 500 years, ethnic Albanians from neighboring land migrated to the Kosovo.\textsuperscript{18} This drastically changed the ethnic makeup of the region – what was once Serbian dominated land was now heavily populated by Albanians, later becoming known as Kosovar-Albanians. The Kingdom of Serbia reclaimed Kosovo in the Balkan wars, from 1912-1913. Shortly after, the monarchy dissolved and established Yugoslavia, which officially became the


\textsuperscript{15} Nikitin, “Kosovo’s Road to Independence.”

\textsuperscript{16} Nikitin.

\textsuperscript{17} Nikitin.

“Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia” \(^{19}\) after World War II. In the 1950s, Albanians became the ethnic majority in Kosovo, and Serbs continued to migrate north.\(^ {20}\) The new ethnic makeup in Kosovo compelled “ethnic Albanians to proclaim [Kosovo] theirs,”\(^ {21}\) no longer wanting to be controlled by the Serbian minority.

In response to growing calls for Kosovo’s independence, Yugoslavia’s Communist President, Marshal Tito, declared Kosovo an autonomous province in 1974.\(^ {22}\) Tito’s government revised Yugoslavia’s Constitution to include six autonomous regions within the Republic, Kosovo being one of them.\(^ {23}\) The new constitution also gave ethnic Albanians in Kosovo control “over local affairs”\(^ {24}\) and gave the Albanian language “equal footing”\(^ {25}\) with Serbian. Naturally, this frustrated some Serbs who were resentful toward ethnic Albanians and nostalgic of the power Serbs once wielded in the region.

*The Rise of Slobodan Milosevic*

Following Tito’s death in Serbia in 1980, Slobodan Milosevic rose in power, capitalizing off of Serbian frustration toward Albanians. In the late 1980s, the entire Balkan region was struggling economically. During this period of depression, there was a resurgence of Serbian nationalism that carried Milosevic into the presidency. Milosevic was committed to strengthening Serbia, and believed the way to do that was to eliminate any threats to Serbian nationalism. In 1987, an Albanian army recruit “went berserk and shot four other recruits (two

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\(^{20}\) Yoo, “Kosovo: The Jerusalem of Serbia.”

\(^{21}\) Yoo.

\(^{22}\) Yoo.


\(^{24}\) Yoo, “Kosovo: The Jerusalem of Serbia.”

\(^{25}\) Yoo.
Bosniak, one Croat, and one Serb) and then committed suicide.” The incident was viewed as a direct attack on Yugoslavia and eight Albanians were accused of planning the attack. In November 1988, Milosevic held Serbian nationalist rallies in Belgrade, using the incident as an excuse to clamp down on the rights of Albanians. For the next two years, Milosevic’s government passed a series of policies “aimed at changing the ethnic composition of Kosovo” from majority Albanian to Serbian.

Serbia repressed Albanian people through human rights abuses and discriminatory governmental policies. Milosevic encouraged Serbs and Montenegrins to return to Kosovo, restricting the sale of property to Albanians. Albanians were cut out of work in Kosovo, and told to find work elsewhere. According to the independent Kosovar Albanian Association of Trade Unions, 115,000 people out of 170,000 people lost their jobs. In July 1990, the Kosovo Assembly was dissolved. This was a direct breach of the Kosovo 1974 Constitution that required the Assembly to consent to its own dissolution. Albanian educational systems were shut down and Albanian language was no longer taught in school. Albanian curriculum was replaced with a new Serbian curriculum. Additionally, Albanian media outlets, including newspapers, radio, and television, were eliminated. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the Council for Defense of Human Rights in Kosovo, recorded several incidents of detaining, arresting, and torturing Albanians on false claims of “verbal crimes.”

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27 Persson, Goldstone, and Tham.
28 Persson, Goldstone, and Tham.
29 Persson, Goldstone, and Tham.
30 Persson, Goldstone, and Tham.
31 Persson, Goldstone, and Tham.
32 Persson, Goldstone, and Tham.
In response to Milosevic’s regime, Kosovo’s government moved underground and began acting in secret. On October 19, 1991, Kosovo parliament held an underground referendum which voted overwhelmingly for independence. With this vote came the creation of the “parallel state,” a term used to describe the hidden Kosovar Albanian government and educational system under Milosevic’s administration. The parallel state was controlled by the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), Kosovo’s oldest political party created in 1989. LDK was founded by Ibrahim Rugova, who was elected as president of Kosovo shortly following the creation of the underground government in 1992. Rugova advocated for Kosovo’s full independence from Serbia, and emphasized the importance of non-violence to achieve this. He worked closely with the West to gain support for Kosovo’s independence movement.

By 1996, several Kosovars were frustrated by Rugova’s nonviolent approach and the worsening oppression of Albanians under Milosevic’s regime. The Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) was created as an ethnically Albanian separatist militia to fight against the Serbs. KLA operated separate from the official Kosovar government and the non-violent independence movement. They acted irresponsibly toward Serbian forces, inciting violence against Serbian police and intentionally picking fights. The attacks KLA organized against Serb authorities only worsened the hostilities and tensions between Kosovo and Serbia.

From Hostilities to Full-Scale Conflict

From 1998-1999, the violence against Kosovars worsened as Serbia continued to build their military presence within Kosovo. While Rugova was meeting with U.S. President Clinton

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33 PBS, “A Kosovo Chronology.”
34 PBS.
35 PBS.
36 PBS.
to gain American support, Milosevic was meeting with Russian President Yeltsin to do the same.

In September 1998, the United Nations Security Council issued Resolution 1199, demanding a cease-fire and Serb withdrawal of troops from Kosovo.\(^{37}\) NATO also threatened Serbia with attacks if they did not comply with the ceasefire. Four months later, on January 15, 1999, Serbian forces attacked the small village of Racak and killed 45 Albanian civilians.\(^{38}\) The Racak Massacre represented a turning point in the war, escalating violence between the two countries, and gaining attention from the international community about Kosovo’s fight for independence.

Serbia failed to comply with peace talks in March 1999, and continued to attack Kosovar villages, killing an estimated 10,000 Kosovar Albanian civilians by the end of the conflict.\(^{39}\)

Given the continual bloodshed, NATO intervened on March 24, 1999, carrying out a series of aerial bombing campaigns in Serbia.\(^{40}\) The NATO strikes lasted for three months until Serbian forces finally retreated from Kosovo. NATO disarmed KLA, and instead created the Kosovo Force (KFOR) – a NATO run peacekeeping force to ensure security in Kosovo post-conflict.\(^{41}\)

KFOR is still present in current day Kosovo.

