



SUCCESS STORY

Women Find Their Voice in Kosovo's Civic and Business Sectors

Women become active in community planning, business growth



Photo: USAID, Bridget Nurre

Ružica Milutinović proudly displays the composter she was given through a USAID environmental push in her region in February. She is a vocal advocate for organic farming in her community.



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Ljiljana Dražić and Ana Lazić of Women's Association Inspiracija present some of the crafts the group of single mothers produces and sells to provide income for their families.

Ružica Milutinović is quick to point to her husband's accomplishments as an activist and president of the assembly in their rural north Kosovo village of Grabovac/Graboc, but one need not spend much time with her before it is clear that Ružica is a community advocate in her own right.

The mother of four established an organic greenhouse in her yard to feed her family and sell her produce locally. "If you eat healthy and give back to your environment, your spirit will be healthy," she said one late summer morning over coffee and homemade walnut Rakia. "My goal is to make my community more prosperous and leave it a better place for my children."

Ružica has become active in her local Women's Community Forum, one of eight established in north Kosovo through USAID's Community Action Initiative Program (CAIP) in 2013 after the program saw low participation among women in community planning. The forums have proven successful in identifying the specific needs and priorities of women in this Serb-majority region of Kosovo.

"I'm grateful for this opportunity, because before the forum, I didn't feel like my voice was being heard," explains Ružica, who helped establish a new village kindergarten and is now a vocal advocate for environmental initiatives like recycling and organic farming in her community.

Unemployment is a major challenge for women in north Kosovo, many of whom, like Milutinović, lost their jobs as the region's once-giant Trepča mining complex dramatically scaled back operations over the past two decades. Through this program, USAID also made a major push for job creation, providing business training to dozens of aspiring women entrepreneurs and issuing economic development grants to 24 women business owners.

One of the grants went to Vesna Grujić, a former mechanical engineer for Trepča who opened her own photography business in 2009. Though her client base quickly expanded, Vesna lacked the financing necessary to purchase the photo printer she needed to meet her demand.

"The words 'I don't know' or 'I can't do' don't exist in my vocabulary," says Grujić, who applied to USAID and was awarded a \$32,000

grant, which allowed her to purchase the printer and hire four additional employees. She saw results immediately, with profits increasing by nearly 40 percent over the next quarter.

Through the grants, USAID has promoted job creation among established women-owned businesses and new businesses alike, placing priority on those that would make the greatest community impact, like Women's Association Inspiracija. Serbian for "inspiration," the newly-formed organization brought together seven creative single mothers committed to earning a living wage for their families.

"Not only do we all love to work with our hands, but as mothers, our children are the force that holds us together," says Inspiracija founder Ljiljana Dražić, who felt that her local government was not doing enough to support single mothers, often viewed as outcasts in the traditional society.

Though not a single mother herself, Ljiljana says she identifies with the feeling of being ostracized after her decision to adopt an ethnic Roma orphan, and like them, she needed to earn money for her family. With a grant from USAID, the women now have the financing necessary to expand their homemade craft business, including the purchase of a loom to open up a new market of woven products as well.

"As women, we are capable of anything we put our minds to, so we are grateful to USAID for giving us the tools to see it through," said Ljiljana.

From July 2011 to July 2014, USAID's Community Action Initiative Program partnered with 40 ethnic minority communities throughout Kosovo to support community development and infrastructure, build a strong civil society, and expand economic opportunities.