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women in
Western Balkans:
rights and fights



Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung

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introduction

system patriarchy

from A for abuse to V for violence

Marion Kraske

The flames leaped up, emitting sparks. The bottom part of the figure blazed away, it crackled, until the whole woman finally burst into flames. She was perfectly dressed up: red sweater, chestnut-coloured hair – distinctive glasses. People know her, in Mostar.

The effigy that was set on fire during the carnival in spring 2020 had a living model: Martina Mlinarevic, current Ambassador of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the Czech Republic. Mlinarevic is also an author and publicist, and hated by nationalists. Apparently, that suffices for someone to be burned symbolically.

The fact that in the midst of Europe a female figure, who does not measure up to the nationalist mainstream in the Herzegovina, claimed by the Croats, is bursting up in flames, allows conclusions to be drawn with regard to the desolate political culture in the country. Somewhere else, such an act would have serious consequences. At least there would be a broad debate. About women and their – non-existent – rights. Their powerlessness. The violence of the men.

But not so in Bosnia, no loud outcry of civil society, the protest of women's organisations rather moderate. At least the OSCE reacted vehemently and called it an unacceptable act. The Republic of Italy honoured Mlinarevic in summer 2020 as someone who is upholding the value of dialogue in society and advocating women's rights. The high distinction was even presented by the Italian President Sergio Mattarella during a digital ceremony, a belated compensation for the humiliation of being burned.

At least abroad.

The image of a burning woman is emblematic for the desolate situation of women in Bosnia and Herzegovina – and in the whole Balkan region.

Patriarchal male circles rule in the six Western Balkan states, in most cases they are deeply interwoven with criminal, corrupt clans. Their politics is a means for their self-enrichment, for taking care of family members and fellow party members. Social factors are marginalised, good governance approaches for the health care system or education institutions are nowhere to be found. There is an anti-modern, anti-liberal climate, in which gender rights overall are doing very badly.

After the Balkan wars in the nineties, a momentous repatriarchisation took place on the territory of the former Yugoslavia: women, so it seems, are enjoying far less freedoms today than during Yugoslav times. That once there was a strong women's movement, when the partisans were fighting European fascism and inflicted a historic defeat on it, seems to be almost forgotten. Such reflections regarding the engagement of women do not take place in the schools anyway.

Thus, in the most Western Balkans 6 countries, women have remained hopelessly underrepresented in political decision-making processes. If they nevertheless do speak up, if they do publicly criticise the desolate situation, they are silenced, harassed, not rarely threatened.

That those women are political actors who are legitimately pointing towards problems – is irrelevant for the political elites from Belgrade to Tirana, even if they like to mime reformers in Berlin and Bruxelles. Several hundred women protested sexual



*Burning of the effigy of author and ambassador of BiH Martina Mlinarević Sopta at the Mostar Carnival, February 2020
Photo: copyright by klix.ba*

violence and the “culture of silence and the lack of empathy with the victims“ in Tirana early in June. This was prompted after the case of a female student came to light, who had apparently been abused over a longer period of time by several of her fellow pupils and a school guard.

Even in political parties women experience exclusion and even violence, it is undesired for them to interfere with supposedly men’s affairs. However, the most incidents occur at home: According to a study of the OSCE, around 50 per cent of women have already experienced violence in Bosnia. Almost four out of ten women (38%) state to have experienced psychological, physical or sexual violence from their partners, husbands or other perpetrators.¹ It is significant for the post-war country that merely three per cent of those affected report the violence to the authorities. Shame, economic dependencies and widespread scepticism towards the institutions are the reasons that the most offences are not reported at all. **The coronavirus pandemic has indeed further worsened the situation of women worldwide, but particularly in the Balkans.**

Violence is used in the Balkan region all the more when it concerns other sexual orientations. In North Macedonia, where the nationalist VMRO-DPMNE (a member of the European People’s Party) has been spreading aggressively homophobic ideologies for years, while exclusion is widely spread in schools. The study of an Heinrich Böll Foundation partner confirmed that 36 per cent of LGBT+ men and 16 per cent of LGBT+ women have already considered suicide. Approximately one out of five girls in North Macedonia believes that women and girls should rather take care of the children

and the household than pursue their own careers.

Inequality and dependency of women are closely linked to a destructive masculinity. In this context, the Balkan wars played a lastingly toxic role: the militarisation of the societies happened primarily at the expense of the women.

Man pillaged, expelled, murdered – man raped.

Only in Bosnia over 20.000 girls and women were sexually abused and raped during the war – the International Criminal Tribunal in Den Haag found that those acts were used systematically as a weapon of war. The aim was not only to defeat the other ethnic group, the aim was to degrade people, humiliate their women, to conquer.

The fact that the children of this violation are only sporadically struggling for publicity and their rights today, is indicative of the destructive climate which does not acknowledge the victims and their needs, indeed often even declares the male perpetrators to be heroes.

The most female victims are marginalised and remain silent – their perspective does not fit in a nationalistically charged man’s world, which largely is disregarding gender issues.

Thousands of rape victims are traumatised; the deeds have barely been dealt with. Furthermore, public authorities do everything to make helping as difficult as possible, international standards in the matter of victim protection hardly receive any attention. The United Nations only recently called on Bosnia to take the rights of those raped during the war seriously and to safeguard their rights and remedies.²

In the whole region, thousands of weapons are still in the possession of men – this likewise being a consistent source of violence in the countries of the Western Balkans, like for instance Serbia, where domestic violence equally occurs on a daily basis.

25 years after the war, those weapons ought to have disappeared from the everyday life of people – not least a task of the international community.

That after the wars of succession on the territory of the former Yugoslavia no woman was involved in the peace process – additionally speaks volumes. Not only about the political circumstances in the Balkan countries, also about the international actors' understanding of democratic processes.

As has been proved, peace processes involving women are more sustainable and stable than the ones ignoring women and their concerns.³

Thus, it is hardly surprising that without the substantial shaping by women, the Balkan states are still dominated by the destructive patriarchal, nationalist ideologies of the nineties. Serbia and the Bosnian entity Republika Srpska are pursuing an agenda envisaging a Greater Serbia, Croatia likewise has not given up on the criminal Herceg-Bosna project (the creation of Greater Croatia). Instead of reconciliation policies, the same destruction policies are dominant, with which corrupt politicians have kept the region in a permanent crisis mode for over two decades.

The access to the resources likewise is almost exclusively male-dominated – the exploitation of the public purse and nature is done on a daily basis, sustainable political approaches often are an alien concept to ruling politicians.

The economic imbalance in the region probably is perfectly emblematised when men in dark SUVs with sunglasses and a horde of bodyguards rush past begging women and children at the roadside – the former have divided the power and the public funds among themselves – the latter are struggling to survive.

The Churches likewise exert a lastingly negative influence in the region: the Serbian Orthodox, the Catholic and the Islamic com-

munities are propagating the supposedly optimal model of the “traditional family”, in which gender rights do not play any role and the man is in charge. Just how much the religious leaders are scorning individual and equality rights, showed itself especially during the coronavirus crisis, when an imam in Bosnia declared: The coronavirus pandemic at least brought one good thing with itself – now at least the Pride Parade, which was organised in Sarajevo for the first time in 2019 with immense security measures, could not take place again.

In Croatia, the propaganda of the Catholic Church against the Istanbul Convention (“Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence”) was so strong that in the Adriatic city of Split even thousands of women protested *against* the Convention – and thereby against a document promising more protection to women. Croatia is an EU member state after all – principles of gender equality are under attack by Catholic and nationalist circles here as well.

If the European Union seriously desires to tie the Western Balkan states to itself in the future, strategic approaches need to be intensified, in order to make women aware of their rights, to involve them purposefully in political and economic decision-making processes. There must be an end to social structures in which the man is the boss, the exploiter, the bully, the torturer.

By contrast, in civil society one can increasingly hear female voices, therefore more offers should be made to those female actors, in order to push a political transformation with international representatives on an equal footing. For women who are being threatened because of their democratic convictions and their political or civic engagement, moreover protective mechanism should be created. Without strengthening women and people with a different sexual orientation, without their equal participation in the social and political life, without a sustainable reduction of discrimination and violence, the Balkan states will persevere in their destructive patriarchally dominated nationalisms – not excluding new spirals of violence. ■■■

1 OSCE-led survey on violence against women: Main report, OSCE 2019, <https://www.osce.org/secretariat/413237>.

2 UN committee calls on Bosnia and Herzegovina to recognise sexual violence survivors' rights after 25 years of impunity, 19 August 2020, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26171&LangID=E>.

3 *In Focus: Women, peace and security*, UN Women, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/women-peace-security>.

standby mode

Lejla Gačanica

In front of you is the feminist edition of *Balkan Perspectives*. We envisioned this edition as a first-person, third-person testimony of women whose rights and fights have lasted for generations in the Western Balkans. The ethical horizon of this issue is inscribed in the expertise, experiences, reflections, data and facts of all female authors who are themselves part of the feminist struggle for equality. This brought repercussions, exile, and an unwavering determination that these struggles would not cease. Here we open important topics, collect and summarise the status of women in the Western Balkans and propose solutions. We wish you inspiring reading and constructive action!

It almost sounds insufficient, wasted, futile to say that we live in a patriarchal society here in the countries of the Western Balkans. It almost goes without saying that life here is difficult, violent, disenfranchised. In the transition from the early 1990s, and all our histories before that, gender in the Balkans is an almost unpleasant fact, a marginalised and repressed category, with regard to which we only see weakness. The ‘gentler sex’, the ‘prettier half’, ‘women and children’, are just categories that are conveniently used once a year for Women’s Day, badges on the lapel of Balkan masculinity, always one step behind their men. Fitting into the norms of life here implies accepting a distorted power relationship, in which every segment of life is coloured by gender-based discrimination and subordination. Imprisoned in gender roles, both men and women are required to submit to tradition, religion, nation. The order depends on the situation – and no one is the winner.

The state of women’s rights and the position of women is ideal nowhere. This is not an exclusive feature of the Western Balkans. What is characteristic of this region is the stubborn resistance and suffocation of equality between women and men, girls and boys, LGBTIQ+ people, single mothers, rural women, Roma women, ethnic minorities,

women with disabilities. Each identity here is classified first by gender (it determines where you belong to in the general social order), and then ethnic (it determines your destiny in terms of where you live). All other identities can potentially be important if you are a mother, a wife (“from an obedient daughter to an appropriate wife”, Rumena Bužarovska). *Women are a minority* is a slogan of this year’s festival Firstborn Girl, relying on symbolic burdens that this notion carries, which are submission, subordination, and being insufficient and less worthy.¹

The repression aimed at stifling the articulation of the demand for equality is undisguised, because violating the existing ‘harmony’ means violating the comfortable positions of power, making women’s issues political, agreeing to a revolution that we ‘do not need’. Because we have bigger and more serious problems. Than gender-based violence. Women’s political participation. Gender inequalities in the labour market. Violence against communities outside the generally accepted gender framework. Sexual harassment and assaults. Autonomies of the female body. Yet even in other ‘most important’ and ‘serious’ state and social issues, women in the Western Balkans are excluded. They are not (sufficiently) represented in EU integration processes, environmental poli-

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cies, pandemic recovery measures. A perfectly legitimate question then is – where are the women in the Western Balkans?

The **state of play** we face here draws and exploits its power from and according to gender. The current state and challenges of women's rights in the WB show us a format in which deep-rooted patriarchal norms shape every segment of women's lives. Violence is the result of disturbed power relations, while finding its justification in social acceptability. Or the absence of an efficient reaction to prevent and stop it. The causes are complex and long-lasting – generational oppression resulted in women's dependence on male family members (economic, psychological), the role model implies a quiet and submissive woman, and emancipation was fragmented and interrupted. In these circumstances, we have obtained a society in which usually only one model of gender relations is correct, and it implies heterosexuality, the traditional family, morality and meeting religious criteria. Add to that the difficult legacy of the wars of the 1990s, and you get a picture in which we fail to address the causes because we are overwhelmed by the consequences that are vital now and here. The consequences, as well as the causes, are not a one-off thing here. It is worrying, however, that what we are striving for, from current Europe's margins – the European Union – is also facing growing populism and nationalism, based on a return to 'primordial values' that fundamentally challenge equality, taking women back for generations. It is unbelievable that in 2020, the permissibility of abortion (the right to choose, the right to one's own body) is being discussed, while the most brutal human rights violations are taking place under the auspices of the Church and the

*"Embroidery on the wooden benches of the Women's Museum, exhibition " (Stickgarn auf den Holzbänken des Frauenmuseums, Exhibition Gestickte Moral. Spruchtücher zwischen Tradition, Rollenzuschreibung und Illusion)", Women's Museum Hittisau, 2014
Photo by: Lejla Gačanica*



state. Wire to borders, nationalisation of female bodies. Known for easily overflowing with tendencies and controversies, as well as becoming part of the geopolitical context too late and too little, can we deal with what is to come? Or use the momentum to resist?

So, where is **gender in transitions: is revolution female?** During different periods in the history of the Balkans, women were pushed out of revolutionary memorable moments, while their contributions were significant. We remember a serious precedent in the case of the Women's Anti-fascist Front of Yugoslavia, a proud moment in the memory of women's contributions in the fight against fascism. Yet the extinction of this movement, accompanied today by ethno-nationalist interpretations of the once glorious common past, is losing its place in remembrance. How is it possible to preserve female fragments of the past? How to bring to light what we can learn from, to direct ourselves to? The nationalist policies that have occupied the Balkans impose frames of memory here as well: what is remembered and what is forgotten. However, the violence that took place in the countries of the Western Balkans has never had a gender-neutral face. Wars are for men, women's bodies are instruments of struggle. War rape is viewed within the framework of collectivity, "the body of a woman is subjectivised as a representational element of enemy and rival possessions, a symbolic space that signifies the right to occupied territory".² Women, let us not forget, were the first to actively oppose the war.

And not just in times of conflict. Rebuilding society, after a violent conflict, means involving women and finding ways to continue the struggle that has been interrupted. Almost as a rule, the state of law and social status are taken a few steps back. Women's organisations and women activists were bravely the first to cross the drawn lines of the new WB states in search of reconciliation. Women's voices in Belgrade called for an end to violence when violence was a legitimate order. Women persevered in their efforts for transitional justice, reparations, peacebuilding. Then, and especially today, these women have been exposed to threats, attacks, and declared 'foreign mercenaries' and 'enemies of the states'. Women human rights defenders are particularly subject to gender-based attacks, such as intimidation and sexual harassment, due to their gender and the sensitivity of the issues they are working on.³ The Women's Feminist – Antimilitarist

Peace Organisation Women in Black (Serbia) raised their voice against illegal violent mobilisation, aggression and crimes against peace. From the very beginning of their activism, they have been exposed to constant attacks, while its prosecution or prevention is extremely slow, inefficient or non-existing, thereby proving to be another way to the shrinking space for civil society, and feminist voices. Women are also not included in the Serbia-Kosovo negotiations – how can any progress be expected if half of the population representatives are excluded from important deals for the future?⁴

The pandemic seems to be our newest transition, going hand in hand with capitalism. Understanding reproductive labour in capitalist and feminist discourses is the opposite. The issue of the feminisation of labour has shown a different face of the market economy, along with the increasing precarisation of labour for both men and women. Considering the right to work as an important part of women's emancipation, it should be borne in mind that access to the labour market alone did not necessarily mean or result in economic and social equality between men and women. Women's participation in the labour market, as well as the types of work that women do, are gender segmented. In WB countries, 30% of survey respondents said they had experienced some form of labour-related gender-based discrimination in their lifetimes (34% of women and 13% of men), with the strongest predictor of the probability of being discriminated against being gender in BiH and Kosovo.⁵ The pandemic (COVID-19) even emphasised these differences and discrimination. Women are those who take the burden on the front lines: health, trade, unpaid house work, education, and the media; jobs where women were the most common working force (catering, trade, production) were most affected by job loss; the whole burden of house work is now on women who do not get paid for it.⁶

In times of uncertainties, there is an urgent need for **intervention**. WB countries struggled to find their path(s) to address some of the issues identified as denying, violations, derogation of women's rights. Addressing tradition, patriarchy, underrepresentation, current political tendencies, WB's feminism has become a dirty word. Antifeminism is spreading from the classic conservative 'family' line, through the right-wing, the women's alt-right movement and 'make-up fascism', all the way to

some left-wing circles that are increasingly concerned about men's 'sexual freedoms'.⁷ By challenging existing power structures, by their persistent deconstruction, women introduce demands for equality into the political and social discourse. This is never an easy fight. And it will never stop. Nothing in the Western Balkans has been 'given' to women, everything has been won. The struggle continues on the shoulders of those achievements. Even when they seem like a pink delusion, women's positions need to be constantly defended and renewed. There are no breaks, we are constantly in a standby mode. We are continuously reminded of the fragility of the elected positions by statements, actions and their non-sanctioning: "God created woman for the mattress, not for thinking" (Croatian right-wing politician Anto Kovacevic to his colleague Vesna Pusic in an official debate in Parliament), the Miss/beauty contest during Local Elections in the Republika Srpska (2012, BiH), the abuse of gender quotas (Tinka Kurti case, Kosovo), followed by the under-representation of women in political decision-making positions, gender-based violence in politics, and the invisibility of women from minority groups in political parties and governments. If there is no systematic implementation of gender policies in various spheres of the socio-political spectrum, nor women's voices in the creation, implementation and correction of policies, then the results are the same – gender blind. Therefore, the political arena is a place for interventions and we are witnessing a slow but persistent entry of women's perspectives here.

In terms of creating a democratic state and respecting the values of human rights and freedoms, **resistance** resides within and towards our societies. It is the driving force, a safe place from tradition, patriarchy and the contemporary notion of the social and political. There are exceptional acts of resistance on the streets, in institutions, in local communities, in art, in language, in academia. As small as they may seem in the face of a corporate-institutional opponent, any resistance to the gender norm keeps the struggle for equality alive. And it paves the way for new generations of feminists. To speak up about harmful traditions such as gender-selective abortions, appeals to conscience, femicide, to institutional disenfranchisement such as deprivation of the right to water, police brutality, access to health care, is an act of courage. We find it in various forms – truthfully speaking, often divided and interrupted – but

articulated in the call for solidarity and resistance. Deprivation of rights and gender equality is inextricably linked to nationalism in the Western Balkans, and should be addressed in the same way. The ratification of the Istanbul Convention in Croatia (an EU member country), provoked massive resistance to the notion of gender and equality. Protesters of all age groups in Split (2018) including BiH's citizens, many displaying Catholic symbols, and including many Catholic priests and nuns, expressed their discontent with the government's intention to ratify the Convention. Many signs and speeches made references to Croatia's war in the 1990s, citing it as a successful struggle for freedom.⁸ This shows once again that war and liberation are appropriated in a populist fashion only for loyal citizens – those who fit into the heteronormative image of a true patriot. There is no place for ethnic others, traitors, LGBTIQ+, and women-feminists.

So, where is the front line for the fight for women's rights in the Western Balkans? Inside, or outside? Grass roots movements do their part, but change is not the sole responsibility and obligation of women. In building a democratic society, rights and fights belong to and oblige everyone – official governments and citizens, society. Expectations from the EU, the international community, influences from outside are important, but they must awaken understanding within each of our communities, not allow to be just a 'tick the box' format. Essence before form. In signing stabilisation and association agreements with the EU, each WB country has committed to harmonise its national legislation with the EU *acquis*, towards eventual EU membership. However, as annual EU country reports attest, the required reforms have been slow and incomplete. The main gender equality legislative framework in the countries of the Western Balkans has been set, by the

CEDAW and Istanbul Conventions, as well as a series of relevant laws which all the countries have adopted during the last decade, but they remain weak in implementation and are lacking full institutional support. EU integration may be a momentum for the advancement of women's rights in the Western Balkans, but systematic work is needed here. As an example, in 2019, the European Commission publish an Opinion on BiH's application for membership to the EU which is particularly weak on gender equality.⁹ This sends the wrong signals about where women's rights are on the EU integration agenda.

The deconstruction of mythological nationalism that draws women into public ownership, devaluing their individual human, civic, and political being is possible. As soon as we perceive it as a threat to a whole society of well-being and prosperity. We need to do this through breaking down, exposing and understanding the harmfulness of nationalisms, 'morals' and the norms we cling to so tightly. I am not inclined to make excuses, but to understand the problem. Without addressing this context, we will neither be ready nor able to find solutions. No matter how much we are outside the EU, we are still in its backyard. Close enough to hear and see each other, and close enough to work together on the burning issues of women's status in the Western Balkans.

Regardless how surfeited and futile it may seem – we must keep repeating that we live in a misplaced, patriarchal society. Because whole generations of girls and boys will grow up within the system of oppression, considering it perfectly normal. Our societies are still in transition and every moment is a moment to act. For revolution, and for change. The strategy of the struggle for women's rights in the Balkans is based on the premise that we will not get tired and give up. The patriarchy here is male, but the conversion must be female. ■■■

- 1 Tiiit! Inc. is a feminist non-profit organisation from North Macedonia, the organiser of the feminist festival Prvo pa žensko (It's First and It's a Girl).
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- 3 *Human Rights Defenders in the Western Balkans Report, Civil Rights Defenders*, 2019, https://crd.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/200611_HRD-REPORTS-ALL_ENGa_Web_Redused.pdf.
- 4 Mitić, A. *Where are the women?* 15.9.2020, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/09/15/where-are-the-women/>.
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state of play

'naming the possible, responding to the impossible': beyond gender normative politics

Jelisaveta Blagojević, Mirjana Stošić

The question of gender is always already an emergent political problem by itself. Theoretical and analytical approaches in the field of gender studies should always consider the ideological, political, social, cultural and discursive context in which the notion of gender appears. All of these contexts render the notion of gender according to alerting multiplications of misreadings that call for a situated critical analysis – a 'diminutive theory', in Haraway's words, (Haraway 1992, 295) of always already bridging the distances and enmities in order to envision alliances, connections and affinities 'beyond' gender normative politics. Using new 'optical tools' to produce re-embodiments of gender and/or non-human theories demands the recognition of responsibility for the imaginary *elsewhere* that one must learn to see and rebuild *here*.

Speaking of contemporary Western Balkans experiences, many concerns and questions about the notion of gender¹ in its contemporary usage are articulated and problematised in a very conservative and non-emancipatory manner. Accordingly, patriarchal structure in Serbian culture is incarcerating the notion of gender into the clear-cut labour divide and the overall gender politics (even though there are mainstream gender advocacies) is reduced to 'including' women in the institutional environment by making them less visible and their voices silenced under the citations of the male power. Therefore, the main consideration in this text will be, on the one hand, a critical perspective towards a new conservative hyper-proliferation of the notion of gender, and, on the other hand, an effort to re-establish a transformative attribute of the notion of gender as a political eman-

cipatory, critical and transformative concept that problematises and questions the dynamics of power relations in the social structures. With that in mind, we can intentionally misread the gender-norm, misinterpret it as a non-place of power relations – the one that induces resistances and dissent. Critical misreading reads performatively, perverting, inscribing and exscribing the notion of gender from all patriarchal, capitalist, orthodox and enclosed fields in which this notion is incarcerated.

The authors of this study were recently invited to write a chapter on gender literacy for a collection of essays under the title *Global Citizenship for Adult Education: Advancing Critical Literacies for Equity and Social Justice* (Routledge). The topic that we proposed for this edition was *Gender Illiteracy and Relations of the Third Kind: Crisis, Critique and Politics*. Our starting point was a critical approach towards establishing the body of knowledge around the contemporary usage and understanding of the notion of gender, while taking into account the various politics and public policies of gender mainstreaming and reduction to the binary models of gender identities. The basic idea is the following: we need to become illiterate in understanding gender as a conservative, binary and administrative category that means nothing or is devoid of any transformative agency. Thus, a certain degree of unlearning about gender is necessary in order to re-open a space for a critical, emancipatory notion of gender, which has been lost somewhere on its capitalist pragmatic path within histories and ideologies of the notion. One of the most often addressed problems in the Republic of Serbia, enhanced and violently prescribed during the last decade, is "a very strong gen-

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Male/Female In the Garden
by Eric Sonstroem,
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der ideology which appears to be still explicitly present in many aspects of our social and public lives [and] is quite visibly supported by language forms used in public discourse,” (Filipović, 2011: 112), and it mainly refers to the mandatory use of the masculine form in naming titles and professions, especially those that carry a certain amount of political power, thus diminishing the female counterpart only to reproduce and strengthen social power models. Gender sensitive policy and planning is one of the major tasks we have to critically work on in the future to come.

As if all feminist work around the notion has disappeared; as if all of the poststructuralist contribution has been erased. This ‘contemporary’ trend that sets the notion of gender as a clear-cut designation (of gender, of sex, and even sexuality) draws critical attention to a certain fashion of relativisations which were, *a posteriori*, ascribed to poststructuralist and feminist deconstructive efforts to re-evaluate the concept of gender over and over again. In that sense, contemporary Serbian gender theories and public policies are encapsulated within the pejorative term of “gender ideology”, e.g. the gender political agenda of enforcing the change of the patriarchal structure, understood as a simple destruction of every political structure and community as such.

Feminism has considerably developed and enhanced the concept of gender. Working through this development requires rigorous attention to what gender adds to conceptions of sex and sexuality.

In so far as gender slips back towards the supposed simplicities of males and females as ‘opposite’ sexes, it fails to add value to those

notions, and detracts from the work that the concept should be doing. Gender as a synonym for sex is clearly redundant, and reductive strategies to push it that way produce confusion. But this confusion is necessary for the notion of gender to remain transformative in practice and to safeguard the openness of gender beyond the binary divide.

Gender is ‘performative’, a category that seems to name a reality that constructs itself in and through the performances that are its only existence. In other words, there is nothing natural or biological that gives us ‘men’ and ‘women’. Men and women are constructed conceptually through hierarchical conceptual binaries that make such social and physical identifications a possibility as such and, hence, a norm. These performances are so thoroughly learned through processes of citation and repetition that they generally seem natural to the subjects who perform them. Human subjects are thus stylised and scripted, naturalised and inscribed, so that concepts of voluntary action and agency exist always and already within this apparent core of personal identity.

After challenging decades of re-questioning gender binaries, all we are left with are equations between normative, normalised and personal identity. Dichotomies have become obligatory and naturalised.

In order to disturb these binary thinking patterns (which are rejuvenating and reclaiming their political strength), we are proposing a deconstructive embrace between the notion of gender and the notion of *autrui*, third person, or the ‘relations of the third kind’.

Drawing on Maurice Blanchot’s concept of the ‘relations of the third kind’ and its political implications, we argue that those relations are not characterised by some specific quality, some distinguished essence, but rather by the absence of those qualities. In this manner, Blanchot’s relations of the third kind evade all traditional dichotomies characteristic of the West European tradition of thought, especially when it comes to gender: being and nothingness, subject and object, identity and alterity, presence and absence, and all imaginable exclusions of a marginal and devastated field of minorities and/or less-than-human categories of contemporary political, cultural, economic hegemonic discourses. In the words of Roberto Esposito, thinking the binary is perhaps best defined as situated “on the intersection

where one is constantly translated into the other: nothingness is translated into being, presence is void by absence, interior spills into exterior" (Esposito 2012, 129). Thinking and politics that are not the tools of power, authority and the maintenance of the *status quo*, now more than ever, seem to be in the hands of the relations of the 'third kind,' places where they intersect, intertwine and negate the positions of subject and object, male and female, human and non-human, etc. Only from these aporetic propositions is it possible to probe the necessary questions whose answers are still unthinkable from today's perspective.

Furthermore,

one of the biggest problems in these recent, mainstream usages of the notion of gender in the Balkans perspective is its non-critical understanding of the notion of identity in general.

Katerina Kolozova proposes to establish an interdisciplinary 'link' between Balkan and gender studies, to trace the "patriarchal patterns which have been repeated/modified in different cultural contexts and at different times" (Kolozova 2016, 133). Concretely, Kolozova deals with contextualisation and analysis of the term 'misogyny', its discursive non-presence, and offers a crucial insight – "the actual presence of misogyny in public discourse is also an important symptom of cultural readiness for war or presence of war-culture in a seemingly pacified culture" (ibid.). Ethnic violence and political hate-discourse, anti-migrant narratives and contaminated public space all result in the counter-security narratives which call for "our mothers, our sisters, our daughters and wives" to be safe-guarded against the imminent threat of the "other" by "their husbands, fathers, sons and brothers". The discourse of sworn brotherhood is narrowing and minimising women's role in the contemporary debate on security narratives. We are witnessing war-like rhetoric summoning the far-right protests and violent attacks against the migrant minority in Serbia, based on the proliferative production of false news (e.g. migrants committing violent acts against "our women") primarily mediated through the state-run mediascape and military response.

