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|  | **UNMIK/FR/0050/01 FEATURE RELEASE -22 June 2001**  Elections  **Kosovo Women Come of Political Age**  By Alexandra George  "The Kosovo-wide Assembly elections are a great opportunity for women to participate in the political process," says Kristin Astgeirsdottir, Project Adviser, United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) a former Member of Parliament from Iceland.  With a 33 per cent gender requirement for political parties recommended by OSCE's Central Election Commission now pending SRSG' approval, Kosovo women will have a landmark opportunity to impact on political life.  The international community is already gearing up to support women candidates. OSCE recently began a new series of women-empowerment activities. In May, OSCE's Democratization Department held a seminar,  "Women and Politics," attended by 40 female politicians from a broad spectrum of political parties, to encourage women politicians' more active role in their parties. Parliamentarians from Germany, Netherlands, Iceland, Norway and Finland shared first-hand their experiences as candidates in their own countries where they built up women's parliamentary coalitions and political interest groups.  International NGOs, like STAR Network and the National Democratic Institute, provided training on public policy advocacy, campaigning and communications.  OSCE and UNIFEM recently held the first two- in Lipjan and Vushhtri - out of 30 seminars, entitled "Women and Leadership in the Municipalities" involving training of Municipal Assembly members and Municipal staff, both women and men, on gender issues.  UNIFEM is also organizing meetings with women voters. According to Astgeirsdottir:  "We need to stress democracy is an individual right, that Kosovar women's husbands cannot vote for them. Our work is all about training in gender-awareness."  Women leaders like Dr. Flora Brovina, President, League of Albanian Women (an NGO), Melihate Termkolli, representative, LDK Women's Forum, and Greta Kaqinari of Albanian Christian-Democratic Party of Kosovo, agree that lack of education and an entrenched patriarchy are major barriers to change. For Brovina: "Women should not just be a decorative piece in a political party.  I want women to have a respectable voice, but their voices will take time to resound." She cites the 80 per cent female unemployment, dire health problems, and lack of female education, especially in rural areas, as the main impediments to progress. "Women have problems distinct from those of men in the house, at work, in villages, in parliament - so women should support women," she notes.    The OSCE Election Department's Outreach section is focusing on gender awareness as part of its voter education campaign: one of its four outreach teams will conduct face to face meetings exclusively with women voters throughout Kosovo, and in the fall a series of roundtables on election issues, including gender awareness, is planned.  OSCE and UNIFEM will also train women candidates in the fall.  Political parties are also forging new ideas on behalf of their cause. LDK Women's Forum platform advocates the establishment of a Ministry of Women's Affairs in the new government as a way to promote women's advancement. "We are determined to institutionalize women's issues because without that no sound basis for normal development exists," says Termkolli.  However, opinions differ among women who are already established politicians. Greta Kaqinari disagrees: such a ministry would merely marginalize women: she and Flora Brovina would like gender quotas to be legally established for governmental appointments at both central and municipal levels.  This is a topical issue among proposals presented this week by local NGOs and civil society members to Security Council ambassadors during the latter's recent visit to Kosovo: that equal opportunities be reflected in the new legislation.  Clearly a momentum for change, no matter how measured in a society divided between modernizers and traditionalists, is underway.  The Central Election Commission's recommendation of both a gender and geographical requirement in political representation in the future Assembly helps move Kosovo society forward to democracy. According to Sean Gralton, Senior Legal counsel, OSCE Central Election Commission Secretariat, "our point with the gender quota is to ensure everyone is represented in the Assembly. The same applies to the geographical requirement: to make sure people from small municipalities, who don't have as much power or votes, should also feel the Assembly belongs to them."  Precedents from Scandinavian countries bode well.  Both Norway and Sweden began with female quotas in parliament, but today women parliamentarians make up a larger percentage than the original ratio. According to Gralton: "That means at some point men and women voters also thought having women in politics was a good idea which validates our gender policy in Kosovo."  Both Brovina and Termkolli agree that, with the new quota in the future Assembly, the prospect for women's advancement is "moving along positively". Kaqinari, who was a member of the 1998 Kosovo Assembly, recalls: "Back then there was no room to fight for gender issues because our battle was over living or dying."  050 Note for editors  The full document may be consulted online in English at <http://www.unmik.org/>. |