



Human Rights, Advocacy, and the Empowerment of Women: An Education and Action Project in the Yugoslav Successor States

Be Active, Be Emancipated (B.a.B.e.)

The transformation from Communist rule to democracy in the Yugoslav successor states resulted in heated ethnic conflict, war, and a deterioration of social and economic structures. The emergence of nationalism and nationalist religious leaders contributed to a breakdown in the sensitive fabric of multiculturalism and resulted in the dominance of the language of war and hate in government rhetoric and national media. This trend devastated everyday communication, with the result that, seemingly overnight, it became impossible to travel or maintain telephone and postal contact among neighboring countries.

Women have been greatly affected by this change, suffering declining status and opportunities and the erosion of formerly established rights. They have also been the first group in the war-torn region to begin rebuilding contacts and to work against a continually reinforced environment of prejudice and hate. Despite the nascent state of civil society, women's groups began to form, born of the pressing need for humanitarian and psycho-social assistance for women victims of war.

Be Active, Be Emancipated (*Budi aktivna, Budi emancipirana*, or B.a.B.e.), a nongovernmental organization (NGO) founded in Croatia in 1994, was one of the first groups in the region to recognize the need to go beyond the mission of delivering services to women war victims. Instead, B.a.B.e. was established as an advocacy and lobbying organization committed to systemic approaches to social change based on women's rights and full participation in society. It has conducted human rights education and training in Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Ukraine, and Russia, and produced reports and guidelines on women's human and reproductive rights and political participation for use by governments. In 1996, B.a.B.e. launched the Women's Human Rights Network for Education and Action (WHRNEA), an education and advocacy project aiming to foster communication and collaboration among women activists and professionals.

Objectives

The WHRNEA project sought to develop a regional network of women with a strong interest in and knowledge of women's human rights in local, national, and international contexts. The network was designed to educate women on their rights and to unite democratic efforts in a region devastated by war, economic dislocation, and geographic displacement. Specific objectives of the project were to:

- ▶ Develop a women's human rights advocacy training curriculum, translated into local languages and adapted to local issues, that could be used throughout the Yugoslav successor states;
- ▶ Identify and recruit women who could develop expertise as activists and trainers in women's human rights education;
- ▶ Develop models for women's human rights advocacy training—designed as a practical combination of workshops and action strategies—that could be replicated by women in other regions;
- ▶ Strengthen the activist and social change dimension within existing women's groups and bring them together in a cross-regional network.

The Project

All stages of the WHRNEA project were strongly rooted in B.a.B.e.'s belief in participatory and empowering learning processes. Local partner organizations played key roles in developing steps for implementation and selecting project participants, who were in turn encouraged to share their experiences as part of the search for solutions to common problems. A central goal in the selection process was to involve women of all ages from diverse ethnic groups and minorities, professions, activist organizations, and regional locations.

To achieve its project objectives, B.a.B.e. conducted workshops and seminars in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, and Macedonia. These encompassed both basic training to educate women on general human

rights theory and law, and advanced training to address local issues and provide concrete skills in human rights advocacy, running for elections, and coalition building. Two groups were targeted for participation: Women activists who lacked knowledge of human rights and advocacy skills, and women victims of human rights violations (e.g., survivors of domestic violence, refugees, and internally displaced persons).

The workshops and seminars were divided into three main categories that were adapted to local needs and contexts. These were the identification of women's human rights and violations; the clarification of countries' legal systems and legislation; and international mechanisms for the protection of women's

human rights. The workshops approached these topics in a general manner, while the seminars were designed for women who had already completed basic human rights education and advocacy training and could therefore delve into more specific questions and cases. Both the workshops and seminars culminated in meetings during which participants planned follow-up action strategies using the knowledge and skills acquired in previous sessions, including the formation of coalitions. In addition, journalists working in print, broadcast, and Internet outlets conducted media training sessions. These sessions provided participants with basic knowledge about how the media works and strategies to promote greater attention to women's human rights activities.

Results

Human Rights Awareness

The five workshops and two regional seminars brought together 165 women representing 69 women's groups from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia, as well as panelists from Italy and Austria.¹ Despite B.a.B.e.'s attempts to involve women from Kosovo, the onset of armed conflict prevented them from traveling. Workshop evaluations indicated that participants had acquired knowledge and skills in women's rights, networking, and organizing. Participants' follow-up plans included lobbying strategies to reform inequitable legislation; the formation of new advocacy NGOs; the establishment of legal hotlines; and initiatives to address such concerns as gender-biased inheritance laws,

biased employment policies, and violence against women.

Advocacy in Civil Society

In its project design, B.a.B.e. aimed to conduct only basic human rights and advocacy workshops. However, women's political participation emerged as a key issue at each of the basic workshops, with many participants requesting additional training on more advanced levels of networking, coalition building, and women in politics. With continued assistance from B.a.B.e. and partner NGOs, local groups made the following strides in the area of advocacy:

- ▶ The first women's joint coalition in Bosnia-Herzegovina was established. It soon conducted the most successful voter education

campaign in the region, reaching more than 60,000 women.

- ▶ The first interethnic group in Macedonia was formed to provide primarily rural women with human rights and advocacy education and training.
- ▶ The 18 member organizations of the Women's Ad Hoc Coalition to Monitor and Influence the Elections of '97 in Croatia actively promoted women's participation in policymaking and political offices through its "51% Campaign" and laid the foundation for future collaboration with female elected officials.
- ▶ Women from Eastern Slavonia (Croatia) formed a women's caucus within an existing human

¹ The seminars were titled "International Mechanisms for the Protection of Women's Human Rights and Public Visibility of Women's Organizing" and "Women's Political Participation."



