

Don't Forget to Come by for Coffee: Conflict Resolution Training with a Group of Muslim Women in Athens, Greece

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In September 1996, I was invited to teach a series of conflict resolution classes to a group of Muslim women in Athens, Greece. This group was part of an educational program funded by the European Union and aimed at providing training and skills to people who are excluded from the "job market." There are four different groups of people in these programs: ethnic minorities, immigrants, people recently released from jail, and people recently released from psychiatric hospitals. It costs the government more to support these groups of people through welfare than to train them to join the work force, so the European Union now provides training programs for these groups.

I accepted the offer to teach feeling both excited and scared—excited to be able to work with a minority that desperately needs support, and scared of the barriers created by years of prejudice and marginalization between us. After all, I am a member of the white Orthodox Christian majority that caused many problems for the Muslim minority in Greece. Over time, the Greek government has gradually recognized the religious and political rights of the Muslim minority, which was officially recognized in the Lucerne Treaty of 1923. The ethnic group called the Muslim minority is made up of Muslims of Turkish origin, Gypsies, Pomaki (Muslims living in mountain areas, of Slavic origin) and Turkish Gypsies.

The terms Turkish, Gypsy or Pomaki are not intended to negate Greek citizenship; rather, they are used to define cultural and ethnic identity. This group consists of approximately 130,000 people, most of whom live in Thraki, the northeastern part of Greece.¹

It is beyond the reach of this article to describe the history of Muslim minorities in Greece. This would take volumes, since the Balkans are a mix of ethnic groups that often live in countries where the dominant group is different from their own, and national boundaries have been changing continuously depending on the result of wars and treaties between the Balkan countries. Turkey lost most of Western Thraki during the Balkan wars and in 1915 gave away what was left to Bulgaria as an exchange for entering the war with the Central Forces.

After Germany's defeat in World War I, the Allies took over Macedonia, forcing the Bulgarians to withdraw to their old boundaries. Western Thraki was occupied by the French army and temporarily ruled by the Allied Forces. Bulgaria, Turkey and Greece all claimed the region. In 1920 Greece achieved an agreement and was allowed to rule in the area, having persuaded the Allied Forces they would guarantee the rights of minority groups.²

These ethnic groups have been heavily discriminated against in the last decades.

Although they legally share the same rights and privileges as all Greek citizens, their daily reality is far different from that of the Greek majority. They face difficulties dealing with the government; since they are often seen as "Turks," they face the anger that Greeks have towards Turkish politics in the region, which ebbs and flows depending on the state of the volatile relationship between the two countries.

Tension between the majority Orthodox Christian and minority Muslim communities surfaces around different religious practices, languages, and dress codes. Most Muslims also live in communities with their own rules of social behavior. Muslim children enrolling in school have troubles assimilating with the Orthodox children. They have learning difficulties, since their Greek is poor and they have to deal with the prejudice of others. They are often accused of being dirty and bringing lice into the schools, although one can find Orthodox Christian children with lice even in the most expensive schools of Athens. A few years ago, when a teacher in a small village school in the Peloponnese encouraged Gypsy children to enroll, the parents of the Orthodox children threatened to withdraw their children from school. Recently these prejudices have lessened somewhat, although at a very slow pace.

When people in Greece think of where the Muslim minority lives, most think of Thraki. Few are aware that there is a Muslim minority of about 10,000 people in Athens, half of whom live in an area called Gazi. In 1983-1984, the socialist government offered the Muslims in Thraki initiatives to move to Athens. The government was interested in lessening the number of Muslims in Thraki, since the region itself had been contested, and the rights of Muslims there had long been a source of conflict in Greek and Turkish relations. Promises of jobs in the public sector and the poverty they had to deal with in Thraki made many choose to leave their villages and come to the capital.³ Once in Athens, they quickly realized that life was equally hard in the city. They remained uneducated, unemployed, unskilled, and poor. They not only lived in

poverty, but language and cultural barriers stopped them from taking advantage of the government benefits more easily accessible to the Greek-speaking poor. They lacked basic knowledge of the welfare system, how to enroll children in school, and how to get medical care. The high rate of illiteracy made these problems even worse.