In the same manner as, for example, the concept of national identity, the dominant contemporary understanding of the notion of gender identity claims an imaginary com-

mon birth and reconstructs it *a posteriori* as something that has always been, presence as such, thus including reproductive heterosexuality and militarism in the core of the gender divide in the Balkans. Gender was said to be a categorial structure of binaries, arranged hierarchically, so that concepts of sexual difference and sexualities were produced, including the apparently natural biology of reproductive sex, based in 'opposite' sexes – male and female – and considering them within the political economy of reproduction in every form it enables: kinship in blood, definitions of family and women's roles within such a family, patriarchal legacy in late capitalist liberalism and so on. In other words, women appear as wives and mothers, and in relation to them, men appear as husbands and fathers within 'the family'. The necessary presupposition for this framework is patriarchy. Rada Ivekovic claims that gender is a form of 'divided reason' (*la raison partagée*) which, in its turn, is an instrument of hegemony (Iveković 2007).

Both the gender binary divide, as well as the exclusion on which the nation is established, are essentialising the equality/inequality as natural and necessary. It is the political *différend* representing the heterosexual normative paradigm through symbolic analogies, for other injustices and inequalities. It is a hierarchy which, one more time, addresses women as well as all other non-normative individuals and groups, as subordinate. Hence, they become subaltern and silenced. If the identity of any individual being exists only as its relation towards the other (e.g. community), and if this relation paradoxically constitutes the self-identity of that individual being, perhaps we can state that the relation towards the other (difference, plurality) precedes every identity structure. Accordingly, modern politics is built upon the exclusion of the other. That is the sole definition of the political – the relation to the other, that is, modern politics is constituted upon the 'relations of the third kind'.

Gender has historically and politically been built as an opposition, as a counter-hegemonic discourse and practice, against more institutionally oriented movements, but also against a public space regulated by hetero-/homonormativity, commercialisation and racism. In the Balkans, history and necropolitics of the patriarchal paradigm have produced various racialised, sexualised and normalised 'subjects' – we can no longer

speak of oppositions, but of the production of the relations of the third kind.

This mirage of sovereign decision-making between the 'livable' and 'unlivable' subjects takes its toll on reproducing various minorities suspended 'in-between' unlivable and death, especially with regard to the current pandemic, globally and locally. These minorities, gendered and racialised, are left to die: domestic violence victims (25% on the rise within the 'state of emergency' measures), the homeless (marked as irrelevant because they are 'already isolated'), migrants (violated and abandoned in camps and zones of exclusion under military jurisdiction) and ethnic minorities (such as the Roma people, marked as self-exposed due to an 'unhygienic life style'). In that sense, and we strongly stress this

'minority-embrace', gender is class, and class is race. To put it differently, gender illiteracy and undoing gender mainstreaming are of crucial importance in emancipatory and transformative politics in general. Only if we abandon oppositional politics of exclusion and devote our public policies and innovative political imagination of community to cherishing and developing the 'relations of a third kind', are we to understand that the notion of gender encompasses plurality of becoming-minority and destabilises exclusive bio/necropolitical and theoretical reductionism – by inclusion, reproduction of connections and affinities that can and must transform and emancipate every minority within the task of becoming gender-illiterate and undoing the traditional gender binary. ■■■

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1 It should be taken in consideration to reconstruct the gender category, because gender itself is a psychological and cultural connotation that was used for the first time in 1968 by Robert Stoller to describe a term that has no connection to biological attributes. Many researchers and feminist critics wrote about the differentiation of the biological and social aspects of this term, separating "sex" from "gender". Why is this matter important? Gender is a category that opens the possibility of equal chances for all and even the inclusion of all participants of civil society, because it takes into consideration all invisible, marginalised, non-normative and non-dominant social positions and groups. Also, it recognises the corporeality and materiality in the analysis of gender political dynamics. All mentioned aspects of gender research and transformations are important goals that should be reached in society, not just because it opens new visibilities of identities and understanding of gender categories, but also provides tools for raising awareness and highlighting many types of discrimination, violence and systematical conditions that are not visible to the law in the Republic of Serbia. This possibility is important not only for the questions of gender, but for the development of democracy in the state, because since 2012, Serbia has been a candidate for admission to the European Union. Although the judicial system has done certain work in the context of gender-based violence and prevention of discrimination towards women and girls, the extent of political influences on the judicature and the corruption in the state still is a main concern that disturbs the development of recommended tactics for inclusion policy, human rights initiatives and the improvement of marginalised groups statuses (LGBTQ groups, Roma people, people with HIV and AIDS, and all other socially vulnerable groups).

how tradition and patriarchy impact violence against women in the Western Balkans

Ermira Danaj

Before going into the analysis of violence against women (VAW) in the Western Balkans (WB), let us briefly sketch the implicit and explicit burden of patriarchal tradition on a girl/woman. Since her childhood, a girl is mainly educated within the following context: First of all, in almost all cases she has her father's family name, not her mother's – a downgrade of the position of the mother. On most of the house doors, only the father's/husband's name exists – another downgrade. In the family certificate in many countries, there is a specific hierarchy – the father is the head of the household, the wife is just the wife. In many cases, the young girl will hear expressions such as “learn to cook because you'll go to your husbands' place”, “be polite because you'll go to your husband's place”, “shut up”, “how dare you”, etc. She will also learn that the ultimate goal for her is to find a husband and be a mother; a woman should necessarily be a mother. In many cases, she will also experience sexual harassment, but she will not tell because she fears to be blamed for it, because she has heard that if you do not behave in a certain way, you will be sexually harassed, or aggressed, or raped, or be considered immoral. Then she will get married, believing that her husband is the head of the household, the one who issues orders, the one who has more rights than her, even the right to shout at her or slap her. In some cases, she will be considered as her husband's property, as it has been the tradition in WB societies for a long time. Thus, for a young woman it will be very hard to identify violence (particularly emotional and psychological violence) as a crime or as a violation of her rights. In most cases, violence against women, both inside and outside of

the household, will be considered as “normal” relationships or “normal” behaviours. Hence the importance of tackling VAW from a holistic approach that includes first education of society at a large scale, and then prosecution and protection.

The transformation processes in post-communist countries, including the WB, have often resulted in gendered job loss with higher rates of female unemployment and the dismantling of public services for providing particular help to women. The transition also bolstered a retraditionalisation of gender roles, where women's roles in society were redefined, and women's place was again homebound. When talking about retraditionalisation, we should be cautious, considering also that during communism, gender roles were not free of patriarchal traits. Women's emancipation during communism was meant principally in relation to the productive sphere, not to the reproductive one, and not as individual liberation. Women's engagement in the productive sphere did not result in the equal participation of men in the reproductive sphere; women remained in charge of the caregiver role and were constantly considered in relation to the man or the state: a mother, a wife, a distinguished worker, etc. They were asked to re-model patriarchal traits to mirror an ideal socialist family: they were now part of the productive sphere, but in the domestic sphere they remained mainly within the borders of the patriarchal system, subordinated to the husband and/or the in-laws. These unequal gender relations were reinforced with the fall of communism, and Brunnbauer¹ talks about the ‘domestication’ of women, referring not only to the visible withdrawal of women from the public

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sphere, but also to the early 1990ies policies and discourses discouraging women's participation in productive work and public life. Patriarchy² becomes particularly tangible through the issue of VAW and domestic violence (DV), highly present in WB countries. To theorise it a little bit more,

patriarchy is composed of several structures such as patriarchal production relations in the household, within paid work, patriarchal relations in the state, violence against women, patriarchal relations in sexuality (i.e. mandatory heterosexuality), patriarchal cultural institutions (i.e. religions, education, media, etc.).³

When it comes to VAW and DV, the states in the WB have adopted specific legislation and measures to fight primarily domestic violence, often by avoiding its gendered approach (i.e. women are the main victims of domestic violence because they are women). Important international document ratified by all WB countries is the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW): Albania in 1993, Northern Macedonia in 1994, Montenegro in 2006, Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1993, and Serbia in 2001, with the exception of Kosovo.⁴

A major change happened with the Council of Europe Convention on VAW and DV (most commonly known as the Istanbul Convention) that was signed on 11 May 2011 in Istanbul. According to this Convention, violence against women is defined “as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of gender-based violence (GBV) that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life”. This definition includes one of the most important messages and novelties of the Istanbul Convention. It explicitly recognises the structural nature of violence against women as gender-based violence. This means that it roots VAW in the patriarchal and unequal power relations between women and men and prevailing gender inequality, existing stereotypes, gender roles and discrimination against women. Combating VAW requires responding to this complex phenomenon with a gender-sensitive lens. Although the Convention has been signed and ratified

by WB countries (with the exception of Kosovo), it has also encountered opposition, particularly in those countries where conservative and anti-feminist forces are gaining space and voice. This kind of opposition is based on the premise that the Istanbul Convention tackles the structural nature of VAW as gender-based violence, and as such it destabilises the prevailing patriarchal gender roles.

The definition provided by the Istanbul Convention confirms what social research about VAW and DV has been saying for many years now: VAW is not perpetrated by men who are sick, or alcohol abusers, or in whatever particular situation. It is instead perpetrated by men who think they are entitled to do so, that they have the right to beat or kill a woman if she does not cook well, if she wants divorce, if she does not accept their advances, etc. VAW is the cause and consequence of gender inequality and is deeply rooted in patriarchal relations. The patriarchal conception of gender relations is widespread and does not represent an exclusive trait of any particular region. However, its scale is not the same everywhere, and in some regions, the manifestations of VAW are cruder and more visible than in others, and that is also the case in the WB. Firstly, because

despite communism and its emancipation policies, patriarchal gender relations persisted and survived transformations and transitions of states and societies, resulting in a retraditionalisation of gender roles.

Secondly, because despite the various political regimes, the patriarchal structure of the state has been consistent and still prevails.

Both CEDAW and the Istanbul Convention are monitored by specific bodies - the Committee on Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) respectively. The latest concluding observations of the CEDAW⁵ for the WB countries raise the issues of underreporting of VAW, insufficient implementation of the national legal and institutional mechanisms, lack of specialised knowledge of the institutions, low prosecution and conviction rates. Similarly, the latest GREVIO reports⁶ during 2017-2018 highlighted that VAW continues to be wrongly considered as a by-product of low socio-economic devel-

opment and not of the patriarchal gender relations by most of the public and professionals. Additionally, underreporting, low rates of prosecution and insufficient support services are persistent.

Let us observe more specifically the situation regarding VAW in WB countries. All of them have taken legal and institutional measures to tackle VAW (specific laws to fight domestic violence, sometimes specific units in ministries or police forces, shelters, etc.). However, these laws often remain just a “dead letter” and are not properly implemented. Hence, the legal and institutional measures have not provided the needed change and the situation in practice still remains problematic in terms of the scale of VAW and femicide.⁷

In 2019, an OSCE study⁸ conducted in the WB countries plus Ukraine and Moldova, showed that 70% of women in those countries have been exposed to violence (sexual harassment, stalking, intimate partner violence or non-partner violence, psychological, physical or sexual violence) since the age of 15. In more specific terms, the figures are 67% in Albania, 48% in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 54% in North Macedonia, 64% in Serbia, 51% in Montenegro, 58% in Kosovo. What is most important in this study is that it reveals, once again, that beliefs in female subordination, spousal obedience and silence surrounding VAW continue to persist in the region. Another important point is that no woman is safe from VAW; any woman, in the city, in the vil-

lage, holding a PhD or an elementary school degree, rich, poor, young, old, might be a victim. However, underprivileged and marginalised women are particularly affected, such as women with disabilities or women from minorities such as the Roma and LGBTIQ+.

Another study conducted in Albania in 2018⁹ showed that 1 out of 2 or 52.9% of women aged 18-74 experienced one or more of the five types of violence during their lifetime – intimate partner domestic violence, dating violence, non-partner violence, sexual harassment and/or stalking. The study also highlights the issue of marital rape where women are forced to have sexual intercourse and if they refuse, they are beaten and/or raped. Another point raised by the study is that VAW is not something sporadic or accidental, “just a slap”, instead it represents systematic violence combining psychological and economic coercion with physical violence.

Both studies have some common features. First of all, the majority of women who experienced domestic violence did not seek help. The answers are quite similar among countries. The most common reason for not seeking help was because the situation was not serious enough to complain (half of the women). Other women reported that they did not seek help because they did not want to bring shame to the family. Research and studies have often highlighted the importance of the honour and shame system that still persists in the Balkan societies.



Protest in Tirana, Albania in June 2020, about the case of a 16-year-old girl who got raped. Photo by Gresa Hasa

Along the same lines,

women did not report violence because they feared they would be blamed for having caused it, they would get divorced and then would have no place to go. A significant number of women stated that they did not report violence because there was no reason to complain, because violence is normal.

In fact, this ‘normalisation’ of violence is rooted and at the same time fed by patriarchal relations. I remember some years ago, watching a reportage about women in Albania when the journalist asked a young woman, just married, if the husband had beaten her. The answer was ‘if I deserve it, he beats me’. At that very moment I understood that laws – even the best ones – might never be enough to fight VAW, as long as women believe they can ‘deserve’ it. The belief that violence against women is ‘normal’ is confirmed by the above-mentioned studies. For example, the OSCE study in Kosovo shows that over half of women say that their friends would agree that “a good wife obeys her husband even if she disagrees.” At the foundation of this belief lies the same mechanism – a woman should behave well, obey and serve her husband, and if she does not, she ‘deserves’ to be beaten.

The cases that are reported are almost exclusively related to extreme cases of physical violence. A slap in the face or a pull by the hair are rarely and (probably) never reported. (That might also occur because police officers would not consider such an act as violence, but I will come back to the institutional response further below). Such cases are also not reported because women themselves rarely consider them as violence. Thus, psychological, or emotional or economic coercion are almost never considered by women as acts of violence to be reported to the institutions in charge. These forms of violence are internalised within the persisting patriarchal gender roles, according to which women are the caregivers and men the breadwinners, the person in charge of the family, the head of the household.

Further, a large number of women stated that most people in their community think that domestic violence is a private matter and should not be reported, and that a woman should tolerate some violence to keep her family together. These patriarchal social norms that consider women as sub-

ordinated to men, as the ones to sacrifice themselves for the ‘wellbeing’ of the family and the community, are contributing to the persistence of VAW. Many women believe that by not talking and by not reporting the violence they endure, they are saving their families, so they can sacrifice a little for the ‘common good’. Indeed, this notion of ‘female sacrifice’ is well rooted in the patriarchal tradition of many societies, including those in the WB.

Another reason why women do not report violence is because of their mistrust in the respective institutions. They fear not being protected by the system and its actors when seeking support. This mistrust is not related only to the police response, but also to the institutional housing and economic support. Women fear that if they report or leave their partners, they will be killed by them. Such cases of femicide have happened in numerous countries. In fact, a lot of improvements have been achieved regarding the institutional response, especially within the police force. Cases where police officers responded to VAW victims that “it is not such a big problem, who beats you, loves you”, as the saying goes, are decreasing. But such responses still exist when women report violence to the police. Despite numerous trainings, there are still judges who try to convince women to reconcile with their violent husbands “for the sake of the children”. There are also many cases where during the civil case of divorce, domestic violence is not taken in consideration, and so on and so forth. The insufficient institutional response becomes quite tangible when we see the considerable number of women who reported violence before being murdered.

The state failed to protect those women despite their reporting to the institutions, and this is the situation in all WB countries. That is also related to the very way VAW is tackled, through those – mostly prosecuting and protective – measures that do not destabilise the patriarchal foundations of the society.

Another stakeholder that often contributes to the internalisation of patriarchal relationships are the media. The current way of media representation on VAW, DV embodies patriarchal social norms, where victims of violence are often blamed or depicted in such a way as to be blamed. Femicides are often depicted as ‘passion

crimes', framing the crime as a love affair and not as the illustration of a patriarchal belief that men own women.

The fight against VAW should be equally (or mainly) focussed on prevention measures (i.e. an earlier education of children about the principle of equality, a drastic change in ways of communication, where lame jokes about women, the sexual objectification of women, constant sexist expressions, should be banned from media and the public discourse). Education about gender equality should teach pupils and students about women's rights being the same as men's, about equal gender roles, about sexual relations as equal, where forced sexual intercourse is not something 'normal', etc. However, the backlash against gender sensitive education is one the strongest, because such education destabilises the existing unequal gender roles.

Hence, the fight against VAW should be founded on a holistic approach that fiercely encompasses preventive, protective and prosecution measures. Fighting VAW only at technical levels without tackling its root causes – traditional gender roles – might bring some changes at the surface, but will not shake the status quo of patriarchal relations where VAW is rooted. A large-scale educational programme on gender equality should be implemented from the early school levels on, so that children know

about human rights, equality and respect. Prevention includes not only official school programmes but also socialisation through the media. Media organisations are an important stakeholder to be on board in fighting VAW; trainings for journalists are another important step in preventing and fighting VAW. Based on the CEDAW and GREVIO reports, there is a need for strengthening the legal frameworks and the institutional response. The existing laws need to be completed and implemented. Furthermore, the institutional response needs to be improved to convey trust to the victims. Mistrust in institutions is one of the main causes of the underreporting of VAW and DV cases. Hence the need for taking the appropriate steps to improve institutional specialised knowledge. There is a growing awareness about the need for research and data about VAW and DV. Fortunately, the amount of research is growing. Now is the time to use this data and research for better policy making against VAW and DV.

In lieu of a conclusion, let us not forget that VAW and DV are ingrained in patriarchal relations that do not exist only within the household, but permeate the paid work sphere, the state, cultural institutions, sexuality, etc. Hence, the fight against VAW is a long and constant process which includes a serious change of society and the understanding of equality. ■■■

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- 1 Brunnbauer, Ulf. 2000. From Equality without Democracy to Democracy without Equality? *Women and Transition in Southeast Europe*. *South-East Europe Review* 3: 151–168.
 - 2 Patriarchy means unequal social systems where women are subordinated, discriminated or oppressed.
 - 3 Walby, Sylvia. 1990. *Theorizing Patriarchy*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
 - 4 Policy Department for Citizen's Rights and Constitutional Affairs. 2019. *Women's Rights in Western Balkans*. European Parliament.
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 - 6 Civil Society Forum of the Western Balkan Summit Series. 2018. *Gender Issues in the Western Balkans*, CSF Policy Brief No. 04; GREVIO, Baseline Evaluation Report, Albania, 2017.
 - 7 Femicide means the death of women on account of their gender or simply because they were women.
 - 8 OSCE. 2019. *Well-being and safety of women*. Vienna.
 - 9 INSTAT. 2019. *Violence against women and girls in Albania*. Tirana.

an inside look – gender equality as a principle or a phrase?

Katarina Pavičić-Ivelja

It is nothing new that the wind of conservatism is blowing through Europe. In recent years, almost all European countries have witnessed the strengthening of the influence of the clergy on the social and political scene or even the big break of right-wing populism to positions of power. The Lega Nord in Italy, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Germany, the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) in Austria, the Swedish Democrats in Sweden, the Front National in France, Vox in Spain, Fidesz in Hungary, the Slovenian Democratic Party in Slovenia, Law and Justice in Poland, the Danish People's Party in Denmark, the Swiss People's Party in Switzerland, Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, the Finnish Party in Finland and the Conservative People's Party of Estonia (Kattago 2019, 9), are only some of the right-wing populist parties that have enjoyed growing popularity in the past years or have even seen their members in various influential positions – from parliamentary mandates to holding the office of the Prime Minister, which quite definitely helps to illustrate the turbulent nature of the social and political climate across Europe.

The above-mentioned increase in popularity of right-wing populism likewise without exception is accompanied by the growingly conservative positioning of the supporters of the stated policies with regard to, for instance, women's rights. That is also evident from the fact that all previously mentioned parties are explicit opponents of abortion on demand and actively advocate its prohibition (which represents a trend that has increasingly gained momentum in the Croatian right wing as well). For instance, the Polish party Law and Justice advocates for making abortion laws

stricter, and preventing women from access to it regardless of the circumstances of the unwanted pregnancy, even though Poland as a Catholic country already has one of the most restrictive laws in Europe in that regard, and it is only possible to perform an abortion in the case of foetal abnormalities, rape, incest or a threat to the mother's health, but even in those cases there is no guarantee that the abortion will be performed, as a great number of doctors refuses to perform that procedure based on their religious beliefs. The situation in Hungary is similar, where it is even established by the Constitution that life begins at conception. Although officially legal, abortion still often remains unavailable to women there due to the procedure that includes persuasion of the patient by the medical staff not to terminate the pregnancy. Similarly as in Poland, right-wing populists like Fidesz advocate the complete prohibition of abortion despite already difficult circumstances. Viktor Orbán even described supporters of the legalisation of abortion on demand as "anti-national communists" (Kovács 2019).

Orbán's afore-stated statement perhaps best illustrates why women's rights (i.e. reducing their scope) are on the political agenda of right-wing populists. Although at first glance it may appear otherwise, the indicated actors are by no means driven by their genuine desire to "protect unborn lives" or something of the kind, but are merely appealing to the conscience of citizens by using a seemingly easily comprehensible issue close to the people in order to score political points. Europe is in the midst of a crisis. In most European countries, a series of ideological and economic factors has led to a declining standard of living, as

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well as a reduction of the birth rate and a general social discontent very much felt by citizens. In order to gain as much support as possible, and to familiarise citizens with their attitudes and thus make them both understandable and tangible, right-wing populists have absolutely simplified the crisis Europe is facing with a sort of scapegoating, by falsely attributing a physical form to it. This is when the crisis ceases to be an abstract concept and becomes embodied in a certain character which then becomes a common enemy, and the fight against the perceived enemy becomes a tool for the unification of the nation.

It seems that Europe has sacrificed women in the current crisis, by representing their fight for the ownership over their bodies as some sort of anti-national sabotage aiming at destroying the nation and as the "beginning of the end" of life as we know it.

However, the growing shift to the right across Europe is not the only thing going on. On the contrary, it is only one side of the coin. Along with the growing popularity of the radical right and the strengthening of the influence of the Church accompanying the right, on the other hand women's rights have been discussed increasingly in the past years, the political participation of women is by no means insignificant; we have witnessed positive improvements regarding the legalisation of LGBTIQ marriages or even the adoption of children by LGBTIQ persons, solving issues like abortion on demand, violence against women and the like. Those topics are being considered more and more frequently, and feminism is increasingly moving to the mainstream discourse. Initially, the afore-stated may seem as a set of truly positive steps forward, what by themselves they are. Still, in the context of interaction with the afore-mentioned supporters of conservatism, the way in which progressive ideas like feminist thought are presented to the general public and the so-called mainstream political scene, seldom is enough to merely prevent scenarios in which the consequences of the ideas of the far-right are manifested fully or where in the best case the status quo is retained.

That is to say, the extension of the scope of women's rights that is allowed any appearance in the mainstream public discourse, as well as the rights which are the direct result of mainstream political inter-

ventions, are very frequently seen in a sort of vacuum separate from the remainder of the political landscape of Europe. On the other hand, however,

right-wing populism entailing ultra-conservatism and clericalisation, offers the return to "traditional values" as a solution to social problems, which often turn out to be mere excuses for propagating extremely patriarchal norms, which would severely restrict and even take away acquired women's rights.

The afore-mentioned extension of women's rights in a "vacuum", as well as advocating a return to "traditional values", are specific forms of concealing the heart of the problems tormenting Europe. While the former leads only to cosmetic changes, and not systematic ones, the latter even shifts the blame for the growingly bleak social and economic situation many European countries are facing to groups which can most easily be scapegoated in a given moment. However, both scenarios contribute in a certain way to concealing the systemic deficiencies of neoliberal, capitalist societies in the midst of crisis by turning female bodies into a battlefield on which some of the bloodiest fights are taking place.

The Balkans, and thereby Croatia as well, is no exception there. Indeed, given the recent social and political developments, Croatia may quite easily be characterised as one of the countries following this negative European trend absolutely successfully. The phenomenon of right-wing populism, as well as the conservatism and clericalisation of society likewise did not stay out of Croatia. In the described context, we have witnessed activities such as the ones of the association Grozd, which is fighting for substituting the educational programme based on science with one based on ultra-conservative interpretations of the teachings of the Catholic Church, then the association Vigilare, which is part of the extreme right-wing network Tradicija, obitelj i vlasništvo [Tradition, family and property] (Iskra 2019), as well as the social and political breakthrough of the association "U ime obitelji" [In the name of the family], concealing the fight for the prohibition of abortion behind a seemingly harmless name, which would directly jeopardise the health and lives of countless women. In the context of political parties, the right-wing oriented Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) remains the most

powerful one, but the appearance of the party Hrast (likewise with right-wing political views), as well as Neovisni za Hrvatsku (NZH) [Independent for Croatia] or even Generacije obnove (GO) [Generations of Renewal] is not insignificant. The two latter ones were founded in 2017 and according to their ideological principles come closest to what we might characterise as a populist extreme right-wing.

In accordance with the above-stated, it is unquestionable that Croatia, just like the remainder of Europe, is increasingly characterised by the overlapping of patriarchal norms into political decisions like the infamous “return to traditional values”. From day to day, women are more expected to return to the role of the wife and mother, while the role of the breadwinner, protector and, most importantly, the “head of the family”, belongs to the man. In view of the centuries of patriarchal socialisation in this region, in combination with a bad demographic situation, it comes as no surprise that to many citizens, the described proposed gender role model might appear not only as reasonable, but also as natural, which makes it even easier to implement certain decisions like restricting the access to abortion on demand. Furthermore, issues like abortion are mostly considered from the perspective of morality, religious views, and even patriotism, which simplifies them, but also (due to the frequent absence of a scientific, as well as an economic/political component of those issues within the right-wing propaganda) makes them more susceptible to manipulation.

We could witness that kind of manipulation through, for instance, the numerous platforms of the association Vigilare, which presents itself as a promoter of freedom and democracy, while in reality it involves endeavours to limit women’s rights wrapped in the foil of Catholic morals and concern for the survival of the Croatian people. Furthermore, numerous events like the “March for Life” have attempted to present the prohibition of abortion as protection of the family throughout the years, which still continues to play a crucial role as a social structure in the Croatian social conscience. Likewise, as many as 188 gynaecologists in 29 Croatian hospitals have appealed to conscience (Bratonja Martinović, Ponoš 2019), and refuse to perform abortions for moral motives at the demand of the woman, even though it concerns pregnancies in a phase in which, from the medical point of view, it

is impossible to talk about the existence of human life. Such acts facilitate the legitimisation of the antagonisation of women in public at large, portraying them as heartless murderers, who neither care for the lives of their unborn children, nor for the fate of their own nation.

The described

treatment of abortion in the Croatian public discourse can be characterised as a classic example of the right-wing populist scape-goating of women through the constant and exclusive moral judging in order to prevent the discussion of the true reasons behind abortions on demand

(and a similar principle is applied to many other specifically female issues). Particularly, in this case, allowing such discussions may result in the disclosure of not addressed social issues, from partner and sexual violence still treated utterly inadequately and inefficiently by the legal system, to issues of an economic nature like high rent prices, the inability to find employment, the cost of kindergartens and the like, which would finally illuminate problems like a bad demographic structure as systemic problems of the capitalist society within which we live, and not problems caused by certain social groups, and thereby it would shake the status quo shifting the antagonism from, in this case, women, to the social structure of the state itself, as well as those governing it. Thus, in the described case it would become apparent that an efficient model of demographic renewal cannot include coercion and endangering women’s lives through prohibitions, but must include high-quality modalities of the fight for women’s rights, worker’s rights, public health policy and social housing policy for everyone’s well-being and the like (Pavičić-Ivelja 2020), and something like that cannot be realised within profit-oriented capitalism and social and economic instabilities caused by it, on whose exploitation the formation and rise of right-wing populist politics rests.

