

Gender and Peace

→ in the Balkans:

Sites of Challenges and Hopes

Editors: Biljana Kašić and Zilka Spahić Šiljak

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***Gender and Peace in the Balkans:
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Introduction

What kind of turn is the turn to peace? And why now? And whose responsibility is it to address this issue?

Living in a time, in which we witness war conflicts and human devastation with unfathomable consequences as well as geographical expansion designed to make a shift in the prestige of political and economic power with neo-imperial gestures, needs this kind of response. In a time of genocide and impunity, in which there is almost no dividing line between real and social death, between the capitalist necropolitics and necropolitics of war, the turn to peace is a more than necessary answer.

Applying the actual complexity and diversity of responses to current problems opens the way to (re)think peace issues within unthinkable geopolitical configurations, but also to consider a wide application of peace approaches and feminist analysis. Even so, one of disconcerting features of peace study is whether a conflict-centric understanding of peace is crucial for a feminist perspective or whether we can think of (a) broader alternative(s) beyond the war/peace dichotomy? The publication that is ahead of us seeks to answer this question, among others.

Gender and Peace in the Balkans: Sites of Challenges and Hopes is a collection of presentations, peace testimonies and conversations that took place at the international conference on gender and peace held in Sarajevo in 2025¹. The Conference was part of the UNIGEM (Universities and Gender Mainstreaming) project implemented with 19 universities in the Balkans region with the support of the British Government.

How to think about peace nowadays and why it is important to publish this book today are the questions that arose before

¹The International Conference: Gender and Peace in the Balkans: Charting the Way Forward was held in Sarajevo from February 25-27, 2025 under the auspices of the TPO Foundation, the Gender Resource Center of the University of Sarajevo and UN Women in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The keynote speakers were prominent internationally acclaimed scholars: Aida A. Hozić, Cynthia Enloe and Nerzuk Ćurak.

the editors of this publication. The militaristically infuriated time in which the leading war masters lead violent 'games of war' to the detriment of people and nations, requires more than anything else a response of a voice of peace. Being aware that the struggle for peace is much more difficult than the production of war, it is even more important to address the issue of peace. To tackle this complicated yet imaginative issue from an experiential perspective, re-signifying the closeness of the idea of peacebuilding and reconciliation, human commonality and establishing justice. Of course, there is another reason that really matters, and it concerns the necessity to (re)think of both *gender* and *peace*. This means to explore anew how gender and peace interface both conceptually and practically, bearing in mind different historical burdens, but increasingly retrograde processes and the derogation of gender equality and women's rights in particular, strengthened by the reinforced patriarchal and militaristic machinery. Thus, feminist approaches to peace building and the analysis of intersectional forms of gender oppression are topics of interest which open up new questions and new dilemmas.

This publication focuses on the resilience and silenced adaptability to the situation, on types of resistance based on women's diverse experiences and their own research both in times of war in the Balkans in the 1990s and in the post-war period. Giving us insight into the ways of local engagement, this publication endeavors to show a wide range of women and feminist peace activities in different domains of the contextual areas and newly created states, namely Croatia, Kosovo, Serbia, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Introducing feminist modes of agency advocating for peace brings a vital complex of questions, including the relationship to the problematics of feminist legacy and memory as well as its troubles with nationalism, emerging states and their gender policies and increasingly present populism, while the tension between feminist versus women's constituency is put aside.

It is conceptually structured around five thematic units that address different aspects of what we can consider the peace agenda in the broadest sense and attempts to respond to the challenges of war issues then and now, and emerging sites of struggle such as regressive anti-gender trends. The papers presented here, despite all divergences in terms of both theoretical aspirations and experiential insights as well as a way of how feminist perspective is embedded, share the common ground in favor of peace. Peace contributors suggest a praxis but also a process of reflection and self-questioning that continually rearticulates boundaries and possibilities, selves and "others". And, of course, an ethical imperative, called into being particularly when war conflicts are at stake.

Apart from individual contributions we also wanted to make visible the constructiveness, fresh ideas and dialogic energy that are especially evident in conversations about topics such as the war economy, contemporary militaristic patriarchy or anti-gender ideology. Thus, some conversations are included in several thematic parts of this book.

Starting from the premise that it is necessary to reinvigorate the humanist mind in the present moment, "The Challenges of Feminist Peace Politics Today" as the first thematic unit situates the problematic in its humanist paradoxality and absurdity. The ultimate question posed to contributors is a twofold one, that is, how the concern with militaristic projects involves a global orientation and global political responsibility that is inescapably ambiguous, and to what extent the struggle for peace persistently calls for feminist positioning. In order to explore the urgent need for feminist positioning, the first paper problematizes some ontological questions related both to the feminist subjectivity and non-ethicity of war, bearing in mind contemporary feminist controversies and uneasiness of the politics of peace, especially referring to the war in Ukraine and genocidal war in Palestine. On the other hand, apart from invoking a need for feminist responsibility for peace, the second paper critically examines the rise of militant patriarchy and its masculinized codes within

a wider geopolitical and historical contextualization. In a deeply reflective manner, the author of this paper creates a theoretical and ethical scope for an appeal that requires a humanist response and response of humanist thinkers to counter human destruction and enable emancipation at general level. The contributor of the third paper in this thematic block, by arguing that feminist perspectives on war are much broader than conventional ones, pays a special attention to the war economy, its links and implications to humanitarian industry, care economy, and the militarization of everyday life. To critics engaged in feminism and gender equality, a proposal about feminist international political economy, which the author supports with feminist, peace and economic arguments, can be a fresh opportunity.

How to approach ongoing retrograde processes, with which tools to investigate anti-gender discourses, populism or hostility towards the other(s), manipulative ‘occurrences’ or ‘linguistic moves’, which circulate in the public at the global and national level, and how to explain the emergence of such a movement that supports these discourses? Feminist positioning toward these controversial phenomena and discursive threats is of significance here. Positioning is not only a matter of voicing counter-war destructions or those that lead to concrete peace-driven actions, but always a site of struggle. In this case, it is a struggle over the means of the above-mentioned processes we are facing today. The group of several papers gathered under the title “Anti-gender Discourses and Populism” is one of the attempts at this. While some papers explore how right-wing populism thrives on national homogenization or how gender-sensitive language is reduced to a tool for perceived national enemies, others clearly demonstrate the link between populist and anti-gender discourse and their implications for feminism. In a scholarly rigorous manner, one author provides a detailed chronology of the anti-gender movement in North Macedonia. Another one comes to surprisingly critical and fresh thoughts by bringing her own disciplinary training into the wider theoretical analysis of the ‘common sense’ discourse which lies behind the

'arguments' of the anti-gender movement along with intellectual ignorance that dictate the public opinion.

In the third thematic unit, entitled "Feminist Legacy and Women's Peace Activism", there are four texts that correlate in terms of content since they basically deal with women's peace activism in the wars experienced in the nineties in the Balkans, but also with the key messages they convey. Yet they differ in the aspects they focus on in their analysis and the ways in which they use feminist means. The authors that examine feminist anti-war engagement in Croatia offer a complex reflexive and socio-historical constellation that enables the process of positioning a feminist political subject through anti-war activism and its anti-militaristic revival today, while the authors of papers that address women's engagement in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina put attention on women's resistance within a wider specific collective political struggle in Kosovo and transnational networks of feminist solidarity, or women's peace culture of remembrance on the example of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The last paper here, based on a conducted survey, clearly shows the importance and obstacles related to women's engagement in peacekeeping and peacebuilding processes both during and after the conflict in the mentioned countries.

"Testimonies of Resistance in the Balkans" as a separate part is linked to this thematic unit. Behind the intention of eleven presented testimonies, behind the words of mostly women's testimonies lies the desire to live together despite war loss and war trauma, to achieve livability, to reconcile, to create a space of mutual obligation and commonality. Testimonies brought to light many concrete actions and examples of how women have produced their micro spaces and affinitive links by expressing solidarity accompanied by feminist drive, values of faith or civil responsibility. Through joint work within their local settings, they showed the ways in which women's resistance and commitment to peace are practiced, from supporting women in marginalized communities and fighting against discriminatory laws and precarious living conditions, breaking down barriers of prejudice

and hatred against others to acts in favor of “unseen heroines” and commemoration gestures.

