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The Advocacy Project/BOSFAM, Bosnia and Herzegovina  
JJCF Final Project Report  
2011/2012

Upon completing five months of my Peace Fellowship with BOSFAM and the Advocacy Project, I returned to the United States for a three-month break over the holidays. As described below, the second half of my fellowship was more serious and challenging, but also provided me with lessons invaluable for my professional and personal life. Without the support of JJCF, I would have been unable to partake in this incredible experience and for that, I will always be thankful.

### **Activities and Outcomes**

In the second half of my Peace Fellowship with BOSFAM I focused heavily on our center in Srebrenica, in the east of the country. Srebrenica, as a town, is known for the 1995 genocide during which approximately 8,000 Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) men and boys were killed by Serb General Ratko Mladic's troops. Many of BOSFAM's Tuzla-based constituents originate from Srebrenica or its surrounding towns and villages, and it was critical for the organization to support women returning to the town through a center based there.

Consequently, the Advocacy Project's and I both believed it was critical to use my fellowship as an opportunity to strengthen capacity at the new BOSFAM Srebrenica center, including producing materials helpful to future fundraising. The main output of ten weeks spent primarily in Srebrenica and working alongside the center's constituents was an in-depth needs analysis report and narrative profiles of eight women from town who work with BOSFAM.

In July my co-fellow and I outlined the needs analysis process, including a survey to administer to women living in Srebrenica, interviews with local and international organizations working in the town, and gathering secondary documents on the current conditions from the local United Nations Development Program office. The following month we spoke to sixteen women based in Srebrenica and the surrounding villages, and seven local, national, and international organizations working to address various needs of the town and region.

After Quinn, my co-fellow left in late August, I began to sort through the data, narratives, and media we had collected. Over the course of three months I analyzed the information, continued to research through secondary documents, and put together a list of the major issues concerning the community as a whole and the specific needs of the women BOSFAM works with. As the report points out, the major challenges faced by women living in Srebrenica are of an economic and psychological nature. First, most women struggle to find employment and sources of income aside from old-age pensions or other government stipends. While most women have their very basic needs such as some form of food and housing met, there is little stability in where next week's groceries will come from or how an unexpected medical bill might be paid.

Not unexpectedly, my needs analysis revealed the many women (particularly older women who were old enough to remember living through the 1995 genocide) experience significant emotional and social challenges relating to post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and other psychological hardships. As a community too, Srebrenica suffers from psycho-social difficulties tracing from the war. The social fabric of the town was destroyed from four years of conflict and lingering ethnic divisions; though there has been significant ethnic reintegration due to international and national efforts, there are still underlying trust issues and a lack of public, shared space for relationships to be rebuilt in a neutral, common place. For example there are few coffee shops and restaurants that are not, at least partially, ethnically defined and the town has even fewer residents who have the economic means to regularly enjoy common spaces provided by the restaurants and cafes. BOSFAM, I found, plays a critical role as an ethnic-blind, safe space for women to gather, share their joys and sorrows, and build relationships and a sense of community critical to their individual and collective mental health.

In addition to summarizing and analyzing the results of our research, I also provided recommendations for future BOSFAM project to address women's needs as well as general recommendations for outside stakeholders to continue steady post-genocide reconstruction and development of the town.

While this was the major focus of my final months in Bosnia with BOSFAM, I also worked on several English-language outreach projects to improve BOSFAM's communications and fundraising. Toward the end of summer, BOSFAM organized an annual handicraft bazaar to raise awareness about our work in Tuzla and promote similar women's organizations and sell their products. In support of this event, I conducted outreach to the international community in Tuzla and Sarajevo. Mainly through emails, I engaged with staff from the American University in Tuzla and Sarajevo, the European Union Police Mission, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and other expatriates living in Bosnia. Additionally, I documented the opening day featuring traditional Bosnian dancing, a BOSFAM fashion show, and the community coming together to celebrate. After filming and editing, I posted a final video of the event on BOSFAM's social media, website, and my own blog.

Finally, I continued to reach out to European and American-based organizations and foundations in order to build relationships potentially leading to funding opportunities. The Directors of American non-profits Empowered Women International and the Women's Peace Collection were both interested in BOSFAM's mission and products. After initially contacting these women, I was able to have conversations with them over skype and email to explore the possibility of selling BOSFAM goods on their online marketplaces. After consulting with Beba, our Director, and crunching some numbers, we decided that it was not the right time to invest in these organizations because of extremely high shipping costs and no guarantee that our goods would sell well through these outlets.

After contacting several foundations that fund similar women's organizations in the Balkans, BOSFAM was invited to meet with staff at a Swedish women's foundation Kvinna till Kvinna. Though I ended my fellowship before the meeting was scheduled, Beba is aware that there may be funding possibilities there and was planning on going to Sarajevo for a meeting. Additionally BOSFAM was invited to reapply for funding from Mama Cash, a well known foundation

supporting women's organizations that had turned the organization down for its past application. I am hopeful that the next Peace Fellow will be able to draft a new, stronger application and I can assist in editing and submitting the final proposal later this year.

### **Changes in Project Plan**

During the second half of my fellowship I had to adjust my plans and occasionally drop smaller projects to make way for larger priorities like the needs assessment and women's profiles. I was excited to write and submit a grant proposal for the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) annual grant competition, but it became clear that BOSFAM had neither the capacity nor the mission most appropriate for USIP's guidelines. I decided it was best to drop the proposal because it would have taken up much of my time and energy with little chances of succeeding.

