



Final Report

TITLE VIII RESEARCH SCHOLAR PROGRAM

TITLE VIII COMBINED RESEARCH AND LANGUAGE TRAINING PROGRAM

Dhurata Osmani
PhD Student, Sociology
University of California, Berkeley

*Fighting For Their Rights: Analyzing the Feminist-Based NGO Boom in Post-War
Kosovo*

Program Dates *e.g. June 6, 2019 – August 30, 2019*
Pristina, Kosovo

Research Abstract: Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been instrumental in post-war reconstruction in Kosovo. NGO actors have been particularly active in the sphere of women's rights in the twenty-year period following the war leading to creation of networks between local and international organizations and fortifying connections between urban and rural women involved in activist work. The research project aimed to analyze causes contributing to a rise in women's organizations after the war in Kosovo and consequences of the work of feminist-based organizations in Kosovar society through in-depth interviews, participant observations, and content collection of local NGO records. Interviews took place with urban and rural women from Pristina, Gjakova, Peja and Prizren. The study showed a mixture of factors for local women pursuing NGO-based work while also showing strong ties of solidarity between urban and rural women, sustained lobbying for women's rights since the war, and women appealing to their local communities, donors, and the state for support for their projects. NGO activity remains stable despite lower level of funding opportunities compared to that immediately following the war. The NGO work of local women has produced a societal shift in capabilities of women, codified rights for women in state law, increased productivity in agriculture for rural women, and provided opportunities for long-term collaboration with the international community in post-war society.

Research Goals

The aim of the research was to establish cause and consequences of feminist-focused NGO activity in the country through qualitative methodology.

The research methods for the study included interviewing urban and rural women from the country's four largest cities: Prishtina, Peja, Gjakova, and Prizren in order to provide results from the study that could be generalized for the country as a whole. Prishtina's status as the largest city with an urban class that is cosmopolitan in nature, educated, and fluent in Western languages has enabled it to become a hotbed for international actors and local activists. Hence, I *expected* to find NGO activity related to women's activities in the capital city but wanted to rule out that this activity was not particular to Pristina. As a result, I targeted the cities of Peja, Gjakova, and Prizren to conduct the research study. Since these three cities are also the largest cities in the region by population size, then it would be probable that there would be NGO activity in these regions as well by activists wishing to service the local populace.

Since the research was based on qualitative methodology, the goals included conducting in-depth interviews, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, participant observation, collection of written material from local NGOs, and monitoring online content, including social media and online presence of NGO groups and local actors. The goals for the study further included interviewing 5 rural women and 5 urban women from each city through in-depth interviewing. Since I have been in the country implementing a pilot version of this study in March 2017, I wanted to speak to organizations and activists that I had previously not spoken to during my last visit. For this reason, I targeted other prominent urban and rural organizations through looking up their information on the Kosovo Women's Network (KWN) organization database. The

umbrella organization has contact information for local women's organizations in all the regions of Kosovo. My aim was to interview 40 women in total and complete at least 2 participant observations.

Research Activities

For the most part, the research activities fulfilled the research goals. During the month of June, I followed up with previously established NGO contacts I developed through the pilot study project in March 2017. During this project, I conducted 30 interviews with NGO activists involved in women's empowerment in Pristina and in a village near Prizren. Upon my arrival, I reached out to these women in order to receive any updates on NGO activity while establishing contact with women in Prishtina and the other regions that I wanted to interview during my time. Through these contacts, I was able to conduct participant observations of a training session on managing stress and trauma in the village of Drenas near Prishtina with Women for Women. I was also able to conduct another participant observation of a training session on how to make strawberry jam with rural women near another village in the outskirts of Pristina. For the duration of the trip, the research goals were maintained and I was able to complete 10 interviews with women from each region (Pristina, Peja, Gjakova, and Prizren) where 5 were conducted with rural women and 5 were conducted with urban women resulting in 40 interviews, several informal conversations, 2 participant observations, and ample pamphlets of reports on program activities produced by local organizations. My in-depth interviews were semi-structured in fashion. My interview guide focused on asking women about their family circumstances (married status, number of children, where they live, if they are employed and if so, where), their history of involvement with NGOs (local or international), the activity they are involved in

currently within their NGOs, how they are able to gain support (monetary or otherwise) for their NGO activities, and current needs for their NGO and how they see their future in Kosovo. The interviews were conducted in Albanian and I obtained permission to audio-record women during the interview session while informing women that they had a right to pause or stop the interview at any time, that the interview data would only be viewed by me, and that they had a right to skip a part of the interview as well as other rights included in the IRB for the project.

