

# Executive summary

## Overview

During the 1990s, grassroots women's networks throughout the Balkans had been found to be effective in reducing conflict-induced trauma amongst women, many of whom found themselves heading households for the first time or had suffered personal atrocities, such as rape. The Kosovo Women's Initiative (KWI) was established in July 1999 in the wake of a peace agreement that included provision for the withdrawal of all Serb forces from Kosovo and the safe and free return of all refugees and displaced people. Initial funding for the KWI, amounting to US\$10 million, came in the form of a grant to UNHCR from the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM) in the U.S. Department of State.

Project documents relating to KWI covering 1999 and 2001 actually describe a diverse range of goals and objectives, but the Terms of Reference relevant to this study refer a 2001 UNHCR document that describes two over-arching goals for KWI as follows:

- To help mobilize women throughout Kosovo, with a specific focus on returnee, displaced and war affected women, to assist them and their families in rebuilding their lives and livelihood; and
- To empower women to become agents of change and solidarity through raising awareness, fostering the development of women's networks and enhancing the principles of gender equity at all levels of government and civil society.

During September and October 2001, a two-member team of external consultants conducted focus group discussions, key informant interviews and a document review to evaluate impact, appropriateness, cost-effectiveness and sustainability of KWI-funded activities. The team also examined the application to KWI of lessons-learned from the Bosnian Women's Initiative (BWI), management and co-ordination issues and assessed the impact of donor requirements on project implementation.

Prior to the war in 1999, Kosovo had a reputation for being the poorest province of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia's (FRY). Illiteracy rates were relatively high before political autonomy was revoked in 1989, and the following decade witnessed further declines in the quality of education and health services for the Albanian population, particularly for women. Over the same period, an armed rebellion by ethnic Albanians gathered momentum. In 1999, massive expulsions, killings and human rights abuses by Serbs against ethnic Albanians living in the autonomous republic of Kosovo provoked an international response, including the bombing of Serbia by NATO forces and the stationing of NATO and Russian peacekeepers in Kosovo. The refugee exodus of ethnic Albanians from Kosovo was unusually large and swift and the subsequent humanitarian response involved the national interests of major powers, regional organizations and NATO. At the peak of the crisis,

UNHCR estimated that there were almost 850,000 Kosovo Albanian refugees who had fled Kosovo.

Serbs had selectively targeted men, and a large number of women thus found themselves not only living in new surroundings in one of the hastily constructed refugee camps, but also with new roles and responsibilities within their households.

The voluntary repatriation of Kosovo Albanian refugees and displaced persons that started in June 1999 was unexpectedly rapid and returnees arrived home to an environment that had been fundamentally altered. Surveys by a UN agency indicated that a third of the population was now under 15 years of age and the ratio of men to women between the ages of 20 - 50 was around 86:100. Many observers also warned about a return to the Albanian "*kanun*" of traditional codes that would result in the deterioration in the situation of women in post war Kosovo, notably in terms of unequal access to education, employment and rights to both property and children.

One of the most disturbing features of the conflict in the Balkans during the past decade has been the systematic use of rape as a weapon and instrument of torture. Concerns were raised from several quarters that similar atrocities were being perpetuated in Kosovo, but the actual incidence of rape remains a subject of controversy due to the unwillingness of victims to speak out for fear of stigmatization and reprisals. The KWI programme was announced in mid 1999 in the midst of the emergency phase and, although some of the initial discussions within some U.S. political circles had focused on assistance to rape victims, when the KWI project was eventually launched it took the form of a two-year multisectoral programme based on the BWI model. During the early phases of KWI there was an appropriate emphasis on using methods borrowed from Bosnia and elsewhere with an initial focus on reproductive health (RH) and sexual and gender based violence (SGBV). Priority was also given to vulnerable women, who included enclave residents, minorities, returnees and females heading households.

UNHCR had assumed a leading role as the head of the Humanitarian Pillar of the UN Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) and widespread damage to housing and public infrastructure meant that UNHCR initially devoted much of its capacity towards helping the population to prepare for the winter ahead. KWI was not prioritised during this early phase and implementation in this already highly complex politicised setting was undermined by a combination of conflicting priorities, low capacity, high staff turnover, lack of a detailed needs assessment, diverse goals and objectives, donor pressure to disburse funds rapidly and provide special reports.

