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HIERARCHICAL SISTERHOOD: SUPPORTING WOMEN'S PEACEBUILDING THROUGH SWEDISH AID TO BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA 1993–2013

HIERARCHICAL SISTERHOOD

Supporting Women's Peacebuilding through Swedish Aid to
Bosnia and Herzegovina 1993–2013

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Development Dissertation Brief 2021:03

to

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Abstract

Peacebuilding in areas affected by war and conflict is a difficult endeavour. The dissertation summarized in this DDB examines possibilities and challenges faced by international interveners in violently divided Bosnia between 1993 and 2013. The study object is the aid organization Kvinna till Kvinna, mainly supported by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency. The encounter with domestic women's organizations is put center stage and studied from the perspective of both actors. This study shows clearly that Kvinna till Kvinna has been successful in building trustworthy cooperation with its Bosnian counterparts. However, the findings also demonstrate that even well-intentioned, locally-focused external efforts, constrained by donor agendas and circumstances on the ground, contain problematic characteristics common in the era of liberal peace. While subscribing to the idea of transnational sisterhood and focusing on local ownership, the organization exercised soft power over its Bosnian 'partners' which slowly but surely led them to adapt to donor preferences. Lessons to be learned from this study are that those seeking to support peace in conflict-affected areas constantly need to be on the alert regarding the risks of power imbalance, have deeper interest in contextual knowledge and a critical approach to their own references of the world.

Introduction

International interventions into areas affected by war and conflict have been a common phenomenon in the post-Cold War period. Attempts to build peace in troubled areas have though proven to be a difficult task. Critics point to discrepancies between the rhetoric and the practice of international actors deeming that a top-down and externally led peacebuilding, dominated by values and norms imported from Western liberal democracies, is problematic (Deacon and Stubbs, 1998; Paris, 2002). While peace missions generally produce limited results in establishing sustainable peace, a growing number of studies shows that women in conflict-ridden societies play a decisive role in resolving conflicts and normalizing human relations in their communities (Porter, 2007; Spahić-Šiljak, 2014; Kaufman and Williams, 2017). These are indeed interesting facts, especially if we consider that one common feature of the interventions undertaken from the 1990s has been the attention paid to the precarious situation of women and to the support for the empowerment of women. Sweden has been at the forefront of making gender equality a priority in its development cooperation. Numerous Swedish organizations have taken part in missions aiming to build peace and transform conflict-affected areas, not seldom by aiding civil society actors (Åkerlund, 2005). What kind of support do women peacebuilders receive from their international sisters? What type of relationships between the two are possible to establish within the context of peacebuilding?

Despite the achievements on the ground and an increased emphasis on women as peace actors in several United Nations resolutions, women's peace efforts remain unrecognized, undervalued and underresearched. In the dissertation *Hierarchical Sisterhood* (Bajramović, 2018), domestic and international women's engagement for peace within the context of peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina (hereafter Bosnia) is put center stage. The overall aim is to contextualize and analyze the possibilities and challenges faced by the Swedish

foundation Kvinna till Kvinna during two decades of supporting Bosnian women's organization. The period under scrutiny stretches between 1993 and 2013, which means that the focus lies predominantly on the postwar years marked by a massive international presence in Bosnia. The encounter between Kvinna till Kvinna and its Bosnian counterparts is of particular interest. The ambition is to understand and illuminate this international/local relationship from the perspective of both actors. Since its inception in 1993, Kvinna till Kvinna has been supported mainly by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). This makes Sida an actor of indisputable importance in the context of peacebuilding in Bosnia, including conditions surrounding the work of Kvinna till Kvinna and domestic organizations.