But, if we return to the progressive advancement and improvements regarding women’s rights mentioned in the beginning, it can likewise be noticed that in that case as well, Croatia is again following European trends. It can be claimed that this is the case precisely because the rise of conservatism in society has illuminated the need for a sort of counterattack aimed at preserving the existing rights as the minimum goal of

the fight. In the context of positive advancements, it is extremely important to highlight the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in 2018, but also the arrival of a series of campaigns and initiatives into the political mainstream, whose ideas have been on some sort of social margin until now, as feminist activism in Croatia still very much is, when it comes to the influence in political decision-making. This concerns campaigns like the one entitled #PrekinimoŠutnju [#StopTheSilence], which, after the public testimony of Member of Parliament Ivana Ninčević-Lesandrić about her personal experience with curettage without anaesthesia, has finally successfully illuminated the problem of obstetric violence women in Croatia are facing at childbirth, curettage and similar procedures that not rarely take place under unsuitable conditions, without anaesthesia and accompanied by utterly unprofessional behaviour of the medical staff. In 2019 we could also witness the formation of a new initiative against violence against women entitled #SpasiMe [#SaveMe] which is specific precisely because it was supported and founded by already famous public figures headed by Jelena Veljača, which has certainly contributed to bringing the issue of an efficient fight against violence into the mainstream discourse (Pavičić-Ivelja 2020). Besides the illumination of the problem of obstetric violence or even family/partner violence, one can also state the political participation of women as positive in a certain way, which seemed the most obvious in the election of Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović as the first woman to the office of President of the Republic of Croatia.

Undoubtedly, all of the aforementioned represents a positive step forward and cannot by itself be characterised as an absence of concern for women's rights by the participants of the mentioned campaigns and initiatives, but their placement in the mainstream of the social and political discourse takes place precisely in the way mentioned at the beginning of the text – in a vacuum. What does addressing the problem in a vacuum mean in the described context? In the context of the mentioned examples, it includes discussing obstetric violence exclusively from the gender perspective, which, although crucial, in this case goes hand in hand with inefficient public health policies, the failure of the Croatian health care system, its struggling with undercapacities, and growing efforts to privatise



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the health care sector. Thus, it is necessary to examine obstetric violence as a gender-based problem, because that is what it is, but it is necessary to also present it as a consequence of the interaction between patriarchal norms and a series of other issues of an economic nature, which also need to be dealt with outside of the context of discussing women's rights.

Something similar is also happening to the mainstream discussion on combatting violence against women. Although the inefficacy of the courts and the police has repeatedly been pointed out, the need to secure alternative accommodation for victims of violence in the form of safe houses, the numbers of SOS telephones for helping women are displayed on television as part of the advertising programme, the problem of violence is addressed on the individual level. Violence is remediated on a case-to-case basis, and not rarely, the mainstream discourse presents it as a non-political event. Likewise, the highlighting of the interaction between the problem of combatting violence and the issue of the dysfunctionality of many other social and economic aspects of the society in which we live is frequently lacking (which seemingly may appear unconnected), like for instance the inefficiency of housing policies, and the absence of a high-quality model of social housing. With such a relationship towards violence, it is only possible to constantly keep treating the symptoms, but not to tackle its causes.

Furthermore, while political participation in the form of electing the first woman President in Croatia certainly does constitute a significant event, this likewise is a case of viewing the fight for women's rights merely as cosmetic change in a social struc-

ture through publically displaying a handful of selected women, regardless of their actions or convictions, which in no way improves their position as an entire social group, that endures class-based oppression under capitalism along with the gender-based oppression, and which limits the struggle for women's rights to dealing with only individual cases, without discussing systemic inadequacies.

With the previously outlined approach of the social and political mainstream to women's rights, the genuine fight for them still remain on the margin, while it only becomes possible to retain the status quo.

By avoiding politicisation, by remaining reluctant to mention the left and the right in the context of certain specifically female issues, by not recognising the connection between patriarchy and capitalism, which becomes the most obvious during crises by the strengthening of precisely right-wing populism, it is impossible to create a society in which a true model of equality exists. That is something feminism has known for a long time.

Developing an awareness about the connection between gender and capitalism unquestionably contributes to precluding the biologisation of patriarchal norms with the aim of turning women not adhering to them into scapegoats of right-wing

populist policies of securing one's power through creating the illusion of effectively dealing with the present social and political issues. Furthermore, the development of the described awareness likewise greatly hinders the watering down of the feminist discourse once it has been placed into the mainstream, where it becomes depoliticised and individualised, and thus harmless for the existing system largely responsible for a whole array of various forms of oppression faced by women.

The awareness of the necessity of the anti-capitalist nature of the women's struggle is something that certainly does exist in Croatia, if one is to judge by the invested efforts of the multitude of activist organisations that have been active for years in this region, but what is lacking is the satisfactory spreading of the ideas among the general public, as well as the expansion of the areas of the fight that will secure that the women's struggle is also anti-capitalist at the same time, and that all struggles against the conservative currents of the populist right-wing assisted by the instabilities of capitalism are also women's struggles at the same time. One cannot function without the other. Furthermore, it is necessary to find an efficient model of networking and gathering the critical mass necessary for the success of the afore-mentioned, which undoubtedly constitutes plenty of room for action in this region, but also beyond. ■■■

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gender in transitions: revolution is female?

the (un)forgotten possibility of emancipation

Vera Katz

Historiography in Bosnia and Herzegovina has neglected topics dealing with organisations like the People's Front, female, youth, trade union, pioneer and similar mass organisations, which were very important for the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (KPJ) during the war, on the way of conquering power, and in the first decade of peace for its consolidation. Some thirty years ago, which is still valid today for Bosnian-Herzegovinian historiography, Lydia Sklevicky warned: "I believe that history can and must be written starting from another starting point as well, metaphorically speaking from the other end of the hierarchical pyramid of power in society. Historical science has directed its view for far too long exclusively to its top, to the powerful, the so-called "great people", who were probably by chance men in 99.9% of the cases. I reached the necessity to actualise that other point, because I deal with, tentatively speaking, the history of women, with the organised action of women, but I am asking myself the tentative question how those organised political, social actions actually can actively influence a change of the culture that in our case still is a predominantly traditional culture" (Sklevicky 1985, 29-30). During the last ten years in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a significant progress with regard to actualising the study of the history of women can be discerned. If one looks only at two more

recent conference proceedings (Čaušević 2014; Dugandžić and Okić, 2016), which consulted both local and international references, what can be noticed is the encouragement for further research regarding the enormous contribution of women in times of war and of peace to the general societal development during the 20th century.

The activities of the Women's Antifascist Front (AFŽ) might serve as an example for the better understanding of the People's Liberation Movement and the revolutionary change of government in the agrarian, patriarchal and traditional Yugoslav and Bosnian-Herzegovinian society.

Considering that the topics from the time of the Second World War have been pushed aside in the Bosnian-Herzegovinian historiography, research on the position of women inside and outside of the AFŽ would be a good path for writing the history of that period without ideologically one-sided presentations, i.e. this example might serve for the better understanding of the gap between highly set ideals and social reality. This topic might also be the model for the research of other organisations as well, such as for instance the popular front, youth organisations, various associations, and the party organisations themselves.

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When the emancipation of women in the Yugoslav socialist society is discussed, the period of existence and operation of the Women's Antifascist Front (AFŽ) in World War Two and during the first eight years of the post-war social and political development was essential, as the most massive women's organisation in the history of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the socialist historiography, the activation of women was exclusively attributed to the merit of the Communist Party and the People's Liberation Movement (NOP) in Yugoslavia at the beginning of World War Two. Thereby the numerous and significant women's unions and associations from the interwar period were unjustifiably omitted, and if they were mentioned at all, they were characterised as "civic", "petit bourgeois", "bourgeois", "national" and the like, i.e. they were unacceptable for the new revolutionary government because of the "bourgeois feminism".

After World War One, in which women constituted the predominant workforce, because the men had been mobilised and joined the army, female action gained momentum and clear requests of the women's movement began to take shape. "Already towards the end of World War One a huge number of (women's, A/N) societies and associations is recorded, many of which had existed prior to the war as well, but resumed their work only after it ended. A total of 1.256 societies was registered in 258 settlements, the most of them in the Sarajevo County (300), followed by the Banjaluka County (248), Tuzla County (222), Mostar County (198), Travnik (181) and Bihać

County (107)" (Spahić and Giomi and Delić 2014, 45). According to the cited authors, the interwar movement for the emancipation of women developed in two directions: bourgeois and proletarian. Because of the links to the workers' movement and the class struggle, the women's proletarian branch was very important to the Communist Party and thus it was included in its discussions and programme documents. Following the line of the Comintern from the mid-1930ies on attracting women to the People's Front with the aim of gathering all democratic forces against the emerging fascism, the Communist Party also paid significant attention to that question at its Fifth Conference held in October 1940. In his paper on organisational issues regarding the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (KPJ), Josip Broz Tito emphasised: "There will be a special paper on the issue of women's rights, because that is a very important issue for us, but unfortunately, our comrades in some organisations still do not pay enough attention to it. Our women comrades will talk about that themselves here, but it is necessary to underline here that all success the women comrades have achieved until now on women's work was mainly done without the assistance of their male comrades, and often even along with disturbances from those comrades" (Broz 1982, 32). Vida Tomšić presented a special paper on the work of the KPJ among women at the V Conference of the KPJ, in which "Women's demands were made, which the proletariat needs to include in its programme, pertaining to the protection of the mother and child, and the issue



"Žena borac" (Woman Fighter), Alija Kučukalić, woman's statue as a symbol of antifascism, monument at Memorial Park Vraca, Sarajevo – Photo by Radio Sarajevo

of the full equality of women in the social and political life. The paper included a criticism of feminism and tasks were set whose performance should be taken care of by all organisations of the KPJ“ (Hronologija, 1980, tom I, 294).

Regardless of the lack of understanding by their own families, the surrounding in which they lived, and most men/comrades in the military units and KPJ organisations, the activation of women had visible success, so that the conditions were met to organise the First National Conference of the Women of Yugoslavia from 6 to 8 December 1942 in Bosanski Petrovac (BiH), at which a common antifascist organisation for the whole country was created – the Women’s Antifascist Front of Yugoslavia (AFŽ). At total of 166 women delegates from all parts of Yugoslavia participated in the conference, with the exception of Slovenia and Macedonia, due to the impossibility to attend under war-time conditions. Importance was given to this gathering by the presence of Josip Broz Tito, Supreme Commander of the People’s Liberation Army (NOV), who in his speech praised the exceptional work of the women, and among other things sent out the following message: “The women of Yugoslavia, who have made such sacrifices in this struggle with such self-devotion, they, standing so perseveringly in the front lines of the People’s Liberation Struggle (NOB), here, today, have the right to establish one fact once and for all: that this struggle has to bear fruit also for the women of the peoples of Yugoslavia, so that no one is ever again able to snatch from their hands those fruits for which such a heavy price was paid! (...) Women, my male and female comrades, have passed the test of maturity: they have demonstrated that they are capable not only of working in the household, but also to fight with a rifle in their hands, that they can rule and hold power in their hands“ (Hronologija, 1980, tom II, 147-148). Praises of the successes of the organising and activities of women, as well as promises of attaining their future fully equal status in the social and political life, came after the First Session of the Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia (AVNOJ) was held in Bihać from 26-27 November 1942, at which only one woman participated, Kata Pejinović, President of the AFŽ for Lika, and there was likewise not a single woman in the Council which had 69 members, neither at the position of Vice-President nor in the Executive Committee of the AVNOJ (Nešović 1981,

89-91). Although women had been left out at the very beginning of constituting the revolutionary government, at the First National Conference, only seven days after the meeting of the AVNOJ, the AFŽ faced tremendous tasks: “popularisation of the organisations of the AFŽ and bringing together the broadest strata of women through various forms of work; the greater engagement of women in building the people’s government and assistance to the AVNOJ; developing brotherhood and unity through organised and planned work in massive numbers and working competition for aiding the NOV (People’s Liberation Army, A/N) and the POJ (Partisan Detachments of Yugoslavia, A/N); strengthening and consolidating the unity of the front and the background, and including women together with men in armed and sabotage operations against the occupier; planned and systematic work on improving the political, cultural and educational literacy of women and offering literacy courses to the illiterate; founding the newspaper *Žena danas* [*The Woman Today*, T/N], as an organ of all women of Yugoslavia“ (Hronologija 1980, tom II, 148).

Regardless of the lack of their participation in the highest body of the people’s liberation government, women continued to work diligently, from securing food for the family and the army, participating in military units on different tasks, to publishing newspapers.

Thus, for example in BiH, the following newspapers came out: *Nova žena* [*The New Woman*, T/N] for BiH, then *Žena kroz borbu* [*Woman through the Struggle*, T/N], for the area of East Bosnia, *Žena na putu slobode* [*The Woman on the Path of Freedom*, T/N] and *Hercegovka* [*The Herzegovinian Woman*, T/N] for the Herzegovina, as well as other papers for propaganda purposes and the creation of the new activist identity. In further phases of constituting the government on the liberated territories, the participation of the female members of the AFŽ was likewise neglectable. At the First Session of the National Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (ZAVNOBiH), held on 25 and 26 November 1943 in Mrkonjić Grad, no woman was a member of the working presidency, only four women were councillors, none were on the list of councillors from Bosnia and Herzegovina for the Second Session of the AVNOJ, nor in the Presidium of

the ZAVNOBiH (ZAVNOBiH, knj. I, 58-69). That the building of the communist government took place without a significant involvement of prominent members of the AFŽ is likewise confirmed by the Second Session of the AVNOJ, held on 29 and 30 November 1943 in Jajce, attended by only eight women from the whole of Yugoslavia (Nešković, 1981, 345-350). At the Second Session of the ZAVNOBiH, held from 30 June to 2 July 1944 in Sanski Most, only four women participated out of 166 councillors, and three more were co-opted during the session. There was no special paper on the AFŽ, and Danica Perović talked during the discussion about the contribution of women to the People's Liberation Fight, and did not mention the AFŽ with a single word. Women were not elected to the working presidency, the verification board, the Presidency of the ZAVNOBiH counting 26 members (ZAVNOBiH, knj. I, 164-174). At the Third Session of the ZAVNOBiH, held in Sarajevo from 26 to 28 April 1945, out of 226 councillors there were ten women, and only four were elected to the National Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and none to the Government of the People's Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina. During the session Mevla Jakupović participated in the discussion, however, she did not speak of the contribution of women to the war and the revolution, and she did not even mention the AFŽ (ZAVNOBiH, knj. II, 484-511). At the Third Session of the AVNOJ, held in Belgrade from 7 to 26 August 1945, 475 councillors were presented, out of which only 16 women. Out of 71 members of the Presidency of the AVNOJ, only two were women. There was no room for women in the first Government of the Democratic Federative Yugoslavia (DFJ) at some of the ministerial positions (Nešković 1981, 689-697). By 1945, it had become clear that there were two distinct phases in the development of the AFŽ: "1) the phase of autonomy within the people's liberation movement, 1942-1943; 2) the phase of direct submission and transmission character, 1944-1945" (Sklevicky 1996, 86). Thus, when in 1944 the communist government had consolidated itself as the political order in the liberated areas, the communist leadership decided to revoke the organisational autonomy of the AFŽ and to integrate it into the hierarchical network of the people's liberation committee, i.e. the People's Liberation Front. In the explanation of such a procedure, among other things,

the recognising of "even certain feminist tendencies" is stated (Sklevicky, 1996, 86).

However, even after the victory in 1945, the Communist Party needed the AFŽ. Immediately after the liberation, republic congresses were organised at which women delegates were elected for the First Congress of the AFŽ of Yugoslavia, which was held from 17 to 19 June 1945 in Belgrade, in the presence of 1400 women delegates and the highest Yugoslav party leadership led by Tito.

According to an already tried out agitation-propaganda recipe, Tito highly praised the contribution of women to the People's Liberation Struggle, at the front and at the background alike, and the congress was the place to assign new tasks to women, no less demanding than the previous ones: women's work on consolidating the people's government, watching over brotherhood and unity, the upbringing and education of children, all sorts of work in agriculture, rebuilding the country which included heavy physical labour of women in massive numbers, taking care of war orphans, invalids etc.

(Hronologija 1980, tom III, 12). At the Second Congress of the AFŽ (Belgrade, 25 – 27 January 1948), Tito likewise praised the women of Yugoslavia in his introductory speech and invited them to fight the enemies of the people, to participate in massive numbers in the economic life of the country which was facing the challenges of an ambitious First Five-Year Plan (1947-1951), to continue working on the health, hygiene and educational enlightenment of the population, and raising children (Hronologija 1980, tom. III, 57). The Communist Party needed the AFŽ in BiH in a special way due to the campaign for "removing the veil and the outer garment", which could best be propagated by women among women, considering the strong resistance not only by women, but also by men, even party members of the KPJ (Jahić 2017, 427-497). The campaign started in 1947, and out of the 48.327 women in Bosnia and Herzegovina who wore a veil and an outer garment, 29.439 did not remove this type of clothing until 5 November 1950, when the Law on the Prohibition was passed. Women had to obey the law or pay a fine, and dressed like that they could not obtain personal documents (Milišić 1999, 225-241). At the Third Congress (Zagreb,

28-29.10.1950), Tito addressed the women delegates only on the second day, complimented their work, and set the fight for the young generation as the next task. Accordingly, the Congress took a stand toward the non-professional character of the AFŽ, that activities were on a voluntary basis, so that the professionally employed members of the AFŽ were transferred to new duties or were dismissed from service, whereby the scope and intensity of work was reduced directly (Hronologija 1980, tom III, 96). The Fourth, and last, Congress of the AFŽ of Yugoslavia was held in Belgrade from 26 to 28 September 1953, Milovan Đilas greeted in the name of the Main Board of the Socialist Alliance of Working People of Yugoslavia (SSRNJ). In his welcoming remarks, Đilas among other things said: "As it is to all of you, it is likewise very clear to me that we are still far away from a true equality of women. Indeed, legal equality has already become a reality in our country, though it is not being realised everywhere and in all cases. But for true equality, equality in all relationships, and especially those which the law cannot even predict – in the house, the family, the understanding, the mentality, the intimate life – aware socialist forces and each true fighter for socialism must fight persistently and incessantly on every step of the way" (Đilas 1953). That was already the time of Đilas's articles in *Borba* [*The Struggle*, T/N], in which he pointed to anomalies in Yugoslav society and the increase of bureaucracy in society, so that he also said the following at the Congress:

"Capitalism turns women into a commodity, and bureaucracy into a robot for producing subjects of the state. The fight against both is likewise inevitable for the woman, if she really wants to break free from the 'double slavery'. Were we not eye witnesses as well, here, how bureaucracy slowly deprives women of their rights effectively and pushes the woman out of positions which she achieved during the Revolution, while acknowledging formal rights to her? And do we not see how the fight for democracy again, in broader, higher and more beautiful forms restores those rights to the woman. Bureaucracy dries out everything it touches. And imposes on the woman the fiercest, most offensive and most concealed forms of oppression, and all in the name of the highest ideals" (Đilas 1953).

The shutting down of the AFŽ was announced by its President Vida Tomšić: "If now under these conditions for the political work among women we would have special women's organisations, that would lead to the separation of women from our joint life. Anticipating such a development of the social life, the Executive Committee of the AFŽ proposes to this Congress to adopt the conclusion to abolish the AFŽ in its previous form, as a uniform and sole women's organisation. (...) However, the activities on the field are the most important – that is where various societies and organisations should emerge that are oriented to overcoming obstacles in addressing various affairs enabling the progress of the woman, her enlightenment, knowledge for her to make better use of all her possibilities for improving her life, and thereby a better life of our families and children and the whole social community." (Tomšić 1953). The second day of the Congress began with roaring ovations of the women delegates to comrade Tito and with cheers "We want Tito! Tito to the Congress!" However, Tito did not show up. He was in Ruma, not far from Belgrade, where the celebration of the tenth anniversary since the foundation of the Vojvodina Brigades at a gathering in front of 300.000 people was held, as was reported by the *Borba* newspaper (Cvetić 1953). "Roaring and long-standing ovations to comrade Tito greeted the reading of the telegram, in which the Congress informed him of its work and the future tasks of the newly founded League of Women's Societies of Yugoslavia. (...) Comrade Tito, in an effort to accomplish all our tasks, we will, using our rights to the full extent, be aware of all our duties and obligations in building the socialist societal relations" (N.N. 1953).

The interpretations of the role of the AFŽ range from the attitude that women's participation in the People's Liberation Army represented the pinnacle of emancipation, to the opinion that it was only the instrumentalisation of the enormous number of women by the Communist Party on its path of seizing power.

Undoubtedly, the possibility of emancipation existed on broad foundations of society, but it could not be realised in an authoritative state, in which the political leadership itself decided on the formation, reorganisation or abolishment of certain organisations, often interrupting initiated processes. Certainly, the AFŽ is only one of such examples from the history of Yugoslav socialism.

During the socialist period, the overall contribution of women was forgotten, and notions on women's participation in the People's Liberation Army (NOV) were reduced to the cliché "that between 1941 and 1945 tens of thousands of caring nurses, brave women combatants and determined party women activists gladly sacrificed their lives for a better future" (Wiesinger 2009, 221). Although the AFŽ was forgotten during socialism, newer research has given it a more visible place in the history of Bosnia and Herzegovina. ■■■

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women's invisibility as punishment: gender, war and transition in and after Yugoslavia

Svetlana Slapšak

just a bit of history

It is necessary to point to some specificities in the Communist movement in Yugoslavia in order to understand such a development. The resistance movement in Yugoslavia in 1941 was mostly led by Communists. Stationed in the cities and illegalized by the monarchy, they were supported by urban dwellers with ideological sympathies, among which the most successful were women – from working class women and schooling system (teachers) to the elite representatives. When the movement became the guerilla (partisans) and moved to the rural and unhabited areas, it lost its urban setting and helpers and had to invent its own, to attract a completely new population. This outstanding work in constructing an army and future citizens of the new society showed best results with mostly illiterate rural women. They were given basic knowledge and also basic promises about the future. As a result of this improvised propaganda, they formed the logistic base for the movement, the information network for the partisans, with care, food providing and refuge, and the additional body of women fighters in the liberation army. In 1942, the first liberation army parliament already had women representatives and their political organization – AFŽ, the Antifascist Women's Front. At the end of the war, the Communist Party (CP) had something over 20.000 members, the AFŽ some 2 millions. The AFŽ consequently played a crucial part in repairing the country, care activities (victims of war, orphans, literacy, women's education), rebuilding, voluntary work and similar. I still remember my grandmother, never a communist and a pre-war new rich, who enthus-

tatically worked with other women inside AFŽ.

Women were given new rights and they were using them skillfully. The whole society was oriented toward emancipation. At the time of the divorce with Stalin and the Warsaw pact in 1948, there was an obvious danger that the most powerful political group in the country, AFŽ, could turn to the Soviet side. Therefore the CP started diminishing the role of AFŽ and watering down its political power with bureaucratization and fragmentation. Till 1952, AFŽ did not exist any more. Some prominent women, high in CP structure formally kept the feminist politics alive.

In the mid 60', the CP policy took a new turn toward consumerist society and a specific form of liberalism.

A new type of women was sought for, adapted both to Western criteria and to the old patriarchal submission: she was supposed to be sexy, attractive, mother, lover, political activist and provider (employed) at the same time. The old AFŽ women were ridiculed...

The CP did not restrain from using pornography in this political project, opening the market and putting out all restrictions. The position toward feminism was unique in Croatia – in other republics it was considered a bad Western influence on women.

In the 70', the Student Cultural Centre (SKC) in Beograd became a secret meeting point for women willing to discuss feminism, thanks to two women, both from the nomenklatura families: Dunja Blažević, the director of SKC and Žarana Papić, the director of the students' publishing house. Dunja

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Blažević gave us the room at SKC once a week to meet and discuss. I remember older women, the AFŽ generation, coming to these meetings and crying of joy to see women organizing again...In 1978, Žarana Papić had the idea to organize an international conference at SKC under the title Drug'ca (a short version of "drugarica", female of "comrade") about a real position of women in Yugoslav society. It was the first feminist conference for the new generation. The state controlled press attacked brutally the conference, with the argument that was common in dissident circles too: women have all the rights, feminism is not a necessity, if not a perversion! The conference marked an interest in contemporary Western feminism, especially in French theory. The interest spread through Yugoslav academic population, the links between feminists in different Yugoslav republics were reinforced, there was a constant flow of publications. The International University Center in Dubrovnik became an ideal institution for organizing international Summer courses and conferences. This was the place for the intense feminist debates on international level in the 80'.

western cultural colonialism and Yugoslav feminism

Yugoslav socialist state was always interesting for Western leftwing population, researchers and academics, as well as artists and travellers. In the 60', this interest became even higher, because of selfgovernment, the general rupture with SSSR after

the occupation of Czechoslovakia and, in a very small number of cases, because of the dissident movement inside Yugoslavia since 1968, which demanded a more human society and more freedom of expression. As a result, some of Western intellectuals preferred the state organized events (conferences, symposia, Summer schools) than those organized by the dissidents. For instance, Terry Eagleton and Torril Moi (early 70') have opted for a high level conference organized by the Communist Party in Cavtat (near Dubrovnik) in one of the most luxurious hotels in the country, and not for the Korčula Summer school of philosophy, improvised on the island some 100 miles to the North, crowded with students from Europe and USA, and with Ernest Bloch and Juergen Habermas as lecturers. The Korčula Summer school was banned by the authorities by 1972. These were "lead years" in the country, with Tito becoming increasingly charmed by the North Korean leadership style, and with the internal situation burdened by expansive Croatian nationalism, terrorist actions by ustashi (Croatian extreme nationalists) and social instability (poverty and unemployment), often solved by discrete capitulating of "exporting" guest-workers to Western European countries. Croatian communist leadership had a good idea about repressing nationalism in academia by initiating and supporting feminist theory, which was international and anti-nationalist. The first publication of this kind appeared in Zagreb. It is important to underline that the majority of academic and cultural population was openly against



"Women's Day March in Istanbul" March 8, 2017
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feminism throughout 70' and 80', and that many prominent opponents of the regime were also staunch anti-feminists.

The first international conference at IUC in Dubrovnik on women's writing was organized in 1986, it was a joint venture of Beograd Institute for literature and arts and the University of Zagreb. Many young blooming feminists from the West came to Dubrovnik and it became a ground for developing theoretical thinking and also activism, including the inner feminist agenda which was becoming independent, like LGBT theorizing and practices. For the Yugoslav feminists and future gender studies initiators, the French theory was much more attractive than the American feminist folklore, which included goddesses and similar. I discovered a new discipline which was taking ground in the USA, the Ancient women's studies. I had reserves regarding feminist lack of sensitivity for social realities and its lack of criticism toward the regime, being active in the dissident group: I was then the president of the Committee for the freedom of expression at the Writers' Union of Serbia. At that time, the Yugoslav dissidency has already shown a split between the old dissidency (since the 60'), which endured police brutality, prisons and passport denial – not to mention the ban on academic career, risky publishing and similar – and the new one, emerging from the new freedom after Tito's death and oriented toward re-venticating national goals, revising history of the WW II and branding openly anti-socialist ideas. The first group was fighting and risking important portions of their private life and success for human rights and freedom of expression, the second defended collective and historic rights in pure nationalist terms, heading into an obvious destruction of a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural state. During that conference, I eventually decided to become a declared feminist and to oppose any compromise with the nationalist dissidents.

My decision was right. The feminist population of Yugoslavia remained anti-nationalist and as the situation worsened, openly pacifist and pro-Yugoslav. The two following conferences, in 1988 and in 1990 became an important forum for global theoretical debate on gender issues and successfully diverged into many directions of activism. Among activist topics, the Yugoslav one became especially important. In 1990, the conference was held in the middle of the pre-election campaign in Croatia,

mostly aggressive and nationalist. More than 400 participants of the conference issued a manifesto on the necessary preservation of Yugoslavia and peace in the region. Needless to say, this became an international feminist issue. In four years of common work and friendship a network of feminists was formed on terms of equality and mutual respect. Thanks to IUC conferences, Yugoslavia has become one of the global "addresses" of feminism.

