



- A Storybook -

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Preface

A lot can happen in 25 years, from human development to technological breakthroughs and everything in between. A quarter-century ago, cordless landlines were the predecessor of mobile phones, the European Union was created by the Maastricht Treaty, and the World Wide Web became a public domain. Anyone anticipating in 1993 what life might be like in 2018 would have likely missed the mark in some ways.

When CARE started working in the Balkans 25 years ago, the world looked very different from today. Since the end of the wars in the former Yugoslavian countries, the region has undergone unprecedented political, economic, social and cultural changes. Communities have experienced the benefits but also the disillusion of democratization and the uncertainties of a new economic system in an ever-shifting international context.

Throughout history, the progress in the Balkans has been closely tied to the idea that all people have rights: universal entitlements to freedom, dignity and security, to be treated equally and to live free from oppression. The health and soul of all communities in the region depend on how these human rights are recognized – and acted upon.

CARE places gender equality at the heart of all of our efforts. The need to address women's empowerment and gender equality in the patriarchal societies that are deeply shaken by wars and militarization was recognized quite early by CARE in the Balkans. Equally, the social, economic and political fulfillment of people's rights is at the very core of CARE's mandate in the Balkans. What has shaped our work the most in all those years were not necessarily historic or political milestones, but our countless encounters with the people we serve and work with. Our ambitions and achievements are best told through their eyes. As such, we are honored to present to our esteemed readers this storybook, providing a glimpse of people's lives and accomplishments.

On behalf of the entire CARE International network, we would like to express our profound appreciation to the international community at large, and in particular to all the partners and donors who supported us along the way. We hope that all our partners, more recent or long-standing, will continue to support CARE's work for prosperous, peaceful and socially just communities across the Balkans.

Sumka Bučan
Regional Director
CARE Balkans



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sumka Bučan'.



Karl-Otto Zentel
Secretary General
CARE Germany

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K.O. Zentel'.

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Introduction

From war recovery to reconstruction, from healing to new opportunities. Throughout history, the Balkans have been an intersection of cultural, economic and social mixing. Lessons of the past and lessons for the future both play important roles in people's lives. This includes the actions of individuals who stood up for their rights, challenged traditional norms and made decisions that positively influenced their families, communities and societies. It also includes the consequences of the ethnic conflict that gripped the region between 1991 and 1999.

The wars in the former Yugoslavian countries that inflamed the region during those years were based on national and ethnic tensions, resulting in large population displacements, mass atrocities, countless cases of gender-based violence and sexual abuse. Violence within communities and families tore the social fabric; many of its effects are still visible today. In a way, the past, the present and the future of the Balkans all exist simultaneously.

For the past 25 years, CARE has been working side-by-side with communities across the region to help create lasting change. CARE began providing humanitarian assistance in the Balkans in 1993 during the violent disintegration of former Yugoslavia and a series of wars and conflicts that devastated people's lives.

During the post-war period, new nation states emerged that were in need of socio-economic transition.

Despite some dynamic developments and progress in reducing poverty and inequalities, social divides, ethnic tensions and poor democratic institutions continued to weaken the region. Although geographically the Balkans are unquestionably a part of the European continent, prevailing social injustice, economic challenges and political divisions have prevented large parts of the region from joining the European Union.

CARE works in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, Kosovo¹, Montenegro, Macedonia and Albania. Our ambition is to ensure that the social, economic and political rights of vulnerable and marginalized groups are recognized and fulfilled, contributing to sustainable peace in the region. To that end, CARE offers conflict prevention and peace-building programs, supports people's livelihoods and access to rights, and works toward gender equality and the prevention of gender-based violence. Marginalized communities, such as Roma and women and girls, are at the heart of our mission. We also provide emergency assistance: for refugees and migrants stranded in the Balkans, for communities suffering from natural disasters and whenever aid is needed.

A strong civil society is the most important basis for people's active involvement in political and social life. CARE vigorously supports local civil society organizations in order to improve the quality of services they provide, help them develop better cooperation with their governments and create a lasting impact beyond our support.

This storybook is a journey from the past to the present and the future. We would like to invite readers to travel with us on our journey of supporting lasting change in the Balkan region. The stories we collected and the people we portrayed are a testimony to what CARE, our cherished local partner organizations and the communities themselves have achieved and continue to achieve today. We want to show what we have accomplished as a collective force and how working together made a demonstrable difference. The 17 portraits featured in this book all tell their own stories of hardships, hopes and little victories. Though unique in many respects, their fates resonate with the experiences of hundreds and thousands of others across the region.

While CARE continues to support local civil society engagement, we also want to draw attention to the needs that remain. We hope this storybook will be an inspiration to engage with the Balkans and support the many impactful activities that all work toward the same goal: to defend dignity and fight poverty ●

¹ Under UN Resolution 1244

1. From Rubble to Revival



Sabira Hašimović, Head of the Roma Women's Association, Bijeljina, Bosnia and Herzegovina

The fall and rise of a Roma woman

People find hope in strange and unexpected places. For Sabira Hašimović, finding the strength and courage to overcome hardship, loneliness and prejudice started in a hopeless place.

Her happy life in Germany took an unexpected turn when her husband died. **“For fifteen years, we desperately tried having children when one day I finally got pregnant. We were so happy but everything changed when my husband died in an accident. At that time, our son Ervin was just four months old. My husband was my family, my friend, my everything. After losing him and having no one to turn to, I decided to return to Bosnia. Having left everything behind, I slept on the street and at the graveyard next to my husband. I did not beg, but to provide for my son I asked people for some food. There were times when we had nothing to eat for ten days,”** Sabira remembers.

For years, Sabira struggled to survive as part of the Roma minority in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Another stroke of fate fell on her when her 5-year-old son became ill and required surgery that Sabira could not afford. She was desperate for help.

In her despair, she turned to Dragan Joković, director of the citizen association “Otaharin” that promoted Roma education in north-eastern Bosnia. Sabira had occasionally visited the education centre that Otaharin was running in Bijeljina, but had never expected to receive help for her son's surgery. To her, this was the start of a new chapter in her life. Since then, Otaharin, one of CARE's long-term partners for Roma community initiatives, became her new home.

