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Unlocking Peace: The Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue and the Untapped Potential of Women's Inclusion

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

More than a decade ago, on March 8, 2011, a historic meeting took place, marking the beginning of a challenging journey towards potential reconciliation and full normalization of relations between the former warring parties, Kosovo and Serbia. The inaugural meeting that initiated the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia convened with Edita Tahiri representing Kosovo's delegation, Borko Stefanovic representing Serbia's delegation, and Robert Cooper from the EU.

Image by [RFE/RL's Balkan Service](#)



EU mediator Robert Cooper (second left) attends a meeting between Kosovo's Edita Tahiri (left) and Serbia's Borko Stefanovic in Brussels.

This meeting signaled potential commitment to work together to alleviate the burdens of the past and pave the way for a peaceful future with good neighborly relations. The Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue has been facilitated by the European Union (EU) with the aim to address the complex relationship between Kosovo and Serbia - taking place under the premise of eventual EU integration for both countries. While dialogue is broadly acknowledged as the primary process for resolving the Kosovo-Serbia dispute, the process itself has been subject to extensive [criticism](#). These criticisms include concerns over the lack of tangible progress, imbalances in negotiating power, issues related to transparency, recurring impasses, the perceived ineffectiveness of mediation efforts, and the limited participation of grassroots voices. Notably, the absence of an inclusive approach that adequately

represents the diverse perspectives of all those affected by the negotiations, particularly women, stands out. This policy brief sheds light on the importance of women's engagement, encountered challenges, and strategic approaches to enhance their comprehensive involvement. This policy brief reflects on the process of the dialogue with a focus on women's engagement or lack thereof in the peace process - with the purpose of identifying some of the challenges and even missed opportunities towards reaching the final comprehensive agreement and lasting peace.

CONTEXT

The Republic of Kosovo declared its independence in February 2008, leading to disagreements and legal proceedings. The International Court of Justice confirmed the legality of Kosovo's declaration. Subsequently, a United Nations General Assembly resolution, co-sponsored by Serbia and the European Union, called for negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina. The dialogue stalled due to changes in the Kosovo government and subsequent elections.

The dialogue, held in Brussels and facilitated by EU representatives, addressed various issues over multiple rounds. Key topics have included regional cooperation, freedom of movement, and rule of law. Gradual agreements were reached on issues like freedom of movement, recognition of university diplomas, and customs. However, some disagreements led to delays and interruptions in negotiations. For many people, the dialogue has been considered as a never ending dialogue.

In 2013, the 'Technical Dialogue' transformed into a 'High-Level Dialogue' with the signing of the "First Agreement of Principles Governing the Normalization of Relations." The European Commission encouraged further agreements, emphasizing their importance for regional stability. Negotiations were suspended due to violence and political decisions in 2018 but resumed in 2020. Economic normalization agreements were brokered by the United States, followed by progress in the EU-facilitated dialogue.

At the end of 2022, the EU presented Serbia and Kosovo with a [draft agreement](#) focusing on developing good relations, reciprocal recognition of documents and symbols, and self-governance for the Serbian community in Kosovo. This "[Agreement on the Path to Normalization](#)" was provisionally approved in February 2023, with leaders from both sides verbally accepting a roadmap for its implementation.

WHY SHOULD WOMEN BE INCLUDED IN PEACE PROCESSES?

Women's involvement in peace processes - whether as political leaders or civil society activists - has a significant positive impact on preventing violent conflicts and facilitating more sustainable conflict resolutions. This may also relate to the level of equal access and representation that women have in certain societies or cultures. [Research](#) has indeed shown that countries with greater gender equality, particularly when women have the opportunity to represent and be included in decision-making processes, tend to be more likely to peacefully resolve disputes and less likely to resort to the use of force for [international disagreements](#). To promote women's participation in conflict prevention and resolution, the [United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325](#) on Women, Peace, and Security was adopted in 2000, calling for increased representation of women in decision-making within conflict-related institutions. This approach is rooted in the understanding that higher gender equality is directly linked to enhanced security and stability.

Women's engagement in conflict prevention and resolution brings tangible benefits in various phases of conflicts. Studies reveal that when women are actively involved, the chances of reaching peace agreements lasting two years increase by 20 percent, and the probability of agreements lasting fifteen years [rise by 35 percent](#).