The situation radically changed with the war in Yugoslavia. From the outside, the suffering multitudes are usually viewed – beside the terror of war – as poor, crying, pityful...The Western media insisted on rural-looking folk, especially women. The discovery of mass rape in Bosnia could not use much visual material, but it had huge consequences in historical revision of generally hidden mass rapes in the recent past and pointed to the Balkan patriarchy. Paradoxically, it was the MTV which for the first time presented young, trendy women with make-up and an attitude in besieged Sarajevo...Inside the war zone the feminist network, including new activist groups like Women in black was connected all time, exchanging information, texts to be published and sending help to Sarajevo. Rape victims and refugees were helped by Croatian feminists, some help was offered in Slovenia too on the state, NGO and individual level. Some Bosnian refugees even found a secure place in Beograd. The information networks with feminist colleagues around the world were kept, and many activists from Europe were coming to war zones bringing help on their own initiative.

The war was also a horrible challenge for surviving population of women, who had new tasks, like reorganizing new social conditions, taking care of damage, material and psychic, and inventing new forms of solidarity and interaction. In many cases, theory and feminist concepts were not central in this new activism.

On one level, women had to pay attention to the new legislation and consequently had to acquire new knowledge: many women lawyers engaged in servicing women's problems, especially in Bosnia&Herzegovina and Kosovo. Social regulation of the position of women raped during the war was another major problem: till now, the social policy in this case was not taken in an universal and functional way. On the other level, psycho-

logical help emerged as a new area of solidarity and activity. None of these clusters of problems were not present on the feminist horizons before the war. Religious problems and the relation with different churches also became an area of seeking solutions for women. Literacy of women was not self-understood any more, poverty appeared as a massive social problem. In short, women had to organize and prepare to confront situations which were not easy to grasp. Thus a huge number of women's NGO's has been formed in a vast array of specific services, new cooperation possibilities (generally quite limited) with the new political groups and new authorities. The process later continued with women's groups related to political parties, which destroyed some older forms of solidarity. Almost in all the cases, these new NGO's and new networks were dependent on foreign funding. This started with the initial help of foreign diplomatic representatives during the war, and then continued with foreign foundations. At the beginning of the new century, most of these foundations diminished or stopped helping women's initiatives in the region, with the explanation that the new states would and should take care of such activism. In many cases, this did not happen, and many NGO's had to cease with their activities. The situation today shows that the NGO network and women's organizations were poorly backed up by the state, although they represent the only haven for political, educational and philanthropic activity for women in devastated industrial regions or in rural areas. Urban women's organizations manifest more visibility and presence, due to their capacity of connecting with culture, politics and traditional philanthropic institutions. The urban women also preserved the activist spirit of protesting and reacting to restrictive measures, hate-speech, militaristic narratives and historical revisionism.

After the war the position of women in all new states worsened immediately: new legislation revised previous rights and generally diminished them. The restricting laws on abortion were rejected in Slovenia after a massive women's rally, but they were implemented in Croatia and Poland, for instance. The new, democratically elected parliaments were appaulingly short in women repre-

sentatives. The patriarchal ideas, hand in hand with the new church influence, gained space in public discourse.

Already during the war, pacifist, oppositional and feminist NGOs were financed by foreign sponsors, usually through diplomatic channels – this was the only way for them to survive. They were supposed, and they were doing it – to express and spread the ideas of parliamentary democracy and the “transition”, a popular word at the time, meaning the accepting of the capitalist economy and the civic values of the West. George Soros and his Open Society organization was crucial in forming new educational institutions (including periodicals, information networks, publishing houses, media centers) in the whole post-socialist region. There was a whole intellectual renewal thanks to this help – and the whole new way of managing culture, education and science had to be invented. First gender studies, independent from the state were founded.

American organizations were the first to move in after the war (many of them purely anti-communist), and American feminists came in huge number to Europe to teach women feminism. They had right to three weeks free after giving birth, and they were teaching women's rights to women who have had from one to four years paid leave for each child...In Yugoslavia, as if feminism never existed before, feminists accepted this brutal colonial attitude without grievances, because their survival depended on it. Books by Judith Butler were translated in all Yugoslav languages as a clear sign of accepting the new framework, and the rich tradition of feminist theorizing in Yugoslavia was wiped out. The EU was late in recognizing the specificities of the post-socialist countries, and especially a huge difference between Soviet-controlled countries and Yugoslav socialism. Rosi Braidotti was the first prominent European feminist who introduced the topic and made place for feminists from these parts in EU projects and their equal participation in conferences and publication. EU exchange systems (Socrates, Erasmus) contributed immensely to the new flourishing of the gender studies and research with the gradual introduction of the post-socialist countries to the EU.

It looks like a happy-end, and in many ways it certainly is, at least on the lower academic level. The higher we go, the gloomier it seems:

National academies have a ridiculously small number of women, the image of women in mass media is deplorably negative or trashy, women are present but not taken seriously... After the fall of the Berlin wall and after the war in Yugoslavia, the tendency of accusing women for the communist rule was general.

From the most visible in former Eastern Germany, to Serbia, many literati developed this narrative. It was the communism that destroyed a traditional Serbian family, especially with the freedom given to women; women embraced communism because it gave them new rights; women were sleeping with communist and thus reproduced the communist population...and many more. The after-war period was understood as a free-range territory for hunting down women and execute the revenge on them. During the war, there was a notoriously famous trial against seven Croatia "witches" – writers and journalists, which did not demonstrate enough patriotic feelings. Similar "purges" on a smaller level were happening everywhere in the post-socialist and the post-Yugoslav space.

The times of such brutal revenge on women are now past. However, many forms of invisibility of women are preserved, inspite of cultural accommodation to EU standards, the political correctness and the financial counter-value of these forms of behavior. The leading propagators of the women's invisibility are churches, which are partly financed by the states and exempt from taxes in the whole region. The hierarchy inside the parties secure from the uprising of women and offer the totally party-dependent women as acceptable representatives. A terminal case of such political play is a lesbian Prime min-

ister of Serbia, serving any dictatorial wish of her master – the President Aleksandar Vučić. This kind of *visible invisibility* is characteristic of all political parties in the region. It also produces a stereotype that women are prone to manipulation, corruption and that they are volatile in politics and beliefs – week as ever, in one word. The social media, after the public trash media, are the lowest level on which women are scorned, attacked, humiliated and stigmatized. A successful woman is only a woman with the money, but she is worthless if she is not a mother.

The base of this retrograde position of women in the region is not one and unified: an important component is the nationalist narrative, which is simplistic and rude and depends on a cluster of lies, which are loosely connected with folklore and oral tradition. A general turn to the rightwing is accommodated by some EU politics and by the American financing during the war: by the term "transition" these channels wanted to secure the rightwing rule in the post-socialist countries and to exclude forever the socialist ideas...otherwise a normal political orientation in EU.

A very hard real life transition in the region has imposed brutal social rules, and the majority of unemployed, impoverished, socially excluded population are women.

Among the restriction and voluntary self-censorship among feminists in the region, necessary for surviving, this general rule produced the weakening of the critical thinking, theorizing and, unfortunately, expressing such views... This "adaptational" lack of criticism is also responsible for a self-denial, visible in forgetting the progressive Yugoslav feminism in the late 80'. Thus, the re-reading of the feminist past, which started at the Zagreb conference on this topic in 2011 and the subsequent publication is still a necessary task for feminists and gender specialists in the region. ■■■

conquering the space of freedom: a never-ending story?

Slavenka Drakulić

A lot has changed in ex-Yugoslav societies during the last two decades. The political and economic system has changed, whereas the mentality of the people has not, especially concerning women. Despite laws on the equality of women inherited from the time of socialism, the patriarchal relationship towards women seems to have strengthened. The reason for that are primarily nationalism and the influence of the Church.

Young generations of women have grown up in a society where all women's problems are seemingly solved. They are neither confused by the facts that most of the unemployed young people are women, that they are employed less and the first ones to lose their jobs, that they are forced to sign secret contracts in which the employer obliges them not to give birth for a certain number of years, that maternity allowances are low, and nurseries expensive, and there are neither enough of them, nor of kindergartens, etc.

For them, this is the time of post-feminism and most of them believe that the patriarchy is – passé. The question arises whether they are aware, and to what degree, what the nationalist states, the Churches and conservative associations are holding in store for them?

Maybe the following examples show best what is expected and desired of women: the refusal to understand the relationship between gender and sex and intentionally wrong interpretations of it, which became manifest during the protests surrounding the signing of the Istanbul Convention, then the controversies related to the freedom on abortion and related discussions, as well as the newest phenomenon of demographic changes, i.e. the growing imbalance between emigration, increased mortality and reduced birth rates, i.e. depopulation.

The campaign surrounding the Istanbul Convention dealing with women's rights in 2018 in Croatia was accompanied by a series of prejudices which were spread by civil society associations of Catholic provenance. Like the one that it entails teaching children that they can change their sex, so that it will no longer be known who is a man, and who a woman, and so forth. Still, none of the politicians bothered (or dared?) to explain that gender, as opposed to sex, is a socially constructed role. Because the society in which a person lives, thus the history, culture, tradition, customs, habits, religion – are what determines the role of the sexes. Those are assigned gender roles which are “socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men”, according to the Convention.

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In a traditional and patriarchal society under the great influence of Catholicism, as ours has become, the focus is not on the individual, but on the family. In it, primarily the gender role of the mother is intended for the female sex, and for fathers the gender role of the family breadwinner. However, gender roles are changing for both sexes. Earlier in history, men could dispose of women and children as of their property, and one hundred years ago women could only dream of the rights making them equal today. Just like that, they are learned. In the first place in the family, and then in society. Gender ideology, for instance, is preached by the Church, with many believers not even knowing that precisely that is concerned. It is enough to listen to a priest's sermon for a little bit, without even considering bishops. As we can read in the media, this is what, for example, Alojzije Stepinac, cardinal during the fascist Independent State of Croatia (NDH), wrote about the role of women or emancipation in 1955: "It is interesting how well Satan has observed the immensely important role of the woman, and uses her under the parole of false emancipation for his own purposes as never before in the history of mankind". Today, in similar interpretations, women, Satan, emancipation, and undoubtedly gender ideology as well, are connected in the fight against traditional Christian values, the family, and especially the Croatian nation. The pattern of this gender ideology is obvious, the woman is supposed to remain subordinate to the man in every sense.

In democracy, the Church has the right to preach – spread its faith and its gender ideology, even if it does so loudly and aggressively. Indeed, it does not only do that in church, but also in state media, as well as state schools. Unfortunately, those schools are not much better, even though they are secular: when it comes to gender ideology, their textbooks preach the same stereotypical gender roles. Two institutions having a crucial influence on upbringing are promoting the same thing.

The citizens cannot protect their children or themselves from the conservative gender ideology imposed on them through the big, political door, and the small, school door by the Church, simply because it is in the position to do so. The Istanbul Convention can neither endanger nor change that with its measures. It may help to protect victims and prosecute the perpetrators. But values, especially the ones related to the gender role of women, are changing slowly and not always for the better.

In the states that emerged after the breakup of Yugoslavia, in which the nationalist ideology has prevailed, the freedom of choice related to giving birth or abortions is a sensitive issue. Still, the women who are primarily concerned by that seem to be sleeping, convinced that someone in charge and paid for that is taking care that this right of theirs is being respected. And exactly the opposite is happening, as it seems that no one cares too much about that, not even women themselves.

Every couple of months, alarming news appear in Croatian media that more and more public hospitals refuse to perform abortions, and a rising number of gynecologists are making use of the possibility of appeal of conscience. That is how some years ago, we saw the case of the hospital KB Sveti Duh in Zagreb, in which all gynecologists signed to confirm that they do not wish to perform abortions. This is the fifth hospital in the state to do so, in addition to the ones in Knin, Vinkovci, Našice and Požega, hospitals paid by the taxpayers, therefore also by women, at whose service they should be. That means that women are forced to go to another hospital or even to another county. In other words, they are left at the mercy of a particular hospital and hospital director. If, in fact, a director should decide that there will be no abortions in his hospital – then there will not be any. The conscientious objection actually belongs to the political sphere where hypocrisy reigns. So publically, such a gynecologist will, in order to demonstrate to be on the 'right' side, successfully ingratiate himself by this move with conservative circles and the Church hierarchy, while he will maybe quietly charge for performing the same procedure in his private practice. Women with money will always find a solution. The ones depending on public institutions will find themselves in the situation to have an unwanted child or to seek another hospi-

tal. Or they will perform an abortion under dangerous conditions with possibly severe consequences. And, additionally, the medical staff will treat them as if abortion was not only their last resort.

Croatia has been moving precisely towards a creeping prohibition of abortion for years. We live in a formally secular state, but the Catholic Church exerts great influence on public institutions. And precisely like in the case of education and upbringing in schools, the Church has the right to preach its dogma, but it does not have the right to impose it on state institutions. However, so far no Government has strongly opposed its influence, they have preferred to turn a blind eye to circumventions of the law.

Additionally, the political climate today i.e. the growth of nationalism and right-wing forces in the EU favours the restriction of the rights of women. Thus, the EU Parliament rejected a resolution on the reproductive rights of women, which also included the recommendation that abortion should be legal, safe and available to everyone in the public health system of the member states.

Now, each state decides individually on that issue. And, of course a step backwards is possible when that decision is being made. For instance, in Poland, where abortion on demand had been allowed since 1956, it was prohibited after the transition to democracy. Because the state and nationalist ideology like to usurp the female body as a machine for the reproduction of the nation. The situation with women's right on abortion is far too dangerous to be dealt with by everyone except by women themselves. But despite the rule of conservative values, there is an increase of the activism of civil society organisations in Croatia (#spasime – #saveme), especially those engaged in domestic violence.

The former socialist countries are facing significant demographic problems. In a speech on the state of the nation, the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán dedicated a part of his speech to measures for the improvement of the demographic situation in Hungary. It is interesting that he connected the proposed measures directly to the anti-immigration policy: "Fewer and

fewer children are being born in Europe. The West thinks that immigration is the answer to that threat. Each missing child is supposed to be replaced by another one arriving from the East and then the numbers are going to be alright. But we do not need numbers. We need Hungarian children", said Orbán and proposed more measures, from advantageous loans for buying apartments and cars, to secured nurseries for all children. Women who give birth to four children will be exempt from taxes for life. Because in such a demographic renewal programme, precisely women are supposed to bear the burden of renewing the nation, but they would obtain the status of heroines in return, of victims on the altar of the homeland. The other side of those somewhat desperate measures of course is the reduction of women to incubators, confining them to the home (and vacating jobs), which no longer is an easy task to accomplish.

If the state desires women to have more children, then it must be able to pay for it. The new list of measures actually is a wish list. The difference between Croatia and Hungary lies in the fact that there is a greater economic growth in Hungary, so that they may even be able to realise some of the measures. Croatia is not, even if no new fountains would be built in Zagreb, no stadiums repaired and no more investments made in similar megalomaniac projects. But, will the new 110 measures affect a change of the situation? A Croatian portal conducted a survey among its readers and obtained the following response: 85 percent of the readers are convinced that it will not, probably aware that most of the measures will remain a dead letter anyway. However good they may be, pronatalist measures alone, without economic growth, do not nearly suffice to convince the young to have more children or to keep them in the country. The paradox of this situation is that the nationalist governments shedding bitter tears are precisely the ones creating the conditions for emigration. Orbán's measures, directed at preserving the nation, are making him the ideal of all Eastern European nationalists. Besides that, he is also presenting himself as the defender of Christian values facing the Muslim invasion, in which Bruxelles, as the "stronghold of the new internationalism", is his main enemy.



#WomensMarch on March 8, 2017, Concord, NH
"Women's Rights" by Marc Nozell – flickr - CC-BY-2.0

Orbán does not only offer favourable measures in the name of patriotism, but, as any other politician, expects votes in return. He and his equals do not hide the fact that it is their goal to win as many seats in parliament as possible, and then attempt to destroy the system from within by voting for solutions weakening the Union, and strengthening the nation-state. The right-wing forces have learned their lesson well and know how to utilise democratic methods to achieve antidemocratic goals. However, the strength of populism lies precisely in appealing to feelings of insecurity and fear – to which dignity and pride are offered as a response. In fact, it is impossible to carry out the shutdown into a state ethnically as pure as possible, unless razor wires are set up not only at the entrance to the country, but also at the exit.

Incidentally, demography is the weak point of nationalist nation renewal projects in Eastern Europe. After the accession to the EU, those countries, headed by Romania, have had the highest emigration rate to other member countries. A major problem is the new phenomenon of brain drain, i.e. the export of brains or knowledge and expertise. Such working age emigrants make up over 30 percent of those who emigrate, and Croatia is at the very top, whereby depopulation is even more felt in each segment of life in a smaller country.

Although in most Eastern European countries, including the Balkans, women live with "inherited emancipation", the fight for women's rights never is nor can be concluded.

Women hold the key to reproduction, and therefore their body does not belong solely to them. It is the combat area of each government wishing to set boundaries to women's freedom of choice. Of course that is far more difficult in a developed democracy than where the remainder of socialist mentality and distrust in democratic government institutions, as well as the scope of one's own influence, prevail. Still, it is of the utmost importance for women to realise that a step backwards regarding their rights is always possible. ■■■

the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women in the Western Balkans

Marija Bashevka

With the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic at the end of 2019, countries all over the world faced the global challenge to navigate the health crisis which rapidly developed into a social, economic and humanitarian crisis. Countries with weak institutional capacities, under-resourced public healthcare and social protection systems, with widespread poverty and inequality, are the ones where the overall impact of the pandemic crisis is expected to be the most devastating.

In the post-conflict and post-transition countries of the Western Balkan region, this pandemic crisis, as other crises before, will yet once again reinforce the already existing unequal power relations and structural inequalities, increase the negative outcomes for the most vulnerable categories, and amplify the alarming gender inequalities and adverse outcomes for women in the region.

The first two months of this pandemic crisis have revealed that the gender perspective and women's rights have again been lost among the "more urgent" issues leaders prioritise on a daily level.

In the Western Balkan countries, where men predominantly hold the highest political and economic positions of power, the gender perspective and women's expertise is often missing in crisis management and decision-making processes. This has been reflected during the crisis in the lack of gender-sensitive crisis-response strategies, resulting in limited or restricted access to crucial health care services apart from COVID-19 (such as sexual and reproductive health services), inadequate social and economic support, lack of comprehensive contingency plans to address the increasing violence against women and domestic violence, and lack of sex disaggregated data essential for informed decision-making.

Women's rights civil society organisations (WCSOs) in the region have provided support and recommendations for the institutions, mobilised their resources into providing humanitarian support and necessary services during the pandemic for women and the communities, targeting the most vulnerable and marginalised ones. However, more substantial inclusion, participation and regular consultation on crisis measures and strategies with the WCSOs during the crisis is still missing on the side of the governments in the region, despite their crucial role in the support of the women now and in the post-crisis period.

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This article explores the impact of the pandemic crisis on women in the Western Balkans region within the scope of the existing initial and still scarce research findings, reports, and available official statistics. Particular focus is placed on the economy, labour rights, unpaid care work, and violence against women and domestic violence. It takes into consideration the peculiarities of the contexts in each of the Western Balkan countries, and does not refer to women as a homogenous group. The aim is to shed light on the often-overlooked gendered aspects of the pandemic crisis in the region and to provide an overview, through findings and evidence from the field, of the lived realities of women in times of the pandemic crisis and beyond.

paid and unpaid work during the pandemic crisis

Countries in the Western Balkan region faced the economic effects of the pandemic crisis with already significant gender inequalities in the economic sphere. Women in this region have lower rates of formal employment compared to men, work more in informal and less secure jobs, face significant gender-based discrimination at work, on average earn less, save less, have lower (if any) pensions, and therefore, on average face a higher risk of poverty and social exclusion throughout life (EP, 2019). When they work, they are predominantly engaged in essential, however less paid sectors and industries such as social work, health, education, and care providing services, in tourism, hospitality, retail, sales services and manufacturing industries (e.g. the textile industry). Most of these sectors and industries are vastly affected with the ongoing pandemic crisis due to the specific preventive measures undertaken in most of the countries on a global level such as isolation, distancing and lockdowns (ILO, 2020; UN, 2020).

Considering these realities for women in the pre-pandemic context in the region, the emerging evidence on the impact of the coronavirus pandemic suggests that women are exposed to negative economic outcomes caused by the crisis at a significantly higher rate, especially vulnerable and marginalised women. A recent survey in Serbia shows that women have been exposed to a higher risk of an adverse impact of the crisis in terms of their health and livelihood outcomes (SeConS, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2020). The

situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is similar, with women overrepresented in the sectors and industries hit hardest by the pandemic crisis, like hospitality, sales, care services, retail, manufacturing, etc. (Basic, 2020). In North Macedonia, recent estimates show that 44% of employed women work in the affected economic sectors and industries, facing economic and social insecurity, an increased risk of losing their jobs and livelihood (Reactor, 2020). In Kosovo, 30% of women work in the private sector without employment contracts, in precarious conditions, exposed to rights violations and layoffs during the crisis and without any social security benefits (KWN, 2020). Furthermore, women prevail in the industries and sectors deemed essential during the crisis, like healthcare, production and manufacturing of food, sales of food and basic products, pharmacies, cleaners and others. The latest official data from North Macedonia shows that 30% of employed women work in these sectors and industries, compared to 16% of men (Reactor, 2020). Moreover, 74% of employed workers in the healthcare sector in this country are women, although the average salary of women healthcare professionals is 40 percentage points lower than the salary of men holding the same level of professional expertise. In Serbia, recent survey findings show that women make 86% of the employees “on the frontline” i.e. in the essential sectors and industries (healthcare, sales, hygiene maintenance etc.) (SeConS, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2020). All of these workers at the frontlines during the pandemic crisis face a higher risk of exposure to an infection with the virus, risk the health of their families, and perform their work in unprecedented circumstances under great pressure.

*Street action against
Gender based violence
Photo by Bárbara Boyero -
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Recent reports from WCSOs in the region point out series of violations of labour rights with clear gender-based discrimination aspects in some of the essential sectors and industries, particularly the manufacturing industry (Regional coalition of WB WCSOs, 2020). Namely, in addition to the high-risk violations regarding the mandatory preventive measures, transportation and equipment (masks, gloves, distance, disinfectants etc.), there are illegal terminations or non-continuations of contracts of pregnant women (one of the most persistent violations even before the crisis), cancellations of short-term contracts and the forced signing of 'blanco' contracts that can be ended without prior notice at any time while workers lose their right to social benefits. Moreover, there are cases of terminations of contracts of women unable to reach their workplace due to limited public transportation, and violations of government crisis measures introduced to support working parents – e.g. the possibility for one working parent to take paid leave during the crisis to take care of children/a child under the age of 10 (Reactor, 2020). This crisis measure introduced in North Macedonia was reportedly one of the most violated measures during the crisis period and affected women disproportionately more than men, considering that women comprise the majority of single-parent households, and hold the primary caregiver role for children due to traditional gender roles in the societies.

For working women with families, fortunate enough to be healthy, still have their jobs and work remotely from home, the closure of schools, kindergartens, and the preventive distancing measures resulted in a significant increase in unpaid care work. Even before the pandemic crisis, countries in the WB region faced significant gender disparities when it comes to unpaid care work. Due to prevailing traditional gender norms, women in these countries undertake most of the domestic work and responsibilities related to the care for children and other members of their families. Recent global research on unpaid care work shows that women undertake 67% of the total unpaid care work in Serbia, 72.5% in North Macedonia, and up to 86% in Albania (Charmes, 2019). In North Macedonia, the monetary value of the unpaid care work of women is estimated to represent 17.18% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for 2019 (Reactor, 2020). This invisible and officially unaccounted care economy provides the founda-

tion for the economic systems, and has a profound impact on women's lives, influencing their available time for paid work and participation in the political, social and cultural sphere.

Given the enormous disproportion in the distribution of unpaid care work in the region, with the beginning of the pandemic crisis, women faced the serious challenge of coping with the increased level of domestic work, preventive disinfection measures, care for children and family members, support for children with home-schooling, and often attending to the needs of the members of the extended family, while at the same time trying to be on top of their job responsibilities and working from home. Furthermore, with limited capacities of the healthcare systems in the region, focused primarily on COVID-19 cases, the healthcare burden became often 'outsourced' from institutions and care professionals to families, transferring additional (health) care work predominantly to women as primary caregivers.

Governments' crisis response measures in the region show a lack of the gender perspective and most of the economic consequences for women are not addressed at all.

gender-based violence and domestic violence during the COVID-19 crisis

Violence against women and girls (VAW) and domestic violence are underreported almost everywhere in the world. This is particularly relevant in countries and regions like the Western Balkan countries, with a history of recent conflicts and wars, where traditional gender norms are still prevailing, with weak, non-functional or non-existent institutional and protection response mechanisms, persistent stigmatisation and double victimisation of women and children who are victims of violence. The latest available data for the WB region prior to the COVID-19 crisis shows that 70% of women have experienced some form of partner or non-partner violence since the age of 15, while 23% of women have experienced intimate partner physical and/or sexual violence (OSCE, 2019). With already alarming levels (or epidemic proportions) of violence against women

and girls in the region, the further increase in domestic violence during the COVID-19 crisis was expected, based on similar past emergencies and reports from the early virus-affected regions in China, where the number of reported cases of domestic violence has tripled compared to the previous year (WHO, 2020).

Domestic violence takes different forms, from psychological violence, sexual violence, economic violence (restricted access to basic resources and livelihood for women and children), risky behaviour and lack of hygiene during the pandemic, causing stress and further a risk of infection, to physical violence and femicides. The most vulnerable are economically dependent, marginalised women living in socio-economic deprivation. The nature of the preventive measures undertaken in the on-going pandemic crisis triggers the further exacerbating of the violence victims experience in their homes, while staying locked down in isolation and long curfews together with the perpetrators (most often partners, husbands, or other male members of the family). These specific circumstances leave victims of violence cut out from their network of support (friends, relatives), with limited or no access to shelters, crisis centres, centres for social work, or hospitals, and make it even harder for them to reach out for help and report the violence to the police and other relevant authorities.

Since the beginning of the pandemic crisis in the region (the beginning of March 2020), CSOs working on women's rights and gender equality have alarmed¹ the relevant government institutions, international organisations and the public about the expected rise in domestic violence during the pandemic crisis and the need for an emergency response by the relevant authorities.

Although official data and detailed reports from the region are still scarce, initial reports from WCSOs, SOS lines and service providers for victims of gender-based and domestic violence in the region show an increase in the calls for help and support from victims in most of the countries in the region.²

Furthermore, similar to the situation in other countries in Europe³, there has been an increase in femicides since the beginning of the pandemic crisis, with several cases of femicides already reported in the media

in the past two months in the WB region.⁴ Although WCSOs service providers in the region adapt to be as functional as possible during the crisis and to provide shelter, psychosocial support, legal and other necessary services to survivors and their children, reports from the region show that they lack professional staff, enough space for distancing, isolation and protective equipment (masks, sanitisers, disinfectants, etc.) and electronic equipment (computers, TVs, tablets) for children to continue their education remotely. Reports from Bosnia and Herzegovina show that some shelters provide part of the services (psychosocial support, legal aid, counselling) remotely where possible by using technology, however, important outreach activities are stopped due to a lack of staff and specific tools and health and sanitation protocols for operation during this pandemic (UN Women, 2020). In the meantime, the need for safe houses in the country is growing, while the financial resources are very limited and the government has not yet provided support for these services during the pandemic crisis.

Unlike reports from the work on the ground (WCSOs, services, shelters, SOS lines), the initial official reports from the relevant authorities in the WB countries often show a decrease or similar numbers of reported cases of domestic violence compared to the reports from 2019 (for instance in Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro; COE, 2020). To a certain extent, this is an expected outcome considering the particularly limiting circumstances with the current pandemic crisis, the continuous under-reporting of violence against women and domestic violence, and the lack of trust in the relevant authorities (such as the police), and the capacities and the effectiveness of the institutional mechanisms for the protection of the victims of domestic violence. Most of the national authorities in the region have put their focus on raising awareness of violence against women and domestic violence during the COVID-19 crisis, providing guidance and information on reporting, available SOS lines, national services and available services run by WCSOs, which is a positive step considering the past negligence and lack of any gender perspective in crises situations, however, it is far from being sufficient. Especially since in some countries in the region (like for instance North Macedonia), it is accompanied by parallel interventions in states' budget cuts and restructuring of funds for CSOs, which

might affect the current and post-crisis sustainability of these essential services for victims of violence and domestic violence.⁵ Raising awareness with targeted campaigns during the crisis is important, however, what is crucial now and in the upcoming period for the governments in the region is to put the highest priority on prevention of and protection from VAW and all forms of gender-based violence including domestic violence, ensure the compliance with and implementation of the ratified conventions and national legislation translated in functional protection mechanisms for victims, and devote financial resources and technical support to the existing, new and specialised services run by WCSOs dealing with VAW and domestic violence. The pandemic crisis and the necessary isolation measures are not the main cause of the rising incidences of domestic violence, yet pose an additional factor which further increases the risks for violence in the context of an already alarming level of gender-based and domestic violence in the region. Women's rights organisations have already stressed that the need for continuous support to the victims is crucial now during the crisis, as well as in the upcoming recovery period.

moving forward

This crisis has shown again that ad-hoc, short-term humanitarian interventions, however helpful, can never substitute long-term, strategic, devoted investment in building more social and gender equal societies.