Interviews took place with women involved with an NGO. This meant women that are working for or with an international or local NGO *or* have founded an organization whose goals are related, in whole *or* in part to, “women’s empowerment” through work with other women in society and addressing gender norms in society. Within an NGO, interviews took place with “leaders” defined as leading women of an organization involved in management and above (managers, founders, directors) and workers of organization (trainers, junior-staff of organization, volunteers). Interviews also took place with self-defined “activists” – women who have a history of working for social justice issues, including women’s empowerment, and are currently involved in NGO work to this end. Women’s empowerment is loosely defined as increasing the role of women in post-war society including but not limited to the public sphere, economic sphere, etc. Women’s empowerment also includes increasing awareness of her rights in post-war society in sphere of land rights, divorce, domestic violence, etc.

In addition to conducting interviews, I also participated in public events such as attending exhibitions regarding women’s issues, public debates, and presentations. KWN organized exhibitions during my time including one raising awareness on domestic violence while the Kosovo Center for Rehabilitation of Torture Victims organized one with interviews of survivors of wartime sexual violence. In addition, I met with students, professors and activists at the

University of Prishtina in a public discussion on how to further broaden discussion on pervasiveness of domestic violence and violence against women in general.

Important Research Findings

The rise in women's based organizations in Kosovo is due to a mixture of factors: the international community, local activism, business/entrepreneurial ventures, and urban-rural networks. The consequences of women's based organizations are women's increased awareness of their rights and role in society and women learning to advocate for their needs to their local communities, donors and the state.

The International Community

Following the war in Kosovo, there was an influx of international organizations and members from Western governmental organizations, such as EULEX, entered the region to initiate rebuilding processes. The international community's prioritization of women's rights has helped to centralize the issue of women's welfare in the country as part of the rebuilding agenda. The international community has been instrumental in providing support for local organizations to focus projects related to women's issues. The interviews revealed that even embassies of foreign governments, such as that of the United States and the Swiss, Swedish, and German became involved in post-war rebuilding processes. To this end, many embassy's provided funds to fund civil society projects in the country. For example, an urban woman from Gjakova stated that her organization received funding from the United States embassy, British, Swiss and Luxemburg embassies in 2001, which led her to implement 66 different projects dedicated to "social and political integration of women" in Kosovo (interview data, Gjakova). The support from Western governmental bodies for local NGO support is coupled with support from international

organizations such as UN Women, Action for Mothers and Children, Women for Women, Medica that have established local chapters in the country to support NGO activities.

The international community has also been effective in introducing language when speaking about culturally tabooed topics related to women's welfare. In one conference led by the Islamic Community in Kosovo titled *Together with one voice: In support of survivors of sexual violence in war in Kosovo* brought together the local Imams, current President Thaqi and former president Atifete Jahjaga and international government personnel including ambassadors, EU envoys to Kosovo, and representatives from international organizations. This conference showed that the re-integration of sexual violence survivors was no longer the tabooed cultural topic it was directly following the war. The head Imam proclaimed a religious and moral duty for citizens to accept these survivors for the first time in 20 years. Hence, this showed that there is a direct interest from the international community in supporting these survivors through civil society projects that has been taken seriously by the local community, despite cultural and religious norms that may have seen topics of women's welfare, such as sexual violence denoting impurity of women, as tabooed ones in society. The international community has been effective in bringing women's issues to the center of discussions within the political and religious arena, despite the socially conservative nature of both.

Local activism

Many women's-based organizations have been the result of local activism that is focused on increasing gender equality in society. Many urban and rural women reaffirmed this notion when they would state that women are heavily oppressed in society despite not reaching a conclusive answer on what it means to be a feminist or feminism in general. Still, women understand that women face a precarious status in society. Many stated they feel unsafe in society and there is no

guarantee for justice for crimes. Women also echoed that the notion that there is rampant political corruption and ineffective rule amidst weak state structures. Many women were also aware that men are employed at higher rates than women and that there is a persistence of patriarchal norms that may limit some women's engagement in public spheres. In addition, women's groups have been instrumental in serving as watchdogs for domestic violence cases, many of which have been fatal in nature and have affected women at the hands of abusive husbands or partners. For many women, especially urban activists, their post-war activism is a continuation from pre-wartime activism.

