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HeForShe Kosovo in Balancing Gender: “I SEE You SAW ME”[1]

“There is no problem of gender inequality in Kosovo,” the man in a pink collar shirt says, holding his son on the moving see saw as the boy played with his brother across. Yet, only about 20% of women participate in the labor force. But the man insisted that there is gender equality, stating as an example that his wife is a university professor. While such a case is the ideal, the reality is that most women in Kosovo (and globally) do not enjoy such work opportunities, or do so certainly less than men. After some discussion, the man admitted that perhaps in areas outside of Prishtina, conditions for women may be more difficult.

The young women nodded at what a necessary initiative HeForShe was, especially in a strongly patriarchal society as Kosovo, and gladly agreed to pledge for the campaign, as well as let their men friends know about it. Some shared their own experiences of problems that they had encountered as women in Kosovo. One major issue facing women in Kosovo is domestic violence, in which 46% of women have reported experiencing it.^[2]

The trio of two young men balked when I proposed that they sign up for the HeForShe Campaign. The third stepped forward, affirmed that he was a feminist and proceeded to take the pledge, setting an example for his friends.

The boy on the seesaw pointed to the giant HeForShe banner with the pink and black logo, and asked what it was about. I searched for words to explain, but wondered how to tell a child that in many places, while boys go to school, girls are expected to stay at home.



While I had seen the HeForShe campaign in action at the United Nations headquarters, with hundreds of supporters, applause, and speeches from major world leaders, seeing the campaign play out for the first time in a vastly different setting in the field – this time for the first time ever in Kosovo – was a different experience.

The official launch of the HeForShe campaign in Kosovo, in DokuFest promulgated the message of gender equality, and men and boys' roles in helping to make it happen. It did this through various organized activities, including the screening of the documentary *Starless Dreams*, question and answer with its director Mehrdad Oskouei and the United Nations Development Coordinator in Kosovo, as well as an interactive art display – a see saw, illustrating gender equality and the need for two people to lift one another up.

The artistic creation, set on the side of the river running through the town of Prizren, was a bright pink see saw titled “I See You Saw Me” and conceptualized by Kosovo artists Dardan Zhegrova and Tadi. It attracted quite a few people ranging from children to teenagers to adults. As my colleague and I approached passerby to explain the HeForShe campaign, their reaction to a discussion on gender equality varied and sometimes brought surprises.

Virtually all the women passing by our HeForShe Kosovo station commended the campaign, noting their own examples in facing inequality in gender in Kosovo. Several of the men, including some with their families and wives, appeared skeptical initially. Some jokingly teased that their wives were more powerful than them. In larger cities such as Prishtina or Kosovo, there may indeed be a greater sense of women's economic and decision-making empowerment. However, this is not the case in the majority of rural Kosovo.

The idea of engaging men in women's rights is a novel one in many countries, certainly so in Kosovo. This makes receptivity to the HeForShe message challenging at times. Yet, during the campaign launch in Kosovo, the population that proved most apt to learn and engage in discussions about the HeForShe campaign was youth. Teenagers, and those in their twenties noted familiarity with gender issues, and sometimes even with the campaign. Some immediately visited the HeForShe website on their phones to sign up and pledge. Indeed, it just may be that youth, in their often openness, awareness, connectivity and engagement with global technology, are part of the key to reversing discriminatory trends and attitudes against women.

Meanwhile, those youngest – the children playing carefree on the pink see saw took turns propelling one another up, not yet fully aware of a world in which they are to grow up in –one that may be on the verge of a turning point – either to perpetuate the cycle of inequality between boys and girls, or to break it. With the HeForShe Campaign having reached over 1.3 billion pledges globally, and growing, and with young people becoming aware of issues of human rights and taking action- we may be closer to finally bringing gender equality to the spotlight in communities, and creating a better balance where men can help women to also rise, as pictured by the pink see saw for HeForShe Kosovo.

[1] *Artwork by Dardan Zhegrova and Tadi*

[2] *At What Cost? Kosovo Women's Network p. 4*
<http://www.womensnetwork.org/documents/20130405120224756.pdf>

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