

We're All Mothers

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, April 27, 2005

Mother's Day approaches, and there's no better time to honor women's strength, bravery, and wisdom. Every year at this time, I reflect on women who've shaped my life, including the women of Bosnia.

As Ambassador to Austria in the 1990s, I was involved in the peace process in the neighboring Balkan states. Bosnia is a tiny country of four million where 150,000 people were killed—that's 50 World Trade Centers in about 50 months. But in thousands of hours around the negotiating table, where the fate of the Bosnian people was being discussed and supposedly decided, women were systematically excluded. They represented well over half the population, but their opinions were neither sought nor welcomed.

My relationships with Bosnian women began on July 4, 1994. During a lull in the fighting, I flew there in the belly of a cargo plane, strapped in with 50,000 pounds of flour—supplies urgently needed to feed the 200,000 Bosnians trapped in the three-year siege of Sarajevo. I brought greetings from President Clinton to hundreds of Bosnians who had gathered to celebrate America's "national day." I met with seven women—all professionals—who poured out dramatic personal stories of hardship and bravery.

In a bizarre juxtaposition, they wore pearls and makeup as they told of hospitals without medicines and university-level architecture classrooms without pencils. One woman, a cardiac specialist in a stylish suit, described her elderly parents. They lived only a 15-minute walk away, but she couldn't penetrate the Serb barricades and hadn't seen them for two years. This was the jagged disconnect of their lives: sophisticated, educated women coping with the barbarity of war.

The violence heated up again, and access to the war zone was extremely limited once more. But I couldn't forget the faces and stories of that first visit. The Dayton Peace Accords were signed in December 1995. Two weeks later, I returned to Sarajevo and met with women all over the war-torn city. I was hollowed and inspired by their pain but was concerned about how their voices suddenly weakened in the presence of men.

I followed up those meetings by inviting a dozen women leaders from Sarajevo to Vienna for several days. In that fresh context, they made plans to reconstruct their society. They designed a conference for women from diverse backgrounds and throughout the divided country. They asked me to keynote the event for 200 women leaders; five hundred showed up.

I was particularly impressed by women who crossed conflict lines in their quest to find missing sons, fathers, and husbands. They transformed personal tragedy into a vehement insistence on restoring their homeland, while ensuring no one else would suffer as they had.

One group of Bosnian women had endured more than most: the survivors from Srebrenica, site of a horrific massacre of over 7,000 unarmed Muslim men and boys. After a year of scant aid and virtually no information about their missing family, their pleas for help unheeded, the women had started to protest. They threw stones at the windows of the International Red Cross office. I wanted to help them harness their grief and desperate worry in a constructive way.

We spoke not as "ambassador to refugee" but as women. I helped them plan a commemoration of the hour they'd been given five minutes to board buses and leave their boys and men to be executed by Serb soldiers. One year later, buses the women themselves had hired would bring thousands of refugees from throughout the countryside. They would drape the sports stadium with cloths with the names of their loved ones, mourning their loss and demanding justice.

I stressed the importance of keeping their commemoration from devolving into a protest that would allow them to be dismissed as "trouble-makers" with political motivations. It was a delicate balance: identifying with the sobbing women whose hands I held in mine and, at the same time, trying to modulate their justified rage. "If I were in your place," I told them, "I'd be right in front of the protest." In a transforming moment for me, I asked the women if they could invite Serb women who were also grieving to come to the commemoration. As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I feared I had asked too much of women whose losses I would never be able to fathom. But one of the organizers looked me in the eye and said, simply, "We're all mothers."