Despite these advantages, women's representation in formal peace processes remains limited. [Between 1992 and 2019](#), women accounted for only an average of 13 percent of negotiators, 6 percent of mediators, and 6 percent of signatories in major global peace processes. Progress has been made, but around 70 percent of peace processes still lack women in key roles as mediators, negotiators, guarantors, or witnesses.

In recent years, challenges in integrating women into peace efforts persisted. For instance, women were notably underrepresented in negotiations in conflict zones like Afghanistan, Libya, and Yemen. However, positive steps have been observed, with women leading mediation efforts in UN-led processes and an increasing presence of women in the support teams of UN-mediated mediation.

Final evidence highlights that women's inclusion in leadership roles significantly contributes to sustainable peace and global security. Recognizing their essential role requires ongoing efforts to elevate their participation, transforming their voices into powerful agents of change in conflict prevention and resolution.

KOSOVO WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTIONS AS AGENTS OF PEACE: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Women played a significant and multifaceted role in Kosovo's resistance and its path to peace, despite often being overlooked and their voices marginalized during negotiations for peace. While having a woman lead the negotiation process is noteworthy, true inclusivity in peacemaking goes beyond a single individual. Gender parity ensures that the perspectives and experiences of both women and men are adequately represented in the negotiations. Inclusive peacemaking should ideally involve a diverse team with a balanced gender composition. While having a woman lead the negotiation process is noteworthy, true inclusivity in peacemaking goes beyond a single individual. Inclusive peacemaking should encompass a broad spectrum of women's voices, including those from different ethnic, socioeconomic, and regional backgrounds.

In an effort to make the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue more inclusive, it is important to identify some of the challenges that prevent women from taking an equal role in the negotiating table as well as some of the opportunities and contributions that they could make if included.

In a recent interview for the policy brief, Shukrije Gashi, Executive Director of the Kosovo Center for Conflict Management Partners, presents essential insights that emphasize the integral role of women in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue.

“The role of women would be many times beneficial due to the fact that women have the mentality of individual engagement for collective causes, which they have demonstrated over the years through the activities of CSOs in Kosovo and Serbia. For instance, we saw the powerful example of the “Zene u crnom” women's group in Serbia in 2015, when they engaged in activities for the benefit of peace and reconciliation”, Gashi says.

Further, speaking with Sytrime Devisholli, a member of the Kosovo State Delegation in the Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue on Trade and Economic Cooperation, about women's involvement she expressed the crucial role of women in peace processes, as stated by Dervisholli, their participation contributes to a diverse and inclusive dimension in decision-making, fostering sustainable peace.

Dervisholli, highlights the critical challenge of limited women's representation in formal peace dialogues. Gender biases and societal stereotypes often undermine the authority of women, hindering their ability to effectively contribute to peace efforts.

Conflict resolution often involves complex challenges and dynamics. However, it is important to note that women can bring a nuanced understanding to the underlying causes of conflicts and contribute to finding solutions. Their emphasis on long-term stability and community well-being can guide negotiators beyond immediate gains. Women have played a significant role in promoting peace and reconciliation. A prominent example of such initiatives is the Women's Peace College, where women from Kosovo and Serbia collaborate actively to promote dialogue, peace, reconciliation and harmony. They offer cross-border workshops for conflict resolution and communication skills, break stereotypes, advocate for victims of sexual violence from the Kosovo-Serbia conflict, and facilitate cultural exchange programs. Additionally, they support joint community projects, spanning education and economic development, fostering collaboration and improving livelihoods. This organization highlights the significant role of women in bridging divides, addressing historical grievances, and contributing to regional peace and harmony.

Both Dervisholli and Gashi emphasize the necessity of broad strategies to strengthen women's inclusion.

Dervisholli underscores the importance of women's presence at all levels of the dialogue, supplemented by training and capacity-building initiatives.

Gashi introduces the concept of advisory groups consisting of women experts to offer essential perspectives to the negotiation team.

To ensure equal voice representation, as proposed in both interviews, the implementation of participation quotas, training programs, and capacity-building efforts is crucial. Furthermore, political commitment and determination are essential catalysts in fostering a conducive environment for women's engagement.

