

**Kitchen of Victims:
A theatre campaign in Kosovo**
Zana Hoxha Krasniqi

The director of the Kitchen of Victims, Zana Hoxha Krasniqi, gave a lecture at the Stop Being Silent! seminar in Novi Sad, Serbia in 2009. She then led an interactive reading of the challenging and moving script. An excerpt from the script, Scene One, is included, following this report on the theatre campaign.

Background Information

The *Kitchen of Victims* is a theatre performance that showcases the trials of modern day Kosovar women. It highlights the problems of domestic violence as the women tell their own personal stories on stage while preparing food. The atmosphere is intimate, and the audience shares not only the smells of the food that is actually cooking, but also the pain and emotions of the female lead characters.

The idea for developing this performance came while the NGO, Artpolis, was conducting social theatre trainings and performances with young people as part of peer education activities supported through previous projects in Kosovo. This initiative included over 100 trained young people, with more than 15 theatre performances produced by young people on themes of reproductive health, gender equality, education of girls, HIV/AIDS, and drug abuse. The initiative also resulted in the establishment of the *Festival for Social Change* in Kosovo.

Believing that the same participatory approach would be applicable also for other social groups, Artpolis initiated the idea of developing a theatre performance that would present the true stories of victims of domestic and sexual violence in Kosovo.

Problems addressed

In Kosovo, various writers have suggested that the 'peace' after war in 1998-1999 had included gender-based violence, usually directed at women. The main categories of violence against women identified by institutions and NGOs in Kosovo include psychological violence, physical violence, sexual violence, domestic violence, trafficking, and economic violence. Less frequently used terms are institutional violence, material violence, moral violence, incest, isolation, war rape, and violence during wartime. These categories often overlap. Kosovo lacks adequate mechanisms for collecting and recording the extent of violence. While most institutions and organisations maintain records, their databases do not include pertinent demographic and geographic information and staff lack training in statistical analysis. Since violence tends to be under reported in general, even the best data collection systems cannot show the true extent of violence.

According to a recent survey conducted by the Kosovo's Women Network, domestic violence remains under reported in Kosovo, mainly because it is generally considered to be shameful. The data of the Kosovo Police Domestic Violence unit showed that there were 1073 cases of domestic violence reported in the country in 2008; from that number 90% were women and,

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in 90% of the cases, the perpetrator was a man. From these figures it appears clear that violence against women in Kosovo is an issue that needs to be addressed jointly by both men and women in order to bring positive change.

The Kosovo Law on Gender Equality and the Law on Anti-Discrimination have had minimal impact when it comes to the number of discrimination and gender inequality cases claimed before the Kosovo courts. Current mechanisms set at the local and central level on gender equality also have shown only minimal effectiveness. Gender mainstreaming in decision-making bodies has been limited due to insufficient human and financial resources that would enable the creation of effective institutions, as are mandated to protect rights of women and girls in Kosovo.

As the government of Kosovo works towards the long-term goal of EU accession, it must address the issue of domestic violence against women. Economic and social policies that support women's empowerment remain very much needed. Only by advancing women's positions will Kosovo be able to reach the European Integration standards and attain the globally agreed Millennium Development Goals by 2015.

Supportive links

Since 2007, Artpolis has integrated theatre as a tool for awareness-raising and outreach alongside with political and cultural transitions in Kosovo. This supportive environment enabled Artpolis and the art community in general to engage actively in linking theatre and social issues. Furthermore, the engagement of the art community in civil society initiatives merged these two sectors and enabled a new and positive movement towards developing meaningful social theatre in Kosovo.

The instrumental support of UNIFEM, UNFPA, and Theatre Dodona were the key aspects that made this play possible. Furthermore, collaboration with shelters, which take care of victims of gender-based violence, together with the Kosovo Women's Network and the art community were crucial in making a theatre performance based on true stories from grassroots realities in Kosovo.

Technical support was provided by Theater Dodona. UNIFEM's and UNFPA's role, in supplement with financial support, enriched the performance and enabled it to be technically and professionally possible.

The process

The process of making *Kitchen of Victims* was as follows:

- The first step was the identification and selection of artists who would be involved in the project: director, playwright, dramaturge, actresses, scene designer, and costume designer. Well known and famous artists were gathered around this project, which was important for its publicity and message.

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- After a wide range of consultations with women's NGOs and gender-based violence experts, Artpolis and the directors and dramaturge visited five shelters spread throughout Kosovo to meet with victims of gender-based violence and understand their stories. During these visits, with permission, more than 20 stories from the victims were gathered.
- Following the field research, the dramaturge, in collaboration with the director of performance, wrote the stories and prepared them to be exercised by artists.
- Continuously for 3 months, the theatre performance team prepared the play, including the set and other visual and musical aspects of the performance.

Results

Since its first premiere in March 2009, *Kitchen of Victims* has received wide attention in Kosovo. Shown more than fifteen times around Kosovo, and once in Albania, the performance was attended by over 1000 persons. The premiere performance received an excellent response from both men and women, who packed into Pristina's Dodona theatre. Engaging an audience of all ages, among them many were artists, human rights advocates, civil society activists, as well as policy makers and respected members of Kosovar society. The performance achieved its aim of breaking the silence surrounding gender-based violence and ensuring that the voices of women are heard.

As the first professional theatre performance that presents the perspective and the stories of victims of domestic violence, *Kitchen of Victims* used participatory action research in writing the script and in actively engaging the audience. During the entire performance, the actors interacted with the audience so that there was not just passive listening, but also a dialogue created between the artists and audience.

After receiving strong support in Kosovo, UNFPA invited the director of play, Zana Hoxha Krasniqi, to present the performance and discuss about using theatre as a tool for raising awareness on gender-based violence in the international conference 'International Standards for Gender Policies' in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan from 13-14 April 2009.

Furthermore, the story of *Kitchen of Victims* has been published in the form of play/drama in Albanian and has served as an artistic piece of evidence reflecting the situation of women in Kosovo and gender-based violence. The narrated stories of victims were published and distributed to audiences and other theatre groups to use the stories as motivation and bases for further performances.

The presence of decision-makers and opinion leaders at the premiere enabled them to view and be influenced by women's realities. In a small reception held after the premiere in Prishtina, the audience commented that they were impressed by this powerful piece of theatre. It enabled them to think differently about issues such as gender equality and gender-based violence. A peaceful resistance veteran, Adem Demoçi, an elderly man who

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suffered much violence while prisoner for 30 years because of peaceful resistance, stated that he 'was honoured to have seen this play and every man in Kosovo should come and see it'. The government spokesman, Memli Krasniqi and the deputy leader of the opposition party, Blerim Shala, were also present, as were other members of Kosovar institutions and civil society.

Most of the people who saw the performance considered it to be a unique piece of artistic work that stimulates thinking and action for prevention of violence against women at all levels, starting from grassroots intervention up to the policy level.

To find Artpolis online, visit www.artpolis-ks.org.

Zana Hoxha Krasniqi is the founder and executive director of Artpolis, a Kosovo-based NGO that promotes culture, arts, and multiethnic co-existence through social dialogue and the use of theatre as a tool for promoting diversity. She has directed several performances that were presented in the biggest theatres in Kosovo and has collaborated closely with regional theatres in the Balkans, such as the Albanian National Theater of Tirana. She has promoted theatre based training through YPEER Kosova and has also founded the 'Youth Festival for theatre for social changes', which has been held annually from 2007-2010.