

<http://wilpf.org/post-conflict-economic-reform-is-a-women-peace-and-security-issue/>

## **Post-Conflict Economic Reform is a Women, Peace and Security Issue**

I was very fortunate to be invited to join WILPF in Sarajevo in June 2016 for a workshop to discuss a political economy perspective on WILPF's proposed reparations program for survivors of the Bosnian war. And I also joined the solidarity dialogue between Bosnian and Ukrainian women on post-conflict situations and women's rights.

Though over the years, teaching at the Central European University in Prague in mid 1990s, in the United States and Australia, I have met and come to know quite a few Bosnians, this was my first visit to the country. It's a truism that one of the most amazing things about working on peace, conflict, and violence against women, is the people you meet. The stories told and shared by Bosnian women will always stay with me.

## **WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF THE BOSNIAN WAR AND ITS AFTERMATH**

Bosnia is an important place for the women's peace movement. The courageous Bosnian Muslim women were those who made war rapes public when hundreds of them spoke up after the war. As a result of their testimonies, the 1998 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court recognised for the first time in international law, sexual and gender-based violence as potential war crimes, crimes against humanity and crimes of genocide

I spent a decade showing the very painful but moving film *Calling the Ghosts* to international relations students to help them understand why gender identities, gendered violence and women's experiences of war and peace matter as much as (but in different ways than) men's. And in the next decade *The Whistleblower* seemed more apt to reveal to students the gendered nature of the peacekeeping economy. That film tells the story of egregious abuse, enslavement and violence perpetrated by the UN peacekeeping mission in Bosnia through the trafficking network its officials' spurned. It featured WILPF's own Secretary-General Madeleine Rees as the UN human rights lawyer who supported the US policewoman, Kathryn Bolkovac, who first exposed the sex trafficking in the Bosnia mission.

While much of the world's attention has moved on from Bosnia to other conflicts and 'rape capitals', I learned sadly that despite the efforts of women peace activists, the situation for war rape survivors and their families twenty years after the rape camps has hardly been addressed. That there have not

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been sufficient [convictions](#), and [reparations](#) have almost entirely privileged male war veterans.

Moreover, as the Gender sensitive reparations programme for BiH reads: “the needs of women remain unrecorded after the war and are excluded from public policies and post-conflict reconstruction policies of BiH society... Men had exclusive control over and access to armies, which also provided them with the decision-making power about the political and economic set-up of the state, as well as exclusive power over resources in the post-war BiH.”

## **ECONOMIC REFORM PLAN**

I also learned that the international agencies, the European Union, World Bank and IMF have [an economic reform plan](#) for Bosnia that will likely make the situation even worse for all Bosnian victims of the ‘forced militarization’ and the Dayton Peace Accords that created the Bosnian state.

Remarkably, that reform plan intends to accelerate economic growth by liberalising the labour market, thus reducing the cost of labour, reducing the size of the public sector, shifting the social welfare system from universal to targeted coverage, privatizing health system and investing in infrastructure (hydropower, telecommunications, roads etc.). Investment in social infrastructure and development, such as, through improvements in education, labour skills and training, health services and access to water and sanitation are second-order priorities to be considered only after measurable progress on the economic reform package. The IMF budgetary support loan to Bosnia is conditional on this progress and neither the reform package nor the conditions of the loan have been [open for public debate](#).

The winners from the reform are stated to be “the poor and often voiceless masses”, as this article asserts. We may presume these masses to include women and survivors of war atrocities. The economic logic is that women may ‘win’ because more jobs will be opened up for them due to the lower wages and infrastructure projects which, it is assumed, will increase foreign investment in Bosnia. At the same time, the privatisation of the health system will apparently improve the quality of services.

What the IMF and World Bank don’t mention, but what we know from similar [‘roll-out’ of austerity policies in other countries](#), is that most Bosnians and disproportionately women will be the losers of economic reform.