Gashi advocates for the inclusion of gender experts in negotiation teams to ensure that gender-specific concerns – such as gender-based violence and economic empowerment of women and women-led enterprises – are carefully integrated into the dialogue agenda. Drawing lessons from international peace processes, Gashi underscores the importance of including women from diverse backgrounds to ensure comprehensive representation. Together, Dervisholli and Gashi project the sustainable positive impact of increased women's participation. From building trust and reconciliation between communities to inspiring future generations, active women's involvement cultivates social cohesion, inclusivity, and a lasting legacy.

The viewpoints drawn from Gashi and Dervisholli highlight the crucial role women play in the Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue. Incorporating women's voices and perspectives into conflict resolution processes has the potential to chart a transformative course for regions marked by conflict. Their emphasis on community well-being, long-term stability, and dialogue can lead to enduring solutions. As we recognize the substance and impact of women's involvement, we can work towards a future where sustainable peace and reconciliation become attainable goals.

With their experiences, initiatives, and global landscape in mind, heightened women's participation has the potential to reshape the region's future, charting a course towards coexistence and harmonious progress. As the dialogue goes on the stories, recommendations, active women's inclusion is not merely an optional add-on, but a transformative element that holds the power to reshape the discourse, mitigate biases, and cultivate a holistic, enduring peace.

For progress to materialize, an all-encompassing approach is necessary. Society, policymakers, and international organizations must collectively commit to creating an environment where women are embraced as leaders, negotiators, and builders of peace. The progress made over the past decade serves as an impetus to accelerate this momentum further. Only through comprehensive engagement, where diverse voices converge and collaborate, can the Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue truly transcend into an emblem of peace, cooperation, and shared prosperity.

CONCLUSIONS

The path towards peace and reconciliation between Kosovo-Serbia remains complex and challenging, yet, the untapped potential of women's meaningful and equal participation in the peace negotiation provides a chance to improve the odds. Numerous studies have asserted the merits of taking into consideration the equal perspectives of women and men when it comes to peace negotiations. Further, as noted through interviews with Shukrije Gashi, and Sytrime Dervisholli -the role of women emerges as a transformative force that demands recognition, empowerment, and inclusion.

Gashi and Dervisholli underscore the critical importance of women's involvement in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. They reveal that women's participation goes beyond tokenism; it is a fundamental component in crafting comprehensive, just, and [sustainable agreements](#). The example of Liberia illustrates that women's active involvement in crafting sustainable agreements leads to more comprehensive, just solutions that address the root causes of conflict. This inclusivity and focus on addressing underlying issues are crucial for fostering long-term peace and societal well-being.

As the cornerstone of society, women bring a unique perspective deeply rooted in communal well-being, and their engagement ensures that the outcomes of the dialogue are all-encompassing, resonating with the experiences and aspirations of the entire population.

The challenges highlighted by Dervisholli – limited representation, gender biases, and stereotypes – bring attention to the necessity of proactive measures to break down these barriers. The experiences of women at the forefront of initiatives exemplify the potential for true change. These initiatives are testament to the commitment, adaptability, and collaboration that women bring to shaping a shared future.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NEGOTIATING PARTIES:

1. Comprehensive Representation:

Both sides in the dialogue should ensure that women are represented at all levels of the dialogue process, including high-level negotiations, working groups, and technical discussions. Implementing gender quotas or targets for women's participation can help ensure their presence.

2. Create a dedicated working group

focused on women's inclusion within the mediation process, where it ensures that women's priorities and needs to be part of the agenda. Both parties should respect the involvement of at least one experienced civil society woman in dialogue, as defined by Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. The Law on Gender Equality requires an equal representation of women in such decision-making positions.

3. Gender-Responsive Agreements:

Each party involved should ensure that the agreements and outcomes of the dialogue address specific gender issues, including gender-based violence, access to resources, and economic opportunities for women.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY:

1. Advocacy:

Advocating vigorously for the meaningful inclusion of women in the dialogue process, pressuring both governments to meet gender quotas or targets and uphold gender-sensitive approaches.

2. Community Engagement:

Mobilizing local communities to support and actively engage with women-led initiatives focused on peacebuilding and reconciliation.

3. Awareness Campaigns:

Launching public awareness campaigns that educate the local population about the crucial role of women in conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts, emphasizing the positive impact on long-term stability and well-being.

By implementing these recommendations, the Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue can create a more inclusive negotiating process. Active women's involvement will contribute fresh perspectives, sensitivity, and a commitment to sustainable peace, ultimately increasing the prospects of reaching lasting solutions.