

15th Anniversary - Reflecting Back

In September 1995, six passionate women from Poland, the Czech Republic and the Netherlands launched upon a project, which they called La Strada. Of those six founders, five are still with La Strada today: Baerbel Uhl (former coordinator Czech Republic) and Trijntje Kootstra (former general coordinator) now both being members of LSI Advisory Council, whereas Stana Buchowska still heads La Strada Poland, while her colleagues Irena Dawid and Joanna Garnier are still responsible for the social assistance and prevention campaigns in Poland. Only Teresa Oleszczuk, the sixth co-founder of La Strada, left after one year. 15 years later, three of them reflect back; Stana Buchowska, Baerbel Uhl and Trijntje Kootstra.

The start & founding of La Strada

Baerbel Uhl: "From the point of view of a social-political activism, the first half of the 1990's was an exciting time in the post-communist central European societies, even though it also created anxiety among the citizens, as sometimes semi-legal privatizations and the reform of the social and health system caused a lot of financial and social challenges. Prague became a centre and a home for thousands of migrants from the Eastern and Western Hemisphere. Everything was in transition, and former underground or dissident political activists, artists and musicians contributed to the overall change by performing in public, merging different styles and creating non-governmental organizations and other initiatives. The creation of the Czech La Strada Program was inspired by these social transitions".

"In 1991, the first European NGO conference on trafficking in women was held in Brussels Belgium by the Green Group in the European Parliament", says Trijntje Kootstra, "in close cooperation with the Dutch Foundation against Trafficking in Women (STV, now named Comensha/La Strada Netherlands)". One of the participants came from Poland and in the period thereafter there were more and more indicators that trafficking from Central and Eastern Europe was becoming a serious issue after the fall of the Berlin Wall. STV took up the challenge and organized a working conference in 1993 where NGOs from Poland and the Czech Republic met to determine their needs in order to tackle the issue of human trafficking. This 'bottom-up approach' led to three pillars which later on became the La Strada Program: the need for prevention activities in the countries of origin, the need for relief for victims returning home and the need for press and lobby activities to influence the national authorities to take responsibility and the media to cover the issue in a more respectful way".

Baerbel Uhl; "In 1994 -while organizing what then appeared as the first East-West conference on trafficking in Prague - I found strong support both in terms of developing common visions and expertise in the colleagues of the Stichting Tegen Vrouwenhandel (STV), The Polish Feminist Association (PFA), Polish YWCA and the Czech women NGO ProFem. In addition to the transitions in our societies, we were also encouraged by the global human rights movement - La Strada was created shortly after the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna 1993 and during the preparation of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing 1995. Moreover, the horrible news of violent armed conflicts in Southeast Europe during the early 1990s had strong impacts on us. We were aware of the fragility of a peaceful co-existence in the post-cold war regime in Europe and the importance of civil societies as watchdogs and as providers of warning systems for human rights violations.

"Based on the grass roots input of the Polish and Czech NGOs, STV submitted a project proposal to two recently established funding programmes: the Phare Program of the European Commission and the Matra Program of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs", states Trijntje Kootstra.

In September 1995, more than two years after the first ideas were developed a small one year pilot project was finally approved by Phare and Matra.

Stana Buchowska: "What I remember was a very special atmosphere in the women NGO movement environment at that time, as the official start of La Strada project began shortly after the Fourth World Conference on Women - Action for Equality, Development and Peace in Beijing. One might feel a lot of enthusiasm was radiating from participants who just returned back and shared their impressions and experiences. A generally shared feeling within the women's movement was that we could achieve a lot.

"The name La Strada was chosen after much brainstorming, eventually leading up to an 'AHA Erlebnis' in a well known pub in the centre of Utrecht, the Netherlands. Stana Buchowska all of the sudden remembered her favourite movie, 'La Strada' by Federico Fellini, in which a young girl is sold to an old man, to work in a circus. La Strada refers to -literally- the street, representing the streets on which many women have to work, the long way out of their exploitative situation and the long road the founders of La Strada saw in front of them towards effective strategies to deal with the issue", tells Trijntje Kootstra.

Stana Buchowska continues: "As the three country project involved small teams, there was a cosy atmosphere during the first meetings; we were quite close to each other, knowing a lot about each other, about our personal lives, family situation, past, hobbies. We invited each other to our houses, spent free time together, organized parties". Trijntje Kootstra: 'For me personally, La Strada was part of my growing up. It was my first major project, but it was much more than that, it was a way of living. We were all so dedicated, fanatic and arguing about the right strategies at times, but we were -and still are- also great personal friends who know each other very well and still keep in touch after more than 15 years. We all sacrificed on a personal level too, but most of all, we had great respect for each other, recognizing a kindred spirit.'

Challenges met

Trijntje Kootstra: 'When we started, everything was new, for us personally, but also with regard to the issue, as La Strada was the very first initiative in Central and Eastern Europe against human trafficking. Hard to imagine nowadays when in Ukraine alone there are more than 30 anti-trafficking NGOs! I remember that we had quite a hard time to get recognition from the authorities at first.