UNHCR had learned from its BWI experience that its institutional capacity and procedures were not well suited to productive interaction with large numbers of relatively small women's groups. KWI funds were thus channelled in two ways; sub-projects with NGOs for sectoral interventions such as RH and microfinance, or small project grants channelled through international NGOs acting as umbrella agencies. Women's groups and organizations were then encouraged to submit proposals to umbrella agencies to access KWI funds. Umbrella agencies invested a great deal of resources in training their national staff, and their professionalism in dealing with women's organizations was evident. Agencies tended to focus on disbursement and reporting which has had a positive impact on sustainability since

representatives of women's organizations are now using their skills acquired from KWI to prepare proposals and access funds from alternative donors for their projects. However, provision of specialized key technical support, sustainability, strengthening of networks and monitoring of reintegration and empowerment indicators has been given lower priority by umbrella agency field staff, despite their status as overarching goals.

A relatively small number of Kosovo Albanian women's organizations were able to establish themselves during the pre-war period with very limited resources in a risk-laden environment. In early 1999, leaders of some of these organizations participated in round-table discussions in the U.S. and were able to enlist the support of key government and NGO figures. During the first few months of the KWI operation, several of these Kosovo Albanian women leaders were severely critical of UNHCR's implementation of KWI and communicated these concerns directly to their contacts in Washington, D.C. Considerable pressure was emanating from the U.S. Senate on PRM and UNHCR to fund four of these organizations, but strained relationships, bureaucratic obstacles and miscommunications delayed the process of submitting and negotiating proposals, while UNHCR staff and women's leaders alike were preoccupied with a number of competing operational priorities during the emergency phase. This situation prompted the donor to once again temporarily suspend funds that had been allocated to UNHCR for the Kosovo crisis.

By mid 2000, at a time when UNHCR-provided relief assistance had been considerably reduced due to improved living conditions, KWI capacity was increased through a combination of additional staffing and a technical support mission by UNHCR HQ, resulting in a marked improvement in the quality of implementation. In the meantime, a new pattern of violence, harassment, and discrimination had emerged in Kosovo that brought with it new victims whose protection needed particular attention by UNHCR. These victims were mainly ethnic minorities, but also included certain categories of Kosovo Albanians who had difficulty in coping with the damage and destruction to housing, infrastructure and social services.

February 2001 marked another major milestone for KWI when six multi-ethnic regional Women's Councils were formed and assumed primary responsibility for review and approval of KWI grant-funded projects. This was something that women leaders had been advocating for from the outset and indications were that this could become one of the KWI's major contributions towards women's empowerment in Kosovo while at the same time providing a viable exit mechanism for UNHCR. At the same time, there was a need to place a greater emphasis on capacity building of Councils and associated networks since there is a focus by Council members on the projects themselves without reference to a strategic framework.

Despite evidence of conflicting priorities, diverse goals and objectives, inappropriate requirements imposed by the donor, a highly politicised environment, poor targeting of beneficiaries, formation of many women's groups "around the project" and high administrative overheads contributing to low efficiency, KWI has nevertheless achieved some impressive results. A number of new women's groups have formed and sustained themselves, and existing groups were supported at key junctures in their development. KWI has supported the mobilization of women during the reintegration process and one of the most noteworthy achievements towards the

second overarching goal has been in helping to identify and empower charismatic women's leaders amongst minorities living in enclaves or in remote rural areas.

### **KWI sectoral activities**

Training of health workers was the core activity of all three of UNHCR's implementing partners involved in RH activities, although a limited amount of equipment for hospitals and health centres was also purchased. Health professionals demonstrated substantial increases in the level of RH knowledge following the training and the RH sector offered a good example of interagency co-ordination although the fact that UNHCR Field Offices were not involved in monitoring this sector left substantial gaps. The KWI network offered an excellent tool for RH outreach advocacy and awareness training although it was not always fully utilized. While overall results of these short-term interventions have been positive, the long term impact will be heavily influenced by factors such as female access to secondary education. KWI funding for RH activities ceased at the end of 2000 and this sector represents a successful phase-out for UNHCR as many key activities were continued with funds leveraged from other donors.