Rolling back the humble progress made in the past in this region is not an option, therefore, gender-responsive policymaking and support for the work of the activists and CSOs working on women's rights and gender equality are crucial in the period ahead. This crisis has once again reminded us why the feminist perspective is so important in the response to the crisis and why investment in public healthcare, social infrastructure, care work, prevention and protection of violence and education free of gender stereotypes and norms is pivotal, if our societies strive to decrease inequalities, not only between women and men or other gender identities, but also between women of different social and economic backgrounds.

All the essential professions during this crisis will continue to be essential for our existence as always, what needs to be changed is the social and economic value we assign to those professions, predominantly performed by women. Gender, social and climate justice do not just happen, and we need to place them as the highest political priority of the governments for the period to come in order to minimise the risks of future pandemic outbreaks and socio-economic crises, where women will yet again bare the hardships and the devastating impact of the crises to a higher degree. ■■■

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intervention

feminism: a universal panacea?

Nadežda Čačinovič

What are my expectations: that feminism can somehow act against the noxious and rampant nationalism in the Balkans or West Balkans? Or, on another level: that the fight against patriarchal structures will strengthen the building of a democratic society in each of the states. Broadly speaking, those were also the positions of the Yugoslav feminist initiatives from the late seventies and eighties, albeit at first with less conscious emphasis on anti-nationalism, just an almost complete disregard of the already existing national divisions.

The feminist movement was part of the civil society. “Civil society” was not really a fact or a name, a description: more of a programme or a point of view stating some kind of collective action. Without any kind of foreknowledge about the imminent crumbling of the whole structure of “real existing socialism”, many of us were looking for new ways of political action. It seemed impossible to confront the ruling forces directly, but here and there you could do something outside the official framework – in an unauthorized way, without an official stamp, without legitimation. At first it meant just circles and discussions, but very soon important real-life attempts outside existing institutions, like SOS phone lines, acknowledging that all was not for the best with the position of women, that law-enforcing officials tended to see domestic violence as a private matter, etc.

These new initiatives did not ignore existing organisational structures. There was a certain amount of negotiation going on, a sort of interplay, and even some funding from official sources – at least as early as the international conference DRUG-CA in Belgrade in 1978. Feminists all over Yugosla-

via were very much connected, even to the extent of using existing differences between the republics (at a certain time a capital or leadership could be more or less “liberal”, i.e. open for new ideas; generally speaking, in the seventies political power migrated from the central leadership to the leadership of the Yugoslav republics) to shift initiatives around. There were obvious differences, the Slovene activists, for instance, introduced a new view of sexual/gender identity very early on. In Slovenia, there was a clear articulation of lesbian and gay initiatives.

There was no general coordination between civil society initiatives. That was the point – literally, the strategy was punctual, fragmented, albeit one might say that human rights, freedom of speech and congregation aspects were common to all of them: but not combining ideas about economic development, distribution, constitutional changes, a different view of the female condition etc. Probably because the different “toxicity” of issues, explicitly rejecting “fraternity and unity” or socialism was still not allowed.

One might see a certain parallel with the fragmentation caused by cultural wars and identity politics in the so-called West, by the shift in left politics from the question of class (possibly revolution) to questions of recognition. But the causes and consequences were very different. Still, it was a fragmentation, an absence of a common programme of change and in parallel with “Western” politics, there was no real expectation that a change of the general framework was possible. Unfortunately, these different oppositional movements did not play a decisive part in the transition. At best, they were a kind of vanishing

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mediator, to a certain degree necessary, but replaced by established forces adapting to new circumstances and solidifying ethnic divisions.

Most of the feminist groups resisted ethnic divisions and tried to keep up contacts. Some episodes showed, however, that all was not well.

Feminists from all over Yugoslavia, for instance, supported the march of mothers to Belgrade: they wanted to extricate their sons from the army.

They asked their friends in Belgrade to help in any way they could. But many of the mothers did not share the pacifist programme, the intention to stop the war and come to a peaceful solution. On the contrary, they were quite ready to send their sons into national military units, some of them even creating a very hard-core nationalistic and militant initiative, and even so still claiming to be feminists. Still, most of the feminist activists were free from nationalistic prejudices. With the escalation of violence and suffering, most of their energy went into the alleviation of hardship, into working with refugees, into protesting against horrendous war crimes, especially rape.

The newly established states showed a marked penchant to change the pre-war position of women. For all kinds of causes: the inherent naturalisation of nationalism, favouring references to eternal, given roles of women in safeguarding the purity of national heritage, for instance; or because of de-secularization: even from the usual backlash in an economic crisis, sending women back home.

Although there was a certain amount of success in their endeavour, the new regimes could not really abolish most of the achievements of decades of emancipation.

Not that the situation before the transition was ideal: feminism before 1989 was motivated by discontent.

What now? A constant vigilance against curtailing former rights is necessary. As mentioned before, this text gives an overall, schematic overview, while the situation varies from country to country and activists engage in a number of different ways. It might be that the weight of specific targets prevents a more vigorous collaboration: although there remains a vivid exchange.

A really well prepared conference like the one in 1978 might clarify some issues. One can assume that, again, there will be a clear West/East axis to explore. In 1978 an approach of that kind was unavoidable, in our time it is a necessary provocation, albeit courting the risk of anachronism. The take-over character of the transition obliterated some elements of pre-1989 feminism in the Balkans and it is difficult to assess the continuity and discontinuity.

New generations of feminists use a different language. They are savvy in the use of new media, of provocation, they are not afraid of controversy

(for instance the Croatian feminists connected with "Muf"). Some of those new initiatives developed without theoretical and personal connections with the older generation, but I am convinced that comparing experiences of the last decades ought to be fruitful. Fruitful because the basic questions are the same: they revolve around power. Who possesses power and how could those who have it be influenced? Can we realistically assume that feminists have enough of it to introduce changes without an alliance, without adapting to specific circumstances? Specifically, can an alliance transcending the borders of states be successful? Is the time ripe to transform bonds of sympathy into something more tangible?

March for equal rights: "Bread and Peace and Roses", 8, March, 2017.

Photo by: Tanja Markuš, Women's Rights Center, Montenegro



Is the global transcending of limits different from a regional transcending of borders? Is it possible to organise an institutional connection?

The primary concern in organising support must be:

1. Questions of abuse and violence. It makes sense to support humdrum activities (safe houses, SOS phone lines etc.), now when celebrity actions have foregrounded the issue and risen awareness.
2. Equal opportunities initiatives, from education to participation in public
3. Prevention of old age penury, especially widespread in the case of women with no employment history or minimal pension as a result of low income.
4. Last but not least, as already stressed, promoting regional cooperation, encounters, exchange in all possible ways, as a way of promoting democratic culture. ■■■

life. Legislative solutions are mostly in place, but there is not enough active support, scholarships for women in science, support for fledgling female politicians, etc.

interplay between nationalism and exploitation, producing poverty to stay in power

Katarina Peović

Horkheimer once stated: “Anyone who doesn’t want to speak about capitalism should also keep quiet about fascism”. Capitalism and its inner logic are the driving force of fascism and motivate and produce non-tolerant political views and practices.

Today nationalism functions as an ideal cover for exploitation and dispossession of the working majority in the Balkan region and beyond. Nationalist false patriotism, but also non-tolerant political views towards the LGBTQ+ community, national minorities, attacks on women’s reproductive rights, the dangerous revision of history (especially regarding the Second World War), clericalism, militant views – all play a role in producing a social consensus on the political and economic “reforms” in favour of rich elites.

Regressive politics suppress the understanding of the importance of the material conditions of life of the disfranchised majority and provide conditions for the reproduction of class inequality. Systemic corruption produces deep inequality that encourages and allows the dispossession of the people that lose access to public health services, public education, affordable housing (a majority of young people live with their parents), forcing young people to emigrate or to work in precarious conditions. Today in Croatia, 14% of the working-age

people have emigrated (the average in the EU is 4%).¹ Croatia is at the top of the list of precarious jobs (3 months contracts) – 6.9 % of Croats are working under such conditions (the EU average is 2.3%). Since its peak in 2016 (8.0%), this share has gradually been decreasing, reaching 5.8%. However, in 2019 Croatia had one of the highest shares of precarious employment since 2012.²

Conservative politics masks the socio-economic conditions for disempowerment – almost one-third of Croats are poor,³ 300 thousand children live in poverty – some of them in extreme poverty, they go to sleep hungry, some of them do not have their own bed,⁴ more than half of the pensioners are poor – every fourth retiree lives with the lowest possible pension, around 2760 kunas (370 euros). At the same time, the privileged retirees – war veterans – live much better. Less than 71 thousand war veterans and their families have average pensions of 5580 kunas (around 740 euros). Among them, there are more than 11 thousand with pensions higher than 8000 kunas (more than 1000 euros), while out of 1.1 million other pensioners, only 3658 have pensions that high.⁵ The exploitation of workers is closely related to nationalism myths that function as an ideal cover-up for the socioeconomic repression. Relations of exploitation and insecure working conditions and low-paid work are easily enabled when workers are divided by the nation.

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Material living conditions – fundamental needs such as health care, education, food, or housing are threatened. The Croatian Government, but also all other governments in the region, are lowering the living standard, and all socioeconomic indicators went down, driving its population into poor living conditions. Lowering the living standard would be much more difficult without nationalist myths bumping in the public space whenever the media come up with some huge corruption scandal or whenever hundreds of workers are fired or workers' rights are diminished. A recent example is a scandal related to wind farms. The Anti-Corruption Office recently discovered that high Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) official Josipa Rimac set up tenders for the owner of the wind farms, but also other entrepreneurs when buying lands or competing for grants. After a few days – the magistrates court issued the verdict that it is alright to use the fascist greeting “Za dom spremni” (“For home (land) – ready”) in a popular nationalist song. The greeting “Za dom spremni” is the equivalent of the greeting “Heil Hitler” – it was used by the Ustasha – the Croatian fascist quisling movement 1941-1945 whose members murdered hundreds of thousands of Serbs, Jews, Roma and Croatian communists during World War II. All media attention and public commentators moved to this other scandal, while the HDZ corruption fell into oblivion.

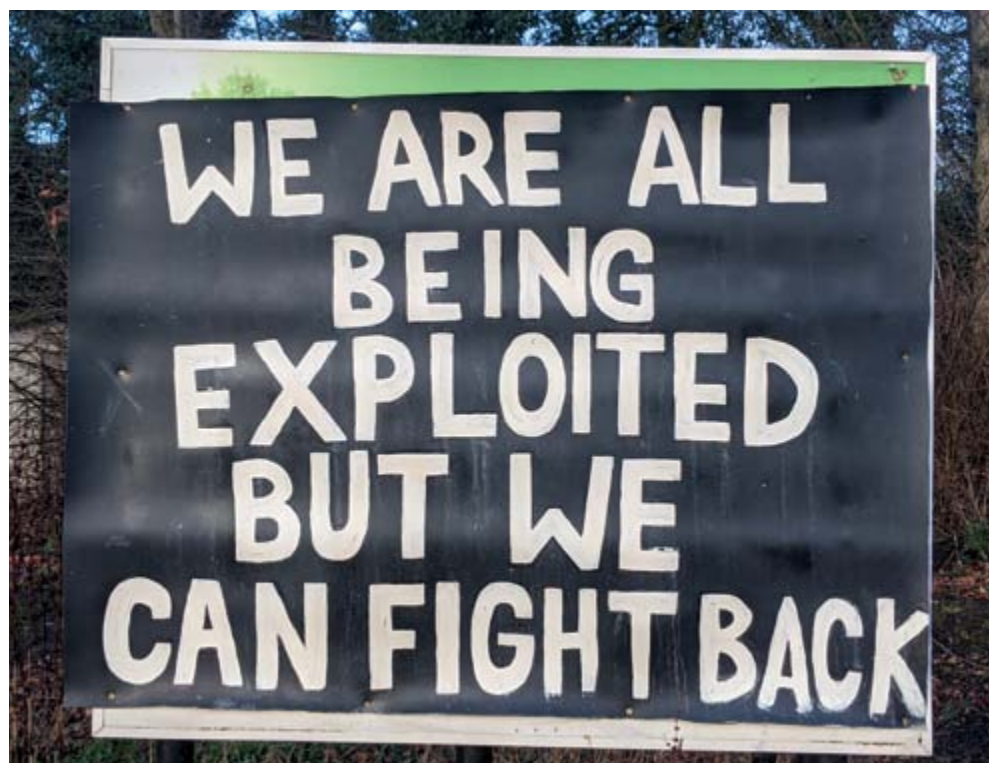
conservative politics and gender

Economic exploitation and all negative socio-economic trends reflect on women to a high degree. In every field of work, women's payments are lower than men's, women retirees have lower pensions than men, unemployment hits women stronger than men, etc. The gender perspective is important in creating an objective view on the Croatian downfall and decline of all material indicators. Likewise,

the production of power and conservative politics is directed against women's rights. Nationalism, regressive politics are also related to the attacks on women's reproductive rights. Croatia is facing the dangerous practice of “appeal of conscience”, doctors refusing to perform abortions, supposedly because of their religious views. At the same time, there are doctors among these “appellants of conscience” who are performing abortions in private practice.

The appeal of conscience is a withholding of a public health service that goes hand in hand with the commercialisation of public health.

Croatia left out the Article on abortion as a women's right from the Constitution – the Article present in the 1974 Constitution (that was the blueprint for the Croa-



*"We are all being exploited
but we can fight back"
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tian Constitution) explicitly stated that it is a personal right to decide on the matter of the birth of children. The same Article is present today in the Serbian and Slovenian Constitutions.

Croatian young couples are facing poor social and economic conditions and are deprived of the possibility of parenthood.

Poor protection of women workers' rights puts pregnant women and mothers in a subordinate position. Women are experiencing pressure at work where they are forced to explicitly state their preferences regarding motherhood and the number of children, as well as their marital status.

The great majority of young people do not have the basic conditions for parenthood – a steady source of income or a place to live. More than 80% of Croats under 30 live with their parents, while more than 300 thousand mostly young and educated people have emigrated.⁶

The legislation regulating worker's rights and the Labour Law, as well as trade union organising, are in danger as market fundamentalists and entrepreneurs' lobbies are trying to undermine the heritage of the trade union fight. Trade unionist and workers' organisations are weak and under the constant pressure of capitalist lobbies. Parliamentary political parties do not recognise the need for the socialisation of reproductive work – the need for publicly available care for the elderly, the infirm and children. An Ombudswoman's study from 2012 on the discrimination of pregnant women and mothers with small children shows discrimination of women on the Croatian labour market, based on their pregnancy or gender-based imbalance in activities of caring for children within the family and how employers mostly disobey legal obligations towards pregnant women and women with small children. The study proved that every second woman gets fired because of pregnancy.⁷ Ruling parties do not invest in additional numbers of kindergartens and nurseries, retirement homes, and related social services. Right-wing ruling politicians count on women's unpaid domestic work, especially free reproductive work in all kinds of health care aspects and care for the family.

As far as partner/domestic violence is concerned, the answer is often reduced only to the need for more severe sanctioning of the perpetrators, without the necessary work on prevention, and even more thoroughly – addressing the structural conditions for domestic violence.

Women's material dependence is an outcome of the existing social and economic relations, gender-conditioned norms and class relations. It cannot be challenged without changing the socio-economic relations which must be accompanied with changes of the capitalistic way of production, the building of the new institutions based on solidarity, equality and justice.

Real gender emancipation cannot be accomplished within existing capitalist relations, especially in poor countries of the Global South. The fight for women's rights has in many cases been co-opted by the elites. (Neo)liberal feminism is not sensitive to class relations among women. Pushing their class interests, women are also taking part in the exploitation of the lower classes and the exploitation of other women.⁸ Nevertheless, nationalism and radical conservatism, accompanied with market fundamentalism, go hand in hand with dispossessing people of their fundamental rights – reproductive rights, the right to have children, to be able to have a family, a salary high enough to provide for the basic needs for everyone.

COVID-19 and the accompanying economic crisis put an additional burden on women. Work from home and online schooling put them in a difficult position of balancing between motherhood and work. Women are more likely to spend time with their children, around 16.8 hours per week, while men spend only 10.6 hours weekly. Women also do 70% of the house work.⁹ However, the pandemic also provided a few insights into how the economy can be organised to improve the lives of the majority. Although COVID-19 caused a shock in supply – the production, trade and investment – when schools and businesses were locked down, followings a shock in demand – incomes dropped and spending collapsed¹⁰ – it also partially caused a turn towards the production of what is needed.

At once there is no limitation of public spending, the state is gaining ownership over private companies, private companies are taking orders from the state for what must be produced – production is motivated by the satisfaction of needs, and not only by profit. In several months, we saw the importance of the necessary production and how production only motivated by profit is irrational. Still, there has been no change in the course of capitalist production in the region. While a stronger state interference can easily be implemented in rich Western countries – the poor periphery still holds on to the capitalist “free market” logic, although it can hardly profit from it.

However, the global turn in perspective against the market lit the optimism that a different organisation of production is possible, one oriented towards solidarity, equality, justice. In such a vision, the position of women would likewise be better. Conservatism and nationalism hit women the hardest. Therefore, real progressive politics towards women’s issues would include problematising the gender pay gap; a strong protection of the rights of pregnant women workers and mothers; publicly available care for the elderly; the public promotion of feminism and publicly available and free abortion and contraception. ■■■

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here to stay – political participation of women in the Western Balkan

Zlatiborka Popov-Momčinović

introduction

Political participation of women in Western Balkan (WB) countries is an important question, but it is also a tempting one and not easy to answer. As is often stressed,

it is important to make a distinction between women in politics and women's politics, as well as between formal and informal aspects of political life, although the boundaries between those two aspects seem to be quite blurry.

Political participation goes beyond the number of women represented in political bodies and institutions and the number of introduced laws for gender equality. The patriarchal structure of WB societies and similarities in exclusion of women from politics seems to be stronger than any other feature of Balkan societies (Hughson 2003). In the region, nationalism is everywhere, going hand in hand with the patriarchy (Hamrud and Wassholm, 2014: 9). This, however, seems to be only one side of the coin, as broken historical continuity and floating images between the former West and the former East also create a context of negotiating gender and female (political) subjectivity. This is more evident in countries that belonged to the former Yugoslavia because of “[t]he narrative about Yugoslavia being closer to Western Europe and to Western feminist movement in the 1970s, in comparison to today’s marginalization of post-Yugoslav successor states” (Bonfigliori 2011, 115).

In WB countries, patriarchal values are not something firmly defined, internalised and unchanging. Research shows how the images of both women and men are changing. In the Western society, something that is often spoken about is the so-called crisis of masculinity and the capability of women to perform different tasks and roles both in the private and the public sphere. As for the WB, studies in some countries confirm the high level of equality in some aspects of social life (e.g. in higher education and in positions of power), but also the discomfort and frustration of men due to the constant social changes, identities’ shift and images (Hughson 2018, 101). Weakened masculinity in the period of transition, especially in countries that have experienced wars in the nineties, together with a lack of general political dialogue and prevailing politics of confrontation, are followed by misogyny and the stereotyping of women (Hughson 2003). This also leads to the stereotyping of the entire region of the WB, for regions (similarly to “woman”) are “mental images”, that should be both internally and externally reconstructed (Maronjak-Bamburać 2006, 30, 31). In terms of political participation, promoted values are reflected in all aspects of political life: representation, access to media, position within political parties, exercising voting rights – and all of this is contributing to the creation of a certain image of women politicians in the WB.

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formal steps (forward)

Despite these negative trends, some steps forward can be seen in the countries of the region when dealing with the adopted laws and established formal institutions and mechanisms for gender equality. All countries have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and in their very Constitution, discrimination based on sex and/or gender is prohibited. Laws addressing gender equality have also been introduced, in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) in 2003, whereas in Albania in 2008 (Duhaček, Branković and Miražić 2019, 11). Despite the fact that the term gender is preferable, in BiH the term sex encompasses gender in the very law, and in Serbia the Law on Equality between the Sexes was adopted in 2009. In Macedonia, there is a Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men which was adopted in 2006 (Duhaček, Branković and Miražić 2019, 11, 12). Different activities have been carried out in this sphere and gender mechanisms have been established. However,

activists and experts stress that reforms in the field of gender equality are more a façade for the European Union (EU) and do not represent a real change.

The case of Croatia is often mentioned, where after becoming an EU member, a backlash of women's rights occurred (Hamrud and Wassholm 2014, 4). Research conducted in the WB points out gender inequalities in the domain of knowledge, work, money, health, time and power, violence and intersecting inequalities. Yet gender inequalities are lower in politics, mostly due to the established gender quotas (Hughson 2018, 32), but attitudes toward quotas are ambiguous. Very often elected women like to stress to be elected because of their own personal achievements and dedication, and not because of quotas or with their help. On the other hand, there is the perception that women are on the lists only because of the mandatory quota and that women in politics have to prove ten times more than men (Šehić and Vidović, 2016). One of the biggest problems is that equal gender political participation and representation are only on the radar during elections (Tadić, Anđelković and Vrbaški 2018, 15).

political representation and participation

A growth of the number of women in the countries' parliaments is visible: at the last general election, Albania elected 28% of women as representatives to its Parliament, BiH 21%, Serbia 34%, Kosovo 32.5%, Macedonia 38%, Montenegro 23% (Duhaček, Branković and Miražić 2019, 14). Throughout the region, the Electoral Law/Code requires political parties to include at least 30% of the underrepresented sex in their lists of candidates, in BiH and North Macedonia 40%. In Albania, the Electoral Law has been amended to require a minimum representation of 50% of both sexes on municipal election lists. Yet, there are no other measures other than quotas for increasing the political participation of women (ibid, 17), and although there are penalties or other mechanisms for punishing political parties for not implanting the quotas, at the local level the law is frequently violated in all WB countries. It is important to note that the career path in politics begins at the local level, where women from the very beginning face obstacles and prejudices, lack of support and resources, with a low possibility for advancing (Cickaric 2017, 7). This is reflected in the visible underrepresentation of women at the position of mayors. In Albania, the number of women mayors is the highest: 15%, in Montenegro there is 12% of women mayors, in Serbia and North Macedonia 7%, in BiH 4%, while in Kosovo there are no women mayors (Tadić, Anđelković and Vrbaški 2018, 12).

During electoral campaigns women are underrepresented in media coverage and often perceived as bystanders to male political party leaders, often treated as a cheap labour force for collecting votes for their parties. Women are used as decoration, and represented as passive supporters of the male leaders of political parties. As one female activist from BiH noticed: "On billboards as well as on the electoral lists women are in the background, behind the leader, or function as a 'decoration' among the favoured male candidates" (Tadić, Anđelković and Vrbaški 2018, 17). The media monitoring of electoral campaigns conducted by *Novosadska novinarska škola* (Novi Sad Journalist School) from 1996 until 2017 shows that female candidates through all these periods were presented in only 15% of media contents (Valić Nedeljković, 2019).

Women are much less present in the executive branch compared to the legislative in all WB countries, with the sole exception of Albania. In this country, the percentage of women ministers in 2018 was 50%. In other countries, the percentage is much lower: 22% in BiH, 18% in Macedonia, 21% in Montenegro, 5% in Kosovo (Tadić, Anđelković and Vrbaški 2018, 8). According to Marina Hugson (Blagojević), “[t]he share of women in sub-ministerial positions is higher than in ministerial ones. It also became a ‘fashionable trend’ to hire women as assistants, counselors, chiefs of the office” (Hugson 2003), which also affects the image of women as supporting and working for males. Some feminists formulate this within the phrase: when you need someone to speak, ask men, when you need someone to act, ask women. Despite of that, male politicians are creators of party politics and the analysis shows the habit of informal meetings of male party leaders in the WB overriding formal institutional and political procedures (Bliznakovski, Gjuzelov and Popovikj 2017, 4). This shows how the value matrix of the patriarchy persists at the informal level, inhibiting the full implementation and adherence to gender equality.

Citizens in the WB do not consider gender equality a priority. It seems that citizens in some of these countries are either occupied with broad and vaguely defined national interests on the one hand, and on the other with daily survival. Research in Serbia shows that although citizens recognise the importance of affirmative action, e.g. in the case of domestic violence, the

improvement of women’s political representation is ranked low as a question of importance (Ignjatovic and Baskovic 2013, 434). When speaking about women, party leaders and politicians mostly use patriarchal repertoires and so-called benevolent sexism based on “protective paternalism and chauvinism” (Moranjak-Bamburać 2006, 27), while highlighting the important role of women as mothers, wives, and caregivers. Also, examples of direct insulting and negative stereotyping are documented in CSO’s Shadow Reports to the Committee for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Different examples are mentioned in the report from Serbia, e.g. the “General Secretary of the Ministry of Youth and Sport offended women stating that women are worse drivers, doubted the relevance of the research on gender-based violence, and while leaving the conference he slapped his female assistant/intern with papers at [the] butt” (Platform of Organisations for Cooperation with UN Human Rights Mechanisms 2019).

The ideological spectrum is of less importance than in a consolidated democracy where parties on the left tend to be more gender sensitive and open to feminist issues, as well as to exhibit higher levels of women representation (Rashkova and Zankina 2017, 384). The specific regional feature of the WB is that right-wing parties tend to include more women and to appoint them to higher positions (ibid). Additionally, in some countries such as Albania women are absent outside the two main parties, whereas in Kosovo the ideological



Women's Rally In Kansas City, Missouri, 2017, "Strong Women" by Donna Trussell – flickr - CC-BY-NC 2.0

division to right-centre-left is quite obscure (ibid, 388). One of the problems is that political parties use different strategies to circumvent the gender quotas, e.g. by combining requirements for ethnic and gender representation (ibid, 381). In the WB, political parties on the right more or less openly propagate patriarchal values perceiving the nation as an extended family, where women have important roles mostly as mothers and caregivers. Parties on the left avoid opposing such standpoints directly in the fear of losing votes. In the entire region, despite of some nuances, feminism is misunderstood and often used as a mocking term. Therefore, many women including educated ones, avoid to identify themselves within feminism, especially women from political parties in order to secure their own votes. In some cases, women in higher political positions are vowed feminists, for example in the case of the Minister of Labour and Social Politics in North Macedonia, Mila Carovska (Tadić, Anđelković and Vrbaški 2018, 10), but this is the exception. Women in politics that can be singled out can hardly be called feminist.

Despite differences among WB countries, what they do have in common are patriarchal values. With regard to this, it can often be heard in public that women do not support other women enough, especially in politics (e.g. in the saying *Žene su ženama muškarci – Women are men to women*). However, this is a questionable position which does not take into account the structural and other obstacles that women encounter when entering politics, and it is similar to the strategy of victim blaming.

Women who succeed in politics face at least triple problems in representation, which is mixed with the notion of loyalty: women politicians stand for voters, party and female population

(Cickaric 2017, 6, 7). As for the voters' turnout, the data in most of the WB countries is not segregated by gender. In Serbia and Kosovo there is no data even concerning the number of registered women voters (Duhaček, Branković and Miražić 2019, 13). The data in BiH are precise, showing that women in general are slightly less likely to vote (ibid). Women from rural areas, less educated women and economically dependent women are often under pressure to vote as they are being told, due to the patriarchy rooted especially in fam-

ily lives. According to female activist Danka Zelić who is acquainted with many rural areas in BiH: "The quota can be 40%, but in the countryside, what the landlord says goes" (Durkalić, 2017).