*They’re “Just Women:” Women’s Activism Before and After the Conflict*

The conflict in Kosovo was closely connected to women’s safety and security. Kosovar women were dehumanized through several Yugoslav media campaigns, referred to as “birthing machines” and “uneducated slaves.”\(^{42}\) Sexual violence was regularly used as a weapon of war against Kosovar women. There were an estimated 20,000 rapes of Kosovar women by Serbian

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\(^{37}\) PBS.

\(^{38}\) PBS.

\(^{39}\) Persson, Goldstone, and Tham, *The Kosovo Report*.

\(^{40}\) PBS, “A Kosovo Chronology.”

\(^{41}\) PBS.

\(^{42}\) Mujika Chao, “Women’s Activism in the Civil Resistance Movement in Kosovo (1989–1997).”
soldiers from 1998-1999. However, due to the stigmatization of sexual violence, only around 1,870 have come forward to the government commission. Given the misogynistic rhetoric of Milosevic’s regime, Albanian women were pulled out of school and expected to lead more domestic lives. This was a huge setback for gender equality in Kosovo, which had improved in the last decade with more women in leadership and educational systems.

Albanian women’s activists found ways to circumvent Milosevic’s restrictive policies, exploiting their domestic role to fly under the radar and secretly organize political rallies and referendums. Albanian men couldn’t travel as freely around Kosovo due to risk of arrest or harassment from Serbian police checkpoints. Women, on the other hand, were perceived as less threatening, and were permitted to travel more freely throughout the region. Women’s activists took advantage of the fact that they were “just women,” and could avoid harassment from Serbian police who “tended to perceive them as harmless.” Kosovar women were responsible for the huge voter turnout of the first underground referendum to establish the parallel system. They traveled throughout the country with fliers, discreetly distributing them to advocate on behalf of the independence movement.

During this time, women’s activists also established several women’s organizations to increase female participation in politics and the independence movement. In 1989, women’s activists created the Independent Women’s Association (IWA), “with the aim of defending

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44 Haxhiaj.
45 Behrami, Molina, and Farnsworth, “A Seat at the Table.”
46 Behrami, Molina, and Farnsworth.
women’s rights”\textsuperscript{47} in Kosovo. IWA gathered 1,300 signatures in support of its creation within the first two weeks. The IWA quickly transformed into a “mass social organization,”\textsuperscript{48} expanding its influence beyond the urban activists circles that created it. IWA led protests of 5,000 women in the second biggest city in Kosovo, Prizen, emphasizing the importance of women’s voices in politics.\textsuperscript{49} Kosovo’s LDK party was created in the same year, and had many of the same goals as IWA to protect women’s rights.\textsuperscript{50} Eventually, IWA joined LDK in an effort to intertwine women’s rights with current Kosovar politics. This caused hundreds of women who registered with IWA to join LDK, wielding more voting power in the political fight for national freedom and human rights.

IWA joining LDK gave Kosovar women the opportunity to participate in the public political sphere. After LDK obtained IWA, LDK officials created the Women’s Forum (WF) to streamline women’s issues within the party. WF addressed issues identified by women in the party, “such as women’s rights, women’s and children’s health, and so forth.”\textsuperscript{51} By 1995, WF had grown in popularity, with branches, assemblies, and different committees throughout villages in Kosovo. However, WF was always viewed as a secondary organization in the eyes of LDK officials. The work of WF was kept separate from the primary work of LDK, and policy related to women’s issues was constantly sidelined.\textsuperscript{52} Leaders from WF were excluded from LDK leadership positions, causing women to feel marginalized by the political space. Because of

\textsuperscript{47} Mujika Chao, “Women’s Activism in the Civil Resistance Movement in Kosovo (1989–1997).”
\textsuperscript{48} Mujika Chao.
\textsuperscript{49} Behrami, Molina, and Farnsworth, “A Seat at the Table.”
\textsuperscript{50} Mujika Chao, “Women’s Activism in the Civil Resistance Movement in Kosovo (1989–1997).”
\textsuperscript{51} Mujika Chao.
\textsuperscript{52} Mujika Chao.
this, many women left WF and sought the creation of independent organizations to advance women’s rights.

Early women’s organizations responded simply to the most immediate needs of women across Kosovo. Between 1989 and 1998 women’s groups grew rapidly across the country, attempting to satisfy “the immediate needs, mainly in the spheres of health, education and humanitarian aid.”

Given the ongoing conflict, and the clamp down on women’s rights by Milosevic’s regime, there was a sense of urgency to address the most emergent women’s issues. These issues included education, healthcare, reporting violence against women, inter-ethnic cooperation, and gaining international support for women in Kosovo.

Under Milosevic’s regime, women and girls were dismissed from schools and the Albanian educational systems were shut down across the country. One of the most pertinent issues to early women’s rights organizations was to improve the literacy rates of Kosovar women. Women in rural areas of Kosovo were hit particularly hard by Milosevic’s oppressive regime and the countrywide economic downturn. Not only were Albanian schools shut down, but many daughters were pulled out of school to take care of their family during the economic crisis. A quarter of girls between 16 and 19 only received four years of education, while 16 percent received no education at all.

By improving women’s literacy rates, Kosovar women could participate outside of domestic spaces, and get involved in the public and political sphere. Sisters Igballe and Safete

53 Mujika Chao.
54 Mujika Chao.
Rogova, two of Kosovo’s most notable women’s rights activists, created the first registered women’s organization in Kosovo focusing on education access. In 1989, the sisters founded the Albanian American Women’s Organization (AAWO), which started as a regional organization but quickly expanded throughout Kosovo.\(^5\)\(^6\) AAWO connected national and gender identity, concluding that nationalism would unite rural and urban women throughout Kosovo. They also emphasized the importance of national education rights, and ensured that access to education wouldn’t just be limited to urban areas.\(^5\)\(^7\) In 1993, AAWO held its first “Historic Night for Women,”\(^5\)\(^8\) a gathering of 350 women advocating the advancement of women’s education.

Another immediate issue for women in Kosovo during the conflict was the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war, and the lack of resources for survivors. In an effort to destigmatize sexual violence and provide support for survivors, activists opened the Center for the Protection of Women and Children (CPWC) in 1991. CPWC’s mission was to create “a safe and supportive environment for women and children affected by domestic violence.”\(^5\)\(^9\) In Kosovar society, sexual and domestic violence are often viewed as “private issues,”\(^6\)\(^0\) so many women were hesitant to report abuse during the conflict. CPWC encouraged women to speak up about cases of sexual or domestic violence, emphasizing the importance of reporting to improve the justice system and personal healing process. They often encouraged survivors to come forward by incentivizing them with financial tokens and free counseling.\(^6\)\(^1\) CPWC was a vanguard in the

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\(^5\) Mujika Chao, “Women’s Activism in the Civil Resistance Movement in Kosovo (1989–1997).”

