

**Report from
IFOR's Women Peacemakers Program's
EUROPEAN REGIONAL CONSULTATION
on
WOMEN AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

**April 2-9, 1998
HUNGARY**

Introduction

This consultation was the first in a series of three regional consultations for women working in conflict areas; a series which will culminate in a fourth intercontinental consultation. The main goals of the consultation were to provide a space where women from European conflict areas, with experience and interest in building bridges between communities in conflict, could exchange ideas and experiences, find support, and deepen their understanding of nonviolent conflict resolution. Judging from the evaluations by participants, co-facilitators, and organizers, these goals were accomplished.

The consultation was organized by the International Fellowship of Reconciliation's (IFOR) Women Peacemakers Program (WPP). The co-facilitators of the consultation were Diana Francis (UK), a former IFOR President and experienced conflict resolution trainer, and Vesna Terselic (Croatia), founder of Anti-War Campaign Croatia and conflict resolution trainer.

The Participants

The organizers spent much time and energy in selecting participants, as the success of the consultation, given its highly participatory nature, depended upon participants. The list of participants is in Appendix 1, on pages 7-9.

The consultation began on the evening of 2 April 1998 with a welcoming meal and introductions. The fact that seven of the expected participants could not attend (from Bosnia, Kosovo/a, North Ossetia and Georgia) illustrates precisely some of the many difficulties that women working in conflict situations face, the very difficulties that the consultation sought to address. For example, the participant from Kosovo/a was in the midst of preparing for a referendum; the Georgian was ill from overwork; there was fighting at the airport the Abkhazian participant would have used, if she had not been denied permission to travel by Russian authorities; the Bosniaks also faced travel and work difficulties.

This "imbalance" resulted in the fact that the participant from Ingushetia, unlike other

participants, had no dialogue partner. She "had much to say" to the North Ossetian, and was initially disappointed. Later she told me she was very happy that she could take the time "to listen", rather than constantly explain the situation in her country, as was the case with most conferences. She was the second participant to comment to me that while their original intention had been to talk and raise awareness about the situation in their countries, discovered that it was preferable to listen to what was being said.

The "imbalance" also meant that the Croatian co-facilitator at times switched roles and became a participant, in order to partner the Serbian participant, which could potentially have created confusion. An Indian co-facilitator of the upcoming Asia-Pacific consultation also switched roles. Originally invited as an observer (to apply the lessons learned from the first consultation to the second), she quickly began to join in small group discussion and exercises. This appeared to be easily accepted both by the group and by the individual herself.

Comment from a co-facilitator: "The idea had been to get together women who had substantial experience, both of conflict and of working with it; women who would have a great deal to teach each other and to learn from each other; women who would value support; women who would also be able to pass on the benefits of this opportunity to a wider network of women. My impression of all the women present was that they fulfilled each of these criteria, though some to a greater degree than others. They also seemed to be strongly motivated from the outset, appreciating the importance of this chance to meet together."

Ultimately there were 11 participants (including the Indian participant), two co-facilitators, and two organizers (WPP Program Officer Shelley Anderson, with the function of recording the event and helping develop follow-up, and WPP assistant Janne Poort-van Eeden (in charge of logistics, media contacts, and videotaping), for a total of 15 women. The religious affiliation of participants included Islam (4), Christianity (6) and Judaism (1). It was disappointing that not all the expected participants could attend, though difficult for the organizers to think what more could have done to ensure participation. The smaller group did allow for a rapid bonding of the group, and the very quick development of a high level of trust. Much informal learning on dialogue and bridge building took place, unplanned by the organizers: one participant reported how moved she was to learn that a Jew had recommended the Palestinian participant, and a Greek recommended the Turkish (N. Cyprus) participant; appreciation was also expressed at how, when giving a history of Hungary (including the Ottoman invasion), the Hungarian guides (members of IFOR's contact group in Hungary) spoke about the appearance of "Turkish guests".

Comment from participant: "I liked working in different small groups, sometimes altogether, sometimes in pairs, sometimes alone...[I'm] sorry that the other women could not attend."

The Program

Comment from participant: "Trainers aren't in touch with each other in my country, so when my tires were slashed, I had to generate support. Coming from a conflict makes us feel very much in need of support, care and empowerment."

This first full day (3 April) reflected the methodology for the entire week: presentations by co-facilitators; discussions in small groups and in the larger group; relevant exercises. The day's agenda was reviewed and home groups were formed. A diagram on the stages of conflict (see Appendix I) was presented, and attention was paid to how issues of justice and power are sometimes left out of discussions on conflict resolution. A discussion was held on the challenges of responding to violence. Each participant positioned her situation based on the diagram, and shared what she is trying to do to respond to the conflict stage and level of violence.

Comment from participant: "I feel so helpless...we work so long and hard, and then the government can destroy everything in a second. People call us traitors."