A non-government organization called "Volunteer Work" started working with the Muslim minority in Gazi, initially offering reading and writing classes to children. Through contact with the families, mostly women, they established trusting relationships with a number of people. This volunteer group designed a training program that offered a group of mothers the chance to learn basic skills in reading, writing, health, and job skills. Through learning crafts such as embroidery, knitting, and sewing, the women would be able to produce products that they could sell for income.

My role was to offer a conflict resolution training to help the women deal with conflicts in their homes, neighborhood, and interactions with schools, the health care system, and unemployment agencies. I was excited by this challenge and eagerly structured four classes that included theory, experiential exercises, and group processes.

A few days before the first class, I decided to visit the group to get a feel of the atmosphere. They were meeting every day from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. in a public building that belongs to the Athens prefecture, offered free of charge to the volunteer group leading the program. When I entered, I was struck by how run down it looked. I walked over garbage, tripped over loose cables and inched my way up seven flights of stairs, all the while circumnavigating stacks of files and papers. As I entered the offices, I was greeted by a group of eight or ten young boys, ranging from five or six to twelve years of age. They were shouting, chasing each other around the hallways, falling, crying, laughing and singing. Three adult staff members were trying to contain the scene.

I was greeted by the social worker responsible for the program, who explained that the

mothers had to bring their children along since there was no child care available and most kids didn't go to school. The child psychologist working for the program offered to update me and answer my questions. The briefing happened as I was being shown around the offices and introduced to mothers, children and other staff members. I learned that the ten women attending the program all headed single-parent families, and that each woman had between two and six children. Many became mothers in their teens, so some of the women were also grandmothers. Their ages ranged from seventeen to fifty-five. All spoke Turkish; most understood Greek, but few spoke it. Although they were there to participate in the program and get training, most had urgent domestic needs as well. The staff was trying to run the program while also helping the women enroll children in school, fill in unemployment forms, get medical insurance, and go to the hospital for treatments. Everyone looked completely overwhelmed.

On my way home that afternoon, I stopped by a bookstore and bought a Turkish/Greek dictionary. Once home, I took out the notes I had prepared for the classes. After one look, I tore them up. They felt useless. This class was going to be unlike anything I had done before. My experience in learning and practicing conflict resolution so far had been primarily within the context of worldwork and conflict resolution seminars with the Global Process Institute and in my process work training. I had been taught and practiced conflict resolution in a specific way, which involved presentation of the theory and experiential exercises and group processes that helped me understand and integrate the theory. I had not yet had the chance to practice this work outside of seminar settings. While this is by no means the only way to teach and practice conflict resolution, it was the model with which I was most familiar due to the fact that I had just completed my training.

Over the next few days, I read books on the history of the Muslim minority in Greece, looked at newspaper articles on related topics, and talked to political activists and other people

around me. I gathered as much information as I could in an attempt to understand the larger context within which I was asked to work. As I read, I realized that while I, like many others in the country, knew about the Muslim minority in Greece, I was largely unaware of the complexity of its history. The rights of minority groups in the Balkans have been used for centuries as a reason for one country to claim rule of a region in a neighboring country. It is thus very difficult to separate historical facts from propaganda. The more I read, the more confused I got. I realized along the way that trying to figure out who was right and who was wrong in these political debates was not going to be useful. It is not a matter of "right and wrong" but a matter of people learning how to live together, accepting their differences and sharing their cultural wealth.