\(^6\) Mujika Chao.


\(^5\) Mujika Chao, “Women’s Activism in the Civil Resistance Movement in Kosovo (1989–1997).”

\(^6\) Mujika Chao.


\(^5\) Mujika Chao, “Women’s Activism in the Civil Resistance Movement in Kosovo (1989–1997).”
documentation process, pressuring LDK party leaders to acknowledge sexual violence retribution as a key pillar of their party platform. CPWC is still an active organization in Kosovo, and has been adopted under the umbrella of the Kosovo Women’s Network.

Women’s rights organizations often promoted inter-ethnic cooperation between Serbian and Albanian women. Organizations overcame ethnic differences in the pursuit of improving women’s rights throughout Kosovo. In 1994, the Serbian based organization, Women in Black (WiB), traveled around Serbia spreading feminist rhetoric. WiB sought cooperation with Kosovar Albanian women, eventually developing a strong working relationship with CPWC. In their mission statement, WiB emphasizes their inclusion of “women of many ethnic and national backgrounds” to promote cooperation “across these (and other) differences in the interests of justice and peace.” WiB and CPWC placed peace and human rights above ethnic conflict. Inter-ethnic cooperation among women’s organizations is a common trend that can be seen today between Kosovar and Serbian organizations.

*The Importance of Women’s Organizations*

Kosovar women’s activists played a pivotal role during the conflict to advance women’s issues and assist the independence movement. Throughout the conflict, women organized protest groups and referendums on behalf of Kosovo’s autonomy and women’s freedom. Activists recognized the shortcomings of the political system when women’s rights were labeled a secondary issue for LDK party leaders. As a result, they circumvented the system by establishing

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62 Mujika Chao.
64 Mujika Chao, “Women’s Activism in the Civil Resistance Movement in Kosovo (1989–1997).”
65 Women in Black, “Vigils Around the World.”
several key civic organizations that, to this day, play a huge role in advancing women’s rights.

Women’s involvement in the independence movement set a certain expectation for activists that they would be looped into future peacekeeping discussions. However, when peacekeeping missions entered the country, they marginalized women’s voices. The next chapter will discuss how, once again, it became the responsibility of women’s groups to step-up when institutions failed them.
Chapter Two: Women’s Organizations & Western State Building Missions

What is the Kosovo Women’s Network?

Strengthening civil society has been a key goal in the advancement of Kosovo’s statehood. One of the most successful civic organizations, Kosovo Women’s Network (KWN), has consistently demonstrated the importance of local actors in initiating systemic change. KWN has faced many challenges since their inception in 1996. International missions in Kosovo have proved themselves to be patriarchal, shutting women out from peacekeeping discussions and leadership positions. Despite this, KWN can be examined as a case study in the success of local non-profit actors, and the progress they have made toward improving women’s rights in Kosovo.

KWN was created informally in 1996 as a network of organizations advocating on behalf of women and survivors of sexual and domestic violence.\textsuperscript{66} Following the Kosovar-Serbian conflict in the late 1990s, KWN expanded their work to the local, national, and international level. The network now includes 140 member organizations from across the various regions of Kosovo, including Serbian organizations in the northern municipalities.\textsuperscript{67}

KWN has four programs part of its strategic plan: “Improving gender equality through the rule of law, a life free from gender-based violence, women’s economic empowerment, and gender transformative education.”\textsuperscript{68} The four categories of KWN’s strategic plan guides its work from 2023-2026. KWN serves as a centralizing force for its member organizations, providing financial support to its member organizations through grants and philanthropic events. KWN staff also have expertise in Kosovar government, and assist member organizations with policy

\textsuperscript{66} Kosovo Women’s Network, “About Us.”
\textsuperscript{67} Kosovo Women’s Network.
\textsuperscript{68} Kosovo Women’s Network.
briefs and discussions between politicians and NGOs. Researchers from KWN write reports to summarize the work and initiatives of member organizations. These reports are presented to Kosovar government to highlight the work of civic actors, and document NGO’s needs from the government. KWN works closely with a team of lawyers to help draft relevant policy requested by their member organizations toward the advancement of women’s rights.69

KWN’s 140 member organizations represent a diverse range of women’s needs throughout Kosovo. Some member organizations have existed since before the creation of KWN, while others are much newer. Member organizations address women’s healthcare, both access to medical professionals, and knowledge of reproductive and general health.70 Other organizations work with survivors of sexual and domestic violence by providing therapy, legal counsel, and educational programs to raise awareness about the issue.71 Access to education and equal education among genders is another topic tackled by KWN’s organizations. They conduct projects to decrease traditional gender norms in classroom settings, and promote education on reproductive health and sexual assault awareness.72 Finally, KWN member organizations work closely with aging and disabled women to ensure access to medical professionals and an understanding of their condition.73

Immediately after the conflict, the United Nations passed Security Council Resolution 1244, that placed “Kosovo under transitional UN administration (UNMIK) and authorized
KFOR, a NATO-led peacekeeping force.”74 In 2008, the EU launched the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX), which worked closely with UNMIK and KFOR to support Kosovo’s path toward stability.75 Together, UNMIK, EULEX, and KFOR were responsible for ensuring security, and helping Kosovo become a successful developed nation. With this, came the expectation that UNMIK, EULEX, and KFOR would support the advancement of women’s rights. Women’s rights and gender equality are key factors of Western nations, and something prioritized in Western rhetoric and society. When the conflict ended, women’s activists expected to be directly involved in peacekeeping talks given their key role in the independence movement. However, leaders from UNMIK, EULEX, and KFOR pushed women to the margins, shutting them out of talks pertaining to the future of Kosovo.

*Women’s Advocacy & UNSCR 1325*

Decades of advocacy work by international women’s rights activists ultimately led to the adoption of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on October 20, 2000. Since the 1970s, activists had been pressuring the UN to adopt declarations on the protection of women and children during conflict.76 Throughout the 1980s, several international conferences were held, eventually leading to the creation of the “women’s international bill of rights.”77 By the new millennium, women’s rights activists were frustrated by multiple international conflicts – in

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77 Peace Women: Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom.
Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Cambodia, and Somalia – that harmed women and used sexual violence as a weapon of war.\(^78\)

This sparked the creation of UNSCR 1325, a resolution enshrining the protection of the rights of women before, during, and after conflict. UNSCR 1325 emphasized the “protection, empowerment, inclusion of women in post conflict zones, government and civic organizations.”\(^79\) It also called on states to “protect women and girls from gender based violence, particularly rape and other forms of sexual abuse, in situations of armed conflict.”\(^80\)

Women’s activists in Kosovo were particularly excited about the passage of UNSCR 1325, given the social, economic, and political effects of the conflict on Kosovar women. Just one year after the conflict, very little had been done by the government to improve women’s economic conditions, and provide justice for survivors of sexual violence. UNSCR 1325 was welcomed by women’s activists throughout Kosovo, hoping it would ignite substantial governmental change for women’s security.