Many urban women were active before the war in political organizations or other civic-society organizations aimed at strengthening the ties between Albanians in the cities and those in the rural areas in order to provide medical services, literacy classes, and generally increase solidarity networks during the Serbian control of the country that heavily discriminated against ethnic-Albanians in all spheres of society. During the war and thereafter, these women became sought after by international organizations to provide psycho-social services to women in the country-sides who had suffered immense trauma from the violent episodes of the war. One urban woman in Pristina stated that she founded her NGO without even really knowing what an NGO is. However, because of the international community, directly following there war, there was an infrastructure present that connected international persons on the ground to local activists and helped create a structure of incentives to become involved with NGOs due to funds set up for projects in Kosovo. Needless to say, the international community was one of the most viable employers directly following the war since the country was in shambles. However, many of these urban women are still heavily active even 20 years after the war.

Urban-rural networks: business ventures, solidarity

The structure of feminist-based organizations in Kosovo is characterized by an urban-rural hierarchy. Urban women are mainly involved in advocacy-based projects, lobbying to state officials, and contract projects to women in rural-based NGOs. The umbrella organizations within urban spaces such as KWN or Women in Business also may offer start-up funds for civil society projects targeted towards rural women including seeds to plant agricultural goods, bees for bee-keeping, and other agribusinesses. Rural women, on the other hand, are mainly involved in agribusiness, skill building for seamstress, hair salon, and baking work, and other profit generating activities. Despite this hierarchy, the results of the research showed strong ties between urban and rural women. In other words, there was a strong level of solidarity between urban and rural women in Kosovo. Among urban women, many articulated a genuine concern for the wellbeing of women, especially disadvantaged women, in society. While they notice vast improvements, they still are concerned with issues such as domestic abuse and the inability of women to find adequate employment. For those that work as trainers with rural women, they explained to me that it is difficult for rural women to speak for themselves because they have been conditioned to not speak up even in their own homes and to always have others speak on their behalf (husbands, mother-in-law, etc).

Urban women seem to be concerned with rural women because they represent, for them, the most vulnerable group in society with the most needs for increased trainings on how to improve their skill-set and their opportunities for self-improvement. Rural women have been able to form their organizations through the help of international donors but also through the guidance of urban women, which they all expressed gratitude for during the interviews. Rural women also expressed appreciation for participation in training sessions and travel throughout the country

and outside of the country to attend talks or workshops dedicated to women's empowerment.

One rural women stated that she learned a lot from attending a training session on domestic violence. She stated that although it did not occur to her personally, it could affect her daughter or her friend (interview data, Kline/Peje). In fact, one key process of urban women's activism was instructing local women to form their own organizations so that there would be a mushrooming of women's empowerment throughout the country that would fortify urban-rural NGO networks, deliver material goods to rural women, and integrate ever increasing number of rural women into NGO feminist-based networks.

During the various training sessions and participation in fairs, women have built strong bonds with one another that cross class, regional, religious and even ethnic lines. Urban women were often the first to visit rural women in their villages and although many rural women were reserved or disinterested at first, the work of urban women enabled higher rates of participation amongst rural women. Many urban women were responsible for selling handicraft work from rural women as part of their organizational activities. In this case, rural women, despite not being able to participate in fairs themselves and sell their own products, still have urban women serve as their agents and act on their behalf. They bring any profit from rural women's handicraft work back to them after the job fairs end. Urban women were also working with women from Serbian, Roma, Bosnian, and Turkish communities in the country. Due to the solidarity around ethnicity trumping that of religious division in Kosovo, Muslim or Catholic urban women worked with all types of religious groups and vice-versa.

The activist work of urban women has equipped also rural women with a tool-kit: skill-sets, language, psycho-social training sessions, and networking opportunities that has also enabled

rural women to seek funding for their organizations from other larger organizations and their local municipalities. One urban woman stated that after the war in Kosovo, urban women in a village outside of Pristina attended meetings with the local mayor and demanded rights for their children, especially their daughters, to attend schools. After the war, rural women's participation in civil society but also through the state is a monumental change brought on by the work of urban women.

Vetedijesim

The civil society projects geared toward increasing women's welfare have produced dual effects: material gains for women (in the form of monetary grants, seedlings for agribusiness, tools for handcraft work etc.) and have also produced a change in consciousness in women through the process of *vedijesim*. The term *vidisinë/vetëdije* is defined as the notion of self-awareness. It also alludes to the process of acquiring knowledge and increased consciousness through the self. In other words, the term signifies a general sense of self-awareness for one's capabilities to be exercised in meaningful action for improving one's status. In the sphere of women, women articulated that their activism is geared toward increasing *vetedijesim* of local women. At a basic level, this meant working to produce a change of pre-conceived notion of women's "proper" role in society, increasing women's awareness for their rights, and providing skills and knowledge to increase their action in the public and private spheres in post-war society.