Kvinna till Kvinna operates in several troubled areas around the globe. One of the reasons for choosing to focus on Bosnia is that the very beginnings of the Swedish organization are directly tied to the Bosnian war. Namely, the organization formed shortly after the breaking news about sexual violence against women in Bosnia reached Sweden. Further, Bosnia is the country where Kvinna till Kvinna has been active for the longest period of time, which makes studying its engagement over time suitable. Another reason to focus on Bosnia is the international intervention, until then unprecedented, that followed the peace agreement signed in late 1995. At the same time as the Bosnia case represents "a positive story of international interest, commitment, and delivery", it offers important lessons regarding both the possibilities and limits of external peacebuilding in a war-shattered, divided country characterized by political instability (Hertić, Šapčanin and Woodward, 2000, p. 315).

Conflict and post-conflict situations provide opportunities for women to work actively on bringing about change. There is no shortage of examples that women in conflict-affected societies, despite trauma and victimization, "grasp this window of opportunity that transitional democracies allow to further gender justice, equality and rights" (Porter, 2007, p. 4). Originating from the

women's peace movement, the Swedish organization has been one of the few foreign actors early and specifically interested in working with domestic women's groups, viewing them as potential peacebuilding forces. By investigating Kvinna till Kvinna, we can throw light on the role that women-friendly foreign actors can play in international peacebuilding.

Women's transnational encounters for peace

A central objective of the dissertation was to go beyond donor bashing and unproblematized descriptions of sisterhood between women. The accent is put on the dynamic nature of encounters between Kvinna till Kvinna and Bosnian women's organizations at a specific time and in a postwar setting marked by strong international presence and domestic political tensions. To capture the complexity of the peacebuilding endeavor, critically scrutinize it and discern its benevolence, inspiration was found in postcolonial and semiperipherality theories, as well as influential theorizing on peacebuilding, sisterhood, and solidarity. In this DDB, the theoretical perspectives utilized are briefly touched upon.

The idea that peace is more than the absence of wartime violence has been articulated in peace research for a long time. The scholarship on peace should "encompass [...] the conditions for peaceful relations between the dominant and the exploited, rulers and ruled, men and women, western and non-western cultures" and look for positive peace "in the form of human empathy, solidarity and community" (Galtung cited in Ramsbotsham, Woodhouse and Miall, 2011, p. 44). Also, limiting peacebuilding to state-building and reconstruction and viewing it as a phase that follows peacekeeping and peacemaking have started to be questioned. Suggestions about broadening the idea of peacebuilding have been voiced, especially by those interested in women's roles in peacebuilding. In order to make visible and value the work done at the grassroots level, where women are usually active, peacebuilding needs to be understood as a process

that encompasses pre-conflict, conflict and post-conflict stages, and both formal and informal efforts (Porter, 2007). Working on the dissertation, I most certainly felt the need for a broad view on peace and peacebuilding. Without viewing peace as more than silencing the guns and peacebuilding as a phenomenon that encompasses issues of gender justice, human relations and a variety of activities, it would be nearly impossible to understand the work of Kvinna till Kvinna and its Bosnian counterparts.

Of special relevance for this dissertation is the peacebuilding model called *peacebuilding from below*, which since the early 1990s has held high status among practitioners. One of the key characteristics of this model is cooperation between international and local actors where the task of the former is to empower the latter to build peace in their communities. Foreign actors are seen to have a major role in the creation of opportunities for encounters, thus making space for the parties to connect as human beings and develop visions of a shared future (Lederach, 1997). Some of the blind spots of this theory, with John Paul Lederach as a front figure, are that it makes the local peacebuilder dependent on international reinforcement, pays no significant attention to the power dimension in the local/international relationship, and holds a rather uncritical stance towards the local (Paffenholtz, 2015).