“They changed my life. The beginnings were very difficult but by joining Otaharin, I started thinking positively again. I came to understand how I was able to change my life for the better. I became independent as a single mother who was working and able to offer my son everything he needed,” Sabira says with a smile on her face.

Today, Sabira's life is not only about survival anymore. In her first job at Otaharin she worked as a cleaner. But she knew that she could do more than that. **“I worked hard and gave it all. I managed to finish high school and all of my efforts paid off. I was given my first independent project to oversee the installation of street lights in Bijeljina to provide more safety to women in the streets,”** she says. Otaharin hired Sabira as a part-time German translator and project support staff for the Otaharin Day Centre, providing day care and help to Roma children. When Otaharin established the Roma Women's Association, Sabira was appointed head of the initiative. Today, she helps other Roma women in challenging situations to fulfil their social and human rights, for example by enrolling their children into school or accessing health insurance.

Ten years ago, Sabira could not imagine the life she is living today. Today, she sets an example for many Roma women in Bosnia and Herzegovina who feel lost and are hoping for a new beginning ●

Rebuilding lives after rising from the rubble



Izeta Mujanović, Returnee to Orlica, Bratunac, Bosnia and Herzegovina

When Izeta Mujanović and her family returned to the village of Orlica 16 years ago, all she found of her old house was charred rubble. Only memories and stories remained at the deserted site. It left her shattered. **“When we went back, no one was in the village, there was nothing. Houses were burnt down and destroyed. We did not even see birds,”** Izeta says.

Ever since the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Izeta was homeless and lived as a refugee in Puračić, a small village in the north-eastern part of the country. For years she planned to one day return to her home, hoping it would alleviate all the hardship that had come with the war. Even its destruction did not keep her from following through with her plan. **“We decided to stay because this was our land,”** says Izeta. During the war, 80% of all buildings in Izeta's municipality were damaged. Houses in rural areas were particularly hard-hit.

Together with her husband and their two sons, Izeta managed to build up a wooden shed in which she and her family initially stayed. “It was hard to stay there and we expected it to get harder because we did not have any means to reconstruct the house by ourselves. But then we heard of CARE,” Izeta says.

“One day, my husband went to Bratunac and met some people from CARE. They told us they could help and they really did. They reconstructed our house for us,” Izeta remembers fondly. With hundreds of homes reconstructed, CARE was one of the most active aid organizations in the municipality of Bratunac at that time.

Putting a roof over their heads meant a new beginning for Izeta and her family, but it did not solve all problems. The village was poor, most of its residents were returnees and there were no jobs available. Bratunac had suffered from massive ethnic cleansing during the war and ethnic segregation is still widespread in Eastern Bosnia. Without any money, Izeta was unable to start farming.

But as time passed, more and more people started returning and helped each other rebuild their community. **“We do not make much, but we are happy that we came back. We are the only Bosniak family here but we are doing fine. Although we are not of the same religion, together with our Serbian neighbors we help each other out. We are now farming and I also work as a cleaner at a school. The war has taken its toll but we are grateful to have met so many good people at CARE,”** says Izeta.

Her once destroyed house is now filled with children's laughter again. Her son got married at Izeta's new home and she now has three grandchildren. It reminds Izeta of the happy times before the war. Today, her home symbolizes life, not suffering ●

She is building the future



Irina Hadji Mitova, CARE Project Coordinator, Macedonia

Photo credits - Venko Sheremetkoski

When CARE came back to Macedonia¹ in 2016, Macedonian women were facing discrimination in all relevant spheres in society, especially in the labour market. Macedonia was ranked 103rd in the world with a gender gap of 0.66 in labour force participation² and the activity rate was 20% below the EU average. The unemployment rate was especially high among women from ethnic minorities. In these communities, women were still mostly tied to their traditional roles as housewives and caretakers.

“This was a right initiative, in the right time for the right people.” That is how Irina Hadji Mitova, a former employee of Women's Civic Initiative ANTIKO, remembers CARE's comeback project “Inclusion of Ethnic Minority Women in the Labour Market”, which was implemented in the Republic of Macedonia in 2016-2017.

How did they do it? **“First with the series of trainings on topics such as gender concepts, individual motivation for employment, communication and soft skills. And then with job counselling, career guidance, on the job trainings, writing business plans and helping them to apply for state subsidies, but moreover to motivate them to actively look for jobs,”** Irina says.

¹ CARE had its office in Macedonia from 1993 until 2010

² Data is from the 2016 report by the World Economic Forum

CARE offered these women additional vocational courses and they were able to obtain certificates from licensed institutions, thus becoming more competitive on the labour market and having the opportunity and know-how to be self-employed.

And how did the women respond? Ardiana Ramadani from Kumanovo is very honest: **“I was reluctant to participate in the trainings provided through the project as I did not believe that they could support me in any way. Eventually, I decided to give them a chance and the knowledge I have gained helped me to prepare the CV and motivation letter on my own. I used those to apply for the active measure - professional practice provided by the Agency for Employment in Kumanovo and I got it!”**

Finding a job or becoming self-employed is still a daily struggle for women from ethnic minorities. Examples like Bedija Arifi Shaqiri, who was part of CARE's initiative and has received a self-employment grant from the national Employment Agency of about 4,000 Euros for establishing an online news portal, shows us that changes are possible and that she as an entrepreneur is in charge of her own future.

CARE on the other hand recognised Irina's efforts and commitment. She is now employed by CARE and is working towards developing a modern system of agricultural cooperatives throughout the country, with a personal commitment for developing Macedonia's first women led agricultural cooperative. **She is building the future, too! ●**

Reaping the fruits of her labour

In early 2000, entire communities from Bosnia and Herzegovina began returning to their homes following the war. This included the small village of Kravica, one of the many massacre sites in the Bosnian war that had been completely destroyed.

Nada Marković was one of the first to return to her home in Kravica back in 1997.

