

## UPF-EUME Pristina, Kosovo: 1st Ladies Association - No Peace Without Women

Heiner Handschin  
June 13, 2023



**Pristina, Kosovo** -- UPF and its International Association of First Ladies for Peace (IAFLP) co-sponsored the second annual "No Peace Without Women" conference.

The subtitle of the conference was "What Are Women Bringing to Peace Processes, Conflict Prevention and Human Security in the Balkans?"



The conference, which was held in Kosovo's Assembly (the nation's parliament), was a joint effort of the Europe-Middle East branch of Women's Federation for World Peace International (WFWPI), an organization that is affiliated with UPF, and the Office of the Prime Minister of Kosovo, together with the Europe-Middle East branches of UPF and IAFLP.

Among the approximately 120 participants of the June 13, 2023, event there were three deputy ministers, 12 parliamentarians, nine ambassadors (including those from Austria, Japan, Norway and Sweden) and representatives of 20 media outlets.

The conference had begun on the previous evening with a welcoming banquet and reception at the Hotel Sirius. The date, June 12, was the 15th anniversary of the liberation of Pristina. Dignitaries present were Kosovo's Deputy Prime Minister **Emilija Redžepi**, former President **Fatmir Sejdiu** and former first lady **Nezafete Sejdiu**, as well as key leaders, with various parliamentarians representing the hosts.

The organizing team comprised **Ejona Icka**, secretary general of UPF-Kosovo, who acted as the representative of WFWP in Kosovo and as the liaison with the Kosovar government. Her efforts were supported by **Gani Rroshi**, secretary general of UPF in both Albania and the Balkan Peninsula, who also took care of the Albanian delegation, who included former Albanian Deputy Prime Minister **Senida Mesi**.

WFWP International President **Moriko Hori** supported the event through her valuable presence and

contributions. Furthermore, both of the UPF co-chairs for Europe and the Middle East, **Dr. Katsumi Otsuka** and **Jacques Marion**, greatly supported the efforts of the local team.



The foundation for the successful organization of the event in Kosovo was set at the UPF Peace Summit 2023, held in early May in Seoul, South Korea, when first ladies and wives of the invited Balkan leaders participated in the International Association of First Ladies for Peace (IAFLP) session and discussions around the event planned for Kosovo in June. It was as he was leaving the hotel in Korea that Prime Minister **Albin Kurti**, with his wife, committed that he would personally host the "No Peace Without Women" conference in Kosovo.

The government of Kosovo graciously supported the conference by taking charge of the speakers' and panelists' conference expenses, including their food and lodging, as well as a special closing banquet hosted by Deputy Foreign Minister **Liza Gashi**, who was also a speaker at Peace Summit 2023 in Korea as part of the IAFLP delegation.

### Opening Session

On the next day, the conference moved to the Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo. The moderator of the Opening Session, **Carolyn Handschin**, the director of the Office for UN Relations, WFWPI, paid special tribute to the government of Kosovo and especially Prime Minister **Albin Kurti**.

Ms. Handschin, who is also the president of the NGO Committee on the Status of Women at the United Nations in Geneva and one of the key organizers of the conference, explained in her opening remarks that the idea of "No Peace Without Women" began in Geneva in a discussion with WFWP leaders after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. After the devastation of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo in the 1990s, she explained, it was clear that women must decide, "No more war" and then work in solidarity. This was exactly the mandate of the founders of UPF and WFWP in July 2012, to "work with women leaders and organizations to influence governance for the right priorities."

Ms. Handschin then introduced the keynote speaker and the main host of the conference, **H.E. Albin Kurti**, prime minister of the Republic of Kosovo. He explained to the audience his background as a non-violent activist, a professor, and later the dean of the University of Pristina.

He thanked WFWP and the organizers for holding the conference at the time of the celebration of the liberation of Pristina. Kosovo has been a success story for peacebuilding in cooperation with the NATO alliance, he said. Peace can come only after the liberation of people who were deprived of their basic rights and freedom. It is after their liberation that women become instrumental in building up a more stable society.

He emphasized that, for his young government, gender balance is crucial. Kosovo is trying to work diligently in that direction, so that women are more substantially represented in political and other institutions. Women and mothers generally are empowered by the authorities in Kosovo. Before leaving the podium, the prime minister was presented with the Global Women's Peace Ambassador's Award by the WFWPI president.

The moderator then mentioned several messages that had been sent to the conference. **Mairead Corrigan Maguire**, a courageous and ever passionate Nobel laureate from Northern Ireland, sent her best regards for this event, very much in line with her own work. Also, the former permanent representative of Bosnia-Herzegovina to the United Nations, **H.E. Mirsada Čolaković**, wanted to participate but could not make it, due to the difficulty in obtaining a visa.