However, UNSCR 1325 was a vaguely written document, causing confusion among the international community whether or not the resolution was mandatory. It uses words like “urges,” “encourages,” and “requests” throughout the resolution, and reads like a mere suggestion.\(^81\) Activists from KWN have expressed their dislike of the way the resolution is written, saying it “lacks teeth and enforceability.”\(^82\) Some activists have gone so far as to say that

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78 Peace Women: Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom.
82 Murati et al., “1325 Facts & Fables.”
the document is written in outwardly feminine language. UNMIK former Gender Advisor, Clare Hutchinson, highlights the feminine and docile nature of the document:

“The whole document encourages the Secretary-General to do *his* work…It’s a misogynist language coming out of the document that is supposed to do something different. The message is ‘We know that you are all women and you will all feel very comfortable sitting around a table holding hands, and we encourage it.’ The language is of a softer nature, so the interpretation is of a softer nature.”

Acting as the governmental body following the conflict, it was UNMIK’s responsibility to implement UNSCR 1325 until Kosovo officially declared independence. As previously stated, UNMIK was an extremely disorganized mission due to its size and scope. Under UNMIK’s leadership were other international actors like the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Kosovo Security Force (KFOR), EULEX, and NATO. All of these organizations were tasked with the implementation of UNSCR 1325, making for a messy and decentralized approach to improving women’s security.

When Kosovo declared its independence in 2008, the implementation of UNSCR 1325 became even murkier. UNMIK and EULEX were still present in Kosovo, but now the Kosovar government had the ability to pass parts of the resolution into law. Since Kosovo had not yet been recognized by two key members of the UN Security Council, Russia and China, it wasn’t formally held accountable for the adoption of UN documents. There was agreement among

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83 Murati et al.
84 Murati et al.
Kosovar politicians that they should uphold the principles of Resolution 1325, however the absence of a legal mandate meant there was little incentive to bring about concrete change.

Some progress has been made at the national level within Kosovo to enshrine gender related policies. From 2013-2015, Kosovo initiated a National Action Plan (NAP), acclaimed as an exemplary bill for women’s rights in the Balkan region. Objectives of the plan included the protection of women’s rights, recognition of sexual violence victims from the conflict, increased participation in women peacekeeping processes, gender diversity on security issues, and improved justice processes for survivors of sexual violence. An estimated 79 percent of NAP has been implemented, making it one of the most implemented plans in Kosovar government.

Post-Conflict Society & Women’s Security

All of the leading Western missions – NATO, EULEX, and UNMIK – involved in post-conflict peace keeping had low female representation among their team. Between 2011 and 2020, there were twelve NATO Secretary Generals, none of which were women. Of the 2011 NATO Permanent Representatives, there was one woman and 26 men. In 2020, that number improved marginally to seven women and 23 men. The 2011 EU Parliament had 35 percent women and 65 percent men, improving slightly in 2020 to 39.5 percent women and 60.5 percent men. Finally, the UNMIK administration responsible for governing Kosovo “did not include any women in the initial Joint Interim Administrative Council.”

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86 Agency on Gender Equality in the Office of the Prime Minister.
87 Murati et al.
88 Murati et al.
89 Murati et al.
90 Murati et al.
91 Behrami, Molina, and Farnsworth, “A Seat at the Table.”
In a report from KWN, executive director Igballe Rogova recalls the introduction of EU peace keeping missions, like EULEX and UNMIK, to Kosovo:

“From day one UNMIK didn’t want to communicate with women’s organizations. They didn’t want to communicate with women. Their structure was completely patriarchal.

‘Yes,’ they said, ‘we came to a patriarchal society, that’s why we are all men.’”

UNMIK’s characterization of Kosovo as a patriarchal society was “patently wrong.” Progress had been made toward gender equality in Yugoslavia, and women held several leadership positions in government, business, and health. As previously mentioned, under Milosevic’s regime, women were active leaders in resistance and independence movements. It was ignorant of the West to categorize Kosovo as patriarchal, and neglectful of them to ignore the deep history of the country. Western state building missions failed to adapt their program to the reality of the country they were trying to help.

Ironically, the United States and the EU have been vocal in criticizing Kosovo for their rates of sexual violence and lack of female representation in government. In the United States, the 2022 Country Report on Human Rights and Practices for Kosovo criticized the failures of the justice system to prosecute perpetrators of sexual violence. It also emphasized the lack of reporting from survivors of sexual assault due to cultural stigmatization of the topic. Adequate prosecution of perpetrators of sexual violence isn’t an issue unique to Kosovo. In fact, in the United States, the vast majority of sexual assault perpetrators will not go to jail. According to the

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92 Murati et al., “1325 Facts & Fables.”
93 Murati et al.
94 Murati et al.
Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, out of 1,000 sexual assaults, 975 perpetrators will walk free.\(^9^7\) The United States also struggles with the under-reporting of assault, only 310 out of 1,000 sexual assaults are reported to the police.\(^9^8\)

It's understandable that American government has been critical of Kosovo’s development: since 1999, they have invested $2 billion in Kosovo and are deeply invested in the promotion of democracy and stability in the country. That being said, it was the failures of Western peacekeeping missions that shut women out of key negotiations surrounding the future of Kosovar women. UNMIK, EULEX, and NATO stacked their leadership with men, and prioritized military security over women’s safety. In post-conflict situations, it is critical that peacebuilding processes prioritize gendered perspectives to ensure women’s safety. Often times, “military security and the reinstatement of political order and rule of law”\(^9^9\) are prioritized over social and economic policies for marginalized communities. When military security is not integrated with socioeconomic security, there is a “disproportionately negative impact on women’s rights in post-conflict societies.”\(^1^0^0\)

By marginalizing women’s voices in the peace keeping discussions, Western actors failed to implement “gender mainstreaming”\(^1^0^1\) processes that would promote women’s safety and prosperity post-conflict. Gender mainstreaming seeks to equalize men and women in social, political, and economic systems. It is important that when actors, like the UN, deploy a mission


\(^{98}\) Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN).


\(^{100}\) True.

\(^{101}\) True.
in a post-conflict zone they include gender perspectives into their state building processes. The absence of those voices “reinforces structural gender inequalities between men and women in employment, the informal economy, and participation in decision-making roles.”