On the other hand, families and personal ties are important for women who are active in politics. In some cases, women that are politically active use those family resources. As noticed by a politically active woman: "Support from family and friends is one of the most important reasons as to why women decide to become actively involved in political life" (Tadić, Anđelković and Vrbaški 2018, 15).

here to stay, further to go

Despite of problems in dealing with and addressing women's political participation, what we have gained and where we stand is that women have achieved that their political and other rights are on the political agenda. We in the WB still live in patriarchal societies, but we have challenged its stereotypes and revealed its hate-speech and open and hidden misogyny alike.

Women activists in the civil society have provided an alternative space for women's political participation outside the iron laws of political parties that are recognised as the major obstacles to increasing women's political participation. There is a general perception that what happens inside of political parties remains their internal matter

(Šehić and Vidović 2016).

Activism in civil society should not be idealised due to the problems of NGOisation and donor-driven orientation and lack of local legitimacy. However, it is clear from different contexts that coordination and mutual support and cooperation between women politicians and women activists have an important impact on the improvement of the position of women in societies and politics. Women activists' street actions and different activities have challenged the idealised image of the passive and silent woman and contributed to the improvement of the general political climate of women's political participation. Women's organisations and networks in the region have advocated for gender quotas and organised various political academies and additional trainings for women politicians and female candidates in elections. The networking of women in civil society

has also served as a model for creating similar networks of women parliamentarians. In the case of Albania, the role of donors was important in their support of establishing Alliances of women's councillors (Arqimandriti, Llubani 2019, 10).

History taught us that what has been achieved, even with struggle, can also be taken away. Therefore, in order to reach full gender equality, we must also know that where we stand and what we have achieved cannot be taken for granted. We may live in the era of social networks, but this does not mean that we are more connected as political subjects, especially for being women. ■■■

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violence against women in politics

Ana Radičević

community of democracies – on our joint path to more humane societies

More than two centuries have passed since the concept of human rights was first developed. During that time, humanity has gone through various stages of history and the world has seen enormous changes. Thriving and healthy societies are those that secure justice, security, freedom and dignity to all of its individuals. Those societies allow the fulfilment of human potential, create prosperity and are based on democratic culture, which is a way of life that implies civility, inclusion, flexibility and compromise. In a community that emphasises tolerance, flexibility and moderation, people may disagree about politics and diverge over faith and culture, but they show mutual respect and tolerate their differences.¹ Political tolerance requires social tolerance, because democratic governance must reconcile not only divergent political preferences but also the claims, interests and sensitivities of different classes and identity groups. That requires the ability and intention to hear ‘the other’, respect and take into account specific social groups’ opinions and communicate with them in a tone of civility and mutual respect. If contending politicians and activists vilify one another as evil and

immoral, communication swiftly turns to the point of violence, which is toxic to democratic stability.

Sadly, in Southeast Europe, as well as globally, democracy and pluralism are under assault. Political leaders in nascent and fragile democracies are increasingly willing to break down institutional safeguards and disregard the rights of critics and minorities as they pursue their populist agendas. Ruling political elites in a number of Southeast European countries have steadily eroded political rights and civil liberties, putting pressure on independent media, the political opposition, civil society, and nascent independent institutions such as the ombudsperson, state audit, or anti-corruption agencies.

Prominent sociologists and independent media report increased ‘brutalisation’ of the public sphere and political discourse in the region. This increased violence in public speech, frequently initiated by political elites, has decreased the space for tolerant dialogue, civilised disagreements, and pluralism of opinions.

The atmosphere of violence seems to be on the rise, and when democratic norms and standards deteriorate, women are one of the first marginalised groups to bear the consequences.

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why is inclusion in politics, including women's political participation, fundamental for a better world?

Women's political participation has profound positive democratic impacts on communities, legislatures, political parties, and citizen's lives. Their inclusion results in tangible gains for democracy, including greater responsiveness to citizen needs, increased cooperation across party and ethnic lines, and more sustainable peace. This has been consistently proven by scientific research and personal experience. Kofi Annan noted: "Study after study has taught us, there is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women. No other policy is as likely to raise economic productivity or to reduce child and maternal mortality. No other policy is as sure to improve nutrition and promote health. No other policy is as powerful in increasing the chances of education for the next generation."²

Research indicates that whether a legislator is male or female has a distinct impact on their policy priorities, making it critical that women are present in politics to represent the concerns of women and other marginalised voters and help improve the responsiveness of policy making and governance.³ There is strong evidence that as more women are elected to office, there is also a corollary increase in policy-making that emphasises quality of life and reflects the priorities of families, women, and ethnic and racial minorities. Research also shows that women lawmakers tend to see 'women's' issues more broadly as social issues, possibly as a result of the role that women have traditionally played as mothers and caregivers in their communities,⁴ and that more women see government as a tool to help serve underrepresented or minority groups.⁵ Women lawmakers therefore have often been perceived as more sensitive to community concerns and more responsive to constituency needs. In addition to that, women prioritise education, health and other key development indicators; they can "increase the legitimacy of nascent institutions, decrease government corruption, broaden the political agenda, promote consultative policymaking and encourage collaboration across ideological lines and social sectors".⁶

Even though women's political participation and representation made unprecedented progress over the last century, there is still a long way to go before women and girls can be said to enjoy their fundamental rights, freedom and dignity that are their birth right, because there are numerous barriers to women's political participation. Cultural barriers make it difficult for them to be perceived as political leaders and create negative perceptions of politics as a dirty business only suitable for men. Due to the way gender roles are defined in many societies, women may be excluded from formal and informal networks necessary for advancing in politics. Additionally, the culture within parties and the accepted norms of behaviour can make them uncomfortable places for women.

"Barbie provoking conversations on gender inequality"
by Robin Prime - flickr - CC-BY 2.0



what is violence against women in politics (VAW-P)?

There is a political phenomenon that has been largely overlooked and hidden over the years, a phenomenon that seems to be one of the major reasons women are discouraged to participate in politics, at the same time making the active ones withdraw from political activity (they “silence” themselves to avoid violence and retaliation). This phenomenon is identified as a unique form of violence and is called violence against women in politics (VAW-P).

It is clear to most of us that women’s voices are frequently not heard in positions of power. Academic studies and countless anecdotes make it clear that being interrupted, isolated, talked over, shut down, or penalised for speaking out is nearly a universal experience of women in politics. While both men and women do experience violence in politics, women are subjected to particular types of violence and intimidation that would rarely, if ever, happen to men.

In addition to specific forms of violence that happen uniquely to women, the National Democratic Institute’s research “No party to violence” indicates that women are more likely than men to experience violence in general within their political parties. In this research, 96% of total respondents (including both men and women) said that women are more likely to experience violence in politics as compared to men.

Like all forms of violence against women, the causes of VAW-P are complex, one of them being a product of structural inequality and deep-rooted prejudice caused by continuous patriarchal oppression and repression. The increased presence and engagement of women in traditionally male-dominated spaces over the last two decades, especially politics, creates a sense of losing power among some men. As a result, they may turn to violence to maintain the status quo. Women who challenge traditional gender roles by demonstrating leadership ambitions and aspiring to elected office, are often attacked by those who wish to “put them in their place”.

As a result, women continue to face prejudice, discrimination, and acts of psychological and even physical violence when they join a field from which they have traditionally been excluded and actively dissuaded. Men in politics also face violence, but the motives and the kinds of violence against women are different and based on gender. These incidents undermine women’s competence, which stymies equal access to positions of power and reinforces the status quo. In addition, in many cases even non-gender-motivated violence can still have a disproportionately higher impact on women, because they occupy a subordinate status in society and are more vulnerable to attacks.

There are varieties of methods to intimidate, delegitimise or exclude women from political life. However,

politically active women have complained of violence that falls into several common categories: psychological, physical, sexual, and economic.

Some examples are coercive behaviour to control a person’s access to economic resources, unwelcome sexual comments or advances, injuries inflicted on women directly, as well as acts of bodily harm carried out against their family members, smear campaigns causing fear or emotional damage. There are many more.

The Assessment on Violence against Women in Politics conducted in Bosnia and Herzegovina⁷ undeniably identifies psychological violence as the most common form of abuse against politically active women. Given its insidious nature, it is the most difficult to be proven or talked about and it can range from subtle comments related to women’s competences or physical appearance to a wide spectrum of behaviours such as the psychological phenomenon of gaslighting,⁸ making someone feel invisible, withholding information, conducting subtle smear campaigns, shaming, labelling as aggressive for behaviours which would be seen as energetic if a man engaged in them. Some of the mentioned and most common forms of psychological violence reported are found in examples of retaliation by male colleagues, when women challenge power dynamics, such as questioning the integrity and/or competence of their male colleagues.

To demonstrate the most common type of violence which reinforces traditional stereotypes and roles given to women, using domination and control to dissuade and exclude women from positions of power, one woman programme participant noted:

“Everything was alright while I was an assistant. The moment my competence increased, and I demonstrated a clear ability to take on higher positions, my problems with him began”.⁹

what can we do to alleviate this problem?

Democracy practitioners, political party foundations and training centres are key stakeholder groups, and hold strategic positions for combating this phenomenon. National parliaments, political parties, gender equality mechanisms and government working groups should be instrumental in this effort as well. Bearing in mind that achieving gender equality in all areas, including politics, is an important objective pursued by the European Union, Commis-

sion instruments such as progress reports could add a dimension in dealing with this problem. One of the most important activities in that regard is raising awareness – it is needed to define and disseminate the concept of “violence against women in politics”, to give a name to these acts at the global, national and local levels. Along with awareness raising, various organisations can develop indicators and collect data on the prevalence, form and impact of violence against women in politics.¹⁰ Programmes can play an important role in supporting networking among female politicians and civil society organisations interested in tackling this issue, whether on a formal or informal basis, by providing opportunities to connect during organisational or regional gatherings – or to connect virtually through organisation platforms. These organisations can consider providing training for women on how to respond to and mitigate acts of violence against women in politics, provide psycho-social support, advocate for change or decrease vulnerability and respond effectively to both in-person and online attacks. ■■■

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resistance

making femicide visible

Vedrana Lacmanović

Violence against women represents one of the most widespread problems when it comes to human rights violations worldwide. Research in Serbia indicates that one out of two women will be the victim of psychological violence, and one out of three the victim of physical violence by a family member (Petrović 2010, 25-53; (OEBS) 2019, 21). The most brutal consequence or manifestation of that violence is femicide – killing a woman because she is a woman. How widespread is it in Serbia? No one can provide a precise answer to that question. The reasons for that may be found in the absence of unique and official publically available records on femicide.

The Autonomous Women's Centre (AŽC) initiated and established the first database for gathering data on femicide in Serbia in 2010. The collection of data from the media was begun as the data from other sources (such as police records) was not gender disaggregated and the relationship between the offender and the victim was not recorded (so that it could not be established whether the woman was the victim of a traffic accident or of domestic violence).

State efforts to establish the prevalence of this problem have not advanced far. The Network Women Against Violence (MŽPN) submitted a proposal for establishing a Supervisory Authority for Monitoring Femicide to the Coordination Body for Gender Equality of the Government of the Republic of Serbia in December 2017 (MŽPN, 2017). The Deputy Prime Minister of Serbia and President of the Coordination Body, Ms. Zorana Mihajlović, announced that such an authority will be established (Danas, 2018), but that has not been done until today. The only progress has been made in the police records, which unlike other competent institutions have begun to keep records of the number of women murdered by their partner or family member. That progress likewise is partially the result of initiatives and years of advocacy of women's organisations. However, a comparative analysis has shown that there are differences in the recorded number of femicides, because the police also include children in this statistic, as well as women murdered by women.

Vedrana Lacmanović completed her BA in Social work and social policy at the Faculty of Political Science, University of Belgrade, after which she enrolled at the same faculty with a Master's degree in Social Policy. Since 2010, she has been employed by the Autonomous Women's Center where she is in charge of data collection, analysis and monitoring of femicide in a family-partner context, as well as monitoring media coverage of this topic. Vedrana is licensed social worker with more than 7 years of experience of direct support on the SOS helpline for women victims of violence. For more than 8 years she was responsible for the coordination and networking activities of the Women Against Violence Network – a coalition of women's organizations. Her primary areas of interest are femicide, the connection between domestic violence and firearms possession, and prevention of professional burnout.

Reports of the Autonomous Women's Centre include women (of full age) murdered by their partner or a male family member (which is why we discuss femicide in the context of the family or the partner), and they were made based on data from the media. In what follows, we shall consider some of the limitations of such data gathering and attempts to improve it. The first limitation concerns the fact that the number of murdered women may be larger, as there is the possibility that not all cases are covered by the media. Besides that, it is impossible to establish how many women die from the consequences of years of suffering violence. Minor victims and women killed outside of the context of their families or partners are not included in these statistics, because there are only few articles about these cases and it is not possible to establish based on them whether the person was killed only because she is female (i.e. persons of the male sex might have been or were killed under the same circumstances). This does not mean that those were not cases of femicide as well, but that those cases require additional data (to which access is restricted or which do not exist), in order to qualify them as femicide with certainty.

Focusing on femicide in the context of families and partners arose not only from the above-stated limitations, but also from the fact that this form is different from the others, and therefore likewise are its risk factors, as are the measures which should be undertaken in order to prevent it, so that it is treated and analysed in isolation. With the goal of improving the records, the recording and examination of the following cases was begun, which might fall into this category of femicide: 1) cases of suicides of women who commit suicide after years of suffering domestic violence (as a result of an inadequate response of the competent institutions); 2) cases which are suspected to be femicide, but in which it is not possible to claim femicide with certainty (for example cases where the woman was found dead, but it is not possible to establish the sex, the number or motive of the perpetrator; cases of alleged suicides of women which were witnessed by the perpetrator of violence, where it is not possible to establish whether the woman killed herself or was killed by the perpetrator); 3) femicide attempts for which there is no information available regarding whether the woman has survived, or only the information exists that the woman's life is threatened. In these cases, a request for

information of public importance is submitted to the competent police administrations and the records are supplemented in that way.

Although the picture we have of femicides in Serbia is partial and vague, we can establish the following:

at least 307 women were killed during the last decade, meaning that on an average, 30 women were killed each year. We know that each month at least two women will be murdered, we know that the greatest danger for women comes from their own home, and that the most common perpetrators (in half and more cases) are the partners. We also know that in almost a third of the cases the institutions were informed i.e. the violence that preceded the murder of the woman had been reported.

Furthermore, we identified the risk indicators of femicide, among which the most frequent are: history of committing violence, access to firearms and possession of firearms, the perpetrator participated in the war, the perpetrator of violence threatened to commit murder and suicide, the woman leaving/divorcing the perpetrator, history of criminal behaviour (brawls, unauthorised carrying and selling of weapons/drugs), drug and alcohol abuse, reported violence in the period from several days to several months prior to the murder (which did not result in the adequate response of the competent institutions). Serbia criminalised domestic violence almost twenty years ago (Criminal Code from 2002); since then it has passed numerous laws and protocols (for all competent institutions which are obliged to act in cases of violence), it has signed the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (which is the most advanced internationally binding document in the area of preventing and combating violence against women). Still, despite the laws passed, measures established, including the obligatory assessment of safety risks, the exchange of information and coordination of institutions in planning protection, as well as implemented campaigns, the number of murdered women has remained almost unchanged and we read about new murders almost every month.

Could the murders of these women really not have been prevented? The response to this question should be sought in the measures for preventing and combat-



Taken at the Slutwalk meeting at Trafalgar Square in London on Saturday 11 June 2011., Slutwalk London 2011 – 18

by Garry Knight – flickr - Public Domain

ing femicide. First to be considered here is the institutional response to the violence preceding the femicide.

Analysing the conduct of institutions following reports of violence preceding femicide, in 14 cases of killings of women the Ombudsman of Serbia found deficiencies in as many as 12 cases (Protector of Citizens, 2016). Among the most frequent omissions (also confirmed by the experience of the clients of the Autonomous Women's Centre), the following were recognised: failure to act or the untimely acting following reports of violence, inadequate risk assessment or

complete lack of risk assessment; requiring women to file criminal charges and requests for imposing protective measures on their own (although the institutions may do so *ex officio*); omission to exchange the information on reporting the violence with other services; interpreting the separation from the perpetrator of violence as a factor of eliminating the violence, instead as a factor pointing to the high level of risk of recurrence and fatal outcome of the violence; minimalisation and relativisation of the violence as a "dispute", "shaken personal relationships" or "verbal dispute"; undue influence on the family of the victim or the victim herself by officials employed in the institutions; omission to propose protective measures *ex officio* with the goal of providing support to the victim.

Similar problems are also indicated by the analysis of the conduct of the police, the Prosecutor's Office and centres for social work in cases of femicide from 2016 (Lukić, 2016). In 16 (out of 33) cases, at least one institution recorded a report of violence preceding the femicide. The data varies with regard to the records of the institution, and significant discrepancies were also noted in the responses regarding the same cases. Only in 1 case (out of 33) there was interconnection and exchange of information between all three services regarding the reported violence preceding the femicide. It has been observed that there is no mutual coordination and connectedness between the authorities, nor the exchange of information, and not all legal measures are undertaken that the competent authorities can use with the goal of protecting the victim.

When we consider cases of femicide in which the competent institutions did not record preceding reports of violence (which is around 2/3 of the total number), two questions arise before all others: Why is the system unable to recognise women who are at risk of being murdered? Was there really no violence in those cases or maybe it has not been recognised and recorded (and therefore was not stopped)? Having in mind the prevalence of domestic violence, as well as the fact that femicide is located at the very end of that distressing continuum, I am inclined to conclude that there probably was violence in those cases as well, but that it was not recognised, reported, recorded and sanctioned. I am lead to that conclusion by the ubiquitous tendency to negate, justify, tolerate, relativise, and even encourage violence. It is visible from the conduct following reports of domestic violence that prejudices and stereotypes regarding violence towards women are very common amongst professionals working in the competent institutions (the most obvious example being the untimely reaction or lack of a reaction following the reports of violence, as well as equating violence with disputes). The inadequate institutional response is only one of numerous reasons discouraging victims to report violence. Those reasons also include fear of the revenge of the perpetrator of violence, material dependence from the perpetrator of violence, fear that the children will be taken away, lack of support from the family and community, being condemned by the community.

Recognising and reacting to violence is additionally aggravated by the deeply rooted patriarchal patterns (where children are taught from an early age to know "who mows, and who carries the water"). Besides that, Serbia's war history should be kept in mind, carrying with itself the burden of a great number of (il)legal weapons, which can be obtained cheaply, quickly and easily, and an undetermined number of persons who have the experience of participating in the war and are facing PTSD without any formal or organised support

(who are more inclined and readier to commit domestic violence). Likewise, it should be added here that three femicides were recorded in Serbia during the past decade, which were accompanied by a mass murder, and firearms were used in all three cases. In one case, the murderer participated in the war events in Slavonia (Croatia) in 1991, and in another case, it is presumed that the weapons used to commit the mass murder were brought from Slavonia during the war in the 1990ies. All those facts support the existence of a connection between femicide, possession of firearms and the wars Serbia lead in the past (Lacmanović 2019, 39-54).

The normalisation of violence is also visible in media reporting on violence towards women where the guilt for the violence is always sought in the victim's behaviour and appearance, or some other stereotypical causes (such as poverty, the weather conditions, magic and the like). In this way, victims are blamed for their own murder, and perpetrators of violence are released from any responsibility. Similarly, the general image of women in the media is objectified, sexualised and marginalised. The most obvious example are reality shows which are broadcast all day long on national TV stations, where various forms of violence towards women are encouraged and committed (humiliation, insulting, slapping, attempted rape and rape that did not result in an institutional reaction and sanctions). In that way, the message is sent to (young people and) the whole society that violence is desirable and acceptable. All of that provides a breeding ground for the unhindered growth, spreading and (unpunished) repetition of violence, and ultimately fatal outcomes.

The criminal policy regarding femicides in Serbia, although insufficiently researched, likewise is worrisome. An anal-

ysis of two trials for femicide (entitled *The position of injured parties in court proceedings*) (Jovanović 2018, 41-61) has revealed deficiencies with regard to the qualification of the deeds. Thus, in one case a person was suspected of murder instead of capital murder, although the expert opinion was that with regard to the proven circumstances of the committed act, the perpetrator should have been put on trial for capital murder. In practice, this means that the defendant could receive a maximum sentence of 15 years of imprisonment (maximum possible sentence for murder) instead of a maximum of 40 years (maximum possible sentence for capital murder). Similarly, it is absurd that the fact that he is the father of two children was considered as a mitigating circumstance in the case of the murderer, the very children in front of whom he murdered their mother. That the children did not obtain the status of injured parties in the court proceedings is staggering. It was also established that the right of injured parties on the provision of data and informing (which are the obligation of the competent institutions) mostly depends on the engagement of non-governmental organisations or representatives hired by the injured parties.

A recent analysis of the judicial practice (Konstantinović Vilić, Petrušić and Beker 2019, 111-177), which covered 65 cases of murders of women, has shown that in half of the cases the act was qualified as capital murder. Although the greatest number of perpetrators were sentenced to imprisonment (71%) or imprisonment and security measures (17.4%), one out of ten defendants was declared criminally insane and only sentenced to security measures. It is similarly worrying that only in 1/3 of cases it was established that the perpetrators were completely of sound mind at the time of committing the act (while in other cases various degrees of diminished responsibility were established). It is discouraging that this analysis has also confirmed that it was considered as a mitigating circumstance for the perpetrator that he had children, while specifying the “contribution of the victim who verbally abused the perpetrator and enhanced his anger and rage“ as a mitigating circumstance is outright shocking.

Finally, we can conclude that much more needs to be done in Serbia in order to put an end to femicide. To begin with, it is most important to establish the actual prevalence and characteristics (of all forms) of

femicide, and that may only be achieved by establishing an adequate recording system and the detailed analysis of the collected data. This system requires establishing a unique definition, gathering and comparing data from different sources, from various aspects, an in-depth analysis and study of concrete cases along with engaging an expert team, which would include representatives of all competent institutions and non-governmental organisations. Unless we do not know the magnitude of the problem we are facing, we will hardly be able to respond to it adequately. The measures applied so far which have not yielded any results in the practice also demonstrate that, which is confirmed by the number of femicides which has been unchanged for years.

Regardless of how big the actual prevalence of this problem is, it can be noticed that the institutional response to its visible segment is also inadequate. The above-mentioned reports and analyses show that the institutional response to violence towards women is inadequate or sometimes even absent. The institutional response may roughly be divided into two categories: the one preceding the femicide and the one following it. When it comes to the period preceding the femicide, it is necessary to respond to every case of reported violence with due diligence, secure that professionals act in accordance with the legal provisions (and not in accordance with one's own prejudices and convictions), to advance and develop best practices as a response to violence towards women (and inform and educate everyone active in the system for protecting women against violence about them). In the institutional response to violence, it is necessary to also consider Serbia's war history, as well as the risks it carries with itself (especially with regard to the correlations between domestic violence, possessing firearms, participation in the war and potential PTSD). In the case of the institutional response following femicide, it is important to first of all examine where omissions were made with regard to protecting the lives of the murdered women, sanction the persons responsible and secure that mistakes are not repeated. The criminal policy needs to be transparent, secure the examination of all circumstances of the case and proportionate sanctions for the perpetrators of violence, adequate protection and informing of injured parties, as well as mitigating circumstances that do not

harm the injured parties and to which the “contribution of the victims” to their own murder cannot be attributed under no circumstances.

As far as the media response, violence should be reported in a socially responsible and sensitised way. It is important that the media create an atmosphere of zero tolerance of violence towards women, which will provide support to victims to leave the violence (especially by including them in campaigns, interviewing experts dealing with this topic, and respecting established standards and ethical principles in the field of reporting on the problem of violence towards women).

Victims need to receive messages of support, they need to be informed that they are not guilty for the violence they are experiencing, and be familiarised with institutions and organisations that might help them on their path of leaving the violence.

In the end, the media should contribute to making it clear to all citizens that any sort of violence is inadmissible and punishable. ■■

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unequal even before being born: sex-selective abortions in Montenegro

Olivera Komar

“Analysis of sex distribution of population by age shows the dominance of male population to the age of 20-24.”¹

a ‘private’ problem

Due to the relatively recent activities of journalists and a prominent women’s rights organisation, the Montenegrin public became aware that we have been missing baby girls for over 24 years now. The gap between boys and girls that are being born has been significantly increasing for a quarter of a century now, and the latest data indicates that approximately 100 girls are born for every 110 boys in Montenegro (the usual ratio is 100-102/4). According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), there are around 126 million women that are believed to be ‘missing’ around the world as the result of ‘son preference’ and gender-biased sex selection.² The problem is most pronounced on the Asian continent, but Montenegro is one of the rare countries in Europe joining this infamous club (along with Albania and Armenia).³ One of the main reasons for this lack of balance is believed to be sex-selective abortion. Namely, modern medicine allows parents to learn the sex of the foetus rather early on, which enables the practice of aborting unwanted female foetuses.

Everything about sex-selective abortions, and every perspective that you try to take on it, incites deep sadness. One perspective would be to look at the unborn and unwanted girls that have never gotten a chance to live for the simple fact – that they would be born with the “wrong” sex. Another would be to look at the issue from the perspective of mothers that are ‘encouraged’ to renounce their children only

because they share the same sex with them. No matter how deeply internalised the ‘wish’ to perform one’s duty in providing a male descendent might be, renouncing one’s own child must induce significant psychological scars. Even looking from the father’s perspective, the situation seems profoundly unfortunate – the inability to produce an heir, someone who will continue the family name and lineage, is seen as an insurmountable flaw in their masculinity. In traditional societies such as the Montenegrin, not being “a man” creates pity and stigma, not only to an individual, but to the whole family.

Finally, looking from society’s point of view, the consequences are similarly quite destructive. A disturbing natural sex ratio causes a “surplus” of males reaching adulthood and lacking marriageability. Research shows that among those men, more are belonging to the lower socioeconomic class and are prone to marginalisation. In excess of choice, women tend to “marry up”, which leads to discontent, antisocial behaviour and, finally, violence.⁴ What is more, there is evidence that a disturbed sex ratio in society leads to increased trafficking of women.⁵

the lost daughters of Montenegro

In order to even start solving this problem, one must first understand it. However, that also seems to be one of the problems. Namely, for quite some time, this topic was neglected, pushed aside and considered a “private” issue. Until civil society recently pushed it hard to the agenda of public discussion in 2017, it was ignored. As a result, we are missing information and data that

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could help us better understand the prevalence and characteristics of the problem. Oddly, the Clinical Centre of Montenegro stopped releasing sex-disaggregated data on newborns in 2015, with the explanation that reporting on sex could be considered a discrimination.⁶ However, women's rights activists found this decision to be an attempt to disguise the gap between born male and female babies.

Svetlana Slavujević, one of the journalists that drew the attention of the public towards the topic with her investigative pieces, reported that she was not able to find women who would testify about this practice and share their stories. She believes that the pressure women face is extremely high and comes from their closest environment – their families.⁷ As such, the problem was considered a private “family issue” that incited unease.

However, apart from the official statistics, there is not much we know and the statistics itself does not help us solve the puzzle.

Looking at data from 1961 onwards, we can see that girls have been missing for many decades now, even before pre-natal sex determination was possible!

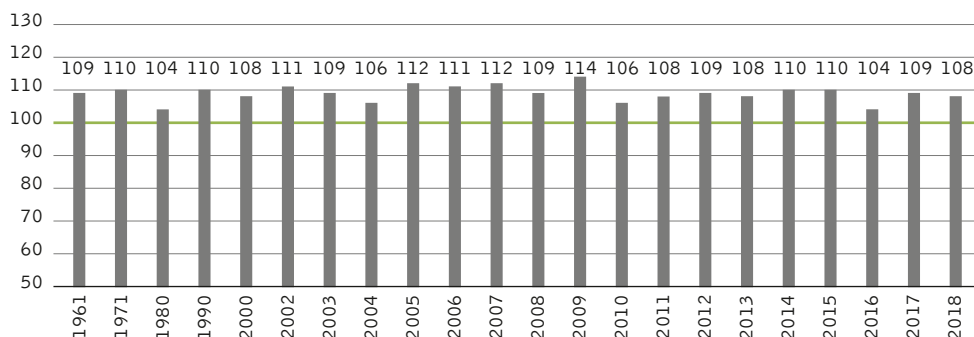


Figure 1: Number of male babies per 100 female babies born per year

Very unusually, there is no available explanation for this discrepancy. One plausible explanation could be that the families used to keep having children until sons were born, while they “stopped” sooner, if the first children were boys. That could partially explain this misbalance, even before pre-natal tests. However, there is no research to test this hypothesis or to provide any other plausible explanation.