Baerbel Uhl: "It is difficult to recall the time and situation in 1994-95 when we were trying to set up a Central and Eastern European program to address trafficking in women and girls within Europe. The difficulties are caused by the fact that the political landscape back then was totally different than today. Trafficking in human being was not at all on the governments' nor on the European agenda. There were no Experts Groups, Monitoring Mechanisms, Anti-trafficking Departments, Rapporteurs or Representatives. Trafficking in human beings, or, as it was called infamously in the early 1990's in the Czech Republic - Trafficking in White Meat - was most of all referred to as a historical concept rather than a contemporary crime. The mainstream public discourse on trafficking in Central Europe located the crime solely among socially excluded and marginalized groups such as sex workers and the Roma community".

Stana Buchowska: 'I was quite amazed and convinced that I was part of a very special initiative, and that the work that I was starting was not only very special, but also very different even from other women' initiatives'. Stana adds: 'particularly difficult indeed it was to convince, explain to others what La Strada was about and what is human trafficking is. It was often funny to see the reaction of other people - from totally not understanding, treating us as a crazy activists, or as people who had chosen a very "exotic hobby". "The project caused many raised eyebrows, as not many people knew about the issue in the first place, and those who did, often condemned victims of trafficking as being responsible for what happened to them" says Kootstra.

Baerbel states: "within the environment of Czech women and civil/human rights NGOs, the creation of the La Strada Program was regarded as a little bit weird because it addressed solely one particular phenomenon, that - in addition - most of the mainstream political community did not even know what it was. Years before the Palermo Definition of trafficking, it took us in 1994/1995 quite some time and persuasive power to convince the respective counterparts in governmental and international organizations to take action against a phenomenon, that actually was not easy to explain: the nexus of migration, human/women's'/sex worker's rights, economics, organized crime, and social exclusion of marginalized groups. It was even years before legendary statistics - like the notorious "500.000 women trafficked into the EU" and the famous "40.000 forced prostitutes trafficked to Germany during the soccer world cup" - could mobilize public opinions, political institutions and donors".

For example, states Trijntje, when Stana and I travelled to Ukraine in 1996 to look for a new La Strada partner, we were received by a vice minister who was joking us around, saying 'You're talking about trafficking in women being a problem for Ukraine? Well ladies, we have a problem with trade in general that we have to solve first. These women can come later', meaning his main focus was on the economic development of Ukraine. Things changed when countries in Central and Eastern Europe wanted to become EU member states and Brussels put emphasis on the observance of human rights as a key element of the admission procedure. All of a sudden doors were opening for us and highly placed politicians wanted to meet us.'

Stana Buchowska; "What surprised me a lot was the huge interest from media. The first press conference in Poland, soon after we started, attracted more than 80 journalists. We never had so many journalists at the one place. I could still recall a panic that I felt seeing so many people in the press conference room. I was frightened that they will ask questions we will be not able to answer. I was reading all the answers, not ad hoc responses and felt totally scared stiff".

Trijntje added: "From the start La Strada received huge media coverage and NGOs in other countries all called upon us to start La Strada there as well.

In 1996 Ukraine joined La Strada, followed in 1997 by the Animus Association in Bulgaria. But still we got more requests to expand the network. By then I had a wonderful assistant, Monika Pokrzywa, but still I told the other La Strada partners that I would not be able to coordinate and coach an even larger network all by myself as the general coordinator of La Strada. The others then came up with a great idea: every La Strada partner would enter into bilateral cooperation with a new partner country that they would coach and assist in every way possible. Poland partnered up with an NGO in Belarus, Ukraine with Moldova, Bulgaria supported an emerging NGO in Macedonia and the Czech La Strada team got into partnership with Bosnia-Herzegovina'.

Later, at the end of 2004, La Strada also founded the La Strada International office as an independent international NGO. STV, the former mother organization, then became the ninth La Strada member.

Changes experienced

Trijntje Kootstra: 'Sadly enough much has remained the same in the trafficking field. Women and men are still exploited on a large scale and their human rights are severely violated. Perpetrators still get away with it quite easily and strategies against trafficking foremost focus on repressive anti-migration measures, making it much harder for people to migrate and/or to work voluntarily in the sex industry. The schism between abolitionist organizations wanting to eliminate sex work as such and organizations working from a rights based approach is wider than ever. Anti-trafficking activities have become 'big business' and many NGOs decide to profile themselves in this field without having much expertise to start with, just to lay their hands on the funds. On the international platform it is positive that there has been a shift of focus from trafficking merely for

sexual exploitation towards other forms of exploitation, but for the general public –and quite a few decision makers too- trafficking is still synonymous for being forced into sex work.'

La Strada's future focuses

Trijntje Kootstra: 'La Strada was the first initiative against trafficking in women in Central and Eastern Europe and therefore is a pioneer in the field. La Strada has really become a brand name. The combination of prevention activities, relief for victims and press and lobby campaigns is a strong one, still using grass roots and 'bottom-up' input from victims of trafficking for its strategies. Also the focus on a rights based approach is very valuable and should not be neglected.'

Trijntje Kootstra: 'I think it is important always to keep your eyes and ears wide open, to look for new opportunities and not to become too confident of one's own success. I would be very interested in working more closely together with sex workers organizations, as they have direct access to sex workers communities and can therefore advocate their human rights at the core level whilst fighting against exploitation and forced sex work. Moreover, I would be very happy if the La Strada partners would use their long experience of capacity building of their own organizations to support new initiatives in other parts of the world, for example in the Middle East or Africa.'