The next group of papers contained in the thematic unit “Interfaith Feminist Approaches to Peacebuilding” insert interreligious dialogue in the middle of their elaboration and analyze and document the experiences of women activists who, motivated by their religious beliefs, have been engaged in ecumenism in Vojvodina (part of Serbia). The main intention of these three papers, overlapping by content dimension and ethical move, was conceptualized around three main areas of interest: educational initiatives, research based on the intersection of gender, religion, and peace activism and the role of women actors in these dialogues, accompanied by concrete projects and events. By combining feminist interfaith approaches and the principles of gender equality, these dialogues aim to connect secular and religious women from different religious communities to create common spaces for conversation and joint work against various forms of discrimination, in favor of peacebuilding and reconciliation.

Addressing once again questions of patriarchy and militarism, peace and insecurity, history and women’s marginalization as well as those in which ways feminist-informed gender analysis may be supportive in offering a fresh framework for theorizing peace and non-violent issues, the final papers conclude this publication. Diverse in content, yet joined in the thematic section “Peace and Non-Violence: Research and Activism”, they demonstrate how particular approaches to the main topic may transcend the scope of the proposed title. Broadly speaking, the four papers enter the conceptual domain of peace through different pathways – a critical investigation of militarism, struggle for women’s legacy and women’s history from a minor position, a discourse analysis of queer and a mode of non-violent experimental research.

Three texts refer to specific local issues or events, and all three examine the specific epistemic methods in the analysis. While shaping the history of Jewish women appears as a specific

feminist task in order to resolve “epistemic injustice” that goes with the danger of anachronisms, generalizations, and arbitrary interpretations, queer linguistics of peace in the post-conflict Balkan context functions as a kind of proposal for “epistemic disobedience” that enables radical configuration for queer subjects. The third one explored the continued act of resistance in Serbia over the course of several months (from December 2024 to spring 2025) through the lens of nonviolent action strategies. How militarizing processes exploit contested femininities and masculinities and what are the cultural, economic and emotional dimensions of multi-layered processes of militarization are some of the crucial questions that are opened in a provocative way in the first text of this part. The author proposes a special attentiveness to watch at the institutions such as military organizations and all sorts of military power that lead to sustain the state of *misogynist, militarized non-peace* and patriarchal-militarized barriers to peace, giving at the same time guides into feminist research epistemology.

Facing critical dilemmas around the questions of war, resistance and peace enabled us to rethink feminist ideas and potential strategies towards peace, which is discussed in an additional contribution to this publication, that is “Charting the Way Forward: Feminist Principles for Peacebuilding Actions”

The publication was initially conceived as a collection of conference presentations. However, on the very first day of the conference, the editors, in conversation with fellow panelists, concluded that it would be important to transform the presentations into academic papers enriching them with discussions and the testimonies of activists to enhance both scholarly rigor and the practical relevance of the volume.

The editors would especially like to extend their heartfelt thanks to all contributors and participants whose insights, commitment, and lived experiences significantly shaped the depth and direction of this volume. Special gratitude is also owed to the organizers and supporters of the Conference, most notably the British

Government and UN Women whose generous support made both the event and this publication possible. Their engagement affirms the vital importance of feminist scholarship and activism in shaping more just and inclusive societies.

Editors: Biljana Kašić and Zilka Spahić Šiljak

The Challenges of Feminist Peace Politics Today

THEME

01

CHAPTER 1

Prospects and Uneasiness of Feminist Politics of Peace

Prospects and Uneasiness of Feminist Politics of Peace

Abstract

“Who counts as a human” and who has ownership of the distribution of vulnerability when the violence is at stake (Athanasidou and Butler 2013), and to what extent human destructiveness by producing a ‘landscape of fear’ (Oslender 2004) and legitimizing crime and ‘social death’ on a global level conceals the thought of peace, these are questions that especially today make the feminist politics of peace complex. Any critical approach to the articulation of these questions requires feminists to deal with the problems that ontological questions related to the ‘uniqueness’ of women, that is, gender subjectivity in the context of war violence must be considered in connection with issues of the “non-ethics of war” (Maldonado-Torres 2008) and destructive oppressive structures and power its global actors. Bearing in mind contemporary feminist controversies and uneasiness about the politics of peace and non-violence against the war in Ukraine (Dutchak 2022; Zherebkina 2023; Kašić 2024) and the genocidal war in Palestine (Deutsch 2011; Ahmed and Bahar 2023; Alasah 2024), in my paper I will address three questions key to the feminist politics of peace. The first question concerns the necessary positioning against (re)militarization and its masculine-colonial-capitalist anchorage; the second question problematizes the policy of non-violence (Butler 2009) into the vibrant bond with the social imaginary of peace, and thirdly, on the trail of historical strides and feminist support (Kašić 1997; Talpade Mohanty 2003), brings new awareness to the concept transnational feminist solidarity.

Introductory Notes: Questions, Misunderstandings and Disputes

Before I give insights into the subject of the prospects of feminist peace politics, I am thinking to what extent the anxieties related to contemporary war events concerns overshadow and reduce the power of responses, while also complicating questions of various types.

How do we oppose the global war regime that is being established in an accelerating mode, as we can see it accelerating? In this way Michael Hardt and Sandro Mezzadra (2025) recently outlined this architecture of modernity, while the management and militaristic administration are closely linked with capitalist structures and demands, as well as with the phantasmagorias of new rights, territorial ownership rights over other peoples' territories, dispossession, genocide, apartheid production, or literally the buying of territories, attempts we have been witnessing nowadays. How is it possible that anyone even dares to think about buying someone else's territory? Certainly, there exists a price for this territory, which fits into this crazy phantasmagoria of new political powers.

While economic development during the last two decades is entirely managed and shaped by the so-called militaristic and security logic, on the other hand, the supremacist worldview of political key hegemony defines the politics of world domination? It is certain that the war regime manifests itself in the militarization of the social field, and especially in the production of a landscape of fear, surveillance and strengthening of obedience to authoritarian and oligarchic powers, in censorship and self-censorship of freedom of speech and freedom of speech and thought about what is happening. What we are witnessing is that an extraordinary censorship and self-censorship regarding speech about what is happening today is intensified. Are we allowed to speak? Are we allowed to analyze what is really happening? Are we daring, for example, to say something about political responsibility for the genocide of the Palestinian people

or anything about Palestinians' right to resistance and freedom without being accused of antisemitism at the same time? So, threats come in many forms from various directions within a new global configuration.

Along with reflections on freedom or public demands for freedom when the decolonial struggle of the Palestinians matters, it is also certain that terms like 'non-violence politics' and 'anti-war resistance' have been forbidden or mostly unwelcome in the official discourse of many European countries as well as within the institutions of the European Union. Yet, there is a different view of Ukrainian self-defense from a Eurocentric perspective. However, historical burdens, imperial weights, moves, transgressive traumas, and historical contingencies raise the question of whether the only possible version of victory is the nationalist one, as it ensures mass mobilization. As a Ukrainian feminist philosopher, Irina Zherebkina (Zherebkina 2023), rightly asks, does the right to self-defense and self-determination clash with the idea of peace and non-violence? These are some of those crucial questions which cause disputes. The above mentioned one created several dividing lines, as well as divisions within feminism at both national and international level during the first year of the war in Ukraine. The dispute was announced through the manifesto of Ukrainian feminists *The Right to Resist: A Feminist Manifesto*, proclaimed on July 7, 2022, which was a critical response to the international feminist manifesto *Feminist Resistance Against War* from March 17, 2022, primarily due to their opposition to militarization, alleged misunderstanding of Ukraine's right to necessary self-defense, so-called 'abstract pacifism', and epistemological imperialism of Western feminists. Furthermore, insisting on the presumption that the war is primarily 'gendered', which is endorsed by international feminists, was not acceptable for the majority of Ukrainian feminists since it is utterly about anticolonial defensive resistance. This predominantly defines their feminist position towards this war. Thus, for most Ukrainian feminists, this international feminist effort to offer a feminist agenda for peace and non-violence

failed. In addition, it should be mentioned that for members of the LGBTQ+ community in Ukraine, the right to resist the current Russian invasion, is also related to the exceptional concern about the possible occurrence of homophobic attitudes and queerphobia as the hatred directed towards members of the LGBTQ+ community and discriminatory practices systematically carried out by the Russian politics. In short, these two publicly opposing positions presented in two manifestos have generated feminist unrest and, in a way, feminist discomfort regarding possible according, and have largely determined the direction of further international feminist support.