“I will never forget the first sight. There was nothing left in the village. The houses were in ruins, there was no infrastructure and very few people lived there at that time,” Nada remembers.

It took one year to reconstruct her home. During that time, Nada developed a strong desire to help other villagers return to their abandoned homes. To accomplish this goal, she founded her own association named Maja in 2001. **“CARE helped me establish the association. I received office supplies through their program. At that time, most villagers had no phones and everyone came to us to reconnect with their families. By donating the supplies, including a phone, CARE opened up a window to the outside world for us,”** she says.

With the support Nada received from CARE, her association helped 13 Bosniak and Serbian families return to Kravice. The village quickly became a close-knit community with families working together, sharing farming equipment, and passing on the support they had received.

With a staggering female unemployment rate of 70% – that is 20% above the national average – it was a long road to recovery for the region. A handful of women joined Nada to challenge the status quo and create self-employment opportunities for women. They built the first female agricultural cooperative named “Women” with the support of CARE. The cooperative grows and sells their own raspberries, runs a poultry farm, and offers catering services in Kravica. The trainings they held on their social entrepreneurship model became very well recognized and succeeded not only in Bosnia and Herzegovina but also served as an example for the establishment of other women cooperatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Montenegro.



Nada Marković, President of the Association of Maja, Kravica, Bosnia and Herzegovina

In their first year of work, the cooperative planted over 10,000 raspberry seedlings, which yielded a harvest of over 10 tons. They also began the construction of a cooling facility with a capacity of 50 tons, further expanding their business.

“Far away from the state capital, women do not have many opportunities to earn a living and provide for their families. I want other women’s associations all across the region to thrive and I hope our association sets a good example,” says Nada ●

2. Gamechangers: Challenging Social Norms

Inspiring youth,
changing
lives

The year 2000 was an important one for Srđan. In this very year, the then 18-year-old young man attended a seminar that redefined his life. As a new member of a national youth NGO in eastern Bosnia, Srđan attended a youth activism workshop organized by CARE. **“I just wanted to have fun and at the same time change my life for the better. The workshop motivated me to find more opportunities to travel and to meet people, to experience different cultures and to learn as much as possible,”** he says. Little did he know at that time that his curiosity would lead him into a lifelong adventure.

Srđan grew up in Vlasenica, a small town in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Tensions around sociocultural and political identities in his hometown strongly affected his experiences towards violence and discrimination. In disagreement with the popular attitudes that surrounded him, Srđan never felt like he belonged to the community. The CARE workshop provided a gateway for him to learn methods to cope with his frustration. He also learned how to communicate better and that violence only created more violence.

He was motivated to share these lessons with other young people in Vlasenica. Six years later, he received a grant through which he was able to open his own youth centre in Vlasenica to promote youth tourism and education. **“Back then kids had very little to do after school, and most did not have the money for extracurricular activities. The youth centre gave them the space to use their time in an effective way and to continue to learn about peace, intercultural challenges and other issues outside of school,”** he says.

“The greatest challenge I had was to communicate my goals to the local communities. I never really overcame this challenge and because I was lacking local support and funding, I had to close the centre a few years later,” Srđan says.

But he did not give up. In a second attempt, Srđan put his own money and efforts into establishing another youth centre, which he still runs today. He offers volunteer work camps for young people from different European countries. Not only does the centre teach young people key skills to find income and employment opportunities, but it is also an intercultural meeting point and helps to rebuild communities in Eastern Bosnia.



Srđan Vidaković, Director of the Youth Camp Vlasenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina

“Through the various workshops we were able to gather youth from all around Europe to help repair our old school buildings and build homes for the homeless. Many people still think that those who work in NGOs do not achieve a lot. But I can tell that I bring positive change to my community and this keeps me going,” Srđan says. Following CARE's example, the volunteer work camps also help young people across Europe to acquire new skills and positive values, promote solidarity, and develop a multicultural understanding of the Balkans.

“None of this would have happened without the continuous cooperation with CARE and the first training that changed me forever. Back then, my looks and thoughts separated me from my community but today I am proud of being different,” Srđan says.

“In the end, I realized I did not only change my life but the lives of many other young people who wanted to achieve something.” ●



The Macho Men, Theatre Group, Belgrade, Serbia

Flipping the script on manliness

Seven boys are up on the stage. A hard worker, a cool guy, a good guy, a macho man – they all play different roles. The only overlap in their performance is the deconstruction of gender stereotypes scene after scene. The cool guy cooks, the good guy does the grocery shopping for his family and the macho man cleans his sick mother's house.

“A real man is a man who knows what he wants and does what he wants, but also someone who thinks without prejudice,” says Nikola Pavlović, one of the performers. As the actors bow, the audience applauds vividly.

“Macho Men” is anything but an ordinary theatre play. As part of CARE's Young Men Initiative, produced by our partner organization Center E8 and youth theatre “Reflektor”, the play challenges the prevailing social norms on manhood and the role men and boys play in the household, in school and the community. The campaign promotes young men helping their parents in the house, for example with cleaning or cooking, roles often left to mothers or sisters. It also promotes healthy and equal relationships, like the fact that violence has no role in dating and the importance of open and honest communication in a relationship.

“If you manage to change one person, it's like you've changed the whole world,” actor Jovan Zdravković says. He is convinced that the show was able to change society. With a total of 121 performances and over 23,000 viewers since November 2012, he might be right. Engaging with the audience is a key factor in the play and a way to receive direct feedback. **“After the play, the audience tells us how the show affected them and how they feel they have changed. Of course, we don't think we've managed to change all of the people's attitudes who saw the show, but if we managed to change at least 100 or 200 people, that's a big thing,”** Jovan says.

Bringing to the stage critical social issues, “Macho Men” sources documentary material from the performers' own life stories, events in the past, and social phenomena characterizing today's society in the Balkans. Most of the young actors were brought up in a post-war culture where expressing feelings is seen as a sign of weakness for a man. Understanding the social barriers for young men having to repress their emotions, one of the scenes in the play breaks down the myth that men do not cry.