Participants made a visual display with drawings, photos, words, objects, of their work. During the afternoon there was discussion on organizational aims, strengths, weaknesses and needs (with funding being identified as a major need by most participants. This led to the addition of a workshop on fundraising, which was later evaluated highly).

A video workshop, conducted by Janne, was added that night. A documentary was shown on how video could be manipulated to make a negative or positive statement; participants were given hands-on experience with the video equipment and videotaped each other, with the videotapes played back immediately for feedback.

Comment by participant: "The kind of things we do never get press coverage, so we always feel we are failing, because we've learned to judge ourselves by the media."

4 April

Discussions in smaller groups and the large group centered around justice, and gender violence. There was general agreement that gender violence increases during conflict, including domestic violence.

Comment from participant: "Women have learned a great deal about domestic violence, and recovery from it, which can be used in the wider context."

An continuum line exercise was held by drawing an imaginary line, with two opposite ends: one end accepted occasion military solutions, while the opposite end stood for total

commitment to active nonviolence (ANV). Participants placed themselves on the line and discussed their positions.

There was one participant at the extreme of each pole, approximately two participants in the middle, while most spoke in favor of nonviolent conflict resolution.

The video "Women in a Divided Land" was shown during the lunch break and the Palestinian and Israeli participants discussed their experiences working with dialogue groups for Palestinian and Israeli women. The group benefited from listening to the different perceptions the women had of each other's dialogue group.

Discussions in small groups on empowerment included answering questions such as "what forms of power do you have? Do you have all the forms of power you need to address your aims? if not, how can you gain the missing forms of power? If you start to think of yourself as being more powerful, would that change your aims?"

5 April

Comment from participant: "Guilt is always individual for me. The debate in my country now is if such a thing as collective responsibility. As a citizen of my country I am co-responsible for what my country's army did. I did not have a finger on the trigger, but I had the power to do something to stop the killing."

Emotionally the hardest day. After reviewing a poster on purposes of dialogue, the day was spent with discussions in small groups and together on dialogue and identity, responsibility and guilt, and living with different histories. Such hard and painful questions are necessary for reconciliation, and it was a sign of maturity on the part of the participants that such a honest exchange happened.

The exercises included thinking of experiences that left us feeling powerful, and of experiences that left us feeling helpless; and exercises designed to stimulate discussion on core values that motivate people to act for peace.

Comment from participant: "I think it was very empowering to create this kind of opportunity and give enough safety for strong emotions to be expressed without shame and with much support. Thanks a million!"

Comment from participant: "The fact that we could use words like 'energy' without feeling isolated or different, the sensitivity expressed...at home I would have rubbished myself for such emotions. I feel looked after here."

6 April

Comment from participants: "Maybe brief summaries and maps of conflicts in advance [would be useful]. This was my first chance to meet women from Eastern Europe and think about west/east attitudes, cultural differences and experiences."

Participants interviewed each other (see "Evaluation and Conclusions", plus Appendix II). Participants appeared very engaged in the interviews, which helped to provide more in depth information about the different conflicts and each individual's work. The afternoon was free, with a tour of historic Budapest offered by Hungarian IFOR members, and dinner together in the city.

7 April

Comment from participant: "I am so tired of looking for money. So much time is wasted--at least a day every time a new funder has to come and inspect our work. For once I would like to get money without having to write a whole book."

Group discussion with case studies on building bridges between communities in conflict, and challenges of dialogue. WPP Program Officer Shelley Anderson gave a workshop on fundraising, and there was a talk by Dr. Kim Lane Scheppele, Co-director of Central European University's Gender and Culture Program, on current research in East and Central European gender studies, and access to research grants, scholarships and the Soros Foundation.

Comment from participant: "[Funders] find different excuses not to help. They don't like our attitude, [which is] to get people to help themselves. If we can't go on [with our work] because of money, it's a crime."

8 April

Presentation of the Goss-Mayr's model of social analysis and strategy (see Appendix III). This model was developed during the work of IFOR Honorary Presidents Jean Goss and Hildegard Mayr, and has been used in training programs in Latin America, North America, Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe), with discussion on strategies for increasing our power. Participants worked in small groups, then came back into the larger group to reflect on what would be useful to initiate in the next few months in their organizations, and what steps could be taken to make these changes. In presentations of their small group analysis, many women identified the need to provide civic education for women, and to increase women's influence in political decision-making.

Evaluation, and videotaping of messages from participants to the Asia-Pacific consultation.

Comment from participant: "I will never again use the words 'justice' and 'right' like I did before. I have learned so much from the sharing of the women."

Follow-up

Numerous projects were mentioned by participants, in particular initiating or continuing in efforts to promote dialogue between 'enemy' women once they return home. The following are some follow-up activities the WPP will be specifically involved in.

A short video is being produced by Janne for participants of the consultation. This, plus a written report, will be sent to all participants. Video messages made by the participants for the Asia-Pacific consultation are being processed.