Feminist Politics of Peace: On Articulation

How, then, I wonder all the time, can we articulate feminist politics of peace today? Any critical approach to articulation by feminists requires delving into problems that involve ontological questions related to the distinctiveness of female, or rather gendered, subjectivity in the context of war, which must necessarily be considered in connection with questions of the 'ethics of war'. This refers to a concept that was initiated and elaborated by a Puerto Rican philosopher, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, in his exceptional book *Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity*, published in 2008.

What are the key questions for feminist politics of peace which tackle both gender and ontological reasons, and which enter the realm of humanity and human existence, humanization and dehumanization? The first question concerns the necessary positioning against the remilitarization of its masculine-colonial-capitalist anchorage; the second problematizes the politics of nonviolence, which is always intertwined with the social imaginary of peace; and the third reawakens how much we need transnational feminist solidarity and support that means in our region as well as on the international stage.

First, how do we position ourselves today in the face of the public advocacy of militarization, which is escalating and, unfortunately, supported? Although there are various entry points into so-called prohibited niches related to the financing of war and the war machine, of which we know little, the servicing of war projects and the scrutiny of national military budgets, as feminists and peace activists – we must be able to question both military regime(s) and the militaristic concept of security. It is known that feminist peace activists often direct attention to the gender dimension of the militaristic structure. It is not my intention here to enter into a well-known discussion about the essentialist-constructivist dichotomy and the reasons why gendered, archetypal clichés often play a dominant role in real political positioning, especially in situations of war violence. Namely, it is about so-called assumptions what men should do in war and what women should do in war. However, throughout, the question resounds: how gendered are the reasons why men – who are often coerced – offer their bodies for political-militaristic purposes? National, patriotic, state-loyal, liberationist, or military-profit-driven? As we know, some soldiers participate in war operations all over the world because it is financially profitable or because they've been released from prison, or for various other reasons, irrespective of 'militaristic masculinity', that we are more and more becoming aware of. We have experience related to the wars we have lived through here in the nineties of the twentieth century. An even more problematic assumption is the necessity of the 'correct choice' which, imposed by politics, functions as an order and obligation for men. Regardless of individual reasons, war as a rule unites the corporate masculinity of men within the template of hegemonic masculinity, and a male collective bodily subjectivity becomes the matrix of combat power, which can also be read through many historical examples. Some men, caught in militaristic projects, as precisely described by the German anthropologist Klaus Theweleit in his book *Männerphantasien*, published in 1977, accept the ideology of militarism as an implicit condition for affirming their masculinity. This is the main problem, I think.

Thanks to my personal experience as a conscientious objector who supported men who refused to participate in military operations during the wars in Croatia and the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, I realized how difficult it was for many men to break away from this ultimate male obligation that they must participate in the war, especially a self-defensive war what was the Croatian official argument for mobilization. On the other hand, as a result of my personal engagement and support for them, I realized how refusal to participate in military operations was so liberating for many of them. In the Anti-War Campaign of Croatia, a few of us – men and women – created the first guide for conscientious objectors in 1991, which is becoming relevant again, especially because of Croatia's new military politics, which again intends to introduce mandatory military service. There is also another point I would like to mention here and in doing so I will quote Cynthia Enloe, actually her passage from the paper "Demilitarization or More of the Same" from 2002:

By agreeing to the ideology of militarism, every person, institution, or community also accepts a very specific package of beliefs¹ about how the world works, about what defines human nature (Enloe 2002:23).

Addressing the second issue, the problem of non-violence in a moment of deep human devastation and fractures along many axes today – existential and ontological – does this take the risk of misunderstanding, rejection, listening, and complete condemnation of the peaceful imagination of peace and the right to achieve it? Is advocacy for peace merely the privileged space of geopolitical power masters, those who create militaristic and peace scenarios according to their political and war calculations, who determine the temporal rhythm of war, peace, or so-called peace or ceasefire, while ultimately in peace negotiations and at

¹ Some of beliefs on the trail of Enloe's reflections belong to principled 'common sense assumptions' such as those that military solutions in various conflicts are legitimate and effective, or that 'enemies' are an integral part of human existence and history. Some of them, on the other hand, refer to gender archetypal features, such as that during a war men should defend their homeland or militarily protect women.

the negotiation tables, the absence of women in peace building is evident? Nothing is more illustrative than an artistic installation by the prominent Israeli artist Sigalit Landau, called *The Peace Cut* (Landau 2019) which was a symbol of resistance much earlier, during slavery in America in the 18th and 19th centuries, scattered in various forms on the sandbars of Neve Midbar beach at the Dead Sea, symbolizing this impossibility, this empty space for women, or rather the disallowance of women's participation in peace negotiations.

Here I want to briefly share a recent story of long-term peace friendship between Palestinian and Israeli peace activists. Although the commitment to peace and co-existence has marked the engagement of nearly a dozen peace and feminist organizations in those areas for the last forty years, today almost nothing is said about it, as if nothing ever existed, as if the friendship between Israeli and Palestinian women has been erased. This needs to be spoken about again in these days. On October 4, 2023, in Jerusalem, just a few days before Hamas carried out a horrific massacre of Israeli civilians at a music festival in the Negev desert near the Gaza Strip border, and before Israel's brutal so-called revenge escalated into genocidal forms against the Palestinian people, feminists organized a peace gathering. Several hundred women, initiated by two organizations, Israeli "Women Wage Peace" and Palestinian "Women of the Sun", gathered around the Monument of Tolerance in Jerusalem. During the peace march, they toured all of Jerusalem, walked to the end of the Goldman Promenade in the Jerusalem district of Armon Hanatziv, and then took a bus to Neve Midbar beach at the Dead Sea. There, a peace mat was laid out. What we know is that not only was the table left empty of any possibility for a peace solution by women, but tens of thousands of human beings, female and male Palestinians, are being killed and displaced based on the principle and the *obtuse right of the stronger* on necropolitics, while the practice of occupation continues to function through destruction and obliteration in those areas.

How can we find any justification today for these acts – this is the question we all have to ask – any justification for war, violence, killing, occupation, destruction, ethnic cleansing, or genocide? What can be justified around this? What is even justifiable about it? How is it possible that military actions create war destruction as a ‘civilizational normality’, as if we lived in a ‘normal’ situation where patterns of inhumanity are established to unimaginable scales, becoming generally socially acceptable? How is it possible to get used to this?

We know that war is a political act, not strictly a militaristic action, just as violence or permanent production of violence cannot stop violence. There is no possibility to put an end to the violence in the Gaza Strip, a remarkable postcolonial theorist, Gayatri Ch. Spivak, recently reminded us², until the colonizing conditions of its maintenance are resolved. How can we in the midst of the human havoc that we are witnessing today, speak without censorship about anti-war activism and the meaning of anti-war resistance, interdependence, responsibility, the value of life, and ideas in sociality? And what compels us to persist in the politics of peace and the concept of nonviolence within the devastation of war?

Responsibility and Responsiveness: How to Act Against Violence?

What can I do? What have they already done to each other? What takes precedence when it comes to my responsibility, or who takes place in my responsibility before the other? These are just some of the hypothetical questions to which the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas appeals in his essay *Peace and Proximity* (Levinas 1999:142), calling upon the conscience of each of us in order to enable interpersonal touch as a modus of implicit

² As Maung Zarni explained: “Professor Spivak speaks on the root cause of the unceasing waves of violence against and by Israel when she points out that the violence by the colonizer/oppressor violence generates violence by the colonized/oppressed. To end this, the colonial conditions must first end” (Spivak 2024).

and binding responsibility toward the other. Responsibility thus appears as a space of self-questioning in the search for possible action. On the other hand, Judith Butler clearly states that the act of deprivation of another person's life means "the annihilation of one's own" (Butler 2009:xxvi). Not just my own life, but the meaning that my life carries, and that is from the very beginning, always a social life. This is how she, by introducing this almost curved truth about war confrontation and analyzing the relations between Israel and Palestine in her book *Frames of War: When Life Is Grievable* (Ibid.), made visible the intrinsic connection between killing any human being and killing the idea of sociability as a precondition for life itself.