That was one of the reasons the Women's Rights Centre, supported by the coalition of NGOs, called for more research on the prevalence of selective abortions⁸ in Montenegro in their CEDAW Shadow Report, as the CEDAW Concluding Observations on the Second Periodic Report of Montenegro (2017) called for a stricter implementation of the prohibition of

sex-selective abortions, including helplines for women who are pressured into undergoing sex-selective abortions.⁹

#unwanted-ly putting the topic on the public agenda

The Women's Rights Centre (WRC) launched the campaign #Neželjena (#Unwanted) in 2017, which sought to attract the attention of the public to the problem of sex-selective abortions.¹⁰ By engaging effective communication tools, such as performances, the WRC managed to push the issue right to the public agenda, forcing the Government to at least admit the problem.

The organisers were clear – the campaign was not questioning legal reproductive rights of women to have an abortion, as reproductive rights of women should not be “pitted against”¹¹ gender equality. Legally, every woman in Montenegro has the right to terminate a pregnancy until the tenth week. The goal of the campaign was to instigate a public dialogue about the value system that favours a male heir so strongly, that women are “encouraged” to have an abortion when carrying a baby girl. The WRC wanted to

draw public attention to the misuse of pre-natal tests for the purpose of sex selection. The campaign was shedding light on a social



Visual of the Campaign #Neželjena (The unwanted) against gender selective abortions in Montenegro. Photo by the courtesy of the NGO Women's Rights Center Montenegro and the Marketing Agency McCann

value system that discriminates women even before they are born.

„We would like to draw attention to the negative tradition in our society that the girls are less wanted than boys, which makes them have less rights to be born than boys. The topic of our initiative is to instigate a public dialogue which will question and change value system in which female children don't have the same rights as male.“

The campaign included health professionals who spoke up about the problem. One of them was doctor Olivera Mijanović, who brought to light the perspective of the mothers who are being “pressured by some needs and wishes, even at the expense of their own health, to fulfil stereotype norms that are still strong in Montenegro”.¹²

The campaign managed to put the topic on the agenda, and it seems to have stayed there ever since. It was discussed in different forums, including artistic ones,¹³ but it also found its place in the first *Gender Equality Report for Montenegro*, where the chapter on health was named *Unequal before born*.¹⁴

poverty makes it more complicated

The sole prevention of sex-selective abortion would not solve the problem of girls not being considered and treated as equally worthy. The research by UNFPA shows that most families engage in sex determination when it comes to the third, fourth or any subsequent child. Unfortunately, such research does not exist in Montenegro, but it would be fair to assume that the same rule applies here as well. This means that the problem entails another dimension – being able to provide for the extended family.

Forcing women to have children until they can produce an heir opens another set of unfortunate consequences, starting from endangering a woman's health and reducing her life to a child-bearing function. However, it also exerts pressure in terms of providing for the enlarged family.

Research shows a correlation between poverty in terms of the amount of material deprivations a family faces and the number of children in a family. The Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS), conducted by the Montenegrin National Statistical Office in

cooperation with UNICEF in 2018, found that households with three or more children tend to experience a higher degree of material deprivation in more than three out of 9 dimensions that were measured.¹⁵

As a result, parents are pushed either towards poverty and not being able to provide for their family members, or towards abortion. In this way, poverty and the patriarchy play hand in hand in deepening gender inequality in Montenegro.

is there a solution?

“Nothing can realistically be done in the short term”,¹⁶ concludes one of the research papers on this problem in the world. What they mean is that there is no quick solution and that we need to play a longer game.

Sex-selective abortion has been prohibited in Montenegro since 2009 and the abuse of pre-natal determination of the sex of an unborn child is treated as a criminal offence, but not much can realistically be done to stop women from aborting girls, as long as society pressures them to have male children.

It seems fascinating how patriarchal societies easily turn a ‘blind eye’ on one of the most forbidden practices, such as abortion, when it comes to being ‘practical’ in ensuring a line of male succession. It might even seem contradictory, unless you have in mind that both practices – forbidding abortion as well as tolerating it for the sake of the fulfilment of patriarchal goals – have one thing in common – controlling women and taking away their control over their own bodies.

Forbidding pre-natal tests that determine the sex of the child would not prevent people from finding out, as they are widely available online. Contemporary society will have to get used to living with abusing technological and scientific advancement in the time to come, and finding ethical and other ways to manage progress and human rights violations goes beyond this issue.

However, this does not mean that nothing can be done, at least to reduce the problem and perhaps “solve” it in the future. First, we need to know more about the prevalence and characteristics of the problem in order to make the best tailor-made solution possible. Also, we need to be able to see the problem – not reporting sex-disaggregated data, especially when it comes to the birth rate.

The Council of Europe has called on the Montenegrin authorities to educate health professionals and adopt strict guidelines in order to prevent selective abortions. That might help in building a large coalition of stakeholders in a more united front. Medical staff, as those women rely on them for guidance and help, can do a lot in terms of building a stronger support system.

Sex selective abortions in Montenegro reveal the profound inequality of women in contemporary Montenegrin society. Even though a lot has been done in terms of creating an equal footing, women are still perceived as less worthy. The duration of their working life is significantly lower than men's, they face discrimination in the work place, often because of potential or actual motherhood, they are constantly put in the position of having to choose between family and career, and yet, they are not considered "accomplished" unless they are mothers, they earn less, rarely find themselves in positions of political, economic or even social

power... Unfortunately, this view seems not to be changing with the new generations. The Westminster Foundation for Democracy in Montenegro conducted a survey among young people (16-28) in summer 2019, that showed that 60.5% of young people did not believe that men and women should share housework, 56.1% believed that the man was the family bread-winner and care-taker, 49.7% of young people felt that gender roles should be different because women should primarily be devoted to the household.

Therefore, the only way out of this is to work strategically on strengthening the position of women in society, especially in the economic sense. Most importantly, the state and all the relevant authorities must stop looking away and address this harmful practice more openly, regardless of how unpleasant it may be. When Montenegrin society becomes ready to truly recognise women's equal worth, the tradition of the unequal worth of female babies will disappear as a consequence thereof. ■■■

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Kruščica in the aftermath of violence

Alma Midžić

In the heart of Bosnia and Herzegovina, a heartbeat away from Vitez, there is a village and a river sharing the name Kruščica. This place has been a well-known excursion site since Austro-Hungarian times. Three hotels were built there during the time of SFR Yugoslavia, as well as weekend homes and sports and recreational facilities. People used to come there regularly in large numbers from the surrounding industrial towns in order to spend time in nature and the clean environment. Unfortunately, after the war, in the mid-1990ies, this infrastructure was ravaged by the transitional plundering, in which valuable resources, which had been shared resources until then, were given to former military commanders for next to nothing. Although not damaged in the war, 2 hotels were destroyed intentionally, so that the owner of the remaining hotel would not have any competition. After all of the social property had been privatised or purposefully neglected and left to deteriorate, the attack on the natural commons was launched. The Kruščica area has exceptionally many sources of drinking water, it is the site of numerous brooks, as well as beautiful forests. This is also the location of the spring "Ilidža", from which the towns Vitez and Zenica are supplied with water. That means that this river already is within the limits of its environmental flow and that any further exploitation would literally mean its destruction. It is important to note that most locals still do not have access to water, i.e. they are not connected to the public water supply system. This river is used by them as a source of water, for watering their gardens, and for children who cannot go on vacation to the seaside it is the most important source of entertainment and recreation. The Development Plan for the Municipality of Vitez for the period 2005 – 2025 foresees this area to be a protected nature park. Unfortunately, the Development Plan was altered precisely in the area of the Kruščica River where the construction of two small hydroelectric power plants is planned. The construction of mini hydropower plants is presented as a developmental opportunity, which essentially is a lie, because precisely the local community benefits the least from such projects, as the example of Kruščica will clearly demonstrate.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), the construction of over 300 projects on 244 rivers is planned, and as the total river network of BiH has around 4 000 km, that practically means that there would be one dam every 15 kilometres. Almost half of the projects are planned in protected areas, and most of our rivers are in pristine conditions, they are drinkable and home to many endangered species. In European countries, this has not been the case for a long time. According to a recently published document¹ of the River Watch organisation, even 60% of rivers in the European Union (EU) do not have a good environmental status, which has led to a dramatic loss of freshwater biodiversity. Unfortunately, the system of concession fees and incentives for renewable energy sources paid by the citizens of BiH through their electricity bills is used for the enrichment of individuals, and not for the transition towards greater use of truly renewable sources like energy obtained from the sun or the wind.

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The request to write this text came at a time when I was thinking about the scope, but also the limits and the challenges of activist fieldwork. Sometimes those “conversations”, in which I attempt to explain things to myself can be rather exhausting, but they are essential as they remind me of the numerous fellow campaigners and actions, our personal relationships, problems, but also the most important thing – that resistance is possible and that the most inspirational battles can happen where we do not expect it or in places we have not even heard of.

Thus, let us start from the beginning, the year 2017 when I heard about Kruščica for the first time. It was Thursday, 24 August, the day when special police forces of the Central Bosnia Canton came to Kruščica with orders to trample, knock over and throw down anyone who opposes them. And this time, women opposed them who sat down on the bridge, held hands tightly and watched with disbelief how the special forces were closing their ranks, taking out the batons and getting ready to attack the “enemy” defending the river. The enemy who needed to be taught a lesson for disobedience were women who were literally defending the source of life of their community – the Kruščica River.

“Why are they attacking us, we are no criminals, we are only defending our right to drinking water and our right to life. It is the right of every human being, isn’t it?”²

Moans, crying, thumps, screams. I could not believe what I was seeing!

A video was luckily made of the moment when the police were beating the women and taking it out on the powerless. I say luckily, because had no video recording been made, the case could have been covered up. The scenes from Kruščica went around BiH, the region and the whole world, and this police attack also launched the mobilisation of the civil society.

That scene shook me up so deeply that I still cannot watch that video to this day, I simply neither can nor wish to understand the torture which the women suffered. There is no justification for such a treatment. I can remember that I was terribly angry, that

in one moment I even felt impotence, and I was bothered by that feeling. I believed that there must be a way to do something. And that is how it started; I wrote to whoever I could, searched for information, sought reactions and like-minded people. I believed that first we had to make Kruščica visible. Those women cannot be left alone, in the dark, left without support to bullies who would continue to oppress them through the system that is maintained by those powerholders who have allowed it in the first place that the locals from this village do not have water, who have issued permits for small hydroelectric power plants to be built on the river from which around 200 000 inhabitants of the neighbouring towns Vitez and Zenica are supplied with water.

“Here the police were on the side of politics, instead on the people’s side!”

I can only interpret this police action in one way, namely that if the community revolts, especially if the fight against common goods being seized and exploited is led by women, the repressive apparatus will strive to demonstrate its whole strength in order to prevent future similar forms of resistance as well.

The police shamefully placed themselves into the service of the investor. With this act, those responsible have sent the message that they are ready to put the public services into the service of private interests.

After this event, the resistance of the Kruščica women became the focus of public attention. Although the intimidation was continued in the police station as well, after an extremely rough apprehension during which they were dragged across the floor, the Kruščica women would not let themselves be deterred. They returned to the bridge and bravely continued to fight a battle at several fronts, and in addition to keeping watch on the bridge 24 hours a day, they also initiated a legal and political fight. Too many events and activities have occurred since 2017, so that I will single out a few of the most significant ones.

The exhausting fight with the BiH legal system is still on-going. Several proceedings were initiated before courts at various

levels with the goal of annulling the order with which the construction of the hydro-power plant was agreed against the will of the majority of the inhabitants. Free legal aid does not exist for cases of this type, i.e. the free legal aid mechanism in BiH is limited to specific social categories; under certain conditions (a means test), some non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are engaged in the representation of certain marginal groups and internally displaced persons may obtain legal aid.

The access to justice is already thereby limited by class, which means that you can use the legal mechanisms only if you can afford expensive litigations. Most of the inhabitants of Kruščica are unemployed, many people left BiH looking for work, and the most jobs available are heavy manual labour in logging and wood processing, while agriculture is not developed, except for personal needs.

The average salary is just under 300 euros. Imagine what that means in the life of a woman from a rural area like Kruščica, con-

sidering that 57.9% of women in our country live in rural areas. Just by going to the protest or keeping watch on the bridge she risks a fine for infringements ranging between 100 – 200 euros for blocking the road.³ And those are only the fines. Each letter of the lawyer or his appearance in court costs half of the average salary. Around 10 000 euros have been spent so far on the costs of the legal fight (including fees, legal letters, addressing the court, the lawyer's services and fines). Maybe that does not seem as much, but keep in mind that most of the local population is unemployed or on minimum income. Court cases of this type can go on for a decade, which has been confirmed recently by the case of the Ecological Humanitarian Association Gotuša from Fojnica, which won the court case against the construction of hydro-electric power stations on the Željeznica River after 10 years. Add on top of all this money the everyday responsibilities in the household and garden, health problems, and you will understand that due to the cumulative effect of various factors, resistance may literally break women if there is no support system in place.

Illustration by BiH artist Alisa Teletović was a contribution to the brave women of Kruščica and was used as a symbol through their fight for the Kruščica river.



“How can something which has been loaned to you be sold?”

Problems related to the construction of the mini hydropower plant started in the office of the Local Community (MZ)⁴, which did not inform the inhabitants of conducting public consultations regarding the environmental permit. Instead, persons supporting the project gathered in a private restaurant. The people of Kruščica rightly asked how it is possible that some 40 persons can reach such an important decision for the whole community, which includes around 3000 people? This community’s interest has literally been jeopardised by the interest (and profit) of the individual, and decision-making rights and the right to access to information have been denied to them. That is the reason why they have voted no-confidence to the composition of the Local Community Council at that time, and requested new elections. As the men could not agree on the nominations for the positions, the Kruščica women took the initiative. They stopped the arguing and went on to organise the electoral activities.

Young women, without any political experience, without higher (formal and non-formal) education, started a door-to-door campaign. This activity was also used for mobilisation, and all inhabitants were familiarised with the events related to the mini hydroelectric power plant.

Tahira Mika Tibold was nominated for President, according to the others a respected member of the community and an experienced woman, and for the members of the Local Community Council they suggested the most active ones among them, their fellow activists. Their enthusiasm and sincerity is fascinating, when they say that they do not know anything about “these things”, but they are neither ashamed nor afraid, as they say, “it too can be learned”. After the elections were held, 6 brave women from the bridge won mandates in the Local Community. Their mandates expire in 2021, and so far, they have discovered numerous irregularities in the work of the previous Local Community Council, but they are also facing challenges on a daily basis. Namely, their political opponents gathered around a former army commander wishing to build the

controversial hydroelectric power plants, are trying to obstruct their work in every possible way and are supported in that by certain political parties (close to the investor), which are at higher levels of government (municipality, canton, federation).

“Our fight is also the fight for our vision of Kruščica... We wish to focus our work on the preservation of nature and the development of resources for leisure and recreation, which we used to have.”

Thus, the MZ Kruščica has not received funds for a single project in over 3 years. They have issues with lightning, illegal logging, rubbish collection, water supply. It is difficult to explain to the locals that the Local Community has limited competence and that it may only inform the citizens and send correspondences to the Municipality. For instance, if you want to replace a defect light bulb, the Local Community is not allowed to do it, even if it has the necessary funds, instead a correspondence is sent to the Municipality which issues an order to a private contractor to carry out the repairs. In addition to direct repression and police intimidation, this also represents a pattern of the systematic repression of resistance through the institutions.

President of the Local Community Tahira Tibold is exposed to online violence and threats on a daily basis, in which the investor, with the assistance of his supporters, is spreading the worst possible lies about her family trying to discredit her honest work. Unfortunately, there is no institution in BiH dealing with online violence, and the reporting depends on the official receiving it.

If you are lucky and come across a person with an awareness of these things, s/he will try to use everything that the Criminal Law (or another one) offers, but there is no law treating cases of online violence specifically. During the fight for the Kruščica River, many women got all sorts of online threats, their social media profiles were hacked and it was even attempted to harm them by posting inappropriate, fake, doctored intimate pictures. Such actions may leave long-term

consequences on the psychological health of women who will have to face the imposed shame in a conservative community.

But despite all the pressure, they are persevering. They have created a Facebook⁵ page in order to facilitate the communication with the locals, but also in order to provide timely information on all developments, or to confute lies told with regard to them or the work of the Local Community. For now, they cannot realise their vision, it is simply not possible without the support of the government, deciding on the transfer of funds and also other forms of assistance, non-material or professional. Unfortunately, that assistance by the government is reserved solely for loyal supporters who do neither question nor criticise. There is actually no long-term planning of local development because planning generally is based on the mandate duration of a certain political subject. Shortly, the purpose of their mandate is to draw profit, money and connections from the public system for a personal gain.

“I do not understand why the construction of water power stations is planned on drinkable waters?”

The fights for our rivers actually represent fighting for democratic management of resources, against unsustainable exploitation and governance which is not based on the interests of the community. It is unmasking the whole system of public system actors and stakeholder representatives whose common goal is solely profit. Besides that, it also indicates that decisions on the exploitation of resources are made predominantly by men who traditionally are in power positions, while it is women who oppose those unreasonable decisions.

In order to obtain a clearer understanding of this issue, it is important to analyse several positions: the governance structures of companies, the number of female candidates at elections and women in leading and management positions in government institutions.

Women in BiH rarely occupy high positions such as directors, presidents or management board members of big companies. The Agency for Gender Equality of BiH con-

ducted the first extensive research on the number of women and men in management structures of companies in BiH in 2014, i.e. their management and executive boards. Although they are outperforming their male peers when it comes to educational achievements, women have only been represented with around 16% in management structures of companies in the last 20 years. It was stated that the reason for this was a patriarchal society and the existence of very strong connections between the social role of a woman, her education, occupation and position on the labour market. On average, women are only represented with 15% in the boards of companies, whereof there are only 12% Board Presidents, while over 50% of boards of companies do not have a single woman in their composition. According to the research of the business magazine *Poslovne novine* “Women in Business“, conducted in 2018, in the 787 companies which entered the project “The 100 greatest in BiH“, which is made up by large, medium and small enterprises according to export, profit, income and cash flow investments, only 19% are companies headed by women managers.

The political representation of women is problematic and represents the mere satisfaction of legal formalities. According to the Election Law, the lists must include at least 40% of candidates of the less represented gender, however, that number is not accompanied by a number of women in leading and management positions. Even if women do win votes in the candidates lists, their parties do not put them in the position, but “some male colleague” instead. Frequently, in the parties those same colleagues propose degrading tasks for women in line with prevalent stereotypes: that the women’s club should be responsible for keeping hygiene in the party premises; that they prepare coffee in the party premises during the election campaign and serve it to the members of the campaign headquarters; that they prepare and distribute sandwiches in the poor neighbourhoods during the campaign. Their role is trivialised and they do not participate in the negotiations on key issues for the social, economic and political development, organisation and safety. Thus, at the General Election held in 2018 there were 4.378 male and 3.119 female candidates (in percentages 58.4 vs. 41.6). Thereof, 376 men and 142 women (in percentages 72.6 versus 27.4) were elected to various positions. Although generally, when looking at the numbers, somewhat more

women compared to men are employed in the public institutions (53%), when one considers the gender structure in management positions, men are significantly more represented.⁶

All of the presented data indicates that gender stereotypes structurally affect the access of women to rights, powers and resources. The governing system is dominated by men, while women are only assigned to positions where they do not have true decision-making powers.

“It seems to me that in the future wars will be fought over water.”

It is a nonsense to destroy water sources, because although water is the most widespread substance on planet Earth, geographically it is distributed unequally and the reservoirs have limited capacities. This information becomes relevant when we consider its intention, and most regulations favour the use of water for drinking water supply as opposed to energy production, irrigation, industrial use, etc. According to data from the United Nations (UN), around 783 million people do not have access to clean water, and over 1.7 billion people currently live in river basins where the water consumption has exceeded the natural cycle of filling and recovery of the river basin. During only one day, women across the world will spend over 200 million hours on collecting and transporting water for the household. Due to population growth, the use in agriculture and the industry, the increased use for energy purposes, and pollution, the significance of this crucial resource will in all likelihood surpass the significance of oil and gas in the near future. Due to its essential nature and the limited water resources, water will become the most important strategic resource. Even in the case of countries that are not lacking this resource, there is the issue of the availability of the sources, the state of development of the infrastructure, investment in its maintenance and management modalities, from which we get an insight into how much access to water affects the standard of living. Thus, in the Kruščica water uprising, for the defence of a river, the contemporary water management crisis is reflected. The fight for water as a common good and for the human right to water, which is necessary in order to

achieve the dignity of human life, surpasses Kruščica, as well as BiH borders.

The rising number of new fights and insurgent communities for saving rivers across BiH and the region is telling us that we must insist on a broad public debate on the future of managing, using and accessing water as a resource. We have to keep the wellbeing of future generations in mind, as well as the upcoming water crisis, but also the issue of securing everyone equal and fair access. Besides being active fighters for the salvation of rivers, we also need to take the role of active keepers of our water resources.

“People have been made aware by the uprising!”

Kruščica is significant for several reasons. First of all, the symbolic strength of this struggle has had an influence not only across BiH, but also the whole region. It has already become a sort of slogan: “If the women from Kruščica could defend the river, then we can defend ...!” Mentioning Kruščica simply motivates people to stand up. From the movement Defend the Rivers of Stara Planina in Serbia, to local fights for parks and urban common goods, it has become the example of sincere, consistent resistance for everyone. They have also shown us that “sleeping” communities may wake up, and they have reminded us of the importance of self-organisation, solidarity and collective action. Although it is the women of Kruščica who are leading the fight, they have emphasised the whole time that they have the support of the men, actually reminding us in a way as well that the fight for the equality between men and women must be a joint one.

But I should not romanticise, at least not too much, this fight has likewise shown us that there are neither emancipation nor resistance without infrastructure. It is immensely demanding to be at the forefront of long-term struggles, what is necessary are resources for implementing the activities, such as the legal fight, but also systematic support in order to bear the burden of everyday life commitments more easily, because single activists will lose a substantial amount of time and strength leading the fight. It is essential to share know-how and resources. We have mastered many skills and knowledge in non-governmental organisations well, but our sisters, especially from rural areas, have not had the

opportunity to go to dozens of seminars and non-formal trainings. Sometimes, this concerns writing a correspondence to the media or opening an e-mail account. It is not really important what it is about, but the ultimate goal of knowledge sharing is above all to teach our fellow comrades that they can perform these activities on their own, and be independent. I remember that on one occasion, Tahira Tibolt told me how her mother was in the resistance movement during World War Two and how she went to the villages and hamlets as a member of the Women's Antifascist Front (AFŽ) after the war and worked on educating women, from literacy classes to learning how to prepare food. This was precisely a time when teachers, whom the people trusted, played a key role for the political education and organisation of the resistance. We might also use this experience as a good starting point.

BiH still remains a deeply patriarchal society, where only during the last year, one woman was murdered almost each month, where political officials often mock their female colleagues, where a man who bru-

tally beat or murdered his partner because of jealousy is defended in the commentaries on internet portals, and rarely is it mentioned that it is precisely the women who are at the forefront of the fights for our better future.

I cannot foresee what the outcome might be. Considering that those fights are exhausting, that it is difficult to keep the community together, that living conditions in rural areas indeed are quite difficult, especially in the dawn of a new economic crisis, and that under such circumstances maximum dedication should not be expected from people anyway, because it is foiled by the race for survival. What I can confirm is that Kruščica has awakened the sentiment of rebellion and that this symbol of the resistance will remain the driving force of many other uprisings for a long time to come. As the active member of many initiatives, it is my pleasure that I am able to confirm that, and it is not by chance that our most important resistance symbol, the Kruščica, has the female gender. ■■■

1 Eco-Masterplan for Balkan rivers. 2018. Riverwatch, Vienna, Austria and EuroNatur, Radolfzell, Germany, source: <https://riverwatch.eu/en/balkanrivers/news/eco-masterplan-shows-value-balkan-rivers>.

2 All quotes are taken from an interview conducted by the author with the support of the HBS office in Sarajevo: <http://ourcommons.org/featured/kruscica-brave-women-balkan-rivers/>.

3 Here I need to emphasise that the roadblocks were set up only for machines and contractors, and other cars could pass freely. The police and government officials often use existential blackmailing to terrify activists with high fines, which is a very efficient method in low-income communities. Similarly, people are also threatened with being fired, or they cannot find employment because of supporting certain initiatives. This constitutes systematic pressure on the citizens of this country and represents a serious problem restricting the expression of opposed (political) opinions.

4 The Local Community (*mjesna zajednica*, MZ) represents the lowest form of the direct participation of citizens in the decision-making process on local affairs; this form of local self-government is the closest to them. The MZ can perform a wide range of important roles, like establishing contacts between citizens and the local government, coordinating citizen's requests, providing various services, initiating social and political activities in the local community, directing the participation of the citizens in the decision-making process. It is a legal entity and the President of the Local Community and the members of the Local Community Council are elected at Local Community Elections.

5 The Facebook page of the MZ Kruščica: <https://www.facebook.com/mzkruscica2017/>.

6 Source: https://arsbih.gov.ba/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Mu%c5%a1karci-i-%c5%beene-u-BIH_2020.pdf.

property rights, economic dependence and the glass ceiling for women in Kosovo

Luljeta Demolli

In many parts of the world, property and inheritance rights for women are restricted by social norms, customs, and legislation that impede their economic status and opportunities to overcome poverty. Various studies have shown that behind the poverty of women and their struggles for better economic conditions are, among other factors, barriers when it comes to the rights to inheritance and property. The issue of property and inheritance itself is a prism through which structural patterns of gender inequality in a society can be discovered.

In Kosovar society, the *Code of Lekë Dukagjini* to a certain extent continues to be an indivisible part of orienting social and cultural values, especially in some regions of Kosovo. Therefore, “*keeping order in the family is up to the man*”, “*a sort of coordinating authority is necessary when so many workers live under one roof and deal with different duties*”. Thus,

the unwritten law requires that each family submits to a patriarchal system, in which all are governed by the head of the household. In these customs, the female subject is also wrapped in the cloak of the morality of the mentality of that time.

The overwhelming part of unwritten laws relating to relations between men and women propose a traditional approach to organising gender relations according to strict gender stratification. Above that are just some of the widely present social norms that actually are part of a document that was written in the 1400ies. Sadly, some of the norms are in one way or another still applied to certain day-to-day relations for women in Kosovo. Affiliation and gender roles also

determine the constraints that women face when trying to secure livelihoods, including land use, land decision-making, and institutions that administer land and other sources of production.

Equal rights of women to property are defined in international human rights laws and standards, and are part of Kosovo’s legislation. Kosovo has included Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in its Constitution, which in the Property Rights section stipulates that in order to end discrimination against women, women’s rights to own, inherit and administer property must be recognised in their names. However, there is a true disruption between women’s formal equality before the law and the real equality leading to problems in practice.

At the outset of this text, it can be said that there are three main groups of factors that affect women’s rights to property and inheritance in Kosovo:

- First, social structures, norms, practices and circumstances have created a society where certain groups (i.e. women) are discriminated in multiple layers of their participation in social, political or economic life.
- Second, laws such as the Law on Inheritance do not sufficiently or contextually tackle long-standing discrimination, and/or gender equality may not be adequately reflected therein because of the lack of implementation.
- Third, even when legal regulations are in place, the rules on property and inheritance are often avoided and subject to structured cultural, traditional and religious norms that are discriminatory against women. The applicati-

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on of such laws in such cases is flawed because of long-standing cultural and societal positions which are often unfavourable towards women and girls. Such an understanding of those concepts is often reflected in court decisions or in the fact that court decisions are not implemented in practice.

There is not much discussion in Kosovo about land as something that women should have, and it is not yet known how many women own land. In particular socioeconomic contexts, land is essential for a dignified life and presents a basis for the rights that can ensure an adequate standard of living and economic independence and, consequently, personal empowerment. When women have or possess land, they have property rights and they are able to earn more and create a sustainability pillow.

tradition above the legislative?