Part of the critique directed towards contemporary peace missions concerns the expectation of evolution in the host country. The focus put on changing attitudes and behaviors of host populations makes them, as it has been argued, “a modern version of the *mission civilisatrice*” (Paris, 2002, p. 638). The knowledge produced on former Yugoslav areas and its peoples after the early 1990s that consequently informed the international intervention emphasized conflict based on identity politics rather than cooperation and the long experience of living together. Unsurprisingly then, the most prevalent role of international actors in Bosnia as well as elsewhere has been pedagogical (Coles, 2007). Seeking theoretical inspiration in the field of postcolonial studies, where

the relationship between power and knowledge, and the construction of notions about ‘the Other’ are central, has thus been a given. This dissertation leans though heavily on Marina Blagojević’s theory of semiperipherality, which deals with the geographic space focused on here and is particularly applicable to countries going through ‘transition’.¹ The characteristic of the semiperiphery are: experienced *de-development* (the formerly industrialized societies have deteriorated rather than developed during the ‘transition’, especially in terms of the social aspect of life), a sense of *lagging behind* (the semiperiphery attempts to ‘catch up’ with the core, which views itself as more developed and establishes norms, but is never able to close the gap) and *self-colonizing tendency* (the need to catch up is not entirely imposed by the core but is internalized by the Balkaners themselves). However, as much as the semiperiphery strives towards the core, it also resists the integration into it, wanting to preserve its own cultural characteristics (Blagojević, 2009).

Before concluding this section of the DDB, the concepts of women and solidarity need to be addressed briefly. Throughout this DDB numerous referenses are made to *women*. It does not mean that I view women as a monolithihic collective. Previous research as well as the empirical findings of my dissertation dispute claims about universality of women's experiences. Although these differ across time and space, the dissertation studies women who choose to organize as women, thus holding a belief that women share some core needs that should be fought for collectively. In order to understand their thinking and actions, some generalization is not just inevitable, but in this case also desirable. However, both the solidarity and hierarchies that unfolded in the context of peacebuilding in Bosnia are problematized. In line with

¹ Although extensively used, the word transition is problematic. As some scholars have remarked, it is ideologically loaded and implies that liberal democracy is a given outcome of transition and the only possible path that a post-socialist and postwar state can take. They suggest the word “transformation” as more suitable to use in this context. See, for example, Einhorn, 2000; Blagojević 2009.

influential scholars such as bell hooks (1984), I view solidarity as something that cannot be assumed a priori, but is rather the result of continuous encounters and bonding across difference. Encounters of this kind are by no means friction-free, in fact debates and disagreements are viewed as a natural part of the process. Challenges and even discomfort are also an integral part of rhetorical listening, which Krista Ratcliff (2005) sees as a code of cross-cultural encounters. It is no quick fix solution but an ongoing process in which we are expected to show openness and make an effort to understand others as well as to critically reflect on our own references of the world.

Empirical material and method

The aim and research questions of this thesis have required a combination of different sources and methods. Thus, the empirical material utilized in the dissertation consists of both written and oral sources, the majority of which appears in research for the first time. There is no given hierarchical order between the sources as their usage is tied to their relevance for the respective research questions. The variety of sources has enabled a fuller and more nuanced image of Kvinna till Kvinna's role in Bosnia as well as an in-depth study of its relationship with domestic women's organizations and the cooperation with Sida. Combining different sources and methods was also a matter of promoting the visibility of different actors and their perspectives as well as illuminating the studied phenomenon from different angles. To enhance the reliability of the data used, I used triangulation as a method, which means to extract information from sources independent from each other.

The written material used ranges from official documents, such as reports and newsletters made for a wider public, to internal documents, such as minutes, weekly reports, educational materials, and some e-mail correspondence. Semi-official materials such as requests and reports to Sida as well as evaluation reports conducted by independent investigators on behalf of Sida have also

been valuable sources of information. All this material, along with articles published in Swedish daily and weekly press, has been produced by Kvinna till Kvinna and located either in the organization's archive in Stockholm or on its website. Official sources are generally purified from information that could compromise the image of the organization, because their very purpose is to show the organization in a positive light and to attract donors. Internal documents, such as the weekly reports sent from the Sarajevo office to the main office in Stockholm, have been of special significance. This rich material gives a unique insight into the organization's work on the ground and allows us to follow Kvinna till Kvinna's activities in Bosnia chronologically, including contacts with local organizations, Sida and other international actors.