War is always the killing of people and the annulment of humanity and the tacit abandonment of the human community. Here I invoke Emmanuel Levinas and Judith Butler and Edward W. Said. By repeatedly exposing this thought, almost in a Levinasian way, I pose the question: How much does this *truth* bind me, and in what way? What type of obligations does it place before me, especially in the midst of war, when human suffering is a true testimony to the fragility of this *truth*? How does the right to life of every human being resonate within militaristic 'normality'? How is it possible to dispossess people of humanity in the name of war-capitalist greed³ or racist obsession? How is it possible not to connect the destructiveness of violence with its obvious effects on human beings amidst the devastation of war? What hinders the power of nonviolence?

Nonviolence is an ethical position that lies at the core of the political field, implying places from the common human register, such as vulnerability and interdependence, understanding and respect, the equal lives of all⁴. Here I turn to a proposition, which

3 Today 'greed' is an illustrative term word for what is happening now, and what one of the powerful figures, like Donald J. Trump, President of the United States, tells us about his ambitions to occupy the territories of other sovereign states

4 It means that we are equal and we should be equal in every sense: Palestinians and Palestinian women, as are Israelis and Israeli women, like every one else at national and global level.

means that what we truly need now is the concept of radical equality. As human beings we need to be radically equal. It always brings us back to the question of who we are as humans, what is considered a human being and human action. Every human life is “a node in the network of other, emotionally entangled, human lives”, as Aleksandar Hemon wrote back then in 2005 reflecting on the possibility of hope after the genocide in Srebrenica. Hope, another huge issue. In the book *The Force of Nonviolence and Ethical Political Binding* (2020), Judith Butler shows how the ethics of nonviolence is always connected to the broader political struggle for social equality, but also for freedom.

Towards Feminist Positioning and Transnational Solidarity

Therefore, it is the stake of feminist positioning of significance here – either through the articulation of peace politics or through critical action, public non-violent resistance or transnational solidarity with others. Never before has solidarity been more urgently needed (Mohanty 2003; Kašić 2024). Acting as a feminist always means taking responsibility for one’s own position at a very specific moment. Right now I am thinking of Virginia Woolf who, in her iconic work *Three Guineas*, published in 1938, raised her voice against the folly of the Second World War, the growth of fascism and imperialist appetites, mocking the hypocrisy of the Arthur Education Foundation and its male authority when it comes to matters of war. Emphasizing at the same time that “war is a profession; a source of happiness and excitement; as well as an opportunity to express the qualities of masculinity”, and that there is no weapon to impose militaristic will upon women, she very decisively address her response:

You have to answer young people so that they hate war. You have to teach them to feel the inhumanity of war, the savagery, the unacceptability of war (Woolf 1938: 31).

She, like many feminist critics of militarism after her, warned both about the toxic forms of patriarchal masculinity that it mobilizes

and about the devastating influence of military logic on all social relations and conflicts. This is so evident nowadays although the militaristic ethos in connection with the open support of the social hierarchies of the new powers seems to be dawning more and more. We are faced with the expansion of a reactionary political repertoire that, as Sandro Mezzadra would say, combines militaristic projects with social repression, more precisely with the strengthening of gender and racial hierarchies, the exclusion of migrants, the undermining of women's human rights as well as the rights of people of a different sexual orientation, all under the guise of the threat of war.

Isn't this time the one that calls for resistance and joint action, the one that calls for transnational solidarity, the one that activates a hope?

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CHAPTER 2

The Rise of Militant Patriarchy and Feminist Responsibility for Peace

The Rise of Militant Patriarchy and Feminist Responsibility for Peace

Abstract

In this paper I will address the topic on the rise of militant patriarchy and feminist responsibility for peace. New governance methods affirm authoritarian and totalitarian practices of oriental despotisms on one hand, and, on the other, a disturbing retreat of liberalism and the set of values generated by it. The era of extremes is radicalizing to the point of breaking. The level of human rights, after an epic, decades-long struggle for gender equality and the general equality of all vulnerable groups, is being annulled, both within national policies and cultures and within the international order. Following the path of the great Greek poet Konstandinos Kavafis, responsible humanist thinkers, particularly sensitized to recognize the masculinized militaristic codes that announce the regression of the world and global pauperization, are called to recognize the diabolization of the world on the horizon of radical negative transformation of the achieved level of universal emancipation, while on the streets outside the people hear nothing.

Introduction: On Militaristic Voices in Today's Time

I wish that the topic which I will address in the paper entitled "The Rise of Militant Patriarchy and Feminist Responsibility for Peace" would still indicate some interest from the male world in losing their position. But we still have a lot of work to do to create a world of gender equality. However, our voices will be heard beyond these militaristic voices we hear every day. I'm surely not to be the only one who, in these difficult times, in general, opts for world peace and, for the direction of further human development, which is the topic that the great Irish poet William Butler Yeats focused on back in 1919 in his prophetic

poem *The Second Coming*. Allow me to remind you of it and explain why I want to begin my presentation with these lines:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre,
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.
Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in the sands of the desert
A shape with a lion's body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all around it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born.

We are living in that time. The center has broken, there is no center anymore, everything has fallen apart, and the worst are swelling with intensity, while the best are doing nothing. In that sense, it may sound dramatic, but our time is one of possible epochal transformations.

What confuses and worries us is whether it is possible for human history to be turned upside down in such a short period of time. I want to remind you of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Back then, leading sovietologists, kremlinologists, and experts on the Soviet empire predicted that the Soviet Union would collapse slowly, that it would take time, that the economy would eventually fail to support that bureaucratic citadel; yet, metaphorically speaking, the Soviet Union collapsed overnight. So, we should not be confused by the fact that the arrival of a new tenant at the White House on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington has caused such tremors, tsunamis, that are changing the vector of human history. It's not because of his superior power, but simply due to the constellation of forces that created the conditions for such politics to come to power in the United States.

What are we actually witnessing? We are witnessing a process of de-socialization. When I say this, I mean the idea of these new oligarchies that want us to forget the idea of society, the idea of inclusion, and the idea of social justice. On track of such thinking, it seems that our life on earth is merely something that grew from the animal kingdom, and that the Darwinism of the animal world should simply be transformed into social Darwinism for the human world, where the stronger rather than better take everything. The root of this idea lies in the politics of two politicians, Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. When Margaret Thatcher, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1979 to 1990 and Leader of the Conservative Party, wanted to suppress the British miners' strike 1987, she said the worst possible sentence, "What is society? There is no such thing as society". Now, Donald J. Trump, the President of the United States, is the offspring of that school of thought. What society? I'll take everything I can take. I'll take Greenland, Canada, some of it may be just a rhetorical

figure, some may not take me seriously, but in the meantime, I'll do something about it. Here I rephrase his statements. This is not a conspiracy theory, but rather the reality we are living. The idea is that whoever is stronger, everything belongs to them. In the end, this ideology has resulted in a team created by Mr. Trump, a team that has the goal of precisely destroying sociality, destroying any form of justice. And the worst part of all is that many people, within this telekinetic and mega-virtual civilization, which is now governed by his main partners, within this literally terrorizing idea, can be accepted with little resistance.