Most of the KWI resources for SGBV have supported international NGOs and several local women's groups in raising awareness of relevant issues through training and community education of local women's groups, while messages are disseminated to a larger audience via posters and flyers. Anecdotal evidence from KWI-funded projects suggests that women are more willing to come forward to seek help although it proved difficult to assess the extent to which KWI had actually contributed to this change due to the large number of agencies supporting SGBV interventions along with the emphasis of KWI field staff on monitoring outputs rather than impact. There is a need for a more holistic approach towards SGBV related issues that KWI can facilitate via existing networks and, since one of KWI's key strategies for 2002 is to invest in girls' education, this presents an opportunity to incorporate appropriate SGBV messages in the curriculum.

A widely heard criticism regarding KWI-funded vocational training projects was directed at the multitude of sewing, hairdressing and English language courses. The prevailing view was that, while many of these projects played a beneficial role in group formation and trauma relief during the emergency phase, there was little planning for sustainability. In addition, participation of teenagers in these courses seemed actually to be a symptom of the lack of female access to secondary schools. There have nevertheless been some markedly successful attempts to diversify into non-traditional activities that have resulted in both employment and empowerment. This success can only partly be attributed to taking advantage of market niches, such as construction-related activities like glass-cutting and metal work during an era of massive reconstruction. Further analysis showed that such projects were actually subjected to a careful preparation process that included market research and a gender equity analysis. Where these techniques were applied by the same agencies to more traditional activities, such as training in handicraft production, trainees were usually successful in earning an income.

Almost two years after the emergency phase had ended, many Kosovo women viewed economic development as the key to empowerment and their future. Increasing emphasis was accordingly placed within KWI on income generation,

either directly through small-scale business activities, or indirectly, through vocational training. Performance of KWI grant-funded income generating projects was disappointing, however, with less than 30% showing indications of being viable. Poor record keeping and a lack of business plans were indicative of poor management capacity and technical support. Eighty per cent of sewing and handicraft projects funded during 1999-2000 were still operating in 2001 by virtue of a second grant from KWI.

A very different situation was found in the Peje region where the bulk of KWI-funded income-generating projects fell under a micro finance programme implemented by ICMC which, in addition to micro loans, also provided training and coaching in business planning and financial management. Repayment rates of micro-loans have consistently been maintained at 100%, with a number of clients repaying early. Many businesses have increased their profit margins and clients are applying for larger loans. However, while the ICMC component project has been very successful in training and increasing incomes of clients, objectives did not include encouraging participation of clients in the KWI network, which resulted in missed opportunities.

Along with assistance aimed at the grassroots, some KWI components attempted to address structural and legal issues for women. KWI began support to legal rights organizations during 2000 that enabled hundreds of women to benefit from legal counselling and court representation. Thousands of women have participated in rights awareness sessions and facilities were also provided for training lawyers and paralegal staff in human rights that has extended outreach and has resulted in a mutually-beneficial collaboration with UNHCR and other agencies involved in protection activities.

Another KWI objective was to create opportunities for tolerance and dialogue, supporting existing interethnic women's groups and promote contacts among different ethnic communities. While much work remains to be done in this area, KWI-supported groups in enclaves and collective centres for internally-displaced persons have reinforced UNHCR's protection monitoring activities and the empowerment of these women could give them a key role in helping to resolve conflicts and promote durable solutions within their respective communities.

Women's empowerment in the political sphere in Kosovo was perceived by UNHCR as being the mandate of agencies such as OSCE and UNMIK. However, many women leaders and even some UN staff were frustrated by stark gender imbalances in the transitional administration and municipal government (where only 8% of elected representatives were women) and felt that KWI could have played a more significant advocacy role within the UN administration to compensate for this. UNHCR and IRC did make repeated efforts during 2001 to try and strengthen links between the Councils and local government through, for example, lobbying for office space in municipal buildings, but this yielded mixed results.

Another KWI objective was to support women's groups in becoming an active part of Kosovo civil society. Examples of effective use of the KWI network was seen in Peje AOR where the KWI network was systematically being used to promote RH, public health and legal rights amongst all women's groups. However, overall there seems to be considerable untapped potential for strengthening KWI networks and making more productive use of their own resources. Many of the members of

women's groups in rural areas were unaware of the identity of their Council representative and, as noted above, promoting involvement of borrowers in the network did not figure amongst ICMC sub-project objectives.

