Lesley Abdela

“Engaging women as equal partners in the peace-building process increases the chance of a lasting, sustainable peace. Issues important to women’s lives would be prioritised. Other priorities would include the needs of widows and female former combatants, full political representation and a lack of impunity for sexual violence crimes.”

Born in London in November 1945, Lesley Abdela went to Hammersmith College of Art and Building. After standing for Parliament in 1979, she formed an all-party campaign group to increase the ratio of women to men in the House of Commons. ‘There must be at least 40% women in top positions in all legislatures, peace processes and constitutional discussions,’ she says. ‘Gender balance would make a real difference.’
In 1999, the UK Foreign Office commissioned her to go to Kosovo. After a short orientation course in Vienna, she became Deputy Director for Democracy in the OSCE Mission based in Pristina.

Britain's gender and post-conflict specialist

After the mission, she wrote the report titled, 'Kosovo: Missed Opportunities, Lessons for the Future'. The report examined what worked and what did not work in the immediate post-conflict situation in Kosovo, and what would help things work better in the future at similar early-stage, post-conflict missions. She concludes that 'peace-making and peace-building ought not to be left so overwhelmingly to men, for one practical reason. Evidence shows men alone are not good at it, and that 50% of all deadly conflicts break out all over again within 10 years. The problem lies at the heart of deeply-flawed peace-making attempts from which women are completely excluded.’

Since Kosovo, Lesley Abdela has worked as an independent consultant on gender, equal opportunities, women's political empowerment and women's human rights in 40 different countries. She has collaborated with governments, IGOs (United Nations, Council of Europe, IOM, OSCE), NGOs/CSOs and the European Commission, undertaking some of the most dangerous missions imaginable to promote women's rights. Her commitment to gender equality in peace-building has placed her boots-on-the-ground in Sierra Leone, Aceh, Afghanistan, Nepal and Hilla (ancient Babylon) in Iraq. She was unable to return to Iraq after her three main co-workers were targeted and murdered returning from negotiating a women's radio station in Karbala.

Over the past 12 years, she has been a principal speaker at the Women in NATO annual conferences in Brussels, and conducted gender and civil military relations workshops for male-dominated deployments to conflict zones, run by SWEDINT, near Stockholm.

She won the UK Woman of Europe award for work with Project Parity, funded by the EU Phare and TACIS Democracy programmes, and Harvard University's Project Liberty, seeking to empower women in Central and Eastern Europe in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Lesley Abdela is one of the ‘Top 50 Heroes of Our Time’

Lesley's work on the front lines of women in peace-building put her 34th in the 'Top 50 Heroes of Our Time' worldwide poll, run by the current affairs magazine New Statesman. Nottingham Trent University awarded her an Honourable Doctorate in Women's Human Rights.
London's Imperial War Museum has recorded dozens of hours of her experiences under its ‘Age of Deadly Conflict’ project. She points out how women so often have become a strategic target of militias, yet are largely denied any say in the post-conflict settlements.

Without intense effort by Europe and international communities, Ms Abdela fears the same will occur in Libya, Egypt and Syria, where women clamour for the right to participate but worry, with good reason, they are now being sidelined.

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