The proclamation of James David Vance, the Vice President of the United States, pronounced at the recent Munich Security Conference¹ is on that track, when he scolded Europe, saying that Europe is actually reducing freedom of expression. Does that mean that America supposedly has absolute freedom of expression, while Europe does not? This is the biggest trap. Let us imagine what might be happen when a political movement has harnessed all of its instruments, so that the AFD [Alternative für Deutschland], the fascist party in Germany, can achieve the best results, when right-wingers supposedly advocate for freedom of speech. By this 'advocacy' for freedom of expression he is actually advocating for the freedom of lies. Namely, to allow anything to be published, and for lies to become the truth of our existence. This is the ideology of the neo-Trump right and his friends in the European Union. If we publish everything, then we, as masters of this contemporary civilization, are creating the possibility for people to believe our lies as truths. And then, the most extreme ideologies—racist ideologies, chauvinistic ideologies, neo-fascist ideologies—can triumph, and all under the banner of something so dangerous, yet clearly not transparent to many. It is all presented as a normal occurrence. Namely, the worst discourses have been normalized – so what? What's the problem? The problem for citizens of the world is that many of them realize they voted wrong when it's too late.

1 The 61st Munich Security Conference (MSC) took place from February 14 to 16, 2025.

Conditions For a Permanent War: The Role of the West

Why have post-fascist and neo-fascist ideologies achieved such results in the heart of liberal democracy? In Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and other countries. A possible answer would be because this narrative of right-wing extremism has been normalized. And in enabling and doing so, migration has occurred as the biggest problem. The simplified approach to migrants, reduced to crude formulas that attributed vile traits to these humiliated and insulted individuals, helped construct a media-driven and politically engineered fear of the Other – a fear that became both a necessary and sufficient condition for many in the West, amidst existential and other anxieties, stripped of respect for differences and deprived of emotional self-regulation, to start voting for extremist movements.

We're still on the ground where nothing seems wrong. These are conditions for a permanent war or conditions for a peace that will be war. What right do I have to interpret these conditions? History gives us the right. History gives us the right to say that when radical right-wing parties came to power, they didn't want to let go of power. These are parties riding on the spin of their own decadence. They don't want to stop ruling. Emergency is their natural state. Who guarantees us that one day, if the AFD gets more votes in Germany and takes power, they will ever organize elections again? Who guarantees us that US president Trump will ever organize elections again, as he told the citizens that these might be the last elections they participate in? Here is my fear. The fear of a permanent global state of emergency in which global militant patriarchy has advanced. It has advanced from all directions. And in this sense, feminist politics for all is needed. Particularly now, when in the heart of liberal democracy the worst and most liberal traditions have emerged. We always believed that authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, oriental despotisms, prevented the further development of freedom, but now, the worst authoritarian practices are growing at the heart of the very type of democracy that prides itself on being 'the best of all worlds'. People are voting for parties that do not

respect inclusion, do not respect human rights, that try to take us back to some unfriendly worlds, even though we know that the level of freedom, justice, and human rights that has been achieved is the boundary that every society should move beyond. That is the starting line from which society should progress. But unfortunately, we are clearly regressing, and we will have to reclaim some of the worlds we have conquered. So, the situation is quite demanding, it is quite complex, and this idea of the center raises the following questions.

The West is the birthplace of theory. But what are we going to refer to now? What are we going to refer to in the post-Trump world? What can we refer to? To these universities where he banned gender studies? The idea of de-centering the world would be good if it had emerged as a result of liberal democracy reaching some maximum, and if now that idea spread around the world in concentric circles. The idea of human rights, first and foremost democracy, individual freedom, freedom in general, slowly conquering the world, so that every corner of the world becomes a center. The ideal world would be one where there is no center, but every part of the world is a center. This is the peace trajectory that a Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung also advocated. But now, de-centering is happening at the worst possible moment, in which, within the center, there is a desire to form the most dangerous, narrow, neoliberal oligarchic center that will govern all processes. That is why we do not have the luxury of distance. We do not have the luxury of waiting for ten, twenty, or thirty years so that we can analyze in peace what happened. We are called to act simultaneously in an activist manner and, through activist action, to produce theory.

There is no time, there is simply no other time. That is why production of feminist theories matters now since they offer scientific and value-based perspective on the world that challenges existing traditional patterns of world interpretation. This is a difficult time, but it is a time of great challenges. Let's create a world where we will defend our ideas, regardless of which language and in which part of the world they are created. Why

not fight for a new, let's call it a post-capitalist Renaissance of science, so that instead of publishing our works in an important world-known publishing house, we might be producing as much quality knowledge as possible for our local worlds? Or will we again accept practices that make it possible for the worst form of capitalism to win?

My freedom to name the latest political processes as processes of fascization of the world arises, as I've already said, from the lived history that doesn't allow us to treat it as just a simple appendage of liberal democracy. Liberal democracy made a big mistake by allowing these liberal ideologies to triumph without resistance. Let us not forget that moment of emergency, that moment that simply comes to us from history as a danger we must not allow. The war in Gaza, the war in Ukraine, these are elements that actually prolong this state of emergency, produced by the dominant, ruling militaristic elites of the world, and we should not be ashamed or afraid of the questions that arise from reality, which somewhere try to place the peace agenda within that.

What are those questions? Well, there are questions that, in the time we live in, have no answers. We cannot, right now, predict the situation about the war in Ukraine; this is a completely, how would I say, aporetic question. And here we have two aporias. One is that Ukraine can have peace tomorrow if it agrees that Russia will take part of its territory. And then it will have peace. This is what Kenneth Waltz, the great neorealist theorist of international relations, would say: every country in the world can have peace if it agrees to capitulate. So, what language should we use to name this if we say that killing stops, there are no crimes, no bombs, grenades, drones, and so on? The price of Ukraine's peace in this scenario is the loss of 20% of its territory. Who has the right to say what is right? That's the first aporia. The second aporia is that Ukraine does not want to lose its territory. If that were possible through peace now and immediately, that would be a great option. But does that mean the attempt to reclaim lost territory in Ukraine? Does that mean the continuation of a war with no end? Well, it seems it does. Or is this a war that will end when the

main creators of the war receive contracts to exploit Ukrainian resources with the support of the American military-industrial complex that will continue to feed Ukraine to keep fighting? Any answer given by someone who is outside of this world simply seems unfair. I am most inclined to think that the Ukrainians themselves must make the decision about this. But when I say the Ukrainians, that cannot just include the leadership in Ukraine. A mechanism must be found to offer additional support to this or that solution. Offering solutions from the outside is a problem. If this aporia prevails, that we have peace, but Ukraine no longer has the sovereignty it once had, that it is reduced, this means that we, as a human community, have abandoned the Helsinki Accords adopted at the European Security and Cooperation Conference in Helsinki in 1975, in accordance with which borders between states must not be changed by force. If this happens, who guarantees that there won't be attempts to violently change borders in the Balkans? There is no change of borders without violence. The only exception was the division between the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

And now, when we have a new ruling nomenclature in the world for whom sovereignty means nothing, where tomorrow the President of the United States can send Navy SEALs to take Greenland and within two hours they can finish that, it literally means the end of the story about sovereignty. According to political scientist Francis Harry Hinsley, sovereignty is a political issue for which the most people have been killed in human history. And this is an important element, but the problem is that sovereignty is truly 'the salt of our lives' in which borders are the main criteria. Can we build a world without borders? That would be the best thing for peacemakers. And now we are facing the situation that people who don't know each other at all, are killing each other because of the idea of borders. How many people have died in Russia, in Ukraine, Russians and Ukrainians alike. How will that stop? The problem is, would thus established peace in Ukraine create conditions for the reproduction of violence elsewhere, in some other parts of the world? Or would

this, regardless of the change of borders, be the beginning of the end of changing the world by changing borders? I doubt it.

Many local scoundrels have been encouraged by such politics coming from Washington, with a strong belief that they have the support to do things that will no longer be punishable. This is the biggest problem created by this new global post-fascist alliance. This alliance is also convinced that it must stop the free flow of people. While capital isn't stopped, the free flow of people is, which is very interesting. So, what do we need 'these hordes of foreigners' from other worlds for? A significant damage has already been done. People who, through some curricula of liberal democracy, have learned about pluralism and some form of mutual control and empathy with other people who arrived, actually a large number of them, have been infected by this story, by this culture of fear of the other. One obvious consequence of this is that this creates conditions for the reproduction of nationalism.