Another change in my projects with BOSFAM was, regrettably, I was unable to hold free English lessons for women living in Srebrenica. I had hoped to begin teaching lessons once the school year began, including holding conversation groups, but both my focus on the needs assessment and the needs of BOSFAM's Director made finding time for English lessons impossible. This, and consistently writing blogs for AP, both fell off my radar because I was so focused on working to finish and perfect the Srebrenica needs assessment. To be honest, as well, writing blogs while living in Srebrenica was too emotionally draining for me to put in major effort. Living in the town during the fall, with few residents and even fewer young, English-speaking residents, and engaging with war survivors all day truly took most of my energy and putting it into words seemed to difficult and too narrow a medium to convey what I was going through. I hope to write blogs to summarize my time there and post them eventually, after enough time of processing and gaining space from the experience.

The largest adjustment in my fellowship was my ultimate decision to end the project a little over a month early than originally proposed. For a number of reasons, which will be further explained in the "lessons learned" section, I decided that my time and personal funds were not being well spent working with BOSFAM for more than five months. Over the course of five months I had completed the tasks most helpful for the organization and the Advocacy Project (the needs assessment and new profiles of BOSFAM Srebrenica weavers) and established new relationships with funders and potential markets for our products. Upon finishing these projects, it was unclear what I would be doing for the next month and, as our Director required I pay for my own apartment in Srebrenica (an unexpected surprise!), I was spending more money than I had budgeted for initially. Therefore, I made the choice to leave five weeks early in order to pursue similar, but more supportive and financially-sound opportunities for the spring.

### **Challenges Faced and Lessons Learned**

My time with BOSFAM is quite possibly some of the most challenging and difficult professional work of my life. On the other side of the coin, this also taught me invaluable lessons about myself, Bosnia, and grassroots peace work.

One of the most unexpected events to occur during the second half of my fellowship was my relocation from the BOSFAM center in Srebrenica to an apartment in town that I had to fund

myself. Financially this came as a burden, but psychologically it was more impactful; Beba Hadzic called me into her office in Tuzla and let me know that I had to move my belongings out of the Srebrenica BOSFAM center and look for an apartment to rent out. The rationale behind this request remains a bit of a mystery to me. On one hand she said she was uncomfortable with me living in a large house full of new electronics on a deserted street. On the other hand, she said I needed to take the bus that very afternoon to move my things because they were having guests visit the house and “it wasn’t nice” for me to have my things in the room that was supposed to be my bedroom. I believe there is some truth to both of these reasons for my relocation, though I did feel blindsided by the way she demanded I move out within the day and how she had claimed that my room was too messy to be shown to potential funders.

This incident is a piece of a larger problem I faced during my ending months with BOSFAM. The organization’s strength and weakness is one in the same: founder and director in Beba Hadzic. Beba is a powerhouse – incredibly focused and good at communicating the needs of the organization. She has built it from the ground up and has given huge opportunities to many women in need. However, for her staff she can be challenging because she is both controlling, giving little responsibility to staff, but also non-communicative. Beba doesn’t give a lot of direction except for occasional small tasks, and because the organization is well established much of the work other Peace Fellows do (ie. like creating a Wordpress website) was not applicable to our fellowship. I think that the fellowship benefited as a learning experience for the fellows more than it helped the long-term health of the organization. I am used to collaborative and creative offices that support thinking “outside the box,” yet Beba comes from a time when socialism played into work styles.

On a broader level, Beba’s work style greatly worried me because of what it means for the future of BOSFAM. Beba’s control over the organization is very tight and she allows little responsibility and almost no decision making for other staff in BOSFAM. Even while in Srebrenica – a two hour car drive away from her office in Tuzla – very little was ever done without Beba’s permission or instruction. I worry that once Beba retires the organization will close because there will be no new leadership to continue the work.

Due to these and other factors, working in the Srebrenica with only two local staff became challenging to the point of depressing. The two staff in Srebrenica, though lovely, were middle age and spoke no English. I had few connections or kinship with youth, and felt very lonely. Beba rarely visited Tuzla or gave much direction, so I felt that my work was being completed too slowly because I had little supervision and no constructive criticism. Also, there was no evidence that the work I was doing (primarily project design and grant writing) would be able to be implemented if successfully funded. I did not see the capacity in BOSFAM Srebrenica needed to replicate my project proposals, and my Bosnian language would not have been strong enough to implement the project. Finally, it was challenging to make deep connections with women in Srebrenica without the help of a translator. This became a very isolating experience which, while I learned a lot from, ultimately made me much less productive and generally less happy than I expected before moving full time to Srebrenica.

Despite unexpected difficulties, this remains one of the most productive experiences of my young adult life because of the invaluable learning experience it provided. I know now my

professional and personal needs to keep me both happy and productive – I believe a creative and collaborative team with more structure (or at the very least, guidance from a supervisor) is my ideal working environment. That said, I am happy to have had an experience with an organization such as BOSFAM because the governance structure and work attitudes seem to be widespread in Bosnia and in other post-conflict societies. The fellowship has given me an in-depth look into the challenges facing small, grassroots organizations in already-challenging environments, and taught me how where and how I might best fit in and become an effective peacebuilder.

## **Summary**

I could not predict much of my fellowship experience. Despite having been to Bosnia and Herzegovina three times prior to working with BOSFAM, the Advocacy Project Fellowship provided me with insights and “field education” that I don’t think I could have gotten in any other way. Living and working with the weavers of BOSFAM during the summer in Tuzla and the fall in Srebrenica, I was exposed to a different and less glamorous side of life that most expatriates never see. Despite the challenges, both emotional and physical, I am thankful for this time. I know that my experiences have shaped my concept of post-conflict Bosnia and, I believe, have helped me to better understand the needs of women living in this society. I will certainly take these lessons into my future peacebuilding work in Bosnia and other post-conflict cultures. Without the generous support of JJCF, I would not have been able to afford living in Bosnia for more than a month or two – certainly not enough time to gain an in-depth, emotional understanding of the victims or perpetrators.