Too many young men still follow the unwritten rules of society. **“I came from a community that was not very liberal. It was a big challenge for me to get away from that kind of environment. It has changed me for the better, because when you start working on these topics, you begin to understand how you are put into boxes. My community still has things to say about it. Even today, they ask me, “What’s up? Are you still playing fags?” That’s how they talk until they see the show,”** says Jovan.

The play not only left its public impressed, but it also changed the actors' lives. **“We have also become a lot more mature. We understand much better now what topics are interesting to people and what young people want,”** says Uroš Novović. His girlfriend had encouraged him to apply to the audition of Macho Men, without knowing he would be able to achieve such a success.

Looking into the future, the young cast is positive: **“We have a whole team that is constantly expanding and we’re creating a new movement. What’s most important is that we have the courage to give it a try and the support to continue our mission,”** says Marko Panajotović, one of the group members of Macho Men ●

A life dedicated to human rights

“I respect others and those who are being called 'different.' And I think that everyone has the right to choose in every respect.” Being different barely scratches the surface when speaking about the life of Jadranka Milicevic. As a peace-builder, feminist and human rights activist, she spent decades helping people who live on the margins of society.

“In April 1992, the beginning of aggressions committed in my home region were drivers and the reason I decided not to allow anyone to speak in my name. I would not have accepted to be manipulated by any leader,” Jadranka says. With the knowledge and experiences she had gained throughout the years, she helped other women to survive and to access their rights.

Jadranka decided to leave Bosnia in May 1992 with her two sons, 3 and 11 years old at the time. **“I decided to leave Sarajevo, where the war was already taking its heavy toll with people dying every day. I came to Belgrade, Serbia, and started my life as an activist mainly motivated by a certain feeling of guilt. All of my closest and most beloved family members, many friends and acquaintances stayed in Sarajevo and surroundings until the end of the war.”**

She stayed true to her commitment. As part of the movement “Women in Black,” she protested the atrocities that were occurring in former Yugoslavia. Despite facing harsh pressure from the ruling political elites who would call them traitors, the women worked with female survivors of rape, refugees and other minority groups. Together, they set up support networks for abused women. They helped gather and exchange the experiences of women living in conflict zones such as Bosnia and Croatia, women who Jadranka calls friends. In the following years, she had co-founded several local NGOs to promote gender equality and the positive development of society through educational and cultural programmes. Jadranka provided trainings to help women earn a living



Jadranka Milicevic, Activist, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

by teaching how to sell honey or lavender-scented cushions, providing advice and the tools to survive in an environment where, even after the war, women were largely neglected.

Since 2006, Jadranka has been working as a project manager with CARE and today is responsible for a regional project through which she helps to empower Roma women in Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina. “At CARE, I work on human rights and the protection of marginalized persons, such as returnees, Roma, young people, women, survivors of violence and displaced persons. I work directly to support people who need help to access their rights to life, freedom, health, work and employment. I also work to prevent all forms of violence through outreach activities, training, project development and applications for funding, including from the EU,” she says. In addition to her busy job, Jadranka still sometimes takes to the street as an activist.

“The needs of people in the 1990s were to survive and trying to keep their dignity in those difficult times of war. Today’s needs are similar because there are no jobs, corruption is widespread and violence is still present in everyday life. But looking at what we have already achieved in the past few years, I am confident that together we can create an even better future.”●



Fana Delija, Director of Centre for Roma Initiatives, Nikšić, Montenegro

A little girl

with high hopes

“When I was in elementary school, I always avoided Physical Education classes. There was one exercise where all the children had to stand in a circle and hold hands. No one wanted to hold my hand because I was different. Even today, when I remember this, it makes me want to cry.” Remembering her childhood brings back both good and bad memories for Fana.

The 38-year-old grew up in a large family of Egyptian heritage. She was raised with seven brothers and two sisters in a small house in the Roma settlement in Nikšić, the second largest city of Montenegro. Looking back, she remembers the many times her family had her back but also the difficult days at school or in her neighborhood when others looked down on her. In many ways, the loving support she received from her family made up for the lack of sympathy she received at school.

“Not much has changed in terms of people's attitude towards the Roma in Montenegro. Kids in kindergartens and schools still encounter prejudice, it's just a bit less obvious today,” says Fana. This is what motivated her to help shift attitudes and create social change in her surroundings.

In September 2004, Fana founded the Centre for Roma Initiatives in her hometown of Nikšić. The organization had its ups and downs, and in their most difficult times, Fana says, they received support from CARE. “CARE helped us develop a strategy to assist Roma girls attend primary education, and they supported us throughout the process,” she recalls. Recognizing Fana's dedication and hard work, CARE also awarded her a scholarship to continue with her education and take English classes as well as IT and organizational management courses. “As a result, I developed my skills, raised my organizational profile, and became the first woman from the Roma community to work as an equal member in the government-working group to develop the National Strategy for the Improvement of the Position of Roma Populations. I was also the first woman to advocate for minority women in Montenegro before the Prime Minister and Members of Parliament,” Fana says.

From being a ten-year-old fighting against prejudice every day to completing high school and establishing her own organization, Fana has come a long way. Today, she is one of the most recognized, well-educated and prominent public advocates for Roma rights in Montenegro and across the region. **“Our mission is to fight against discrimination within the family and society as a whole and to improve the position of Roma women and children in Montenegro through education and public campaigns.** We have had excellent results in the past. Of the 15 Roma children completing elementary school, we have managed to enroll 13 in high school,” Fana says with a proud look on her face.

With her organization, she hopes to have improved the integration and protection of the Roma communities living in Montenegro. “I will never give up fighting for equal rights and a life without prejudice,” Fana says.