What Can Be Done? We Need Allies in Multilateral Organisations

So, what can be done in such a world? This is a world that has changed so much that a parallel comes to mind. A famous sociologist, Anthony Giddens, once said that Karl Marx believed the working class would bury capitalism, but unfortunately, capitalism buried the working class. Now, why do I say this? Because I want to make a comparison with Francis Fukuyama, who in the 1992 published his book *The End of History and the Last Man*, where he argued that humanity is living at the end of its institutional history, that liberal democracy is the end of the world in terms of institutional and normative political development, that nothing better can come after liberal democracy, and that over time, liberal democracy would only perfect itself and become the norm of our world. And he made a colossal mistake. Instead of liberal democracy burying totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, we are witnessing the burial of liberal democracy by totalitarian and

authoritarian regimes. And in such an environment, producing feminist politics is the greatest possible undertaking. How is it possible to produce such politics? In my opinion, our main ally must be multilateralism, namely international organizations or in short, an international institutionalism. Unfortunately, the burial of international organizations has begun, whether they are national, but act internationally, like the U.S. Agency for International Development [USAID], or many other international organizations that are losing crucial resources for their missions, visions, and goals. Many little fascists lurk in our countries, clapping for the dismantling of these organizations. In addition to this, many people in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Balkans can't stand those of us who are now considering these ideas seriously. One reason is because we are hitting at the foundations of patriarchy. Violence will always be on the agenda of militant patriarchy. Absolutely and always. And we have no choice but to fight against it with our knowledge and skills. My proposal is: When you want to do something, it must be significant. You shouldn't aim for small things.

Three issues are of significance here.

Firstly, it is extremely important for us that international organizations are remain². And multilateralism as a way of acting. The United Nations, despite its sluggishness and handicaps, has been the only major organization to act in Palestine. Despite all resistance, it is the only one to have acted in a way that advocates human, social, and international justice. So, if we abolish that, we are left without the main instrument for building peace. After all, in this post-Cold War world, the United Nations created the

2 I wonder why this Conference or organizations like TPO and others from the region do not send an important letter to the UN Secretary General in this dramatic time, namely a letter of encouragement for the survival of international organizations? It is important, because the United Nations are threatened with extinction just like the League of Nations. History is changing in a day. If the President of the US, D. Trump immediately after the announcement of his victory were to say, "There is no more unification. America won't be part of that", or "Who are the United Nations to sign my agreement with Putin on peace in Ukraine? Who are the United Nations?" everything is possible. These are not just foolish things. That's the world we live in.

peace-building framework that is vital. We must rely on that and create new peace agendas for the world that will cover other areas of activity, not just security and peace operations. It is, in fact, extremely important for the feminist movement to show a strong interest in issues that are exclusively treated as male concerns – issues of security, force, militarism, and so on. That's why feminist figures are so important, because this power dynamic must not remain in male hands. There needs to be a different description of that, a different analysis of that. In that sense, this would be a gesture that makes sense, because António Guterres, the current Secretary-General of the United Nations, who is more of a momentary worker than a politician, is aware that there are objective threats within the UN. These threats can always be expressed through financial collapse, but behind it, there are many symbolic actions from these militant structures that would most like to break it. In my book *Rasprava o miru i nasilju* [*Debate on Peace and Violence*] (2016), I wrote that perhaps we are entering an era in which the people of the world who are not bound by nationality, whose belonging to an ethno-national community is not the main criterion of existence, may want to have their own assembly that articulates their common interests, beyond borders. We must leave open the possibilities for utopian ideas. We must leave open the possibility that after the UN, there may be a need to create an international organization that will be more individual-based, rather than state-based. In that sense, this is some kind of plea for the UN. Another important institutional entity is the European Union. Despite everything, it is necessary to save and develop the European Union as a cosmopolitan trajectory. A great German sociologist, Ulrich Beck (2008), advocated the idea of Europe as a cosmopolitan trajectory, without borders, which attracts people and universalizes itself as a pluralistic entity of all people. I am very close to Beck's idea. There are also other ideas generated from classical geopolitics, which say that the European Union must have its own borders, that it must establish its own territory. I don't think that is the future of the European Union. The European Union has no territory. Those are the territories of national states

that make up the European Union. The European Union should remain and develop as a national entity with the hope that, in the future, the children of our children in some utopian vision will live in a European republic. That perhaps, through the United States of Europe, we will one day become united and radically equal citizens of the European Union.

The second important issue, aside from this with the United Nations, is an 'anti-feminist feminism'. When I say 'anti-feminist feminism', I'm referring to the fact that that we face more women leaders in Europe and beyond, who are clearly anti-feminist. Alice E. Weidel, President of AFD, Giorgia Meloni, the Prime Minister of Italy, and, unfortunately Annalena Baerbock, the President of the Green Party, formerly the most pacifist party in Germany, appear with some very militant statements. What do we do with this? Now we've entered an era in which militant patriarchy will affirm such women. We are also entering an era in which the new rulers of the world will give money to the *men praying on their knees* in Zagreb and elsewhere. These anti-gender organizations are now forming around the world, including also in Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina. We are entering a time in which the idea of human rights, protecting vulnerable groups, and building a better world through civil society as a mediator in that building will change its sign. That's why I've always been theoretically opposed to considering backward, regressive right-wing organizations as part of civil society.

A new era is coming, because the actors of those ideologies will easily create projects to affirm that the old conservative world, and money will start flowing for that further regression of the world. That's why we need allies who we will always find a meaningful existence in these multilateral organizations and, of course, in those countries that, at least at some point, feminized their foreign policies. A great role model that supports this is former Swedish Foreign Minister Margot Wallström. She established a paradigmatic feminist foreign policy. She managed to put it on the agenda of international organizations that the most important foreign policy issues should be the fight against

sexual violence, for example, and the fight for women's quotas in international organizations where decisions are made, and so on. Unfortunately, a new conservative Swedish government, and sadly Scandinavia as such, has neglected this wave of extreme right-wing politics, and they've abandoned this progressive path. Swedish foreign policy is no longer officially called feminist, yet promised not to lower these already established standards.

The third important issue, in fact, is where feminism can act, imagine and bring about transformations without any prior doubt about what is being done. I know where I live, in peace, no one is guilty. Yet I know I live in a real world, and I am very aware of that. The agendas of militarism and nationalism are the strongest, but despite that, I will act to counter them. Sometimes things can be done, sometimes results have been achieved. In this regard, the important issue for our time and for feminist peace politics is the area of peace agreements. What are peace agreements? A German philosopher Immanuel Kant (2007) says that no treaty should be considered a peace agreement if it contains the cause of some future war. Most of our agreements are like that. The Dayton Peace Agreement is like that, although it is praised for the fact that for three decades, violence has not broken out, but it is simply a peace agreement that contains the seeds of a potential future war.

Feminist Peace Politics and Peace Agreements

So what is the moment where feminist peace politics can, in my opinion, make an important breakthrough? It is, however, deeply connected with power. Galtung talks about this brilliantly. Despite leaving an immortal legacy behind in peace studies and peacebuilding, he believes that the most important resource for human transformation is power. There is military, political, economic, technological power, but peace power is also power, if one knows how to use it. If it creates the conditions for us to use it. For me, one of the potential conditions of that power is to forge alliances with the United Nations and international multilateral

organizations. By insisting on it, by undertaking efforts to make feminist politics take over those organizations. Many of them have a niche of openness for such things.

Coming to peace agreements, the question is how they are achieved. They are in principle achieved through talks with warring parties to reach some kind of peace, which in theory is called negative peace, because it only means the absence of violence. The war is over, the armies retreat to barracks, and now we enter a time of negative peace, which in many peace agreements is the only kind. And it very often remains almost forever. For example, the peace agreement in Bosnia and Herzegovina is a real example of that: we've lived in negative peace for thirty years. There is no development that would lead to achieving human rights, equality, freedom for all, justice, a country of unity, pluralism, and so on. It is simply a "passive peace", let's call it that way. It is the peace brought by diplomats, but in one way or another, it also includes politicians and soldiers. Civil peace, to which peacekeepers belong, the peace created by civil organizations, civil structures, individuals, groups, and so on, remains for later. And it always remains for later. Thus we should create conditions at the international level so that these peace talks simultaneously include the idea of positive peace, i.e. they include the presence of these civil society actors, since peace is not just the end of the war, but involves immediate creative transformations of society that lead to the building of positive peace. This is the place where women, who are always absent from peace processes, appear. To be present while discussing ammunition, weaponry, and also to affirm the horizontal connections that will emerge in post-conflict society, where people who were once divided will reunite, connect, and so on, because the time of war has passed.