B.a.B.e. and Ad Hoc Coalition members spread their election campaign messages throughout Zagreb. The coalition advocated for 51 percent representation of women in government to reflect the proportion of women in the population at large.

rights organization. Members who had participated in the workshops and seminars drafted a statement to the Governmental Commission on Equality denouncing the increase in violence against women throughout the region.

- ▶ In collaboration with its Croatian NGO network, B.a.B.e. prepared the *NGO Report on the Status of Women in the Republic of Croatia*. The document cited the deteriorating status of women in the republic and provided information on women's political participation and their economic status and employment, violence against women, reproductive rights, and social benefits. B.a.B.e. staff presented this report in New York at the January 1998 session of the Committee on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (the CEDAW monitoring body).²

Regional Cooperation

During a time of intense ethnic division, the WHRNEA project facilitated a process of regional reconciliation and cooperation.

Despite countless ideological and technical obstacles, the project provided a rare opportunity for women from different ethnic backgrounds, regions, and socioeconomic situations to come together in a neutral setting to discuss mutual challenges and needs. During a

time of intense ethnic division, the workshops and seminars enabled participating women to share ideas and develop strategies to promote women's human rights, with the following outcomes:

- ▶ Country coalitions were formed in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia, and a loose regional network of all workshop participants was formed. The network is linked through electronic mail (where available), and information is exchanged on a regular basis. While the network is still somewhat informal, B.a.B.e. predicts that it could easily be mobilized to take action on regional human rights initiatives.
- ▶ The WHRNEA project succeeded in attracting international organizations, including the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and Delphi International to support additional workshops.³ These sessions expanded B.a.B.e.'s geographical outreach and provided new opportunities for the organization to evaluate

and refine its methods and training materials.

Development of Training Materials

A human rights training curriculum was developed that included case-by-case examples, session descriptions, and methodologies used at the WHRNEA workshops and seminars. The curriculum was based on international human rights training resources, but was carefully adapted to the local needs, languages, and political contexts of the participating countries. The curriculum will serve as a strong resource for future human rights education and advocacy training in the region.

Conclusions

B.a.B.e.'s model of integrating participatory educational activities (i.e., the workshops and seminars) with action strategies and follow-up support proved to be an effective tool for facilitating social change. Individuals and organizations used the knowledge and skills they acquired in advocacy, strategic planning, use of the law, working with the media, and political campaigning to promote women's full participation in local and national policymaking and elections. By expanding the definition of human rights beyond social protections to encompass women's full political participation, the project contributed to the process of ensuring greater respect for human rights in the Yugoslav successor states. Networks of human rights trainers, activists, and women's NGOs that emanated from the project will provide a sustainable infrastructure for continuing efforts.

² CEDAW stands for the international "Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discriminations against Women."

³ Delphi International formed the STAR project in 1994 to provide technical assistance, training, and resources to women leaders and women's groups in the Yugoslav successor states that demonstrate a commitment to and a record of working across state and ethnic lines. STAR helps to link these groups with women's organizations in the United States and worldwide.

Recommendations and Lessons Learned

Based on the relationships that were established through the WHRNEA project, B.a.B.e. recommends the following to donors and development organizations wishing to support similar efforts:

► **Encourage sustainable organizations.** A strong, long-term partnership between donors and recipient organizations is crucial to the latter's success. Development organizations should also ensure that their relationship with local organizations fosters not only financial security, but also builds capacity and supports organizational development and growth through technical assistance and participatory evaluations.

► **Promote local initiatives.** Development priorities and policies should be articulated in close collaboration with local organizations and should not be swayed by the shifting influences of the media or policymakers. Local groups and experts possess a keen understanding of workable strategies for promoting women's human rights, but they must be granted the flexibility to experiment with and adapt them.

Organizations wishing to replicate projects similar to the WHRNEA can benefit from the following lessons:

► **Loose networks can be effective.** Although Yugoslav successor states have many similarities, the development of civil society in each has been very different. It soon became clear that the formation of a monolithic regional network was an unrealistic project objective because of differences in levels of experience and development, as well as lengthy and expensive travel conditions and a lack of a communications infrastructure. Instead, B.a.B.e. and its partners opted to design and maintain a looser network based on the expressed needs of women throughout the region. B.a.B.e. is confident that with adequate time and follow-up, the network will be formalized and increasingly represent the voices of diverse women throughout the region.

► **Patience and flexibility are critical.** The WHRNEA project had an ambitious agenda in a region devastated by war. Many of the challenges that were encountered during the two-year project were related to restrictions in communication and the overall danger associated with traveling from one part of the former Yugoslavia to another. Thus, the central problems encountered were not the result of a lack of cooperation among participating

women, but rather a lack of agreement between countries and political entities. Time, resources, and a great deal of flexibility were required to overcome these challenges. However, the rewards of increased dialogue, opportunities for women to overcome prejudice, and collaboration on shared goals were considerable.

► **Adequate training and follow-up should be ensured.** B.a.B.e. notes in its evaluation of the project that, following initial workshops and seminars, participants were not immediately prepared to become human rights trainers. While knowledge and skills related to human rights advocacy were acquired, participants continued to need education in participatory training methodologies (critical to B.a.B.e.'s approach), as well as personal experience in advocating for social change. B.a.B.e. estimates that in the next two years, many participants will be prepared to train other women, which will in turn increase the outreach and expand the impact of women's human rights networks throughout the region.

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