In Kosovo, when women were excluded from post conflict leadership positions, women’s issues, like sexual violence, were de-prioritized. The dismissal of women’s activists worsens a vicious cycle of gender abuse, making women “more vulnerable in conflict and post-conflict situations” and reinforcing “a culture of impunity for violence against women.” This is exactly what happened in Kosovo; addressing sexual violence was seen as a secondary issue, and as a result, Kosovar women struggled to implement institutional policy changes necessary to obtain justice against their perpetrators.

*KWN’s Response to Mission Failures*

In response to the failures of Western peace keeping missions to enshrine women’s security, KWN activists and their member organizations rallied together to advocate on behalf of Kosovar women. In the 2000s, local women’s activists highlighted the importance of including women’s perspectives in the KFOR police missions. KFOR was charged with the protection of women, however, like other peacekeeping missions they neglected to include women’s voices in their work. In 2011, zero of the 16 KFOR commanders were women. On top of that, women’s activists weren’t even consulted to discuss the ways KFOR would benefit women’s security. Activists took to the media to criticize KFOR for their gender exclusionary approach to security, eventually securing a meeting with the head of KFOR. The head of KFOR was extremely

\[\text{Behrami, Molina, and Farnsworth, “A Seat at the Table.”} \]

\[\text{102 True.} \]
\[\text{103 True.} \]
\[\text{104 True.} \]
\[\text{105 True.} \]
receptive to the activists requests, creating a gender advisor on each mission and consulting women’s organizations before publishing reports. KWN has maintained their relationship with KFOR, organizing training for incoming troops on the women’s movement in Kosovo, gender inequality, and sexual violence.¹⁰⁶

Women’s groups pushed for equal participation in post-conflict decision making and political spheres, as mandated in UNSCR 1325. The resolution directly calls for “women’s equal participation in conflict and post-conflict decision-making processes, toward ensuring that women’s needs and priorities are addressed.”¹⁰⁷ To satisfy this clause, the Kosovo government was expected to implement a quota with a minimum percentage of women in Kosovo’s parliament. When the government failed to establish the quota, women’s activists sent letters to UNMIK leadership and UN headquarters in New York. In June 2000, KWN member organization, the “Union of Kosovar Women,”¹⁰⁸ organized a conference to unite Albanian women and advocate on behalf of the quota. The conference gained the attention of the head of UNMIK and other Kosovar politicians, resulting in the approval of a 30 percent quota for the first Kosovar local elections in 2000. The success of this quota can solely be attributed to the organization and cooperation of local women’s groups throughout Kosovo.

KWN successfully organized three campaigns to shed light on women’s issues during the 2004 Kosovar elections. In cooperation with OSCE, “Women Propose,” gathered women together to talk about key issues leading up to the elections.¹⁰⁹ KWN hosted several meetings

¹⁰⁶ Behrami, Molina, and Farnsworth.
¹⁰⁷ Behrami, Molina, and Farnsworth.
¹⁰⁸ Behrami, Molina, and Farnsworth.
¹⁰⁹ Behrami, Molina, and Farnsworth.
across the country, and collected ideas from a diverse set of Kosovar women. Their second campaign, “Political Parties Work for Women,” held a series of meet and greets to introduce female candidates to voters. In the third and final campaign, “Women Can Do It,” KWN member organizations (The Gender Training and Research Center, Circle of Serbian Sisters, and Kosovar Women’s Coalition) organized seminars to teach women about gender, politics, legislation, and debate. These seminars united women from inter-ethnic backgrounds to learn about the importance of understanding politics in their community. The events educated women on politics, making them feel adequately prepared to engage in the political scene. A study sponsored by the United States Agency for International Development found that countries that sponsor female empowerment events, in politics and in the workplace, are more likely to have a greater representation of women in politics. This can be seen in Kosovo, where in 2021, 36 percent of the national legislative seats were held by women. There is a direct impact between female empowerment and educational courses, and women participating in politics.

In 2014, KWN established the Kosovo Lobby for Gender Equality, uniting women’s organizations and women in politics across the different Kosovar municipalities. The Lobby is still present in Kosovar government today, and brings together female politicians on issues of

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111 Agnes Kalungu-Banda.
112 Behrami, Molina, and Farnsworth, “A Seat at the Table.”
114 Groh, Marple-Cantrell, and Mosner.
115 Groh, Marple-Cantrell, and Mosner.
116 Behrami, Molina, and Farnsworth, “A Seat at the Table.”
joint concern.\textsuperscript{117} The Lobby meets biannually to discuss these issues, and figure out the best way to address them through policy. In 2018, the Lobby expanded its efforts to collaborate with more members of Parliament. They created the Coalition for Equality, a larger lobbying body with more politicians and organizations involved.\textsuperscript{118} Both the Coalition and the Lobby have directly contributed to the empowerment of women to get involved with politics locally, nationally, and internationally.

In addition to their success in including women in politics, KWN’s member organization work across ethnic lines to advance women’s rights. Both EULEX and UNMIK emphasize the importance of normalizing relations between Serbia and Kosovo, but neither mission has sustained cooperation between the two countries. Women’s groups have been able to overlook these ethnic disputes, and work together for the betterment of women in Kosovo and Serbia. In the northern most Kosovar municipality, Mitrovica, KWN has nine member organizations who they peacefully cooperate with.\textsuperscript{119} Mitrovica is predominantly Serbian, with fights between KFOR officers and Serbian nationalists breaking out as recently as September 2023. Despite these hostilities, KWN and its Serbian member organizations overlook the ethnic disputes to prioritize the wellbeing of women in all of Kosovo.\textsuperscript{120} Inter-ethnic cooperation between women’s organizations emphasizes the importance of local actors to address issues most salient to its constituents. Civic organizations, like KWN, need to be credited with the work they have done to advance their goals while cooperating across tense ethnic lines.

\textsuperscript{117} Behrami, Molina, and Farnsworth.
\textsuperscript{118} Behrami, Molina, and Farnsworth.
\textsuperscript{119} Mujika Chao, “Women’s Activism in the Civil Resistance Movement in Kosovo (1989–1997).”
\textsuperscript{120} Mujika Chao.
Women’s rights advancement in Kosovo wouldn’t have been possible without the work of local organizations, like KWN. KWN has successfully united its 140 member organizations to work succinctly to support survivors of sexual assault, involve women in peacekeeping discussions, and represent women’s rights through Kosovo’s government. KWN was forced to step up due to the shortcomings of Western state building missions, who neglected women’s role in Kosovo’s independence movement. KWN’s success as an organization was in direct response to the failures of the EULEX, UNMIK, and NATO to enshrine women’s security in Kosovo.
Chapter Three: KWN Member Organization Spotlights

Highlighting the Work of KWN

As covered in the last chapter, KWN is a conglomerate of 140 women’s rights organizations throughout Kosovo. KWN does its own work to advance the rights of Kosovar women, but its member organizations have specific goals and outcomes. The following chapter spotlights three organizations under KWN: Action for Mothers and Children (AMC), Ura Sociale, and the Kosovo Women’s Fund (KWF). AMC is one of KWN’s largest member organization, and dedicates itself to the improvement of women’s healthcare in Kosovo. Ura Sociale focuses on the Kosovar education system, and the dismantling of gender stereotypes in the classroom. KWF is a subsect of KWN that provides grants to underfunded member organizations. The organizations benefited through KWF cover a variety of women’s issues, including healthcare for elderly and rural women, health education, and support for survivors of sexual violence.