This is something that the American peace theorist John Paul Lederach calls a *haiku moment*, a concept that is extraordinarily important for peacebuilders. To be more precise, a different idea that suddenly appears, that tries to bring a kind of disorder into traditional patterns and enables to move forward. For example, in peace negotiations, the most recognized peacebuilders from

opposing sides participate; those people who are recognized in different communities. Very often, simply because we remain stuck in that 'negative peace' brought by diplomats, we do nothing. When the implementation of the agreement starts, and again I refer to Bosnia, very often these international actors, who have lived in Bosnia for thirty years, have never spoken to the Bosnian members. In reality, it is a learned peace, lessons that come as learned from any kind of conflict, and not something that is in interaction with the local people. Acting in this regard requires some strength, some kind of cheerfulness, and a belief that we live in a world in which everyone is equal. Only with that belief, that we live in a world in which everyone is equal, and not in a world of patriarchy, we actually approach these ideas. In this respect, I see the struggle in times of war despite many of those who will say: 'Now is the time of war', and so on.

A Turn Towards the Humanities and Social Sciences

In the midst of a battle we cannot stop, we fight for emancipation. That is why I insist so strongly on the deep connection between leftist ideologies and liberal democracy. There is much confusion regarding terminology; people think differently. Some radical leftists, when you mention liberal democracy, immediately equate it with neoliberal hegemony and the worst practices of exploitation. When I think of liberal democracy, I start from the political philosophy of liberalism, from the idea of freedom. Today, the idea of freedom, civil rights, human rights, the protection of vulnerable groups, and so on – this whole corpus of ideas and practices that constitute liberal democracy – is directed toward a civic political community as a possible common ground for both liberal and leftist ideologies that do not fall into the fire of extremism. Without this alliance, with the ideological deepening of the divide between liberalism and the left, the ideological conflict will permanently harm the left, just as it has already harmed liberalism. How can the new fascism, which is, among other things, precisely a result of capitalist social Darwinism as the antechamber of fascism, be better than, theoretically and

metaphorically speaking, the best communism? How can a good Western world be built if, at some point, there is an open and clear coalition of centrist parties with radical right-wing, extremist ideologies?

Let me explain further. In my view, one of the main reasons for the rise of post-fascist and neo-fascist policies is the global neglect of the humanities and social sciences. Complete acquiescence to the monopoly of the system, and to the monopoly of a technicalization of the world in which we have completely lost awareness of society, awareness of the human. States have even abolished programs in social and human sciences – whoever wants to pay for them, the state won't anymore. This has led to such a regression that, while we face a complete flourishing of the technical mind which has dominated the processes, society has become alienated. We don't have any more knowledge of the societies we live in. These societies are ruled by *raw power*, the naked force now represented by the U.S. President Trump and various neoliberal hegemony who think that this is how it should be – a ruling elite interested only in money, money, and money. An elite that should be in the hands of a family, ten people, and so on. The rest will simply be a degraded class. That's why I consider the return of humanities and social sciences, and education in those fields, to be of great importance if we are to save the world. Without getting into critical thinking about the triumph of this mega-virtual civilization, without knowledge and social sciences and humanities, the production of these rigid ideologies will continue. One of the reasons for this is the fact that these ideologies need nothing; extreme nationalist ideologies don't need knowledge, but promotion the advantage through media channels. Nothing else. And this, in my opinion, can be an instrument of feminist politics regardless of the fact that it will be dismissed within the neoliberal discourse.

Also, we have to be aware that the time has come for the economy. We are in fact all hostages of the idea of profits. What have we agreed to is that the economy, or profit, dictates everything. Why shouldn't social justice be the ultimate criterion of the economy?

Why does it have to be profit? Somehow we have completely lost track, and that's why I'm advocating for the return of social and humanitarian sciences. Somewhere we lost much of what is offered within those interpretations of the world. The film director Jasmila Žbanić recently made an impressive documentary film about Emerik Blum, the great pre-war director of Energoinvest. Energoinvest was a world-class company of the socialist Yugoslavia and socialist Bosnia, which achieved incredible results worldwide, which in the 1970s had its own internal internet with email addresses connecting all Energoinvest branches worldwide, which operated on the entire continent and, to use today's language, acted like a capitalist company in production, however, the ultimate result of that company was not profit but rather investment in people and social rights. Let's not accept the idea that this is a finished story, that this is a done deal, that this is some historical epoch that is now in the trash heap of history. I truly don't want us to be people who will believe that the idea of seven people in the world having more money and power than the whole world is in the trash heap of history.

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CHAPTER 3

Women, War, Economy

Women, War, Economy

Abstract

The war in Ukraine and the prospect of war resurging in other parts of Europe have prompted repeated calls for the development of a European “war economy”. A war economy is typically understood as a state-supported subordination of the economy to military needs. Historically, it has been praised for its ability to generate political consensus and mobilize resources, but also criticized as a deviation from market forces. Less visible, but equally important, the war economy is known for transforming gender relations, though not always in the same way: it may pull women into defense production or relegate them to household labor and the informal economy to make room for men. Moreover, feminist perspectives on war are much broader than conventional ones and regard the war economy as having far-reaching implications beyond the production of weapons and ammunition, including, for example, the humanitarian industry, the care economy, and the militarization of everyday life. As there are currently no discussions in Europe about how a new war economy might affect already existing significant threats to gender equality and feminist politics, this presentation will address the often-neglected gender aspects of the war economy in its various forms. Feminist international political economy can create opportunities for broader conversations that would allow women and feminist activists to shape the war economy rather than be marginalized or instrumentalized, as has often been the case in recent conflicts and post-conflict recovery programs.

Introduction

This text was written in a time of heightened global instability. It seeks to draw parallels between the escalating geopolitical crises across the world and a deepening crisis of social reproduction – one that calls into question the capacity of societies to sustain life itself. While my remarks focus primarily on contemporary developments in the Western Balkans and broader Europe, they are informed by feminist political economy and feminist security studies, as well as by empirical research across a range of historical and geographic contexts.

In the weeks leading up to the conference “Gender and Peace in the Balkans”, the world appeared to be entering a period of profound convulsion. At the Munich Security Conference in February 2025, there were indications that the United States was retreating from its role as Europe’s principal security guarantor, even as new conflicts loomed on the continent. Negotiations over a potential resolution to the war in Ukraine were taking place between the United States and Russia – significantly, without the participation of Ukraine itself or its NATO-aligned European partners. Meanwhile, Israel appeared poised to annex the West Bank following the destruction of Gaza. The decades-old Assad regime in Syria finally collapsed, but its successor – comprised largely of former Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham [HTS] militants – offered no clear future for the war-torn country. Across Asia and Africa, new and long-simmering conflicts continued to unsettle states large and small. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, paramilitary forces from Rwanda – a country with its own history of genocide, akin to Bosnia and Herzegovina – marched across the border. In a bid to secure favor with the re-elected U.S. President Donald J. Trump, the Congolese president reportedly offered access to the country’s rare earth minerals, echoing Ukrainian President Zelensky’s earlier overtures in the summer of 2024.

Amid these global dynamics, the Western Balkans remained mired in endemic instability. Serbia was witnessing student protests, while the Balkans’ fragmented states engaged in

opportunistic exchanges of arms, natural resources, real estate, and strategic commodities such as lithium with actors as diverse as Russia, Israel, Ukraine, Germany, and the United States. For ordinary people, survival continued to hinge on navigating treacherous political terrain shaped by shifting borders, opaque violence, and resurgent ethno-nationalism. To borrow the words of my colleague Nerzuk Ćurak (2002), geopolitics appears to have become the fate of most people in the world – except, perhaps, for the small number of powerful men who govern them.