The second speaker of the opening panel, **H.E. Ol'ga Algayerová**, executive secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe based in Geneva and former ambassador of Slovakia to the UN in Vienna, spoke to the audience through a video message. She emphasized the great potential of women's leadership in peacebuilding and said this potential could be enhanced through the technological empowerment of women. Given the fact that the root causes of conflicts are often difficult to cope with, there is a need for a broader, more inclusive approach. She said that gender balance is a great attribute for sustainable development and peacebuilding.

As the last speaker of the opening session, **Moriko Hori**, president of WFP International, explained her life experience growing up in Korea as a young girl from Japan, facing many experiences of hatred from Korean classmates and teachers. It was through these very tough experiences that she learned the value of reconciliation and forgiveness.

She closed with a quote from UN Secretary-General António Guterres, who said that women are crucial for promoting peace and security in the world. Given the great difficulties in the Balkans, Mrs. Mori said that women leaders in this region can make a difference in worldwide peace efforts, and she encouraged strong women leaders from the Balkans to use their potential to create peace around the world.

### **Session I: 1325 / UN Agenda on Women, Peace and Security: A Roadmap toward Peace and Reconciliation**

As the first session followed directly after the opening panel, Ms. Handschin was again the moderator.

Kosovo's Deputy Prime Minister **Emilija Redžepi**, who is of Bosnian ethnicity, often has promoted the rights of her nation's non-majority communities (which are only 7 percent of the 1.8 million people of Kosovo). Since the beginning of the new millennium, she said, we can witness women pursuing peace and succeeding more and more to bring conflicting parties to reconcile. In this context, the second "No Peace Without Women" conference is focusing on Kosovo and the situation in the Balkans.

The deputy prime minister emphasized the need to work for the equal rights of all citizens, because we all are humans first and members of ethnic groups second. The common goal of the Kosovar government is to remove human suffering, she said.

In Kosovo, much importance is given to women, and, therefore, women's representation is more than 30 percent in the Assembly, which is the largest female representation in the institutions in the Balkans. Women leaders and mothers emphasize the need to end bad experiences for all. She closed with the invitation to all women to bring in all their wisdom for a great and positive outcome and to learn from great women leaders' abilities and capacities, so that peace will prevail with a greater inclusion of women in decision-making.

The next speaker, **H.E. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf**, the former president of Liberia, addressed the audience through a video message, expressing her deep desire to be present but being unable to do so, due to health issues.

The former president, a global champion in efforts to end violence against women, congratulated the organizers for this important conference. She reminded everyone that 33 years ago the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security. She reiterated that there cannot be peace without women.

Many countries have come to recognize that solutions cannot be found by military means, she said. According to research, countries with insufficient numbers of women in leadership have great difficulties in realizing peace.

She is the first and, so far, the only African woman leader of a government. Each nation has to find its own ways of realizing peace, she said, but women should be an integral part of any peace efforts. Despite the fact that women are still far from being a decisive part of peace processes, the time is now ripe for action and for women to be an integral part of peace processes anywhere in the world.

**H.E. Nancy Soderberg**, a former U.S. ambassador and appointee by the Clinton Administration as senior director of the National Democratic Institute in Kosovo, stated that without women the crucial issues of our time cannot be addressed. Referring to the previous speaker, she emphasized: "As Ellen said, we can do better by including women into all facets of society. The [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development] found narrowing the gap between men and women does bring substantial results in terms of peace and prosperity.

"In Northern Ireland there were women pressing for peace beyond the religious and cultural divide. Put women at the table, and peace will be stronger! Let's take that to heart in the Balkans!" She ended her presentation by stressing that in Kosovo, where more and more women are playing a decisive role, the

participation of women will increase chances for prosperity.

**Hon. Suzana Pribilović**, a judge and former government minister and current member of Parliament from Montenegro, explained that very unfortunately, Montenegro's efforts to join the European Union stalled three years ago. Despite the fact that the Constitution of Montenegro guarantees equality between men and women, it can be observed that the institutions and the general society are still very patriarchal, and the data show very slow changes.

She requested that the institutions in the Balkans in general should do more to prevent violence against women. There are widespread difficulties related to the patriarchal system in the institutions. For example, the current legislation, in case of a divorce, too often causes a very complicated situation for the children of divorced women. Yet there are signs of hope, as many programs in Montenegro are trying to make things easier for women. She concluded by reiterating the conference theme: There is no peace without women being involved in the process.

As the final speaker of the session, **Hon. Anja Margetić**, the deputy mayor of Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and an Olympic medal-winning swimmer, expressed her enthusiasm about the topic of the conference. She expressed her wish that the next conference of this kind would be held in Sarajevo.

As the first female deputy mayor of Sarajevo, she said she was proud to attend this conference as a representative of the mayor. She also said that it was a shame that, despite living in Europe, the importance of women still has to be emphasized.