It’s worth recognizing the accomplishments local actors have made in protecting women’s rights and women’s voices in Kosovo. Throughout Kosovo’s state building process, women’s issues were marginalized by larger Western actors, so civic organizations stepped up to advance the rights of Kosovar women. Now, Kosovo’s political scene is deeply affected by civic organizations’ initiatives to address women’s issues.

Action for Mothers and Children

Action for Mothers and Children was founded in 2009 by Kosovar and American medical professionals. Former Dean of Dartmouth Medical School, Dr. James Strickler, had a special

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121 AMC Health, “About Us.”
interest in establishing healthcare access for women and children living in post-conflict zones.\textsuperscript{122} From 1992-2004, Dr. Strickler visited Kosovo on several missions as a board member of the International Rescue Committee.\textsuperscript{123} While working at Dartmouth Medical School, he facilitated a relationship between Dartmouth and doctors in Kosovo, eventually establishing AMC.

AMC was created with the simple goal to “save the lives of mothers and their children in Kosovo.”\textsuperscript{124} AMC’s mission has four pillars: advocating for better healthcare for women and children, conducting research studies on women and children’s health, implementing programs to improve health outcomes, and collaborating with the Kosovo Ministry of Health to achieve its goals.\textsuperscript{125} In 2000, Kosovo had one of the highest perinatal mortality rates (stillbirths) in Europe, at 29.1 percent.\textsuperscript{126} Eleven years later, and after the implementation of many of AMC’s health initiatives, the perinatal mortality rate dropped to 18.7 percent.\textsuperscript{127} Reducing maternal and perinatal mortality rates is closely connected to the overall wellbeing of women’s and children’s healthcare in a country. It is important to ensure that all women have the right to a safe birth, and that their children have access to medical professionals as they grow up. AMC has made strides in reducing the mortality rates of infants, children, and mothers by donating standard medical equipment to hospitals, providing mothers with at-home nurse visits, and organizing educational programs on maternal and children’s health.\textsuperscript{128}

\textsuperscript{122} AMC Health. \\
\textsuperscript{124} AMC Health, “About Us.” \\
\textsuperscript{125} AMC Health, “Our Staff.” \\
\textsuperscript{127} Azemi et al. \\
\textsuperscript{128} AMC Health, “About Us.”
The organization receives governmental funding from the USAID reproductive health programs, along with several private donors who are passionate about the cause. There is a large Kosovar-Albanian diaspora around the world, so many doctors from the diaspora have returned to AMC to provide service. Another key part of AMC’s work is to increase donations and philanthropic awareness outside of Kosovo to members of the Kosovar-Albanian diaspora. AMC hosts fundraisers, most notably their “Count Me In” event, raising 3 million euros in donation of necessary pre and post birth medical equipment. It also raised money for AMC cervical cancer screening program, which has benefited an estimated 14,000 women with preventative medical examinations.

One of AMC’s most successful initiatives is their Home Visits program sponsored by the Ministry of Health and UNICEF. Home Visits provides at-home healthcare and mental well-being services to women across the different Kosovo municipalities. Home Visits seeks to strengthen the relationship between mothers and nurses. Nurses help families to “identify newborn problems,” and supports practices of breastfeeding and vaccinations to for overall child well-being. AMC’s Home Visits initiative has reached over 129,000 children ages zero to

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129 AMC Health.
130 AMC Health.
131 AMC Health.
132 AMC Health.
134 AMC Health.
135 AMC Health.
136 AMC Health.
three, and 25,000 pregnant women since its inception. In 2023, 19,404 home visits were conducted to assist women and children across Kosovo.

AMC has created 18 centers across Kosovo to provide women with health resources. The goal of the centers is to “educate women from family planning to the early pregnancy through delivery and the early post-partum period.” The centers provide women with educational videos and handouts about pre and postnatal care, baby nutrition, and immunization. Women also have direct access to midwives, nurses, and gynecologists in a comfortable and safe setting. Since January 2014, more than 10,000 women and their partners have benefited from the support of AMC’s women’s centers.

Group Care is an internationally funded project that AMC has incorporated into their work in Kosovo. The main objective of the project is to “implement group care of pregnant women during the first 1000 days” of pregnancy. In March 2022, the Lipjan and Prizren municipalities held the first Group Care sessions in Kosovo. The group is organized by midwives and nurses, who facilitate conversations between pregnant women and new mothers. Pregnant women share stories from their pregnancy experience. The idea of Group Care is for women to learn from one another about pregnancy, while also having access to trained midwives and

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138 Molliqaj.
140 AMC Health.
141 AMC Health.
142 AMC Health.
nurses who can provide guidance. In doing so, Group Care actively contributes to healthier pregnancies by educating women throughout Kosovo.

AMC is representative of the national and international significance of civic organizations. AMC Health has successfully tapped into the needs of Kosovar women, and with the help of KWN as its conglomerate, can work in tandem with other Kosovar women’s healthcare organizations to achieve its goals. AMC has also garnered support from members of the Albanian diaspora and philanthropists internationally. Civic organizations, like AMC and KWN, fill in the gaps where Kosovar government and Western state building missions have fallen short. When peace building missions prioritize military security over socioeconomic security, women’s needs are ignored and women are subject to harsher economic conditions. Because AMC is a local actor, they can truly tap into the needs of women across Kosovo, and appoint representatives to work with the different levels of government to achieve these needs.

