

Hearing of the Committee on Women's and Gender Equality on
“*Women’s Role in Peace Processes - the specific case of Western Balkans*”
“Building Culture of Peace - between Despair and Hope”

2nd April 2019, European Parliament, Brussels

Ladies and gentlemen,

Living in the violent and turbulent times that we do I find myself asking this question: *can nonviolence overcome violence?*

I ask this as a citizen of Europe and as a citizen of Croatia who has experienced first-hand the terror and violence of war in our times.

This is not a new question. Rather it has been the affirmative principle on which many of the women I represent here today have based their engagement as active citizens. Together in the 1990s, we sought meaningful ways to build foundation for peaceful relationships in the midst of war. Today, over twenty years after the end of hostilities, the question is still one that needs to be asked.

If nonviolence can overcome violence, is then peace truly attainable?

The story of Europe and of this place, the European Parliament, is the result of an endeavour to answer that question – a peace project following the destruction of not only the material fabric of the continent but of the relations between peoples and nations. For many, it is an inspiration and goal.

On my own peace journey, I have had the privilege to work with many different women. From those active in feminist, ecological and peace movements (both atheists and believers - as am

I), to those women using interreligious dialogue to work on tangible issues around peace and justice. All of us bringing different sets of experiences and realities to the table yet sharing a common purpose.

Their activism is diverse: strong and persistent anti-war dedication of Women in Black in Serbia; the 'invisible', spontaneous but vital role of women in the post-war restoration of trust in local communities; the peacebuilding role of teachers in war torn communities and in schools; women's rights & peace & dealing with the past activists; and then there's the role of peace-oriented women in religious communities - a huge potential for transformation at a cultural level which needs to be recognised! Today there is a new generation of women who are increasingly engaging in political struggles against the multiple forms of violence which are a major problem of post-war societies.

In my region, war divided our societies rapidly and in such ways, so that it was not possible to establish a common platform and peace movement – therefore, our peace efforts developed in separation. However, we still found a way to nurture communication and develop a soft structure of mutual support (networking), also for joint actions. In this we were helped by our friends from Europe and afar.

We did not stop the war nor did we significantly influence its course. But our peace endeavours – the majority of which were led by women – did contribute to the foundation of values on which a democratic society, and culture of peace, can be built.

Today, I am acutely aware of the need to work together to save and advance the European peace project: to ensure peaceful societies and prevent conflict in our politically unstable neighbourhoods such as in Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Macedonia; and to work on sustainable development. If we are to live in communities free of violence (and from the fear of violence) whether it be against our fellow citizens or against the fragile environment entrusted to us, we need to work together.

We are desperately looking for hope again! Where can we find it?

Allow me to share with you two milestones of my hope!

First: I am encouraged with the fact that today there is **common global recognition** of the need to build peaceful societies as a lever towards sustainable development. The UN 2030 Agenda states: *there is no sustainable development without peace and that there is no peace without sustainable development.* Article 4.7 specifically calls for: “....*education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence.....*” Furthermore, the main message of the 2018 World Bank and UN report *Pathways for Peace* confirms that **prevention works:** *“how actions taken through education; economic and social development; human rights; gender equality; democratic participation; understanding and tolerance; the free flow of information; and international peace and security can serve to build a culture of peace”*. It is confirmation of the 2003 UN General Assembly conclusion that **working for a culture of peace is also working for prevention of armed conflict!**

But let's bring it all back down to societal level and meet women where they are – indeed where we are.

Second: one of the main lessons I learned was from my experience at the Centre for Peace, Nonviolence and Human Rights in Osijek was that **it is possible to build peace in the middle of the war.** In actual context that lesson means: it is vital to build peaceful relationships even while struggling with structural violence against people and the planet.

Then, in the middle of the war, in reaction to the violence around us, we (small number of citizens of Osijek, vast majority of women) sought ways to prevent war and then stop it. We soon realised that this was not in our power, so we asked ourselves a different question: *What kind of state and society do we want in the future?* We agreed that it should be one more resistant to violence and have the nonviolent capacity to build a just and sustainable peace. We defined peace as a ‘dynamic state of constant rebuilding, of improving relationships towards greater justice, inclusivity, cooperation and solidarity in economic, social, political and cultural spheres (Adam Curle).’ This was the paradigm of developing a culture of peace.

By testing this common vision in the middle of war, we were able to confirm that such a society can be created. Our guiding principles were concrete: **help** the most vulnerable (refugees and the displaced); **oppose** violence and human rights violation of one's own community; **open and nurture** communication between civilians across the front lines of separation and do that through **cooperation** with local government, institutions and with the local community. Within the context of war, it was by no means easy, it was even dangerous, but it was possible!

How? I am convinced that it was possible because we always used to think very carefully not only around the question **WHAT**, but, also **HOW** - how to act to dismantle the dominant culture of fear, anger, distrust and hate; and in doing so build trust, solidarity and cooperation? How to build a culture of peace!?

We sought answers by **educating ourselves in nonviolent action**. This strengthened us and helped us empower hundreds and hundreds of women, teachers and youth as peacebuilders.

In 1997- 1998, the peaceful reintegration of the occupied territories took place marking the end of the war in Croatia. It was one of the most successful UN peacekeeping missions ever (UNTAES) – and was a joint venture combining political will, a strong UN mandate and the civilian contribution of 10 peace organisations from Croatia and Serbia. But most importantly, it was achieved with the will, strength and courage of thousands of women and men.

I am deeply convinced it was the nonviolent and peacebuilding actions of ordinary citizens which tilted the scales - the multiple resources invested directly into the grassroots ensured that the peace attained was sustainable.

Let me invite you to visualise your Europe of the future – that common space in which our children and grandchildren will live. Take with you the question – how you are contributing or can contribute to test that vision today. ***What must we do, need to do and can do today to ensure that vision is a reality today and tomorrow?***

I believe we need to invest in those people who oppose violence, regardless of religion, ethnicity or gender:

- make **education for nonviolent action** accessible to all people;
- empower people of all ages and from all walks of life for the **nonviolent transformation of conflict** – in so doing we create a place of influence and change from the bottom up;
- facilitate and encourage **movement and meetings of peoples, particularly women and youth, across borders** both physical and cultural **to restore trust**;
- and then we need **to build trust by opening our societies to those fleeing terror and violence** from other parts of our world, and who seek hope.
- And finally, we need to ensure that the credible and courageous women who champion a culture of peace and the principles of nonviolence in their everyday lives and in their towns and communities have access to financial resources they need.

The solution is almost always in the problem. I have seen and can witness to the power of nonviolence as an antidote to violence so yes, in full confidence I can answer that first question.

Nonviolence can indeed overcome violence.

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