A booklet with map and background information on the conflicts will be put together at the IFOR office, based on writings by the participants; the Armenian, Azeri and Ingush participants will arrange translation into their own languages and into Russian, and distribute this throughout the region.

The Azeri participant is speaking with Oxfam and the Soros Foundation about funding for a consultation for 25 Azeri women, plus international speakers from European conflict areas.

The Armenian participant is interested in a similar consultation, first perhaps for Armenian women and then a joint Armenian-Azeri consultation. She has translated the Decade Appeal into Armenian and collected 300 signatures for the Appeal.

The Israeli participant will investigate an active nonviolence training for her organization, Bat Shalom.

The North Irish participants will investigate instituting a Listening Project in their communities.

The Cypriot participants are organizing speaking engagements in Cyprus for other selected participants.

Success Factors

Several factors seemed to contribute towards the success of this particular consultation:

- * the time and care taken to select women with experience in working with conflict, in particular looking for women willing to engage in dialogue with women from the opposite community
- * good criteria for selection of participants
- * the participants own eagerness to learn from each other and to share their own experiences
- * an adequate common language (the consultation language was English), and the gradual development of another common 'language' with which to talk about peace and conflict resolution. The fact that attention was paid to underlying values of the participants may have created to a feeling of commonality, despite cultural differences.
- * the creation of an atmosphere where emotions such as sadness, pain, and trust could be expressed, along with the presentation of more 'factual' information, without participants being made to feel 'weak' or 'stupid.'

Comment by participant: "I learned I wasn't as inexperienced as I first said I was!"

- * Good cooperation and team work in the working group, and between organizers and facilitators.

Comment from facilitator: "I feel we [the co-facilitators] complemented each other well. I think our style must have contributed to the 'gelling' of the group. All of us seemed to work together very comfortably...I felt completely supported and able to rely on all my colleagues, both practically and emotionally."

Evaluation and Conclusion

The consultation confirmed the usefulness of the idea of bringing women from opposing communities together. While specific sessions were deemed less useful by specific participants, every session offered was rated useful by most participants. Overall evaluation of the consultation was very positive; two participants spoke of it as "life changing". One participant recommended that such a gathering be held at least once a year. The concrete information exchanged was useful (for example, the North Caucasus women were very interested in learning from the Northern Irish participants about the effects of long-term conflicts on children), but perhaps more importantly the women's sense of isolation was

diminished.

Comment from participant: "I will try to create 'Network of Women from Conflict Countries'. We should meet at least once a year."

Almost every woman spoke of being considered a traitor to her country/ethnic group because of her work for peace. The sense of isolation and helplessness was mentioned several times by most of the participants. Many specifically mentioned how learning of other women's situations put their struggle into perspective. All of the participants agreed that being together had been useful and informative; it was clear from the very beginning that the women were enthusiastic about meeting and exchanging experiences and support with women from other conflict areas.

Comment from participant: "Meeting strong women in conflict areas and hearing about their struggles created solidarity and empowerment."

Two specific concerns were raised repeatedly by participants: the need for more information and skills in fundraising, and the need for more access to political decision making. Fundraising not only for their specific group in order to continue their peace work, but also income generating projects (especially for refugee and displaced women) and general economic development for their countries. Some women used the term "civic education for women" in the context of women accessing decision-making processes, while at the same time criticizing existing political parties for lack of attention to women's issues.

The consultation was not a conflict resolution training as such. While some participants expressed the desire for more conflict resolution information/training, others felt some of the conceptual information presented was too "abstract". A few participants were trainers themselves. It would have been difficult to conduct an actual training given the participants' very different levels of expertise. Nevertheless, the working group for the Asia-Pacific consultation feels it important to establish a common group for participants, and will begin the Asia-Pacific consultation with a one-day conflict resolution training.

One criticism voiced by many participants was that they did not receive sufficient background, with map, on all the conflicts. The organizers had considered sending out a pre-consultation packet with information on the conflicts. This did not happen for several reasons: communication was difficult with many participants (for example, the Abkhazian candidate sent information that was never received, and relayed messages from Abkhazia to Moscow to IFOR; the Ingush participant had great difficulty in faxing to Europe; an Armenian candidate's mail was returned undelivered after three months); finding "neutral" background information on North Caucasus conflicts was difficult; the pressure of organizing travel and the program took precedence.

A half-day was devoted to women dividing into pairs and interviewing each other, based on

a list of questions specifically designed to elicit a deeper understanding of women's role in conflict. This was a very successful exercise, providing participants both with more time for in-depth discussion, and providing the WPP with written responses. It occurred in the middle of the consultation, however, and did not provide some participants with all the background information they wanted. The Asia-Pacific working group is looking at ways to provide for more in-depth understanding of the participants' conflicts.

Submitted by Shelley Anderson
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