Sarajevo has been famous for various reasons, she explained: first, as the place where World War I started and then, in the 1990s, because of the dreadful siege and war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. But even after the end of hostilities, there is still a threat of violence.

Women have more importance, she said. No mother would send her sons to war. Men do send men to war! She wrapped up her very compelling presentation by stressing that reconciliation isn't needed by the people, but by the politicians. "Women, much more than men, seek practical solutions! Women are used to taking care of others and therefore have more capacities in creating peace and harmony. Unfortunately, it seems that men create war and fall prey to corruption more easily."

## **Session II: Women in Development, Integration, and Finance: Advancing Peace**

The session chair was **Jacques Marion**, UPF co-chair for Europe and the Middle East, who gave a brief introduction to the session's theme.

**Hon. Flora Brovina**, a former MP and chairwoman of UPF-Kosovo, was the first speaker. As a professor and human rights activist who spent time in a Serbian prison during the Kosovo War, she spoke about the painful details of the war, including poisoning, rape, and brutality. But much could be turned around through women, she said. Women's groups in Kosovo are meeting with Serbian women, even when the political leaders from different sides don't dare to do so. There are very active women's parliamentary groups with a creative and strategic focus, she said.

Strikingly, she added: "Hatred is a cancer. Women will protect life, and Kosovo is a peace-loving nation and should never turn into a hateful state. Women bring unique perspectives to war and to wounds of war and peace." Although her parents were sent to Nazi concentration camps, she chose never to bear hatred against the German people.

**H.E. Senida Mesi**, former deputy prime minister of Kosovo, stressed the need for more men to learn from history and therefore to promote greater inclusion of women into politics. She said that she didn't believe in quotas but, after the terrible genocide in Rwanda, the number of women parliamentarians rose to 66 percent. This is a historical fact. Of course, due to the many men killed in war, women had to take over, and certainly many were not qualified at first.

H.E. Senida Mesi stated that she always would give a hand to younger, less experienced women, because afterward they might excel in their abilities. Our economic livelihood is supported by men and women, she said. How much more could we do in economic development if we engaged more in women's economic empowerment?

In the six Western Balkan countries, a mere 30 to 35 percent of women are active in the economy. Imagine how much economic growth could be generated if more women were economically empowered, she said -- and what a difference they could make! Empowered women could contribute 30 percent more to the nation's gross domestic product.

Also, there needs to be a general reform of the current laws in many Balkan nations regulating inheritance, she said. The key question is: How can we support women to benefit all society? Former UK

Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher said, "If you want to get a job done, ask a woman to do it." H.E. Senida Mesi ended her presentation by stating, "The world is a very diverse place, and men and women are different, but much more can be done if we work together!"

One of the highlights of this panel was the testimony of **Sally Becker**, a British humanitarian worker and CEO of the charity Save a Child. As Woman of the Year in the United Kingdom in 1994, she saved hundreds of children's lives during the Bosnian and Kosovo wars. She was called the "Angel of Mostar" because of her incredible work to save children in war zones. She continues to take care of and save children in trouble spots such as Israel and Palestine, as well as Ukraine since 2022.



She gave a firsthand account of the frontline situations in the Kosovo War, where she and her convoy of refugee women and children were ambushed. She tried to negotiate with the belligerent soldiers to let the women and children go. She finally managed to get them to safety; however, she was arrested and taken prisoner. She also almost lost her life when she was ambushed again and shot.

She has shown incredible courage and persistence for the sake of suffering civilian populations, especially young children who are trapped in war zones. She touched the audience deeply, as in Kosovo the memories of the dreadful war years are still in people's minds, causing great grief and suffering to this day.



**Biljana Braithwaite**, a lawyer and CEO and founding partner at Sustineri Partners and the head of the AIRE Centre's Western Balkans Rule of Law Programme, stated that there is a need for men and women to work together. Women should help men, and men should help women to be empowered.

She doesn't like quotas, she said; however, she realizes that women will not be included automatically, and it is not just a matter of education. There is a need for a clear goal of including women in any process in society through special measures and support mechanisms, she said.

Furthermore, she wonders how to conserve this, so that it serves current and future generations. The proper agenda is critical, she said, even though we don't internalize that. Women on governing boards in the newly named Adria region can be modeled on the basis of European standards.

At the end of 2022, the European Union set general standards for women to be part of governing boards in EU territories. There is a need for short- to medium-range measures. There are women who are ready for governing boards. It is better not to create a picture of a perfect board member, but to use diverse and wise criteria in order for women to acquire qualifications and sustainability.

The Adria region is forward-looking, adding Croatia and Slovenia to the Western Balkans, she said. Slovenia has gone far to create a balance between men and women in the private sector and corporate leadership.