“While I live and while I have the support of organizations like CARE, I will keep working and fighting to make sure no Roma child ever has to feel how I felt in that Physical Education class. No one should feel alone and rejected just because they are different.” ●



From CARE Archive



3. Faces of Change

Breaking down barriers and taboos



Kaja Raimovic, former Health Coordinator, Vranje, Serbia

At first glance, Kaja looks like a typical young woman in her early 30s. Born and raised in South Serbia, she calls Vranje her home. But unlike some of her friends, Kaja chose to overcome some of the social taboos and obstacles in her home town at a very young age. Being Roma herself, she knew how girls and women in her surroundings struggled with inequality both within and outside of their communities.

“Young girls and women like me were expected to accept issues such as forced marriage and gender-based violence,” Kaja says. **“There was no arguing about that.”**

In 2007, she joined NEXUS, a longstanding partner of CARE that focuses on social inclusion of women, particularly Roma women, displaced people and other marginalized groups. She and her fellow health mediators worked in three communities in South Serbia to educate and teach people in Roma settlements about sexual and reproductive health and connect them to health providers.

“At the beginning we were afraid, especially since we had to deal with mixed groups of different age and genders. Sexual and reproductive health is a taboo in our community. I was afraid whether my family would accept me speaking about it in public,” Kaja says. Roma are among the most vulnerable groups, and Roma women in Serbia are known to have lower access to family planning supplies and maternal health services than the majority population. In her team, Kaja organized workshops, street activities and facilitated health checkups. **“I worked a lot with young people, and in a way it was easier for me to reach them because I was one of them. Most of them were interested but too shy to speak about safe sex and family planning openly because the topics were forbidden in their communities. But as we slowly got to know each other, they became more comfortable and learned to talk about their worries,”** Kaja continues.

“In my first session, I was asked a lot of questions to which I did not know the answers. My colleague back then helped me out and, looking back, I learned so much,” Kaja says. **“I am so proud to have witnessed women in my home town stand up for their rights and actively seek medical support. My work not only changed people's lives but also had an impact on me. It made me more aware of my own health and capabilities.”** ●

Turning drama into play



Svetlana "Ceca" Kijevcanin, Activist, Belgrade, Serbia

Although Svetlana, known as "Ceca", is many things — a psychologist, a trainer, a women's rights and peace advocate — the role she embodies most is that of an activist.

Before the war broke out in former Yugoslavia, Ceca's life looked very different. She graduated in psychology, had two children and was a member of a traveling theatre company. But once political unrest started in 1991, she found herself unemployed, and her life changed dramatically. "I decided to join a proactive group of antiwar activists and started giving psychological support to refugee children and women in collective centers in Belgrade," she says. **"My first big project was to let refugees restructure their lives and time in the centers through games and theatre plays, which helped them tell their stories. This proved to be a very successful method to cope with their trauma and was a personal breakthrough for me,"** Ceca says. After that project, she and her colleagues founded an organization called "MOST" (the term translates to "bridge") - Association for Cooperation and Mediation in Conflicts. Later on they developed this work into educational programs targeting psychologists, journalists, teachers and other academics to expand the reach of this methodology.

"The war was affecting me personally. The country where I was born was falling apart, people were in need, and war was raging. This really urged me to do something meaningful for people and for my country." After Ceca joined the Group MOST, she got a job at the University of Belgrade as a teaching assistant and completed her degree in peace education and mediation through non-formal education. She then joined CARE to work with young people on multicultural, peace and reconciliation issues. Ceca continued using theatre play as a tool to bring young people of different ethnic origins and genders together, enabling them to express themselves and interact with their peers. This also gave them the space to discuss prejudices and discrimination in education, particularly issues that affect Roma girls and youth in multiethnic regions of Serbia. **"I worked with such diverse groups of people. Not only did they speak different languages, but they also lived in truly split and conflicted communities. They were used to living near each other but not *with each other*,"** she says. Creating those fictional spaces with theatre projects was the first step to turning the plays into reality and challenging social norms. However, it was not easy. "We were working with minors, so bringing young people together often required the consent of their parents. It was often very difficult to convince parents that these projects were beneficial for their kids in these divided communities."

"Through non-verbal theatre plays, they were able to tell their stories, learn to understand each other, and create something special together. It showed that differences do not have to be a dividing force but that differences can be beautiful," Ceca says ●

A cash cow for female farmers

Drita is proud. She is the first female farmer in the region who founded her own business. And not just any business: She set up a whole dairy farm in the male-dominated farming sector in Southern Kosovo. In the beginning, things looked very unpromising, she remembers. **“I started with only two dairy cows for our own use. But after the war, we were left with no other source of income. The fields were all we had, and I tried to make the best out of it.”**

She certainly did. When she heard that CARE with its partner, the Local Development Fund, offered grants to small and mid-scale farmers in Suharekë/Suva Reka, she jumped at the opportunity and applied. “I had the idea to create a milk storage room to produce new dairy products to bring to the market”, Drita remembers. A few months later, she received a grant through which she was able to build the storage room in her farm. **“This changed everything for me. Instead of having to transport my milk daily, I was able to store it for up to four days and drive it up to the collection point only once a week,”** she says. Drita has expanded her family business and today owns 19 cows.

The increased income Drita generates translated into the wellbeing of her entire family. While one of her sons helps her at the farm, her other son became an architect and her daughter is currently studying in the U.S.

The grant also motivated her to look for more expansion opportunities elsewhere. Unhappy with the collection points regularly overcharging her for milk packaging, Drita decided to buy a milk bottling machine herself. With the investment, she is able to sell her milk for 45 Euro cents per litre, a 40 percent increase compared to before.

Drita also encouraged other female farmers to follow her lead. **“I had the courage, was fearless and physically fit to start my own business. I wanted to show other women around me that they had the potential to do the same,”** she says. Together, they built a cooperative of nine farmers, producing more than 400 litres of milk per day. They store it at Drita's milk storage room and then sell it directly at local markets.

Now she dreams of expanding her farm and capacities even further. **“My next goal is to produce and sell yogurt and our national drink Ayran in the markets.”**●



Drita Kabashi, Dairy Farmer, Suharekë/Suva Reka, Kosovo

From finding his voice to speaking on air



Agon Kelmendi, Radio Host, Pristina, Kosovo

“What does it actually mean to be a man?” Agon asked himself when he saw a group of people come into his high school in t-shirts that read “Be a Man”. Curious to find out, he approached the crowd and soon learned that it was the opposite of what he thought.

