
AdvocacyNet
News Bulletin 207
July 24, 2009

KOSOVO-SERB WOMEN SHAKE UP CIVIL SOCIETY WITH NEW NETWORK

July 31, 2009, Pristina, Kosovo: After struggling unsuccessfully to get their voices heard in a male-dominated civil society, Serbian women in Kosovo are taking matters into their own hands with the creation of the Kosovo Serb Women's Network (KSWN).

Fifteen organizations led by Serbian women in Kosovo have banded together to form the network, which aims to empower them and strengthen women's rights as the young country develops.

The KSWN was launched in May as an integral part of the established [Kosovo Women's Network \(KWN\)](#), an Advocacy Project (AP) partner. The KSWN addresses two causes of disempowerment among Kosovo-Serb women – ethnicity and gender. It strives not only to give Serbian women a unified presence in Kosovo, but to be a force for ethnic cooperation among Albanians and Serbs.

“The work of Serbian NGOs needs to be more transparent, accessible to women and communities, unified and coordinated,” said Snezana Karadzic, one of the founders of the KSWN.

The Serb minority makes up around 7 percent of the population in predominantly-Albanian Kosovo, and ethnic tensions run high. The government of Serbia maintains significant influence over the Serb population and they are instructed not to participate in any of Kosovo's institutions – civil, cultural, political or economic.

In the last few months, these tensions have resulted in allegations that [off-duty Kosovo police officers beat up a Serbian man and his son](#), and a [standoff over electricity](#) in the town of Sirinicka zupa, where Serbian residents refused to make payments to a Kosovar company. Some Kosovo Serbs have also [protested against paying border taxes](#) on goods transported between Kosovo and Serbia, because they still consider Kosovo a part of Serbia.

In contrast, the women of the KSWN believe in multi-ethnic cooperation as the only way toward integration, prosperity and a better life for all women in Kosovo. Many of the organizations that make up the new network have been longtime members of the KWN, and they chose KWN director Igo Rogova as their network consultant.

They've opened an office in the Serbian area of Kosovo, easing the infrastructure and transportation problems that had sometimes hampered Serbian women's involvement with the KWN.

And they've tried to create a space where the women's contributions and perspectives are valued, rather than ignored. In the past, Kosovo-Serb women who tried to participate in civil society found that political leaders held all the control and gave them few opportunities. In addition, those leaders neglected them while taking credit for the results of their work.

"Serbian women's NGOs have recognized the problem and realized that only the unification of their work can prevent a monopoly," Ms Karadzic said. "(We want to) support women from the Serbian community – to hear their voice and to recognize the results of their work."

The women hope the network will provide a path for them to make an impact on the process of transition and democratization in Kosovo, much like the KWN has strived to do since its establishment in 2000. Still, some Kosovo-Serbs see working with a Kosovo-Albanian network as a betrayal, and several women's groups have said they will not support or join the KSWN.

AP has supported the KWN since 2001, helping them to develop advocacy tools, such as press releases and a [newsletter](#). [Tiffany Ommundsen](#), a graduate student from Columbia University, is volunteering this summer as an AP Peace Fellow with KWN, and helped to publicize the KSWN launch.