I was to meet with the group for two hours every day over the course of a week. The first morning, I arrived half an hour early, sat outside the room they were working in, and played with the kids. From behind the closed door I could hear loud voices, speaking all at once, mostly in Turkish, with some Greek here and there. When it came time to meet the group, I entered a small room full of cigarette smoke and saw ten women talking, drinking coffee, and doing embroidery. Some of them stared at me, while others glanced up quickly before returning to their conversation. Once we were left on our own, I joined the circle and introduced myself. We went around and said our names. Alexandra, Yesarie, Hanifie, Fatme, Neriman, Hatie, Atzer, Hidaet, Nevrie, Zeinep and Alide. Many of these names were foreign to me, difficult to understand unless they were repeated slowly numerous times. I discovered they had equal trouble remembering my name, which in Greek is a simple name. I told them I didn't speak Turkish, but I had a dictionary with me and I was eager to learn from them. The women who were fluent in Greek offered to translate for the rest.

From that point on, we spent our time together in a continuous group process. Nothing was linear. All of the women needed to

have their stories heard, to tell how hard they worked, how they struggled, how they made it on the streets, how they dealt with illnesses, what their symptoms were, what cures they knew. While talking of prejudice that the Christians feel towards them, and how they experienced it, we got into what prejudices existed between them. Atzer spoke of feeling isolated, because widows, as divorced women are called, are not welcomed in homes. They are considered a threat to other families, since as single women they are available to other men. Fatme spoke of the class system amongst them, with some having an easier life than others. Some have electricity in their homes while others do not; some have extended family in the neighborhood, and some do not. Some of the women literally lived off garbage, while others had a welfare income that provided them with food. All of them lived in small homes, sometimes housing three families in two rooms, with no bathrooms; one house had no running water.

Hidaet spoke of feeling ashamed of living in such poverty, unable to make ends meet. Her son was doing his military service, and she asked me again and again, "Why do they call me Greek when they take my son to the army, ready to kill and get killed for Greece, and Turkish when I am looking for a home or a job?" We spent hours listening to each other's stories. Through this sharing, we got a chance to know each other more and to offer some support and advice. Yesarie told me, "Just knowing I am talking to a psychologist makes me feel better." We all laughed and I encouraged them to see the "psychologists" in themselves and in others.

This was one of the first moments that we addressed roles in the group, in this case, the roles of the psychologist and the one in need. Using the example of the widows who were not welcome in homes, we spoke of how prejudice manifests not only in the larger society but also within the smaller communities we belong to, even when they are being discriminated against. One of the women spoke of her embarrassment to invite others over for coffee,

since she is the poorest of them all and has ten people living in one room. She is barely surviving financially and her house is always messy and dirty. She needed help with chores and could not afford to spend time drinking coffee with neighbors. When Fatme offered to come over and help her, the woman replied, "I am afraid you are repulsed by me, that you think because I am poor and wear torn clothes that I am also dirty." Fatme told her how she had reached out to her but mistook her embarrassment for hostility and did not persist. Without using terminology or explaining theoretical structures, we spent hours exploring roles, resolving conflicts, and listening. At this point, I realized that group process does not have a typical form; rather, it is something a group structures according to its needs.

One day I arrived to find total chaos. Everyone was shouting and the women were obviously angry. A staff member told me that the women were upset because they had not been given an advance payment for their participation in the program. Because they were illiterate, they did not know that the contract they had signed clearly stated that payment would be received upon completion of the program. They viewed the contract they had signed as a trap. They also were not aware that the European Union had frozen payments to all Greek programs because of bad financial management in some programs. The government was doing its best to get the money from the European Union, but none of us knew for sure when the funds would arrive. There had been a moment of despair when most of the group threatened to leave the program. When I finally entered the room, the social worker leading the program turned to me and said, "Here is a chance for some real conflict resolution. Please explain the terms of this contract to the group." She then left the room.