“I went to a problem school with a lot of students having gone to jail. Many boys in my school took drugs and carried a knife with them. Although I was not comfortable with this, I tried to fit in. I started to become ignorant and did not treat girls with the respect they deserved,” he says.

This was five years ago, just before he joined CARE's “Be a Man Club”. Recognizing the importance of working with young men to cultivate gender-equitable attitudes, reduce violence, and promote healthy lifestyles, CARE set up the clubs as part of a broader programme, the Young Men Initiative. This innovative approach across the Balkans targets adolescent boys and girls aged 13-19, who named the project “the club”.

“We discussed what it means to be a real man and how to treat women equally. We also received trainings on issues such as violence, drugs and sexually transmitted diseases. For many of us the topics led to a shift in attitudes, particularly as we grew up in post-war societies where violence was always very visible,” Agon says. The programme challenged the prevailing social norms on masculinity and the role men play in the household, in school and the community. “I was given the opportunity to travel and meet other young men from Serbia and Croatia. Speaking to them and exchanging ideas motivated me to become an active member of the club,” Agon says. Agon participated in many different activities. He handed out roses on the streets to celebrate International Women's Day, appeared on public TV cooking shows and organized campaigns proclaiming: “Be a man, change diapers.”

Soon thereafter, Agon was offered a part-time position at the club and was trained to provide trainings himself. He organized movie nights, gave workshops on topics such as gender and violence and went to schools to advocate for this work. The transformative moment during his time there was when he was asked to join a theatre play on gender stereotypes and perform in front of an audience. “I was always very shy and did not speak much. The theatre play really forced me out of my comfort zone,” he says. **“Finishing our performance and standing in front of so many people felt unreal. In that moment I realized how many people I was able to reach, and it motivated me to further speak up,”** he says.

With increased confidence, Agon applied to become a radio host when he heard of a vacancy at a local radio station. Having acquired video editing and public speaking skills at the club, it did not take him long to get the job. **“It is so inspiring to know that all of Kosovo can hear my voice now. I owe this largely to my experience with CARE and the 'Be a Man' programme. The club was my hero and it changed my life and that of my friends forever.”** ●

Crafting new opportunities in transit

There is wood shavings on the floor, dust in the air, and the sound of machinery is whirring.

Inside a bustling carpentry workshop, Masoud is crafting new tables and benches for his students in Presevo, a refugee reception centre in Southern Serbia. **“I teach German and English in the camp and also give guitar and piano lessons. Even though we are in a camp, it is important for me to continue to learn and teach others. I strongly believe in education. I believe that with better education you can create a better world,”** he says.

Masoud never thought he would be a refugee one day. He was raised in a safe home in Iran, born to wealthy Muslim parents, and did not lack anything — except for his freedom. His motivation to convert to Christianity was not accepted in his conservative neighborhood in Teheran, and he soon found himself having to flee his home to save his life. “I was fired from my job and my bank account was blocked. My plan was to study engineering in Germany and I was accepted for a Master's programme in Hannover. But since I could not prove that I had sufficient funding, my visa for Germany was declined,” Masoud says.

In 2017, the 32-year-old fled to Serbia in the hope of reaching Germany. The so-called “Western Balkans Migration Route,” leading from Turkey through Greece, Macedonia and Serbia north toward EU countries, was an established corridor for many refugees. But as Masoud arrived in Serbia, the Balkan route was shut down and the borders to Germany were closed. “Now I live here in Presevo and have no choice other than to live in the camp for the time being. All borders are closed, and I do not want to cross them illegally. **I am not a criminal, I just want to start a new life,”** Masoud says.



Masoud Hashemi, Refugee, Presevo, Serbia

In response to the unfolding humanitarian situation in the Balkans, CARE started to provide immediate humanitarian aid to refugees and migrants in 2015. CARE provided food, shelter, water, sanitation, and health and protection assistance to over 100,000 refugees. Today, CARE still provides livelihood support in the form of carpentry and other workshops. “The biggest challenge for me was to communicate to the locals in Serbia because of the language barrier,” Masoud says. “I was also not used to living in a camp because back in Iran, I had lived in a nice house. But still, I do not regret anything because here I can experience the one thing I never had in Iran: freedom.”

“My biggest wish is to live in a country where I can study for a doctorate degree. I also hope to be able to help other people who come to the Balkans as refugees. I received so much help myself, I want to give something back.”●

Bridging the multi-cultural divide in Mostar and beyond

“I come from a city that is divided into two sides, one with a majority Bosniak population and the other with a majority Croat population. We almost never used to hang out together. When the Young Men Initiative brought Bosniak and Croat school students together around the same table, it was a big surprise for us.” This is how Nedim Mijičević remembers first meeting CARE. He and his peers then discovered how much they had in common, from listening to the same music to watching the same movies and TV shows. What struck him the most was to find out how similar they are to each other. His whole life he had been taught that people of different ethnicities had nothing in common.

CARE did not only help Nedim to overcome prejudices and stereotypes, but also reached many other young groups who took part in the program. The summer camps and meetups run by the Young Men Initiative were a key methodological component of a reconciliation process for youth born during or shortly after the wars – they involved high school boys of mixed nationalities from all countries, languages and religions. For most of them it was the first time to see Bosniaks and Croats in the same place. The discussions focused on their perceptions of 'masculinity', learning new skills to confront peer pressure, exchanging experiences around combating violence, and sharing every-day life tasks and responsibilities.

For Nedim, the road towards a unified city may seem long but the project was one of the first steps to overcome the divided class structure in his town. His school followed the disputed national education scheme of “two schools under one roof”. It refers to schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina based on the ethnic segregation of children. Children from two ethnic groups, Bosniaks and Croats, attend classes in the same building, but are physically separated from each other and taught separate curricula.