**Ura Sociale**

KWN member organization, Ura Sociale, focuses on changing traditional gender norms in the Kosovar education system. According to their mission, Ura Sociale assists “in advancing the position of youth in society.” They work directly with teachers to ensure classrooms are inclusive spaces for students of different gender identities, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

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144 AMC Health.
147 Kosovo Women’s Network.
In 2023, Ura Sociale conducted a six part event series titled the “Promotion of Quality Education and the Transformation of Traditional Gender Norms.”\textsuperscript{148} Ura Sociale’s researchers presented reports from two elementary schools to teachers, school principals, and relevant individuals from the local Directorate of Education.\textsuperscript{149} Ura Sociale sought to highlight how the Kosovar education system pushes traditional gender norms, and fails to adequately educate its students on gender-based violence. The reports included “deficiencies in both teaching materials and the activities conducted in the classroom to address or promote gender equality, stereotypes, and gender-based violence in schools.”\textsuperscript{150}

After delivering the reports, Ura Sociale members facilitated advocacy meetings and educational sessions to address the various discrepancies. They discussed teaching methods that dismantle rigid gender stereotypes, and promote inclusion across genders.\textsuperscript{151} The meetings gave teachers and principals an opportunity to work together and discuss schoolwide strategies that could be implemented.\textsuperscript{152} Biology teacher, Zehra Kovaci, speaks to the importance of the Ura Sociale led meetings:

“I believe that in every conceivable scenario, additional training is beneficial for everyone in acquiring information. In vocational schools, the field of biology often lacks sexual education and concepts related to gender equality.”\textsuperscript{153}

\textsuperscript{149} Kosovo Women’s Network.
\textsuperscript{150} Kosovo Women’s Network.
\textsuperscript{151} Kosovo Women’s Network.
\textsuperscript{152} Kosovo Women’s Network.
\textsuperscript{153} Kosovo Women’s Network.
In total, the activities led by Ura Sociale engaged with approximately 300 students across the two schools. In most cases, teachers were well-equipped with knowledge of gender equality, gender-based violence, family planning, and reproductive health. Ura Sociale believes that their additional trainings will fill the gap where teachers lacked information.

Following up on the work of this project, in March 2024, Ura Sociale cooperated with the Directorate of Education in the Vushtrri Municipality to write a Memorandum of Cooperation between the organization and the school district. The memorandum highlights the partnership of Ura Sociale with the Directorate of Education, and encourages “mutual support and commitment to improve educational practices.” Ura Sociale concentrates their findings into policy briefs distributed to relevant Kosovar politicians.

Kosovo Women’s Fund (KWF)

KWF is yet another example of the work KWN does to improve the rights of women across Kosovo. KWF was established in 2012, and provides small grants to member organizations that lack other sources of additional funding. KWF is intended to benefit “diverse women, including women with limited physical abilities, from rural areas, or various ethnicities, youth, and pensioners.” KWN estimates that 21,028 women and girls of diverse backgrounds have been benefited by the fund. Since its establishment, the fund has distributed

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154 Kosovo Women’s Network.
155 Kosovo Women’s Network, “‘Ura Sociale’s’ Initiative Aims to Strengthen Education and Transform Gender Norms in Vushtrri.”
156 Kosovo Women’s Network.
157 Kosovo Women’s Network.
159 Kosovo Women’s Fund.
160 Kosovo Women’s Fund.
1,011,387 euros in grant money to 107 recipient organizations. KWN member organizations demonstrate a high demand for the fund and want to see it continued for the foreseeable future. KWF grant recipients address a variety of issues pertaining to women, including preventative health screenings, reproductive healthcare, women’s health education courses, and support for survivors of sexual violence.

In 2022, KWF sponsored 850 retired women to create Vita-Jeta, an association raising awareness about osteoporosis in aging Kosovar populations. Osteoporosis is not well-known among elderly women in Kosovo, and can often be hard to detect if unaware of the symptoms. While not reversible, if osteoporosis is caught in its early stages, it can be managed with medication to reduce its painful symptoms.

Vita-Jeta launched a robust informational campaign about the disease in Kosovo’s capital city, Pristina. They hosted lectures about osteoporosis and provided free medical exams to check for the disease. Vita-Jeta tested 243 retired women for osteoporosis, and found that one-third of those women were suffering from the disease. Vita-Jeta member and former nurse, Remzije Pireva, was unaware she had osteoporosis until her exam: “It was only through Vita-Jeta that I took the initiative to do the test for diagnosing it.” Pireva is now on medication to treat the disease, and is “feeling much better.”

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161 Kosovo Women’s Fund.
162 Kosovo Women’s Fund.
164 Kosovo Women’s Fund.
165 Kosovo Women’s Fund.
166 Kosovo Women’s Fund.
167 Kosovo Women’s Fund.
Vita-Jeta representatives convinced local pharmacies to provide free medication for retirees living in poor economic conditions.\textsuperscript{168} The organization works closely with its members to ensure their medications and doctor-prescribed therapies are being done correctly. After its first two months, Vita-Jeta had 500 women requesting osteoporosis screenings.\textsuperscript{169} The organization plans to apply for KWF again, seeking to expand their work to different parts of Kosovo.

The women’s association Ato received KWF funding to initiate a women’s health education campaign in rural parts of Kosovo. Kosovo’s rural populations typically lack knowledge about healthcare, specifically reproductive health.\textsuperscript{170} Ato targeted women in the Vushtrri Municipality, a small region in the northern part of Kosovo. They organized several lectures about “reproductive health, protection from unwanted pregnancy, child growth, and domestic violence, including what to do in violent home situations.”\textsuperscript{171} The lectures were conducted by nurses, giving women access to medical professionals for advice. Hazbije Dibrani, a nurse who hosted several lectures, described the environment as a safe space for women to “speak freely” and “ask questions”\textsuperscript{172} about various topics. Ato recorded 94 women from three different villages across the Vushtrri Municipality attended their lectures.\textsuperscript{173} The initiative has been regarded as a great success, and will be continued in the following years.

\textsuperscript{168} Kosovo Women’s Fund.
\textsuperscript{169} Kosovo Women’s Fund.
\textsuperscript{171} Kosovo Women’s Fund.
\textsuperscript{172} Kosovo Women’s Fund.
\textsuperscript{173} Kosovo Women’s Fund.
Dragash is a small municipality in the mountainous southern region of Kosovo. Women living in Dragash have limited access to healthcare, and there is no reliable public transportation system to take women to the closest city, Prizen.\textsuperscript{174} There are also no female doctors in Dragash, and many women in rural Kosovo are not comfortable with seeing a male physician.\textsuperscript{175} Concerned for women’s health in the area, the Women’s Initiative Association used grants from KWF to “raise awareness about the importance of routine check-ups, particularly toward early diagnosis of cancer.”\textsuperscript{176}

The Women’s Initiative Association brought in several female doctors for women in Dragash to consult with. They had the opportunity to ask questions and learn about the importance of detecting cancer early.\textsuperscript{177} Qesbana Pajaziti attended a meeting in the Lubishte village and spoke to the importance of the initiative for women in Dragash: “It was much needed in our village…we are even able to perform self-exams to identify symptoms ourselves.”\textsuperscript{178} The knowledge obtained from these educational sessions has helped women independently detect potential signs of cancer.