It was difficult to even begin to explain anything amongst the raised voices and threats to leave the room. These women had been taken advantage of numerous times by landlords, employers, and politicians. They now turned to me and said, "She [the program

leader] is probably stealing our money.” They were distraught at the idea that even this woman had taken advantage of them. The social worker had been working for years as a volunteer with the community. Up until this point, she had been seen as their trusted connection to the government, as one of their spokespeople, and as a friend. I realized that trust was missing and that nothing could be resolved without trust. I asked the group if they were willing to discuss things with the people leading the program. They agreed, so I invited the social worker back into the room and facilitated a group process. The situation escalated again, with accusations flying back and forth, until I encouraged the program director to express her feelings. She spoke of her desperation at dealing with bureaucracy, her ongoing efforts to make the program successful, and her frustration at having to do so much administration while helping everyone with their day-to-day needs. She told them that she and all the other staff had gone without pay for all the months of preparation and had agreed they would be the last to be paid, after the program members had received their payments. She told them how much she believed in all of them and the work both the staff and group members were doing. As she talked about how frustrating it was as the situation became more difficult, her eyes filled with tears. I heard a group member say, “That’s what I feel like every day at home.” Suddenly, something changed in the atmosphere. There was no longer an “us and them” distinction. The role of the one who is not trustworthy was assigned to the “bureaucrats,” who were still not represented.

I encouraged the program leader to explain the contract they had all signed, hoping that through that process the usefulness of the “bureaucrat” would be represented. We went through each paragraph word by word, translating into Turkish where needed. Slowly, everyone realized that this contract protected both sides, including those running and funding the program and those participating. All the women had to do was to complete the program in order to be legally entitled to their pay.

Through that interaction, it became clear that trust was a relationship issue between all of us. There was no longer a “bad side” and a “good side.” Some of the women spoke of how staff members had lent them money and how appreciative they were of the support this program provided. They spoke of their dreams to create a cooperative that would sell their crafts and provide them with much-needed income. The day ended with optimism in the atmosphere.

On our last morning together, I asked for feedback on our work. They all spoke of how important it was to them to have this time each day to talk about their problems and share their feelings. They noted that this was the first time they were listened to, and the first time someone took the time to explain things to them instead of just saying, “You don’t understand.” I told them that I was touched by the way I was included in the group. One of the women told me that what made me trustworthy was that I had been human with them, that I had asked to learn from them, not only to teach. They felt appreciated and welcomed. That was mutual. I was grateful for the opportunity to learn more about a culture within my country, to connect with people from the Muslim community, and to find new ways to teach and practice conflict resolution. I was touched by their stories and courage and was taught by their willingness to learn together. As I was leaving, one of the women turned to me and said, “Don’t forget to come by our neighborhood for coffee. You make good company.”

Afterword

Many months later, I was sitting in a taverna with two friends having dinner. A young woman selling flowers came by our table. She was one of the many one comes across in a night’s outing in Athens. My friends and I were engaged in conversation, so all three of us made a hand motion indicating we weren’t going to buy any flowers. As she turned to leave, I glanced up and recognized one of the Muslim women of the group I had worked with. We simultaneously recognized each other. I stood up, she put her basket down, and we hugged. We exchanged news: I asked about her baby,

bought some flowers for my friends, and added some extra money for a gift for the baby. Although I hadn't intended to buy flowers earlier, I felt it was important to support her and share some of my privileges.

As I sat down, I saw that quite a few clients of the taverna had turned around and were looking our way. Then I realized that it was highly unusual to see a Greek Christian woman eating at a taverna and a Muslim woman selling flowers hugging each other. In a way, that scene was part of our work in the group. We took the learning and understanding from our week together and put it into action in the world. The two of us came together as people, breaking the boundaries of our division in the outer world. In a small way, our learning together became public.

1. For more information, Saltarides, S. *Western Thraki and the Muslims: What Exactly Is Happening?* Nea Sinora: Athens, 1990. (Title translated from Greek.)
2. From newspaper articles in the Greek newspapers *Kathimerini* (30/6/93) and *Epohi* (13/1/94).
3. Psomiades, Harry *The Eastern Question: The Last Phase*. Institute for Balkan Studies: Thessaloniki, 1968.

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