When it comes to Bosnian organizations, written material is much scarcer. As young organizations with small resources, they primarily invested time in implementing their activities and less in documenting the work. Some letters from Bosnian women as well as a small number of evaluations of activities arranged by the Swedish donor were found in Kvinna till Kvinna's archive. Also, the weekly reports contain substantial amounts of information about Bosnian organizations. Although the fact that these reports have been written from the perspective of the Swedish organization makes them somewhat problematic, I have reasoned that the relevance of the information for the research question determines the suitability of the source (Ågren, 2005). Unlike other written and oral sources available, the weekly reports provide us with a glimpse into the dealings of local organizations in different situations over time, displaying both compliance with and opposition to donor requirements.

The oral source material used comprises interviews conducted with Kvinna till Kvinna employees and with women from four Bosnian women's organizations. Oral sources "tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believe they were doing, and what they now think they did" (Portelli, 1991, 50). An oral source is always affected by the context in which it was

created and by the purpose that it was created for. Each encounter with interviewees presents an opportunity for new and deepened insights. During these encounters, I gained invaluable knowledge about the context in which Kvinna till Kvinna and Bosnian organizations operated. Oral history has been immensely significant to women's history research (Armitage, Hart & Weathermon, 2003), and remains essential for documenting and understanding women's activism and peacebuilding efforts in societies around the globe.

Interviews with 9 former and current employees of Kvinna till Kvinna were carried out between 2009 and 2013. As the selection of sources depends on the information that they can provide, I chose to focus primarily on persons with the experience of working at the Sarajevo office and those that due to the nature of their work assignments were closely connected to it. During three research trips to Bosnia, made between 2009 and 2012, I conducted 13 interviews with activists from Lara, Žene Ženama, Budućnost and Forum Žena. The selection of organizations was based on the following criteria: long-term support by Kvinna till Kvinna, representation of both entities that make up postwar Bosnia, geographical areas particularly burdened by the wartime past, and political activity. The reason to pay attention to organizations from areas with a troubled wartime past and pronounced nationalist sentiments is that they organized under especially difficult conditions, which made them an interesting example of local agency. All interviews were semi-structured which means that interview guides with a few predetermined open-ended questions were used, and that the interviewees could freely expand on topics that they found to be of importance.

This study combines an interest in rhetoric, narratives and practice from the perspectives of both actors. Paying attention to silences is another important component. Silence is nowadays perceived as more than a passive form of agency. Rather it is looked upon as a "tacit form of communication in post-conflict social processes and everyday life" (Schierenbeck, 2015, p. 1027-1028),

and it can be used in a constructive way to cultivate relationships in violently divided societies. In terms of methodology, in this study a hermeneutic approach meets that of oral history. Both methods cultivate a genuine interest in historical actors, viewing them as subjects worth understanding on their own terms, which has demanded thorough contextualization. Entering an actor's perspective does not necessarily mean portraying the studied in a positive light. Striving for a critical but also empathetic view on the actors studied, I was aided by Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion and hermeneutics of reconciliation. The focus of a hermeneutics of suspicion is to expose structures of power and hidden power ambitions (Ricoeur, 1993). However, in doing so the researcher also needs to remain faithful to some of the most basic principles in hermeneutics, such as the importance of listening and approaching the empirical material with sensitivity.

Findings

The dissertation illustrates how even principle-driven, well-intentioned, and locally-focused external efforts contain problematic characteristics typical to interventions in the era of liberal peace. Two parallel lines of thought manifested in Kvinna till Kvinna's encounter with its Bosnian 'partners', namely a strong belief in transnational sisterhood coupled with notions of Swedish superiority.