“CARE would bring us – young men of different ethnicities – around the same table so that we could get to know each other. After just a few minutes of talking, the prejudices we held against each other would start to fade,” says Nedim.

This is what motivated Nedim to become active himself, wanting to change his city. When he was just 17 years old, he got involved in the Young Men Initiative and started working with his peers and other young people in Mostar. This was six years ago but Nedim lives in his hometown to this day. He is one of the youngest people to organize workshops and events on ethnic division and gender inequality for young men in Bosnia and Herzegovina. During discussions, most of them realize that they are not so different from each other and share the same interests, dreams and hopes for the future. As prejudices are broken down, friendships develop. **“For me, this is a big thing, and none of it would have been possible without CARE,”** says Nedim ●



**Nedim Mičijević, Student, Mostar,
Bosnia and Herzegovina**

Kicking off social change through football

Thirteen-year-old Ervin Hašimović from Bijeljina hurries home from school almost every day. He quickly changes into his sport clothes and goes out onto the football field. For him, football is the best game in the world.

“I get upset when my mom calls me to come back home. I lose track of time when I’m out playing with my friends, and I never get tired of the game. I could spend days playing football with my friends,” he says.

Ervin is one of the 40 children who are able to receive football training thanks to the Otaharin Day Centre. The Centre, with the support of CARE and other organisations, not only offers trainings but also a safe environment for disadvantaged children to learn and to study. To those who regularly attend school, monthly scholarships and school supplies are provided. Moreover, the Centre is a place for Roma and non-Roma children to meet and become friends.

Having grown up without a father and belonging to the Roma minority at school, Ervin faced many prejudices from a very young age onwards. Until recently, he had difficulties connecting with his school mates. The football training gave Ervin a chance to socialize with his peers and become friends even outside of classes.

“During vacations, we only have training once a week at Otaharin. But that’s OK. I still see my friends and play with them every day,” he says. Ervin’s mother, Sabira, is incredibly grateful for the change she has been witnessing in her son’s life.

“He used to be very reserved and quiet but now he plays, talks and simply has fun with other children of his age,” she says.

The Day Centre promotes social change and education to overcome social exclusion. Through sports, an activity provided through a CARE project, Roma children gain new perspectives in life and are taught key skills, such as team spirit, fairness and responsibility. At the same time, this enables solidarity in the communities and helps overcome cultural and socio-economic barriers.



Ervin Hašimović, football Player, Bijeljina, Bosnia and Herzegovina

The past few months have shown Ervin that he can lead a life of endless possibilities. His greatest wish now is to become a professional football player. **“I want to play left wing,”** he says decidedly, knowing that nothing stands in his way to chase after his dream ●

Violence has many shapes and Sanja fights them all

When the war started in the 1990s, Sanja Cesar was studying psychology in Zagreb, Croatia. Together with a group of students and professors, she

decided to help displaced persons. Sanja started working at collective centres and refugee camps in Croatia, running workshops for children and spending time to speak to their parents. As a member of the Centre for Women Victims of War, she mainly worked with refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina up until 1997. Their focus was to end gender-based violence and elevate women's voices in the anti-war movement by empowering women – including survivors of sexual violence in conflict – on many levels.

Afterwards, together with a few like-minded people, Sanja established the Centre for Education, Counseling and Research (CESI). Having spent years working with survivors of violence, Sanja witnessed different forms of discrimination on a daily basis and met far too many people who were denied their basic human rights. The goal of the organization she set up was to change this.

“We worked a lot on protecting the rights of women and promoting gender equality when we crossed path with CARE back in 2005 to become partners in a regional project to prevent gender-based violence. CARE supported our activities, including one of our most successful projects called “Silence is not Gold”. The campaign raised awareness about the different types of gender-based violence – family violence, violence in relationships and human trafficking – and the connections between these issues across Croatia. In 2009, the initiative won the “ERSTE Bank Social Integration Award” and was selected as a best practice example for preventing domestic violence in Europe,” says Sanja.

CESI and CARE also cooperated to produce a study on **“Men and Gender Equality”**. This was the first research on attitudes and behaviours of men in this country concerning gender equality, and was conducted as part of a large international study. The results represented the basis for creating systematic changes and influence policies.

Knowing that the road ahead to a democratic and free society will be a long and rocky one, Sanja will not give up to make the bad good and the good better. Her outlook towards full gender equality is the same today as it was more than 20 years ago when she founded CESI. Looking back, Sanja is proud of her achievements. When she looks into the future, she sees hope. **“It was an honour and privilege to cooperate with CARE, to meet and work with amazing, enthusiastic and dedicated people who share the same vision, which ultimately lead to so many meaningful, creative and productive actions. We did a lot of good things together. I hope that CARE will continue to work in the region, so that together we can change things for the better when it comes to gender equality in Croatia,”** Sanja says ●



Sanja Cesar, Project Manager with the Centre for Education, Counseling and Research, Zagreb, Croatia

Zora keeps the CARE house in order

In March 1994, many things happened: Tunisia had its first multiparty parliament, 64 passengers were killed when a train derailed near Durban in South Africa and in Washington D.C., the Washington Agreement was signed to ensure ceasefire in Bosnia and Herzegovina. And in Sarajevo, Zora Pipić found a job.

Although Zora finding a job may not seem as significant on a grander scale, for her it was life-changing. At that time, Sarajevo continued to be under siege and being employed was of vital importance for most people. The fighting in Bosnia and Herzegovina lasted for four years. Survival was a daily struggle; people suffered from a lack of electricity, water and food.

Before the war, Zora was a well-respected business woman. She worked as the Deputy Director of sales at Veselin Masleša, one of the most prominent publishing houses in the former Republic of Yugoslavia. But the war changed everything. With her husband leaving to fight on the front lines, Zora became the only caretaker of her sick mother and 12-year-old daughter. Having lost her job, she was desperate to provide for her family. **“I had no money at the time and was willing to take any job,”** Zora says. She was thrilled to get a job with CARE, even if it meant cleaning and maintaining the office space. Shortly after that she became a housekeeper and a regular CARE staff member. Twenty-five years later, Zora is one of the longest serving members of CARE in the Balkans.