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Women will be the beneficiaries of low-skilled and poorly paid jobs, of a profit-driven health system which enables quality services only for those who can pay, of a trimmed public sector with less community services and social support for the care of children and the elderly, and a targeted system that will force poor women into the labour market and likely require war widows and survivors to continually 'prove' their status to meet eligibility requirements for welfare payments.

## **SCANDALOUS ECONOMICS**

This is classic '[scandalous economics](#)', as Aida Hozic and I have written, straight out of the post-Global Financial Crisis austerity and economic stabilisation playbook and as applied across Eastern Europe after communism but hardly adapted at all to the realities of a post-conflict society.

There is a scandalous neglect of the fact that this is a society recovering from not the crisis of socialism but the crisis of ethno-nationalist war; scandalous obfuscation of the distributional consequences of economic reform for different groups in society; and scandalous exploitation of women and gender equality in service of a militarised austerity society.

The Bosnian economy has not recovered since the shock of the Global Financial Crisis in 2008, which dramatically decreased the foreign remittances upon which the economy and society has been reliant since the war.

Paradoxically, the military is one of most functioning parts of the economy, which as well as security and power provides salaries and benefits, education and health for its members.

Bosnia has high rates of unemployment especially for youth (62 per cent – including particularly difficulty gaining employment for young educated women) and higher for women (31 per cent) than men (25 per cent). The population is declining with emigration and a birth rate below replacement. The World Bank argues that the gender gap in labour market participation represents a 16.4 per cent loss in Bosnia's GDP with women's participation rate the lowest in the OECD.

Yet they do not ask why women's participation might be so low in Bosnia?

## **SILENCING THE GENDERED LEGACY OF WAR**

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There is no mention in any reform documents of the Bosnian war and its ongoing effects on households. One is reminded of an episode of the English TV series [Fawlty Towers](#) where a German guest is staying and staff are told never to mention 'the war', though of course that only makes it more ominous.

Yet, the 1992-5 war resulted in a massive contraction of what was the Yugoslav economy. Despite the wilful forgetting of the war in the International Financial Institution's (IFIs) economic analysis of Bosnia.

The Bank report on '[Her Opportunities](#)' in Bosnia is indicative. In analysing the impact of disparities in economic endowments, access and opportunities only the negative effects of domestic violence on women's economic participation are mentioned; not the fact that this is a country in which tens of thousands of cases of sexual violence took place, and where there are survivors whose health, wellbeing and livelihoods are affected by this legacy.

That reality is inconvenient to IFIs' plan of economic reform, which leaves politics (of war, reconciliation and reparation) to [ethno-nationalist elites](#). Rather than addressing reparations for sexual violence, those elites celebrate Bosnia's participation in the NATO coalition in Afghanistan and the use of SCR 1325 to include women in the armed forces.

Meanwhile, the IFIs pretend there is value in the Bosnia economy and Bosnian elites pretend to support them mutually shoring up neoliberal stabilisation and the normalisation of power.

## **EXACERBATING GENDERED VIOLENCE?**

Yet we can expect the Bosnia economic reform program to exacerbate the conditions for gendered violence because it will likely increase many of the direct and indirect risk factors for that violence: unequal power, financial stress, economic instability, unemployment, lack of services, and men's risky behaviours such as alcoholism, drug-taking, and suicide.

Ironically, a plan designed to achieve "prosperity in one to two generations" will undermine rather than empower women to participate more in the post-conflict political sphere and formal economy as intended by SCR 1325.

It is worth remembering that conflict in the former Yugoslavia as well as in Ukraine, Cyprus, Syria and Iraq were ignited by reactions to unequal and uneven development, the result of a global capitalist system that is perennially in crisis. These reactions played out in gendered and sexualised ways,

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particularly on women's bodies, to provoke international attention while also contesting hegemonic capitalist norms and power in the West.

Post-conflict and post-Global Financial Crisis recovery in Bosnia through the economic reform agenda reinforces inequality, but perhaps more importantly it promotes the acceptance of a continuum of structural and gendered violence in an increasingly militarised and globalised order.