The idea of female solidarity guided and marked the role that Kvinna till Kvinna played as an external peacebuilder in Bosnia. The formation of the organization as a reaction to the suffering of women during the Bosnian war was in itself an act of solidarity. Kvinna till Kvinna worked actively to awaken a sense of solidarity among Swedish women, stressing common experiences of male oppression and women's vulnerability in war, but also their potential as peacebuilders. This signals that Kvinna till Kvinna, with its roots in the peace movement, was in the early 1990s on the cutting edge of viewing women as

valuable peace actors. Further engagement in Bosnia shows a persistent encouragement of domestic activists to cooperate for inclusive peace and to do so based on their commonalities as women. Strong evidence points to that Kvinna till Kvinna has had a decisive role in giving impetus for joint action and the creation of the women's movement in this violently divided setting.

Female solidarity was also found to constitute a foundation in the relationship between Kvinna till Kvinna and the women's groups that it supported. Both actors spoke about the importance of shared values regarding bettering women's situation. For Bosnian NGO women, Kvinna till Kvinna distinguished itself from other donors by genuine care, the ability to take them seriously and engage in dialogue with them. As a pioneer of peacebuilding from below, the Swedish foundation highlighted local actors as true peacebuilding forces and saw its own role in supporting their initiatives. My findings suggest that this was sincerely attempted to be put into practice. However, the results of my investigation also expose power imbalances in this type of cooperation that at first glance may seem insignificant. While Lederach (1997), as a front figure of peacebuilding from below, did not attach much importance to the power dimension in the local/international encounter, peace researchers such as Thania Paffenholz have recently warned that local actors are "still at risk of being dominated by soft power inherent in the international peace builder's interventionist logic of training and peace infrastructures" (Paffenholz, 2015, p. 860). I argue that the practice of Kvinna till Kvinna in Bosnia illustrates that the organization, despite a general emphasis on local ownership, systematically exercised *soft power* over its Bosnian 'partners'. Through frequent meetings and utilization of soft methods such as (formal and informal) conversation and persuasion, the field representatives sought to influence local organizations in a desired direction, inducing them to adjust to donor preferences, which with time usually happened.

Another main finding is that the mission of Kvinna till Kvinna in Bosnia to a great extent has been pedagogical. Kvinna till Kvinna saw itself as an active donor that wished to contribute to the empowerment of its ‘partners’ in several ways. Education turned out to be a dominant method intended to strengthen local activists. Research indeed shows that the empowerment of women happens with success in alternative learning spaces organized by autonomous organizations (Stromquist, 2002). There is solid evidence that Kvinna till Kvinna put a great deal of effort into equipping Bosnian organizations with knowledge they could use in their work, especially attending to the political aspect of empowerment. However, education was also a method used to inspire Bosnian NGO women to think differently. Whereas there are early traces of Balkanist and Cold War discourse within the organization, it is from late 1995, after the organization increased its presence on the ground, that notions of Bosnia lagging behind and thoughts about educational needs of local women emerge.

Kvinna till Kvinna saw itself as contributing knowledge to its Bosnian ‘partners’ in gender equality, the third sector, and feminism. In particular, the first two are known to be areas of Swedish expertise. Statements regarding the feminist views of the Swedish foundation being “new and radical” in Bosnia, the investment in education of its ‘partners’, and, not least, the unforeseen silence about state socialism and its gender order bear witness that Bosnia was seen as a clean slate concerning the aforementioned areas. Another, somewhat surprising, finding of this research is Kvinna till Kvinna’s lack of deeper knowledge about the local context, including basic facts regarding Yugoslav/Bosnian women’s history. My conclusion is that it was deemed as irrelevant for the mission in Bosnia. Employing exclusively Swedish staff at the Sarajevo office, study visits in Sweden and the hiring of Swedish experts sends a clear message about who was the learner in the Swedish-Bosnian encounter. Thus, the dissertation pinpoints the existence of a ‘we’ (Swedes) versus ‘they’ (Bosnians) thinking and pays attention to that there was a hierarchy of

knowledge. Notions of Swedish superiority were also expressed in relation to other donors. My findings thus confirm the Swedish self-image in the context of international development identified by other researchers where Sweden tends to be placed outside of colonial history and Swedish aid/peace workers perceived as more respectful of indigenous people (Eriksson Baaz, 2001; Berg, 2007).