The Women’s Initiative Association also helped 182 women in isolated villages receive free health exams from female doctors.\textsuperscript{179} The association estimated that 2,500 women gained knowledge through their lectures and radio campaigns launched through the region.\textsuperscript{180} There was such a high demand for healthcare services that the Women’s Initiative Association had to

\textsuperscript{175} Kosovo Women’s Fund.
\textsuperscript{176} Kosovo Women’s Fund.
\textsuperscript{177} Kosovo Women’s Fund.
\textsuperscript{178} Kosovo Women’s Fund.
\textsuperscript{179} Kosovo Women’s Fund.
\textsuperscript{180} Kosovo Women’s Fund.
prioritize women based on needs. They hope in the future to receive more funding and expanding their resources to all women who seek healthcare services.\textsuperscript{181}

As discussed in past chapters, thousands of women were victims of sexual violence during the Kosovo-Serbia war in 1999, yet little has been done to raise awareness for victims. Activists have been frustrated by the lack of attention survivors of sexual violence have received from Kosovo’s political leaders. Kosovo’s society has failed to support survivors of sexual violence, and as a consequence many women live with “untreated illness, including trauma, phobia, inhibited sexual desire, and eating disorders.”\textsuperscript{182} The issue of sexual and domestic violence is often considered a taboo topic in Kosovar society, so many women are hesitant to speak up about it.

The Center for Protection of Women and Children set out to identify and support survivors of sexual assault in the central Kosovar region of Drenas.\textsuperscript{183} In their first months, CPWC found 37 survivors ages 25-50 scattered among 13 villages.\textsuperscript{184} CPWC facilitated conversations with survivors to dismantle the negative stereotypes surrounding the topic. By providing individual and family counseling, they opened up discussions between survivors and their families to initiate the healing process.\textsuperscript{185}

CPWC worked closely with survivors to form a list of eight demands they presented to the President of Kosovo, Atifete Jahjaga, to demand institutional justice for victims of sexual and domestic violence.

\textsuperscript{181} Kosovo Women’s Fund.
\textsuperscript{183} Kosovo Women’s Fund.
\textsuperscript{184} Kosovo Women’s Fund.
\textsuperscript{185} Kosovo Women’s Fund.
domestic violence. The demands were well received by the president, and she reaffirmed her personal and institutional commitment to improved survivor support. A woman survivor who worked closely with CPWC describes the impact the project has had on her and other survivors: “This project has had a very positive impact and has broken the silence that covered this issues for many years. We feel much safer.”

The Role of KWN Member Organizations in State Building

While the work of AMC, Ura Sociale, KWN, and KWF is not always in direct response to helping women post conflict, these organizations have stepped up to combat the marginalization of women’s rights by peacebuilding missions. These organizations are directly engaged in Kosovo’s post-conflict state building process by shaping the role civic society has in the country. In post-conflict Kosovo, “gender mainstreaming” practices were undermined and bogged down by the bureaucracy of Western state building missions. UNMIK and EULEX viewed women’s issues as secondary, and therefore reinforced “structural gender inequalities between men and women” in Kosovar society. Women’s activists recognized these shortcomings, and decided to combat them through the development of strong civic organizations focused on the advancement of women’s rights.

There are great benefits to involving local organizations into a country’s state building process post-conflict. When NGOs are brought into the fold, solutions are directed toward the needs of local citizens, often proving to be “more effective and more sustainable.”

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186 Kosovo Women’s Fund.
187 Kosovo Women’s Fund.
188 True, “Women, Peace and Security in Post-Conflict and Peacebuilding Contexts.”
189 True.
NGOs work better than large scale international organizations, with a “deeper knowledge of the cultural and political setting”\textsuperscript{191} of their community.

Local actors are in touch with the needs of Kosovar women, and have ensured access to those needs when peace building missions neglected to do so. Organizations have direct communication with the needs of underrepresented rural and elderly populations, providing them access to healthcare and health education. Activists are also plugged into the Kosovo education system, working from an early age to dissolve gender stereotyping among Kosovar students. Some NGOs do work more directly with the effects of the conflict on Kosovar women, providing support and legal counsel for survivors of sexual violence. With these organizations on the ground, directly communicating with women to understand their needs, the advancement of women’s rights in Kosovo can be attributed to the success of its local actors.

\textsuperscript{191} Llamazares and Reynolds Levy.
Conclusion

After years of marginalization, women’s activists in Kosovo deserve to be highlighted for the work they have done. Like many other women in conflict, Kosovar women were the unjust victims of sexual violence as a weapon of war. Following the conflict, Western state building missions failed to ensure the advancement of women’s rights despite their goals to do so. To combat this, women’s activists stepped up to provide support for women where it was lacking. They established organizations to improve access to healthcare, provide equal education opportunities, and offer legal counsel and therapy for survivors of sexual violence. Kosovo Women’s Network, and it’s impressive member organizations, have footholds all across the country to ensure no women is left behind in her pursuit of equal rights.

To the Western countries who were involved in Kosovo’s post-conflict development: a “one-size-fits-all” approach to state building does not work. Countries have nuance, they have their own culture, that has existed long before the introduction of state building missions. These nuances need to be reflected in the policies and practices of development missions. It was ignorant of the West to assume they could come into Kosovo and ignore women’s voices, when it was those same women’s voices who were so pivotal to the underground independence movement throughout the 1990s. It was neglectful to simply deem Kosovo as a “patriarchy,” and ignore female organizers, stacking UNMIK, EULEX, and NATO leadership with men. When women’s rights are sidelined during state building processes, it perpetuates a system of societal abuse against women that can be impossible to break. Kosovo is lucky that they have so many smart, passionate, and determined women’s activists who are willing to fight in defense of women’s rights.
To those who wonder what can be learned from a small, conflict-ridden country like Kosovo: don’t discount the local players. Civic society in Kosovo has developed in response to lacking policies from their interim government. It was in the absence of governmental guidance that local activists organized to fill in the gaps. This is a phenomenon that can be extended to countries much larger than Kosovo, particularly in the United States.

As a young American, I can speak to the growing frustration of misrepresentation in government. As an American woman, I can speak to how disheartening it is to see the rights of women being taken away state by state. However, in my short time studying Kosovo, I have gained a lot of hope from the small country, and from Kosovar women’s activism. This is a country where women were tormented by the brutalities of armed conflict. Nevertheless, women’s activism persisted. Women in Kosovo have remained strong, successfully organized, and implemented policies and programs to improve women’s rights. American women can do the same. Organization at the local level may seem small, but it is the most effective way to make direct contact with the needs of women across the country. Overtime, consistent change at the local level builds into substantial change at the national level. This is exactly what happened with women’s rights in Kosovo, and the same is capable in the United States.
Bibliography