As the final speaker of this session, **Brigitte Wada**, vice president of WFP Europe, mentioned that, more and more, our society is plagued by school violence and bullying. One might ask: Why is this happening?

Some experts think that young people need to come back to basic rules for living together with others, as encouraged by many faith-based efforts, an attitude of loving kindness, simply living for others, based on the teachings of the great faiths.

WFWPI has developed programs on how to guide youth to a more sustainable way of life for the sake of society as a whole and the individual as well. Research has shown that, in 90 percent of cases, the main cause of conflict seems to be misunderstanding. Diversity requires mutual respect, inclusion and integration. By incorporating more women in this process, more promising results will come about.



### **Session III: Peace Leadership: Access and Opportunities for Young Women in STEM, Media Literacy, and Information Technology**

The final session of the conference was facilitated by **Ejona Icka**, the executive director for the Balkans of International Association of Youth and Students for Peace (IAYSP), another organization that is affiliated with UPF. She is also the secretary general of UPF-Kosovo and liaison of the organizers to the government of Kosovo.

The first speaker of the panel, the **Hon. Liza Gashi**, Kosovo's deputy minister of foreign affairs, stated that women are by experience agents of change in a postwar era, and they are the ones who can rebuild the nation. The deputy foreign minister was instrumental in organizing the conference and helped very much to bring guests from Kosovo; she even sponsored the conference's closing banquet.

She referred to the importance of women in peace processes by mentioning a few outstanding women among the people of Kosovo, such as the current president, H.E. Vjosa Osmani, a former law professor and member of parliament who was instrumental in finalizing the constitution of the Republic of Kosovo, among other great efforts.



She also mentioned Hon. Dr. Flora Brovina, former vice president of the Assembly, who was a speaker in the last session. Both of these ladies are considered heroic women in Kosovo.

The Kosovo experience shows that bringing together women and empowering them to take on leadership roles brings great outcomes through women excelling in many fields, Hon. Gashi said. This is true for the economy and finances, entrepreneurial activities and so forth.



As 70 percent of the population of Kosovo is under 35 years of age, there has to be a conscientious effort to include more women as students of STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) at universities, thus laying the groundwork for a sustainable and gender-balanced development in the nation.

**H.E. Teuta Sahatqija**, a former Kosovar ambassador to the UN in New York and former deputy foreign minister, and currently the director of the Kosovo office of Women in Tech, stated that actually it was women who started the dialogue with Serbia -- through Serbian women. In this process, she discovered that Serbian women have very similar circumstances and concerns, which allowed them to get together and discuss the way forward. She asked for funding to create an academy for Serbian and Albanian/Kosovar women, which no men would dare to do, even while the wounds were still fresh.

Also, as a tech person she launched the Women in Tech chapter in Kosovo by empowering and teaching women to go into STEM education and technical jobs. It is important to also keep good jobs for women and to transform them and adapt them to the current needs. She closed by saying, "Gender equality was invented by God" in order to have a critical mass for future development.



**Astrit Istrefi**, chairman of the Balkan Forum, a civil society platform that focuses on conflict prevention, peacebuilding and development-related issues in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, stated at the outset that some may expect good news from him in terms of women's engagement in the Balkans, but he apologized that he couldn't do that. This was because in terms of women's engagement in the Balkans, in politics women represent fewer than 15 percent, less than half of the suggested quota of 30 percent. Women are underrepresented as leaders, and one must ask why?



Based on his experience, he said, people in the Balkans want strong leadership, which seems to be provided more often by the male leaders who traditionally have ruled the region. There is no use to hide the traditional social norms; they are there.

He suggested that the key point for change should be a social transformation in the region, in which social media could be helpful in achieving that. He closed by stating that women need to show more resilience to withstand traditional norms and in this way assure a sustainable future in the region.

As the final speaker of the session, **Dr. Diana Ungureanu**, Moldova, a cardiologist and vice president of IAYSP for Europe and the Middle East, explained her organization's efforts to empower young people, especially in the Western Balkans, to become agents for change and empowered future leaders. In Moldova, her home country, she is engaged in projects of teaching girls, especially information technology. Young women and girls need to be taught in a safe environment, so that they can build confidence and finally excel in their professional careers, thus contributing to a more gender-balanced situation in the region. After a short report about such a program that she conducted with 60 participants, she closed her presentation.





The moderator, **Ejona Icka**, offered some closing remarks for the session and the conference, and the participants assembled for a final photo shoot.



Later in the evening, the efforts of the day culminated in a closing banquet sponsored by the Foreign Ministry of the Republic of Kosovo, hosted by **Hon. Liza Gashi**. The participants were offered tasty local food and finally were stimulated to dance together to the sound of a very vibrant local music group.