At the same time, Kvinna till Kvinna continuously evaluated its own work methods, often in dialogue with their Bosnian counterparts. It is equally important to underline that knowledge transferred from Sweden has been appreciated and requested by Bosnian women's organizations. This fact has, on one hand, been interpreted as a self-colonizing tendency due to signs of internalized beliefs of underdevelopment, not uncommon in the semiperiphery which tends to more voluntarily accept influences from the core. On the other hand, the findings clearly show that the attention received from Kvinna till Kvinna was significant for young women's groups with limited financial resources, which used educational opportunities offered to increase their own capacities.

The unfolding of the Swedish-Bosnian encounter between 1993 and 2013 attests to an apparent change over time, thus disclosing a movement towards a greater power imbalance in the relationship between Kvinna till Kvinna and the women's organizations that it supported. This process began with the abandonment of the principle to provide support from the distance in the fall of 1995 when the Swedish foundation embarked towards active presence in Bosnia. Through this move, the potential for better understanding of the needs of local organizations was enhanced as so was the possibility to control and influence them. A redefinition regarding the kind of relationship that Kvinna till Kvinna wished to cultivate with women's groups in Bosnia also occurred. In the initial phase, thoughts about closeness based on friendship were voiced, but with time the friendship became problematic and the relationship turned

into a contractual one. The professionalization of Kvinna till Kvinna, including Sida's demands for faster measurable results and stricter reporting requirements, prompted increased control that seriously affected the relationship.

As an important background actor, Sida both enabled and limited the cooperation between Kvinna till Kvinna and its local counterparts. The relationship between Sida, Kvinna till Kvinna and Bosnian organizations was one of interdependence. This dissertation shows efforts that Kvinna till Kvinna continuously made to create good contact with Sida, influence and educate it on women's role in peacebuilding. At Sida, Kvinna till Kvinna was, however, for a long time seen as an organization engaged in humanitarian issues and women's health rather than democracy and peace. With its holistic view on women's empowerment and strong focus on women as peace actors, Kvinna till Kvinna was indeed breaking new ground in the field of development.

The analysis shows that the control, which gradually intensified, was also a way of coping with the lack of insight into that actions of 'partner' organizations. The latter resisted the control and influence by its Swedish donor in many subtle ways. The resistance that manifested over time illustrates the ambivalent relationship of the semiperiphery to the core. I argue that the simultaneous interest in and rejection to influences from Western countries was especially pronounced in the post-Yugoslav space, which had experienced significant de-development, but where people still had rather fresh memories of better times. The relationship that developed between Kvinna till Kvinna and its Bosnian counterparts during the studied period can thus be described as a *hierarchical sisterhood*.

This concept captures well the asymmetry and the desire for female solidarity found in the Swedish-Bosnian encounter. As already mentioned, shared values about the need of bettering women's situation and a sensibility to problems that women face daily were a common platform for a sisterhood to develop.

However, what constitutes a sisterhood between women is by no means a given. According to Jenny Gunnarsson Payne (2006), sisterhood is as an empty significant that can be filled with different and even conflicting demands. Her explanation that sisterhood is “necessarily paradoxical” as it, on one hand, has universal ambitions appealing to all women and, on the other hand, usually includes a limited circle of sisters is also confirmed in the dissertation (Gunnarsson Payne, 2006, p. 138). The solidarity and support of Kvinna till Kvinna was intended for women who actively sought to bring about change in postwar Bosnia. The ideal Bosnian female peacebuilder was one who prioritized her gender identity before the ethnic one, embraced multiethnicity, distanced herself from the communist past and engaged in political activism. She was initiative-taking, but at the same time willing to learn. Finding individuals and organizations that matched this romanticized image of the local peacebuilder was not always an easy task.