Appealing to donors, the community, and the state

The NGO activities of women at the local level have introduced all women participants in the crucial process of applying for funding to donors. In this way, rural women have been instructed by rural women to be knowledgeable that they must secure funding for projects in order to

continue NGO activities. Women articulated the difficulty in obtaining funding for projects. Many women expressed anxiety about difficulties in securing funding for short-term and long-term projects. Many women were concerned with ensuring longevity of their organizations in a financially scarce climate. Still, many women, especially rural women stated that they have applied for funding to their local municipalities. Many women even received funding from their local municipalities along with support from the Ministry of Agriculture, Social Welfare, and other governmental bodies. Rural women, especially, were successful in obtaining funds for handicraft and agricultural projects. The introduction of the process of applying for funded projects produced remarkable ability in women to learn the terminology, knowledge, and process in applying for funding from the state within a short period (20 years since the war). For rural women, this is a success in resourcefulness since many expressed that they felt uncomfortable in merely entering the local governmental offices since they believed that the officials would not even take them seriously (interview data, rural woman from Prishtina). The process of overcoming cultural notions of shame and willingly making claims to the state for support of women's-empowerment projects is an undeniable feat for women.

One common objective urban women held in their NGO activities is working to increase women's voice in society. Urban women articulated that it is important for women to learn how to speak up for themselves and ask for their rights to their families, society, and the state. Urban women added that even if their requests are not met, it is still important that women learn how to think and speak for their own behalf. To this end, one urban women stated that after the war, in a community outside of Pristina, rural women participated in their local town hall meetings. The rural women articulated needs for the community, which she stated, were much more well thought out than those of men. For example, the rural women demanded bus service to and from

schools for their children so that their educational transportation was safe for all students. The process of women learning that their voices are valuable is part of the process of *vetedijesim* but which has been a key factor in women's empowerment projects in the country. It is important to underscore that these tools for women's empowerment go beyond the specifics of civil society projects.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Policy recommendations from the research findings include increasing funding for women's empowerment projects while focusing on a holistic model that includes economic productivity, skill-building, knowledge-capacity, and increased networking opportunities between rural and urban women. The key impediments to development initiatives in Kosovo are large-scale immigration of youth, corruption in local and central government, costly and disastrous medical practices by professional medical staff in public and private hospitals, vast unemployment, and low economic productivity/growth which has contributed to widespread poverty since the war. Within rural areas, there is low productivity because farmers remain de-incentivized to participate in agriculture due to low local demand and agricultural imports. In addition, previous trade routes to neighboring countries of the former Yugoslavia have been destroyed as a result of the war. Hence, there is a general need for projects dedicated to increasing incentives for productivity in the agricultural sector for male and women farmers and skill-building for increased economic production in the entire region. Further, political efforts can be made to increase trade with neighboring countries to counter high imports of products to Kosovo.

In particular, funding is needed for skill-building for rural women so that income-generating activities can be produced from these grants to local women who can go on to pass on skills to

other women in their community. This should include farming of local produce to bee-keeping and even production of jams and spreads. These activities can even enable farmers to market their products outside of Kosovo. This business model has the ability to produce economically independent female farmers. Rural women who have been involved in NGO networks and were able to secure seedlings for agricultural produce, bee-keeping, and making of local goods were largely successful in these businesses. These women were able to provide an independent source of revenue for their immediate families while also integrating other local women into these projects.

It is recommended that there is sustained funding for projects aimed at agribusiness projects for rural women but projects should aim to increase knowledge capacity of women. This can include projects related to learning of foreign languages, topics in higher education, and governance. These projects can be offered at local schools or community centers since transportation to city centers is long for many rural women. Local women involved in NGO projects can work to ensure these educational programs are carried out in urban and rural areas.

The NGO sector is a proactive part of civil society. Since the sector has increased knowledge, productivity, and networks between all regions of Kosovo, it should be seen as a serious actor in the post-war rebuilding process. To this end, it is recommended that there is greater participation between NGO actors, local businesses, schools, local government and members of the international community to allocate funding for projects that will increase capacities, skills, knowledge, and collaborations between local and international actors. In other words, international community practitioners should work alongside local advocates in order to identify target areas for intervention and continue building opportunities for collaboration throughout the region.