### **Management issues**

Although KWI specifically targeted women, mainstreaming was an underlying goal and UNHCR in Kosovo interpreted this at two levels. Firstly, UNHCR decided at an early stage to incorporate KWI resources into their overall programme rather than treating KWI as a separate project, a decision that subsequently proved to have both advantages and disadvantages. Secondly, KWI sought to promote mainstreaming through increasing gender awareness among UNHCR and NGO staff and this was reflected in a progressive improvement in the quality of KWI implementation. Nevertheless, KWI remained somewhat handicapped by weak networking and inadequate gender analysis leading to a tendency to view KWI as a "woman's project" rather than adopting an approach consistent with UNHCR's policies regarding gender equality mainstreaming. The capacity of UNHCR and international NGOs was also undermined by staff turnover, including five different KWI Co-ordinators from the programme's inception in mid-1999 until the end of 2001.

Monitoring by UNHCR KWI staff and implementing partners focused mainly on disbursements, project procurement and other outputs resulting in a contradictory situation whereby financial records relating to salaries and procurement records for KWI projects were being meticulously kept, but staff of UNHCR and implementing partners were not in the habit of examining accounts of individual projects once disbursements had been completed. Likewise, monitoring of empowerment and networking was carried out on an ad-hoc basis without clear agreement on indicators or definition of terms amongst field staff. Given the distinct developmental focus of KWI activities from mid 2000 onwards and clear linkages with reintegration programmes, it was also unclear why guidelines and lessons learned from UNHCR's long experience with Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) were not used in the development of tools for KWI.

By 2001, most of the relevant lessons learned from BWI had been applied to KWI, though not always in a timely fashion. The exception was a recommendation to promote cross visits between KWI and BWI members and there appears to be considerable unexplored potential for sharing of lessons learned and mutual strengthening of both networks.

The proactiveness of the donor in supporting a Women's Initiative should be viewed positively. KWI has helped to elevate the profile of women's organizations and networks and demonstrated the potential of such groups to participate actively in rehabilitation, reintegration and peace-building. At the same time, donor emphasis on rapid disbursement of KWI funds and special bimonthly reports was unrealistic, inconsistent with KWI goals and objectives and seriously undermined its cost-effectiveness. One indicator of this was that, in contrast to the pre-war organizations, many of the newly-formed women's groups (and NGOs in Kosovo in general) were established to access the relatively abundant funds from KWI and other international donors. As a result, a substantial number of such groups were observed to be implementing KWI-funded projects without a clear sense of unifying goals.

The KWI experience gives some basis for supporting a targeted Women's Initiative in post-conflict environments. Prominent among the potential advantages of a targeted Women's Initiative is the time and resources needed for capacity- and confidence-building during preparatory stages to support women's collective efforts to take advantage of any "windows of opportunity" during the transition phase when policy-making and political structures are in a state of flux. At an individual level, KWI's involvement with psychosocial issues (including SGBV) has highlighted the need for a context-specific and skillful approach to ensure that priority needs of women in traditional societies can be rapidly identified and appropriately addressed.

A high priority is to build gender awareness, particularly amongst staff implementing the program, and support this with a sound gender analysis. Otherwise, assistance to women will tend to be marginalized, and the importance of male responsibilities and roles overlooked. Indeed, in the absence of an appropriate focus on awareness-raising, many stakeholders will tend to view both approaches merely as a different label for women's projects.

UNHCR's comparative advantage in this type of programme is likely to be at the beginning of a repatriation operation because of its protection mandate along with the ability to co-ordinate activities and provide operational/technical support in emergency situations. However, it is evident at the same time that a more cost-effective, appropriate and sustainable implementation model that incorporates a longer-term developmental planning horizon is needed. Consequently, implementation by agencies other than UNHCR has also been considered as an option. An institutional assessment of alternative agencies was beyond the scope of this study and it was recommended that a consultative process take place involving key stakeholders to examine a range of options and lessons learned to identify an appropriate strategic framework and guide the development of operational tools.