Research shows that relations developed in transnational encounters are in more cases than not asymmetrical, but not necessarily in a total sense (Saunier, 2013). While there is no doubt regarding which of the actors studied was in the most privileged position, my findings show that there was some mobility with regards to superior/inferior positions. Peace researchers have started to problematize essentialist understandings of the international/local relationship that associate the former with power and the latter with resistance (Paffenholtz, 2015). As an intermediary, Kvinna till Kvinna was dependent on information from its local ‘partners’ but was not always able to receive it. When it suited their own interests, some Bosnian women’s groups withheld information about things ranging from their own activities and situation in the local communities to taxes. Interpreted as a form of resistance, the findings at the same time challenge the image of local actors as powerless victims of Western domination and indicate that they occasionally were in the position to exert power over the donor.

Conclusion

Women peacebuilders and their role in peace processes are still awaiting recognition and inclusion in history books. The dissertation *Hierarchical Sisterhood* documents and analyzes Swedish support to women's peace efforts provided between 1993 and 2013 in a specific geographical area. Although the study deals with the Bosnian context, conclusions are not necessarily confined to it, but are to be viewed as contributions to the body of literature that problematizes international interventions in areas affected by war and conflict. The dissertation makes contributions to subfields of historical science such as women's history, development history and the history of transnational encounters and peacebuilding. Responsible peacebuilding scholarship is, however, also dedicated to a critical scrutiny of the link between peacebuilding theory and what is practiced on the ground with the goal to improve the latter. Hence, this DDB ends with a consideration of the implications for both research and practice given the lessons learned from the summarized dissertation, and a few recommendations of to address the challenges presented. My truest hope is that the content in this report will be beneficial for international and local actors involved in peacebuilding at different levels as well as for Swedish development assistance in general.

Implications and recommendations for the future

Following the work of Kvinna till Kvinna during two decades of its engagement in Bosnia provides us with an understanding of possibilities and challenges within the field of international peacebuilding. The overall findings suggest that a mixture of Kvinna till Kvinna's own notions of women's peacebuilding and of the area in which it operated, along with donor agendas and concrete circumstances on the ground, both enabled and limited its work in Bosnia. The report has highlighted both the potential of women's transnational encounters for peace and problematic features that we need to

continue pondering. The dissertation illustrates clearly that aiding peacebuilding in troubled areas is extremely difficult, but also that taking a position of a bystander to war, conflict and inequality cannot be an alternative if we strive towards sustainable peace. We learn that engaging for peace at home and abroad demands courage, persistence and a “capacity to imagine something rooted in the challenges of the real world yet capable of giving birth to that which does not yet exist” (Lederach, 2005, p. ix). We also learn that meaningful peacebuilding happens at different levels, involves a variety of local actors and creative action which, when recognized, can make significant contributions to inclusive peace in conflict-ridden areas.

The example of Kvinna till Kvinna teaches us that international peacebuilders who are driven by a sincere commitment to support local peace efforts enjoy credibility among local actors and can create fruitful long-term cooperation with them. The organization’s roots in the women’s peace movement are reflected both in its dedication to exclusively support women’s groups as well as its view on peace and peacebuilding. The findings suggest that experiences and knowledge that internationals possess affect their approach to actors and initiatives that they encounter on the ground. Considering women to be key actors for peace and embracing a broad understanding of peace and peacebuilding enabled Kvinna till Kvinna to recognize and support the peace efforts of local women. The definitions of peace and peacebuilding that we, as researchers and practitioners, use obviously matter as they can either broaden or narrow our perspective. In order to spot potential peacebuilders and creative context-adapted actions, we need to employ theoretical definitions that allow us to do so.