Co-Curricular Activity

During my research, I met with development practitioners from UN Women and USAID. I attended exhibit on commemoration of survivors of wartime sexual violence organized by FemArt and Kosovo Center for Rehabilitation of Torture Victims and exhibit on domestic violence organized by KWN. I met with gender scholars from University of Pristina including Professor Nita Luci. I met with the following local organizations: Women for Women, Apetiti, SHE-Era, Bio-berry, Duarte e Arta, Valbona, FemArt, Aurola, Center for women's welfare, Zana, Alma, Syri I Vizionit, PEMA, Maria, Fana, Women's Democratic Forum, Mali, Women's Initiative in Kosovo, The Safe House of Gjakova, Women's shelter of Peja, Dora e Dores, Orkida, Venera, Medica Gjakova, Women's Network of Gjakova, Fatjona, Jeta, Aldi, and Medica.

Conclusions

In conclusion, as a result of the development focus on women's empowerment by international organizations, countries, and multi-national organizations, women's welfare has become a burgeoning area of post-war reconstruction in Kosovo. Local NGOs involved in this area have expanded to rural areas by incorporating rural women to their activities, training sessions, expositions and fairs. The projects dedicated to women's welfare have expanded the way women see themselves in post-war society as well as increasing their skills and offering profit-generating activities through NGO work. It is recommended that women's empowerment initiatives continue to be a focus of international donors amidst continued poverty in the region.

Plans for Future Research Agenda/ Presentations and Publications

After a thorough analysis and writing of the research project, I will submit the paper to

workshop of Gender & Sexuality at my current university. I also aim to submit the project for next year's American Sociological Association's conference as a paper in the Gender section. I also plan to submit the paper to the *Gender & Society*, *Journal of Development & Change*, and *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*.

Bibliography

Grewal, Inderpal and Bernal, Victoria, eds. *Theorizing NGOs: States, Feminisms, and Neoliberalism*. Duke University Press. 2014.

Klarreich K., and Polman L.. 31 October 2012. "The NGO Republic of Haiti," *The Nation* . Available at: <<http://www.thenation.com/article/170929/ngo-republic-haiti>>.

Kosovar Civil Society Foundation. 2016. Kosovo Civil Society Index 2016. Accessed online at <http://www.kcsfoundation.org/?page=2,94#.WUAvWWXtT8sK>

Kosovo Women's Network Annual Reports 2004-2016 . Kosovo Women's Network. Accessed online at: <http://www.womensnetwork.org/?FaqeID=13>

Kosovo Women's Network. 2016. Budgeting for Social Welfare: A Gender+ Analysis to inform Gender Responsive Budgeting in the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare in Kosovo for 2016-2018. Accessed online at: <http://www.womensnetwork.org/documents/20151203094304537.pdf>

McMahon, Patrice. 2017. *The NGO Game: Post-Conflict Peacebuilding in the Balkans and Beyond*. Cornell University Press.

Reineck, Janet Susan. The Past as refuge: gender, migration, and ideology among the Kosova Albanians. Dissertation submitted to University of California, Berkeley. 1991

Riinvest Institute. 2016. *Assessment of Corruption in Kosovo*. Accessed online at: http://www.riinvestinstitute.org/uploads/files/2016/September/20/Assessment_of_Corruption_in_Kosovo_1474359621.pdf

The World Bank. *In the Aftermath of War, Women Farmers in Kosovo Rebuild Their Lives*. October 15, 2015. Accessed online at: <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2015/10/15/in-the-aftermath-of-war-women-farmers-in-kosovo-rebuild-their-lives>

Tzifakis, N., & Huliaras, A. 2013. Hegemonic Relationships: Donor Countries and NGOs in Western Balkan Post-Conflict Reconstruction. *Southeastern Europe*, 37(3), 312–329.

Varga, Eva, Villanyi, Viktoria. 2001. Social Enterprise as a Strategy to provide economic opportunities for people with disability in Kosovo: An Assessment of Social Enterprise and its Potential. NESst Report. Accessed online at: <http://www.nesst.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Kosovo-final-research-report-NESsT-Dec-2011.pdf> Wachtel, Andrew. 2008. Balkans in World History.

World Bank Report on Kosovo. 2016. The World Bank.

Photographs



A gift to the leading trainee of the workshop ‘Managing Stress and Trama’ from a rural woman. The crops are a result of programs offering agricultural seedlings to local rural women farmers from the orgnaization. Participant observation in Drenas, Kosovo with Women for Women International on managing trauma and stress. June 2019.



A trainer from the Initiative for Agricultural Development in Kosovo meets with rural women in the village of Podujeve outside of Pristina on a session teaching women how to make strawberry jam. June 2019.



One of the largest fairs in Pristina housing local handcraft, agricultural goods, and other types of cultural products produced by women from various local organizations in the country. August 2019.