One very

frequently used method of avoiding the application of property rights in the case of women and girls in Kosovo, especially in more rural parts, is through the "voluntary" renunciation of inheritance.

In such cases women, often even those who cannot read or write, sign certain forms through which they "reject" their right to property, thus opening the path for male members of the family to inherit the property or transpose it.

Another way of avoiding applicable laws related to inheritance and property rights of women and girls in Kosovo is through the avoidance of women with regard to the right to inheritance. In such cases, male members of the family often do not declare their married sisters during the inheritance process. Due to the large number of cases in which the property, even the immovable property, is possessed, enjoyed and even transposed to third parties without a formal transaction (based on traditions, trust in relatives and neighbours, etc.), land is often sold without formalising the transactions, which in turn violates the rights of women and girls to such property. This is a traditional practice which has been present for centuries. There are no official statistics which would offer a transparent and empirical perspective on this practice.

Kosovo's property registration system does not yet function sufficiently to secure and protect property rights throughout the whole country, or to enable a smooth transition to a market economy. Neither the legal framework, its implementation, nor access to the property registration system are adequate enough to ensure that it reflects the real situation regarding property rights in Kosovo.

Moreover, many women do not have the information, trust, experience and resources to obtain or enjoy their legal rights. Not many women have access to legal advice, especially because of established public beliefs that property ownership is an area reserved exclusively for men. Awareness should exist not only for rights holders, but also in the case of professionals, policy makers, judges, notaries and all those who work with or are related to equal rights to inheritance. Access to free legal help is widely available from both state institutions and non-governmental organisations.

Awareness-raising campaigns regarding these practices should focus on addressing the issue of renunciations of inheritance rights by women heirs. In order to limit renunciations and make parties carefully consider whether the renunciation act is adequate, imposing heavier taxes or notary fees on such acts should be considered. The Cadastral Administration should make

As in cities across the globe, hundreds of women including Black and Brown and trans people, children and men took the Philadelphia streets on March 8 to assert their resistance on International Working Women's Day. "Philly IWD March" by Joe Pietti – flickr - CC-BY-NC 2.0



additional efforts in order to enhance the automatic process of registering properties in the names of both spouses.

domino effect

The data shows that women in Kosovo inherit only 4% from their parents. Only 17% of women own property.¹ Only 18% of women own businesses² and only 3% of all business loans are given to women. There is no official public data on the types of bank loans and the percentage of successful loan applications by women.

While the causes for such low numbers can be found on multiple grounds, this makes the problems women face even more concerning. The causes are also inter-linked. The low percentage of ownership of property can cause low or almost non-existent participation of women in obtaining loans. Low access to loans means low access to cash, which in turn causes an inevitable obstacle to initiate, establish or maintain a business. Sadly, it is not surprising that the number of women entrepreneurs in Kosovo is also among the lowest in the region, and women are often faced with more obstacles than men in trying to start a business, especially with regard to initial financial capital, business networking, and more specific educational professional orientation. Unfavourable statistics force us to think in-depth about how much causality there is between increasing ownership on behalf of women and the number of women running businesses.

Important institutions of society sometimes tend to consider the dominance of men in Kosovo in terms of ownership to be a gender norm. There are cases when women are deprived of a proportionate access to power, and are therefore powerless to influence political processes. The low percentage of property ownership is making many Kosovo women dependable on men's income. It also limits their ability to take on their hobbies and passions because they often have to stay home and assume the care-giver role towards children or the family. Extremely low representation of women in business ownership decreases the chances of women and girls to participate in business chambers and unions on an equal basis with their male counterparts. This in turn decreases the chances of women to influence important policies related to labour and other business-related matters.

The lack of property and the predominance of men in institutional decision-making is something that forces women to be left outside the structures of economic and political power. The new government of Kosovo, which has been formed recently, has 13 male ministers and only 3 women ministers. None of Kosovo's 38 municipalities has a female mayor, and women also rarely attend rural councils and lead them much less frequently.

These gender norms have built an unchanging basis in relations to gender powers, a situation which aggravates the already generally unfavourable status of women in society. According to official statistics, more than 80% of women are unemployed. Ownership and participation in political life is directly related to women's economic empowerment, which thus creates income and life security.

Women's economic rights are limited on another level as well. Sometimes they are not even considered employees who desire long-term or secure employment, because employers fear that marriage, pregnancy or other family barriers may cause a worker to retire. Due to these circumstances, many women have remained working in the informal sector. This sector is characterised by small, generally unregistered enterprises, with jobs performed by casual or intermittent workers. Such informality on the labour market leads to a lack of workers' rights and protections, as well as lower incomes. Informal work has no minimum wage requirements, no compulsory rest time, and no safety standards. Informal workers are usually the first to be laid off and are most affected by economic shifts, such as the current global economic downturn due to COVID-19. There is no credible gender-segregated data on this topic.

a way to go

Sometimes the problematic implementation of certain laws in Kosovo, which have been identified in the Kosovo Progress Reports, and have also been addressed by USAID projects dealing with property rights in Kosovo, are the obstacles that have created an almost impenetrable glass ceiling for women to fully exercise their property and inheritance rights, both in rural and urban areas.

The unenforceable laws are often accompanied by a lack of awareness of the existing laws. Among Kosovar women and men,

there is still a lack of awareness regarding inheritance rights to some extent, which impacts denying women the right to inherit and own property.

That is why a legal reform was undertaken in Kosovo in the last two years in order to change the legislation on inheritance and to open the door for new opportunities for women to individually or collectively protect their rights, as previous applicable norms did not include all principles of gender equality that are part of the Constitution of Kosovo. One of the problems that emerged in this reform is the aspect of the legislation determining the family relationship, which was not in the spirit of gender equality or neutrality. For example, there was a lack of gender neutral vocabulary (e.g., “husband – wife” was used instead of “spouse”). The principle of gender neutrality was not respected when addressing the discrimination on the basis of sex, sexual orientation and gender identity.

The EU has funded numerous projects in the rule of law sector in Kosovo. It aims to support Kosovo in establishing an updated and comprehensive Civil Code in line with the EU Acquis and other relevant international standards. The current legislative framework is insufficient to tackle traditional practices and there is a need for clearer and more meticulous legislation and

procedural rules. Amendments to laws are needed to clear gaps, harmonise rules and act as a precaution to circumstances where women's legal rights might be violated.

Property owning, higher employment and economic progress in general would empower women in Kosovo on many levels. They would become powerful stakeholders in the institutional and economic life, thus creating stable perspectives and orientation paths for both the qualitative and the quantitative increase of systemic engagements of women in the years to come. This change would impact the economic development in general and result in the greater wellbeing of women.

One of the most important first steps should be a better understanding of the importance of data collection by state institutions and swift changes towards the improvement of current unfavourable practices. Developed and nuanced gender budgeting would inevitably prioritise the role of women in economy and business.

Challenging and changing discriminatory social norms, initiating and supporting appropriate and effective legislation, as well as proper information and awareness-raising among women – and men – is the best way forward for the much needed positive social and institutional reforms in Kosovo. ■■■

1 Farnsworth, N., Morina, D., Ryan, D., Rrahmani, G., Robinson-Conlon, V., and Banjska, I., (2018). *Gender Analysis in Kosovo 2018*. Kosovo Women's Network.

2 Ibid.

activism in times of uncertainty: Albanian Pride 2020

Gresa Hasa

It is Pride month in Tirana. This will be the first Pride in nine years that Tirana's main boulevard won't be filled with a colourful crowd of people of all ages, religions, nationalities, gender and sexual identities, all cycling and loudly chanting in the streets, proving there is room for everyone.

Due to the pandemic, restrictions suspended some plans and rights, and activism needed a new form of response. COVID-19 brought many inequalities to the light, underlining and deepening gaps between social, class, gender groups. Being more discriminated, more oppressed and vulnerable, the pandemic reminded us how our won rights and spaces are fragile when it comes to LGBTQ+

(*lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer*) persons and women. In this article, Pride is the symbolic articulation of activism, the necessity for equal status and understanding of difference in everyday life in Albania.

Individuals from marginalised or disadvantaged groups are disproportionately affected by COVID-19 in Albania. Many LGBTQ+ individuals have no access to healthcare and they are very often discriminated against because of their gender identity, sexual orientation, or ethnicity. In many cases, doctors refuse to treat LGBTQ+ patients. The situation is especially severe for trans individuals, particularly trans

women who are sex workers. There has been a surge in domestic violence during lockdown, predominantly affecting women and LGBTQ+ people. In the case of LGBTQ+ individuals, many are abused and rejected by their family, and thus are often at risk of becoming homeless. The few shelters available in Albania lack the capacity to accommodate all those in need of safe housing. LGBTQ+ people are routinely insulted, humiliated, violently attacked, sexually assaulted, or abused because of their sexual orientation and gender identity. These incidents happen in every facet of society from the street and workplace, to social media and even their own homes.¹

Many Albanian LGBTQ+ women have been forced into hetero-marriages and childbirth by their families, which is perceived as a "cure" to their gender identity or sexual orientation. Due to patriarchal gender roles, most women have to carry the burden of caregiving and reproductive activities for the entire family, while being at risk of domestic violence. Now – these responsibilities have increased for them. Because of economic restraints, in many Albanian families, two or three different generations live under the same roof. The patriarchal norms require the "bride" to be the "maid" and the "caregiver" of the entire family, which means never ending work for *her*.

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Women's march in Tirana, Albania, on 8 March, 2020.
Photo by Gresa Hasa -
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As we descend further down into the Dantesque hell of social hierarchies, we begin to encounter an even darker reality, comprised of the struggles of those who have been hit the hardest by capitalism's iron foot. They are the ones whom Italian intellectual Pier Paolo Pasolini has thoroughly described as the "sub-proletariat" in his works: the unemployed, the homeless, the sex workers. They are the most oppressed among the economically exploited classes: unemployed or low-income women, also from the Roma and LGBTQ+ communities, mostly from rural areas; migrants. The capitalist system feeds on a pre-existing system of oppression – patriarchy – and on the other, it compounds many of its defining characteristics.

The oppression of women is a tool which enables capitalists to manage the entire workforce for their own profit. It also enables them to justify their policies when they find it more profitable to shift the responsibility for social welfare from the state and collective institutions to the "privacy" of the family. In other words, when the capitalists need extra labour, they call upon women whom they pay less than men.²

Capitalism uses patriarchy as a lever to attain its objectives, while at the same time reinforcing it.³ Those who have become disposable under capitalism, become invisible. Pink capitalism⁴ is still just a mist around the Western Balkans.

While we are all living through the unsettling realities of this pandemic, our struggles are shaped by the contours of class, gender, race, citizenship and sexual orientation. Albanian LGBTQ+ individuals continue to

experience discrimination from individuals as well as institutions. The public visibility of LGBTQ+ individuals continues to remain very low. Hate speech is not reserved for citizens only – it comes from high ranking politicians too. At the same time – Albania collects no official data on hate crimes.⁵ Our experiences are by no means the same. On the edges of Europe, life squirms differently.

a rainbow in the house

Faced with this unprecedented crisis and the harsh realities it has exposed, those of us who fight for social justice and equality are challenged by a new question: how can we organise in physical isolation and with curfews in place? How can we reach people when the Albanian government has brought armed military men on the streets? When every 5 kilometres there are police and military checkpoints? When we are obliged to get official permission to do our grocery shopping for 90 minutes, before total lockdown starts? When the official update on the COVID-19 situation comes directly from the Prime Minister's Facebook page?

Activism is the ultimate resistance against a system that works to exhaust us and in a situation where we are surrounded by insecurity and misery.

So, for the first time in Europe, the Pride event will happen online! Activists gathered around this idea are aware that giving up on Pride is not an option. There have been many activities during the pandemic, and many more are planned. Twice a week for two months the regional "Queer Talks" – live sessions were held with different queer activists and personalities, discussing the current situation and other important subjects affecting the community. Also, activists worked on gathering personal stories from LGBTQ+ individuals, turning them into short films and publishing them on social media every week. These events have grown out of a diverse group of people that has been meeting for nearly two years to read and discuss radical feminist texts collectively, and which is currently translating a large selection of these texts from English into Albanian.⁶ Other activists and scholars also engage in lively discussions during these sessions. Activists and IT experts are working on gathering people from different countries in a common virtual platform on May 15, when Pride will take place.

“what are you?”⁷

Being loud, being visible and providing support for LGBTQ+ community has no substitution. Even in circumstances when street Pride, as an action for tolerance and respect, is not possible – the fights continue. According to available data, 76% of the LGBTQ+ people surveyed in Albania felt that Pride parades have improved the position of the LGBTQ+ community in society. It is important to celebrate, but also to acknowledge all those who are still in the closet and unable to come out, to show that the struggle continues. Pride does not only belong to the LGBTQ+ community. It belongs to the entire Albanian society and to those struggling toward emancipation everywhere else in the world. Celebrating Pride during lockdown is a reflection of the LGBTQ+ experience in Albania every day, by feeling locked up.⁸

We may not gather in the streets this year, but for as long as the private remains political, there is nothing that prevents us from making it public, this time by bring-

ing the public sphere directly to our living rooms. This is of high importance for women and LGBTQ+ individuals, who are constantly excluded from the public space and in addition, oppressed within all the layers of oppression. Pride delivers two messages this year:

Injustice and violence are no private matters, and as a society, we will not legitimise them through silence; Solidarity is the most needed human act – nobody is alone and our struggle knows no borders.

Activists know that what they are doing is much bigger and more important than each individual involved and the single constituent parts. We are aware that the seeds that we are planting today will go on living even – especially – when we will not be alive anymore. Therefore, activism here in Albania must be free of silence and safe of threats and attacks, as the frontline face of the fight for equality in a society burdened by patriarchal, religious and wild capitalism offset. ■■■

1 Report on the Situation of the LGBTI Community During 2018.

2 Denise Comanne: *How Patriarchy and Capitalism Combine to Aggravate the Oppression of Women*.

3 In capitalism, the family unit has its roots in a patriarchal system that preceded it. The family is based on heteronormative gender roles, supposedly grounded in “science” and “biology.” Women supposedly have a biological inclination for *reproductive labour*, like cooking, cleaning, raising children, and washing clothes. The “woman’s role” in unpaid domestic labour is essential to keeping the wheels of capitalism turning. That is why the capitalist system is enormously invested in gender roles and particularly in the unpaid childcare and housework that occur within the family sphere. Although the family and gender roles have become more fluid since the women’s liberation movement and the LGBTQ+ rights movement, the cis-heteronormative family model has remained, perpetuating the oppression of queer people (source Tatiana Cozzarelli: *Queer Oppression is Etched in the Heart of Capitalism*).

4 Pink capitalism (also called rainbow capitalism, homocapitalism or gay capitalism) is the incorporation of the LGBT movement and sexual diversity to capitalism and the market economy, viewed especially in a critical lens as this incorporation pertains to the LGBT, Western, white, and affluent, upper middle class communities and market.

5 *Country Policy and Information Note Albania: Sexual orientation and gender identity*: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/849856/Albania_-_SOGIE_-_CPIN_-_v6.0__December_2019_.pdf.

6 “Radical Sense” is a reading group based in Tirana. Every Wednesday a diverse group of people meet to collectively read and discuss different radical feminist texts in English (mainly because the participants come from different countries and also because these texts cannot be found in Albanian yet). Due to the COVID-19 situation, these meetings now take place on Zoom. For more information, check 28 November’s website: <http://www.28november.al> and their Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/28nope/>.

7 Reference to *Country Policy and Information Note Albania: Sexual orientation and gender identity* where described incident with police officers, regarding trans persons and LGBTQ+ activists.

8 *Celebrating Virtual Pride During Lockdown in Albania*, <https://www.nhc.nl/tirana-lgbtq-virtual-pride/>

swimming against the current

Iva Mihajlovska

Women's rights in Southeast Europe or the Balkan countries are not only of great relevance to the region, but also to Western Europe. Their position is much more complex than in any other region of Europe due to the reason that patriarchal values have traditionally been a dominant factor of social organisation and have not been eradicated.

Women in Southeast Europe belong to the losers of the transition crisis, with regard to their social and economic status, as well as their political representation and the feminisation of poverty and refugees. In patriarchal society, there is a clear gender order, with the authority of men and the subordinate position of women. The patrilineality of the father's hereditary lineage regulated all kinship relations and all legal issues, such as the right of ownership and the law of succession, but also the continuation of spiritual and cultural values. A stringent gender segregation and authority hierarchy, based on differences in gender and age, ruled the cohabitation of the members of the extended family. Hence, as time goes by, women have been torn between two clearly separated functional spheres, the public and the private one, with a multiple strain. After her daily work outside her home, the woman had to do all the work in the household. Her double burden was aggravated by the common scarcity of goods, and also the insufficiency of public facilities for childcare.

Nevertheless, there are some particular challenges that need to be overcome: gender-based violence, political participation and decision-making, lack of gender mainstreaming, gender stereotyping, and

discrimination on the labour market have been recognised as the most pressing challenges women face in the Balkans.¹ All of these areas have a strong gender dimension. In many areas, women are the worst affected by any crisis. They constitute the majority of those living in poverty; the majority of those unemployed or in precarious employment; the majority of those with small pensions or small social benefits that leave them under the poverty line; the majority of those affected by discrimination and violence. But women are also the ones who can bring solutions.

What we live today, we got by never giving up. We live and practice it because some other women believed in making a change.

They were hopeful. They were brave. They did not give up. They fell, but rose again. If the challenges are all around us, the answers are too. There are many, but several counters are important for the future prosperity of women – education, empowerment and endorsement. These three main lines are the essential answer to all of the above-mentioned challenges. With providing a proper education, a knowledgeable Balkan woman has the skills, information, talent and self-confidence that she requires to be all that she wants to be – a mother, a daughter, an employee, a manager etc. The education of girls and women from the Balkans is necessary socially as well as economically. Educated Balkan women yield a positive impact on society through their contribution in professional fields like – the medical sector, defence services, science and technology.

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Mural in Argentina, North-West: "Insults, verbal violence, psychological physical abuse, rape, beatings: enough. Do not be complices. November 25 day of violence against women. Live with love, respect and equality. We have rights. Do not shut up! Let's not naturalize the violence. You are not alone. For our children let's be an example of change"
 Photo by Françoise Gaujour – flickr - CC-BY-NC-ND 2.0

Women and girls are either equal or exceed men and boys in educational enrolment and attainment overall, and women represent the majority of all graduates from tertiary education. Still, limited participation in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) is the main barrier to their full participation in the fields of environmental protection, climate change and disaster-risk management, as well as their poor representation on boards and in senior management positions in the private sector, such as the energy sector.² An improved economy and society are the outcome of educating girls and that is what we dream of in the Balkans – an improved economy. Yet, we have to better understand the fact that without the growth and development of women, the growth of the country is not possible. It is very true that the equivalent expansion of both sexes will boost the economic and social growth in every area of the country.

Education will consequently empower girls and women. Empowering women and girls and achieving gender equality are not only moral imperatives, they are crucial in creating inclusive, open and prosperous societies. Empowerment thus comes to constitute renegotiating and re-imagining the boundaries of the possible, not simply the act of making independent choices.

As everywhere and as always, violence against women is an age-old phenomenon. Especially in the Balkans, women were always considered weak, vulnerable and in a position to be exploited. Violence has long been accepted as something that happens to women. Cultural mores, religious practices, economic and political conditions in this region may set the precedence for initi-

ating and perpetuating domestic violence. In societies with a patriarchal power structure and with rigid gender roles, women are often poorly equipped to protect themselves if their partners become violent. However, much of the disparity relates to how dependence on men and fearfulness amount to cultural disarmament. Husbands who batter wives typically feel that they are exercising a right, maintaining good order in the family and punishing their wives' delinquency – especially the wives' failure to keep their proper place³.

It has been acknowledged that gender-based violence is rooted in women's unequal status reflecting the unequal distribution of social, political and economic power between women and men in society along with gender-based stereotypes and biases. Preventing gender-based violence has been the subject of continuous efforts and resulted in the adoption of the Council of Europe Istanbul Convention⁴ which includes concrete measures to improve prevention of violence, protection of victims and prosecution of perpetrators. Physical violence against women is recognised as the most critical gender-related issue in the Balkan countries⁵.

Economic dependence has been identified as the central reason. Without the ability to sustain themselves economically, women are forced to stay in abusive relationships and are not able to be free from violence. Due to deep-rooted values and culture, women unwillingly adopt the option of separation or divorce. They also fear the consequences of reporting violence and declare an unwillingness to subject themselves to the shame of being identified as battered women. Lack of informa-

tion about alternatives also forces women to suffer silently within the four walls of their homes. Some women may believe that they deserve the beatings because of some wrong action on their part. Other women refrain from speaking about the abuse because they fear that their partner will further harm them in reprisal for revealing family secrets, or they may be ashamed of their situation.

Violence against women is a violation of basic human rights. It is shameful for the states that fail to prevent it, and the societies that tolerate and in fact perpetuate it. It must be eliminated through political will, and by legal and civil action in all sectors of society.⁶

An effective response to violence must be multi-sectoral: addressing the immediate practical needs of women experiencing abuse, providing long-term follow-up and assistance, and focusing on changing those cultural norms, attitudes and legal provisions that promote the acceptance of and even encourage violence against women, and undermine women's enjoyment of their full human rights and freedoms.

Yet, practice has shown that the Balkan countries have not succeeded in establishing a comprehensive and functional protection system that will address and implement acted policies and measures embedded in the laws. The Balkan counties are still lacking resources, social services and, above all, responsible appointment to government structures. The government needs to allocate substantial resources for systematic changes to respond to violence, including functional services at the local level for the care and support of women who are victims of violence.

Needless to say that the feminist movement successfully called attention to the need to end violence against women. Despite years of committed hard work, the problem of male violence against women steadily increases. I firmly believe that

violence is inextricably linked to all acts in society that occur between the powerful and the powerless, the dominant and dominated. It is essential for continued feminist struggle to end violence against women.

Balkan women leaders are needed and those should be individuals who acknowledge their role and are accountable.

In the Balkans, we need to write television shows in which female strength is not depicted as remarkable but merely normal, we need to teach our students to see that vulnerability is a human rather than a female trait, to make sure that in media interviews fathers are asked how they balance family and work. In this age of 'parenting as guilt,' in the Balkans we have to make fathers feel as bad as mothers, through campaigns and actions to make fathers share the glory of guilt. In the Balkans, we need to hire more women where there are few.

Establishing mentorship programmes for young girls and women equips girls with the skills they need to navigate economic, gender, and social barriers and grow up healthy, educated, and independent; it makes transformational change through experience with people, environment and programming, that, together, empower girls to succeed. Because the education of girls does not just empower girls, but families, communities and economies. Mentoring relationships in girls-only spaces that are physically and emotionally safe and where girls find a sisterhood of support with shared drive, mutual respect, and high expectations provides girls with the skills and knowledge to set goals, overcome obstacles, and improve academic performance. This type of constructive force is very much desirable in this region; however, it also works with policymakers to advocate for legislation and initiatives that increase opportunities for girls. One of the most effective ways is promoting female entrepreneurship. Recent studies have shown that women entrepreneurs are far less likely to be corrupt than men.⁷

An example where women are an important part of the solution is promoting ethnic minorities, especially Roma rights. The most effective way of promoting social and economic progress of any group in a situation of underdevelopment is to educate girls. Educating girls and women from ethnic minorities benefits the whole society. Specifically, for the Balkans, I think women are the best chance for peace and reconciliation. It is needed to increase and support the education of the most vulnerable and marginalised groups, such as ethnic minorities, especially Roma girls, girls from rural communities, poor and socially excluded girls, and addressing horizontal segregation in education, especially through initiatives to promote women and girls in STEM fields.⁸

Solidarity can be recast as something that can be actively constructed through identification with a shared concern about issues of social and gender injustice. Solidarity, autonomy and empowerment remain feminist keywords of action on different levels, as they represent closely held ideals for many, capturing vital elements of the normative project of changing gendered power relations. The gender myths associated with these ideals may have outlived their usefulness, but the overarching goal of transforming unequal and inequitable gender relations has not lost its salience. To address it, strategies are needed that can reanimate and repoliticise the gender agenda. For this, new myths may be needed: narratives that speak about justice and equality in ways that hold more resonance with women's everyday lives and can better serve to enlist broader constituencies in the struggle to bring about a fairer world.

Swimming against the current, women have had to speak louder to have their voices heard. In a social and political landscape where women are still under-represented, remarkable examples of women show how important it is for women to continue to speak up and speak out: Woman's suffrage movements that date back to the late 1800s. The women's liberation movement of the 1960s. The black feminism movement of the 1970s. The #MeToo movement from several years ago that has continued to gain momentum each year. Beyond these, there are thousands of global and local women's movements, smaller and larger in scale, less conspicuous, yet equally relevant that fly under the radar of the media but that continue to exist, relentlessly fighting battles, for all women's rights.

The result of empowering and enabling the authenticity of women's core initiatives and communities is what gives us the freedom to be ourselves and to be comfortable with who we are, and it is also what provides us access to connecting with other people in a meaningful and genuine way. The continuous support of women activist groups and gender initiatives can create safe spaces for women, and bring hope for future changes in local communities. The true power of embracing and supporting women's authenticity, even though uncomfortable and scary at times, is a courageous process that provides society in the Balkans more safe spaces that, as history recalls, we are starving for.

If women in the Balkans ever successfully achieved solidarity, it would bring power to the feminist movement, as well as make women feel more influential on a personal level and in their struggles in everyday life. When women exchange their experiences, solidarity is about them seeing the shared oppression and the links between different oppressions, sharing the same goals and hopes to abolish inequalities, having other women around when they and others were suffering, recognising a common voice and a collectivity.

When I asked the participants at a training we delivered what solidarity entailed, most of them defined 'being a woman' as the basis of solidarity.

In that sense, an embodied view of 'woman' as a unifying category was seen as very important.

Women and girls understand more and more that we are linked, we are not ranked. Women's rights movement and the work of women's rights activists in the region deserve much more attention. Today's feminist movement has become more attentive to a wider range of experiences of those oppressed by gender norms and stereotypes, including men, non-binary and trans people. There is also a greater awareness of the way that racism, anti-religious hatred, disablism or homophobia work alongside sexism, creating complex forms of prejudice and oppression. It is not so much that feminism has moved "beyond" sexism. Rather, a wider range of voices is now counted as feminist. If the current situation has anything positive to show, it is that where there is injustice, there is also resistance.

However, the problem with solidarity starts if we understand it as always meaning necessarily full and unequivocal support of another's position, where critique is not permitted. As one of my colleagues nicely puts it: "Solidarity can become the other party's demand: to approve and stand by her, whatever she does. It turns to be criticism-free and turns into affirmation, whereas solidarity is a trust relationship that makes conflict possible." Her answer is especially relevant here, as criticism of another's stance, for example, could be construed as an act of anti-solidarity, whereas it could be argued that solidarity should entail being able to express one's hesitations and criticisms. Only this can establish an open dialogue among women, which also brings

with it the need for debates in order to try and understand each other's differences.⁹

There is no "right" form of activism and no single issue of greatest importance. A century ago, women's rights activists were not all fighting for suffrage – some of them were working on other campaigns, such as equal access to university education, or a decent wage for working-class women. Nor did getting the vote solve other instances of gender injustice. Feminism is a movement for gender justice, and it needs to be fought by many different people, in many different ways, especially in the Western Balkans.

I am firmly convinced that the women's rights movement across the Western Balkan region can and will utilise all possible instruments to make progress a reality. And for that, the EU accession process offers a number of instruments and tools. Every country that wants to join the EU has to align its legislation and provisions accordingly and ensure women's rights, as well as

to prove that they have been implemented. Whether it is for basic fundamental rights that are perhaps still inaccessible to women in small, isolated parts of the Balkans (issues like female infanticide, child marriage, rape in marriages, and more, still continue to exist), or whether it is more powerful, privileged women publicly fighting for issues like wage equality, the right to marry whom they want, or waging a war against sexual harassment, stories of women fighting to be heard, and for equality, are everywhere.

A lot has been done for women's rights in the past decade. We have testimonies that things have become better, but that also makes expectations rise. We still have a long way to go when it comes to equality of women and their rights. History can go backwards in the same way as it can go forwards. All we need to do is be awake, aware, act and inspire each other for a better future. ■■■

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