It is essential that major donor agencies have comprehensive and nuanced knowledge about peace processes as well as the will to use it. The findings strongly imply that approaching conflict-affected settings with an open attitude, curiosity and genuine care is vitally important for establishing oneself as a

credible international actor and for achieving results that benefit those one wishes to aid. Building trustworthy relationships as well as supporting solidarity across difference in violently divided societies is, however, a process which demands effort and time. This is valuable for donor agencies to understand and consider in their strategies, so that they can actively support long-term cooperations between external and local peacebuilders. Clearly, dedicated international organizations that have a sensibility for women's needs, solid knowledge about peace processes and experience of transnational encounters bring something qualitatively better to conflict-affected areas. They connect quite easily to local activists, facilitate encounters between them and encourage joint action. To support the strengthening of international/local cooperation, it is important to avoid burdening the parties with excessive bureaucracy, because it tends to affect the relationships that they have worked hard to establish. A disturbing discovery in the dissertation is that the uneven power dynamics, which is very common in international/local encounters, increased over time. As significant background actors, which create conditions for international/local cooperation, donor agencies need to problematize their own role in bridging and reinforcing the inequality gap between intermediate organizations and their local counterparts.

The example of Kvinna till Kvinna also teaches us that linking a feminist agenda with concrete aid work is possible, but not easy. The findings show that shared core values and nurtured relations combined with a dialogue-based approach constitute key presuppositions for a successful cooperation. The ambition to exclusively support local initiatives proved to be another valuable component. An important lesson that can be learned from this example is, however, that an emphasis on female solidarity, local ownership and dialogue does not necessarily solve the problem of power imbalance between the actors involved. In line with a study by Paffenholtz (2015), which warns about domination of local actors by soft power, the dissertation indeed exposes a pattern of the systematic use of soft methods to influence local organizations,

which generally led them to adapt to donor preferences. This implies that even well-intentioned and locally-focused external actors need to constantly be on the alert regarding the risks of power asymmetry. This not only prompts practitioners to continuously reflect on the consequences of their own thinking and actions but could help them recognize usually subtle forms of local resistance. Needless to say, critical reflection on the extent to which authentic local initiatives are encouraged is also needed within donor agencies.

Another lesson that can be learned, based on the dissertation summarized in this DDB, is that donors seeking to support peacebuilding in conflict-affected areas would benefit from developing a deeper interest in contextual knowledge instead of deeming it as outdated and irrelevant in times of 'transition'. In order to take seriously the wealth that the different experiences women bring into encounters with each other and act with even more sensitivity to the local context, there needs to be a will to understand the point of view of others as well as a critical approach to one's own references of the world. Since there are few, if any, quick fix solutions in peacebuilding this is also an ongoing process, which Ratcliff (2005) calls rhetorical listening. When applied, it can potentially bring the parties who meet to a better understanding of each other's standpoints and help us deal with hierarchies common in the field of aid work. Finally, the findings disclose a need for problematizing our rather uncritical stance towards the local as well as essentialist understandings of the international/local relationship. By exclusively associating the former with power and the latter with resistance, we might fail to attend to the power dynamics in these relationships, thus disregarding their complexity.

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International peacebuilding in conflict-affected areas entails possibilities as well as challenges. Focusing on the engagement of Swedish foundation Kvinna till Kvinna in Bosnia between 1993 and 2013, this DDB analyzes encounters with domestic NGOs to understand the international-local relationship.

Internationellt fredsbyggande i konfliktdrabbade områden innebär möjligheter såväl som utmaningar. Denna DDB undersöker den svenska stiftelsen Kvinna till Kvinnas engagemang i fredsbyggande i Bosnien mellan 1993 och 2013 och analyserar mötet med inhemska NGO:er för att förstå relationen mellan det internationella och lokala.

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