“My daughter hated the thought of me working as a cleaner. But I did not mind. **CARE saved me during the war and in the years following, it had become a family to me.** I recently sprained my ankle on my way to work. When my colleagues heard about it, all ten of them from the Sarajevo office came to help me. When my mother died, they all came to the funeral. These are not small things. I never felt excluded or felt like I was worth less because of the job I was doing,” says Zora.

As one of the first employees of CARE in the Balkans, Zora witnessed changes, big and small, in her own life and CARE's work. **“Every day, I would come back from work satisfied. I watched my daughter grow up and my organization getting bigger. The focus of the work changed, people came and went, and I watched my colleagues work on different projects. But the mission remained the same: to not just change people's individual lives but society as a whole. I am very proud to be a part of that,”** says Zora. Zora is now 71 and cannot imagine what her life will be like when she retires. “It will be hard, I will miss it a lot. I know I can always come to CARE if I need any help and I know my colleagues will always be there for me. There is something special about CARE. Even those who leave come back again.” ●



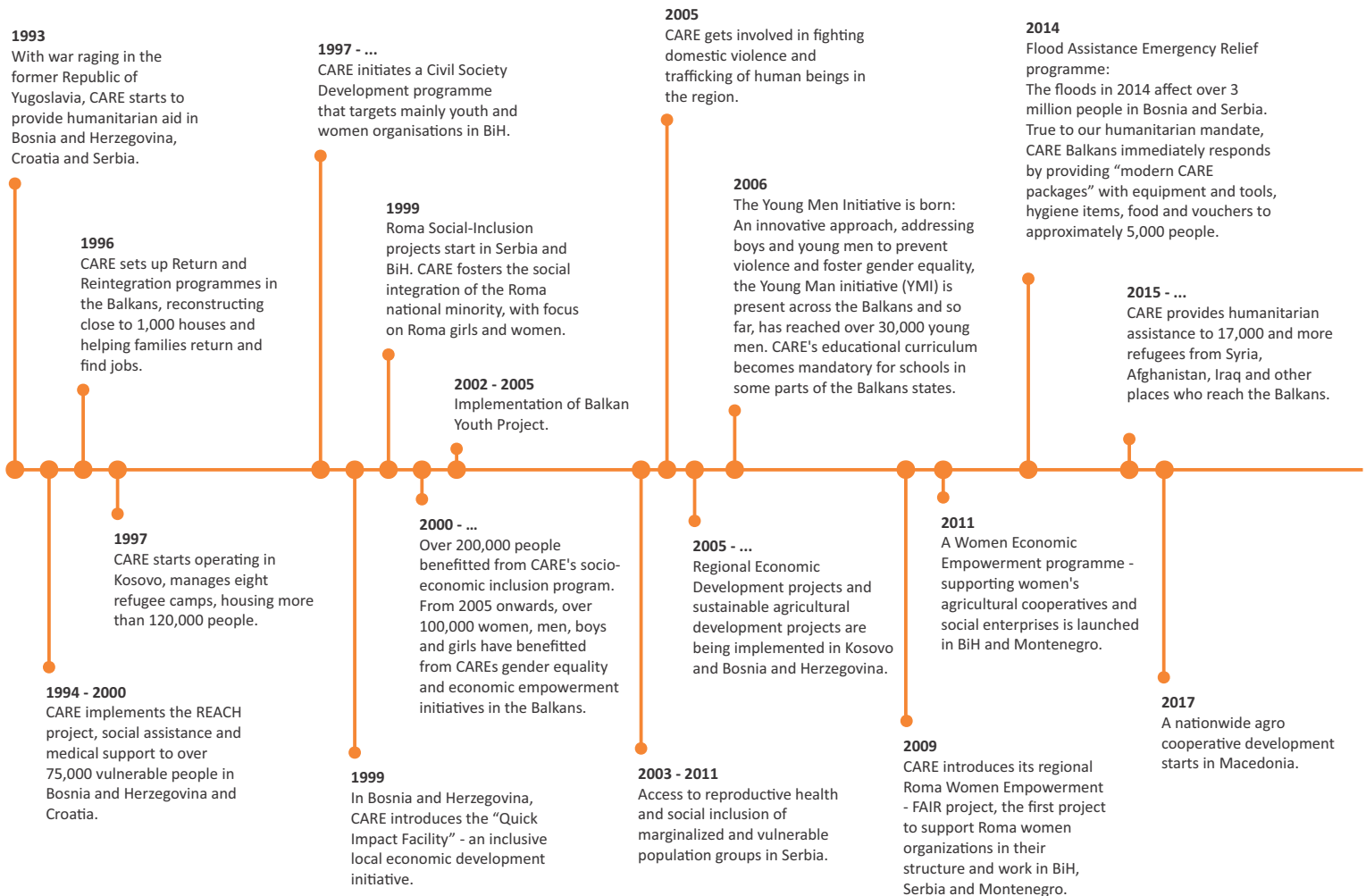
Zora Pipić, Longest-Serving CARE Employee, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Milestones

CARE has been working in the Balkans since 1993. We started by providing humanitarian aid to those displaced and affected by the wars. Today, CARE seeks to help build sustainable peace and development in the region. Our programmes support economic activities on a regional level, strengthen peace and reconciliation efforts, seek to integrate minorities and foster opportunities for young people.

Since the 2000s, CARE focuses its efforts on the **political and socio-economic inclusion** of marginalized groups and **gender equality**. We also provide **emergency assistance to refugees** stranded in the Balkans.

CARE today works in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, Kosovo¹, Montenegro, Macedonia and Albania.



¹ Under UN Resolution 1244

Thank you

CARE would like to thank all donors that have supported our work over the past 25 years. Their support enables us to fulfill our mission to uplift communities and individuals to seize opportunities, live their lives with dignity and to contribute to socio-economic inclusion and gender equitable societies in the Balkans. We look forward to continuing working side by side.

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