The Crisis of Social Reproduction

In this geopolitical turmoil, it is easy to overlook the deeper structural crisis that underlies it: a crisis of social reproduction. Social reproduction refers to the array of activities and relationships involved in sustaining life on a daily and generational basis (Bakker 2007). These include biological reproduction, the production and maintenance of labor power, caregiving, and the nurturing of human relationships. Feminist scholars such as Juanita Elias and Shirin M. Rai (2019) have described it simply as the production of life itself. This labor is overwhelmingly performed by women—not because they are naturally predisposed to it, but because the gendered organization of capitalism has historically assigned unpaid reproductive labor to women in the household, while positioning men as wage earners in the formal economy.

Feminist political economists have argued persuasively that social reproduction is in crisis globally. The transformations of capitalism since the 1970s – particularly the increasing incorporation of women into formal labor markets – have disrupted the traditional gendered division of labor and profoundly altered familial and social relations. Women’s roles have become more diverse and complex, but they also rely increasingly on the labor of other women, particularly migrants from poorer regions, to sustain their households.

Care work has become a transnational, market-driven sector, embedded in global circuits of inequality (Prügl 2020).

At the same time, reproductive sectors such as education and healthcare have been feminized and devalued. For example, although women constitute the majority of educators, the status of the teaching profession has declined significantly. A colleague at this conference cited Serbia as an illustrative case: despite having more women than men with doctoral degrees, the Serbian Academy of Sciences remains overwhelmingly male. As women enter certain professions, they often find that the standards for recognition rise – or that the professions themselves lose prestige.

Europe’s Reproductive Crisis and the Migration-Care Nexus

These dynamics are especially pronounced in Europe. In Western Europe, decades of neoliberal restructuring have undermined the welfare state, while Eastern European countries have faced complex post-socialist transitions. The combined effects of the EU enlargement, the 2008 financial crisis, and subsequent austerity measures have severely reduced public investment in healthcare, childcare, education, and social welfare. The consequences are stark: birth rates have decreased even as the elderly and disabled populations have grown. Many regions, particularly in Eastern Europe, are experiencing acute depopulation (Krastev 2020). Youth unemployment remains high, delaying the formation of new households and families, while marriage rates fall and economic stagnation persists.

A recent McKinsey report (Madgavkar et al. 2025) warns that Europe’s demographic decline could reduce GDP per capita by approximately \$10,000 over the next 25 years. Labor shortages in care-related sectors have been offset by the recruitment of migrants and refugees from conflict zones. This reliance on foreign labor, however, fuels right-wing narratives of a “great replacement”, which frame migration as a demographic invasion

by people of different races and religions. In reality, these anxieties reflect deeper vulnerabilities and structural dependencies: in some Western European cities, immigrants now comprise over half of all healthcare workers. Within OECD (2023), 24% of doctors are foreign-born.

The Pandemic and the Acceleration of Crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed and intensified these vulnerabilities (Mezzadri 2020). Healthcare systems were pushed to the brink, and care workers – nurses, doctors, teachers, transport workers – were momentarily valorized as essential. Yet this recognition was fleeting. As public attention shifted, inflation and rising interest rates suppressed real wages, and the political will to invest in social reproduction quickly evaporated. Instead, European countries turned more aggressively toward peripheral regions to fill care labor shortages. Nations such as Ukraine, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and others in the Middle East, have become essential to Europe’s reproductive infrastructure, though often at the expense of their own societies. According to a Pillars of Health report (2022), Germany imported as many as 200,000 nurses since 2013, 17.3% of whom came from the Western Balkans, representing 29.3% of nurses in the region itself. The move was facilitated by the Western Balkan Regulation of 2016, which opened Germany’s labor market to “Western Balkan nationals of all skill and German language proficiency level” if they had an offer from a German employer. This outmigration places an immense pressure on the women who remain behind, many of whom are compelled to shoulder additional caregiving responsibilities without compensation or recognition. In the Western Balkans, female labor force participation remains strikingly low – the average female labor force participation rate is 18 percent lower than it is in the four comparable EU Member States (World Bank 2024). This systemic depletion of women’s energies and contributions helps explain their limited visibility in public and political life.

Responses to the Reproductive Crisis: Natalism, Migration, and Militarization

In this polarized context, three political responses to the crisis of social reproduction have emerged. The first, championed by right-wing and conservative actors, calls for a return to traditional gender roles. Women are encouraged to leave the workforce, renounce personal ambitions, and embrace motherhood. Policies promoting “family values” are coupled with restrictions on reproductive rights and access to contraception and abortion. This position is supported by a transnational coalition that includes Russia, the U.S. Christian Right, and religious institutions such as the Vatican, Orthodox Church, and conservative strands of Islam and Judaism (Corredor 2019). The slogans “Women must be mothers”, or, if not, they are “baby killers”, encapsulating this worldview, are disturbingly blunt.

The second, endorsed more cautiously by centrist and liberal actors, involves managing demographic decline through immigration. While politically expedient, this approach relies on restrictive visa policies, selective citizenship regimes, and the discursive production of “good” versus “undesirable” migrants. The West’s role in generating displacement through peripheral conflicts—stretching back to the 1990s—has been instrumental in sustaining this labor supply. However, the 2015 refugee crisis marked a turning point, hardening divisions between pro-natalist and pro-migration camps. As far-right movements gain traction, support for immigration is becoming increasingly untenable.

In this context, a third option has begun to gain political appeal: the war economy (Hozić and True, forthcoming). Advocates argue that the rearmament of Europe and the expansion of the military-industrial complex could drive technological innovation, support the green transition, and restore Europe’s global competitiveness.

Implicit in this vision is the hope that militarization will also resolve the crisis of social reproduction—by absorbing surplus populations, reinvigorating national purpose, and reasserting gendered norms.

War Economies and Gendered Violence

The term *war economy* has multiple meanings. In previous decades, it was often used to describe the informal economies of peripheral conflict zones—economies marked by illicit trade, survival barter, and blurred boundaries between humanitarianism and violence (Kaldor 2016). In the Balkans, this is a familiar phenomenon. Women in such economies sustain daily life, supporting both war efforts and local communities, while men fight and often die. Post-conflict, men return with physical and psychological wounds, and women frequently become de facto heads of households – roles that often expose them to domestic violence. Without robust investments in education and healthcare, the social wounds of war remain open (Lai 2020). The epidemic of femicide in the Western Balkans, three decades after the wars, is a stark reminder of this enduring violence (Bojičić-Dželilović, Kostovicova and Henry 2020).

Feminist analyses challenge the dichotomy between “war zones” and “peace zones”, emphasizing the continuity and circulation of violence across borders (True and Hozić 2020). From this perspective, war is not an anomaly confined to failed states; it is intrinsic to global capitalism (Bieler and Morton 2018). Conflicts in the periphery sustain speculative capital and produce surplus populations that are essential for reproduction in zones of relative peace.

Militarization as Policy: The New European War Economy

As dependency on peripheral wars becomes politically unviable – and as refugees are increasingly rejected – European leaders are

now actively promoting a different model of war economy. In this version, all sectors of the economy are subordinated to military needs. States mobilize capital to support defense industries, while social budgets are cut. The British Prime Minister, Sir Keir Starmer, recently announced a 2.5% increase in defense spending, to be funded by reducing aid to developing countries. EU institutions are preparing similar measures, with billions earmarked for military investment while social inclusion programs are defunded.

Notably absent from these discussions are women – and the ongoing crisis of social reproduction. This silence is deeply troubling. The liberal center, while nominally opposed to the far right, is now actively reshaping the economy and society in ways that structurally re-inscribe traditional gender roles. Women are being positioned to reproduce life; men, to sacrifice it.

The “great replacement” feared by the right may, in fact, unfold within Europe itself – as women, like those in Ukraine, are forced to embrace militarization, nationalism, and motherhood as conditions of survival.

Hope and Heresy: Feminist Alternatives

Are there alternatives? I believe there are. But they are unlikely to emerge from the centers of global power. In the United States, gender-related policies and institutions are being systematically dismantled. The Department of Government Efficiency, led by Elon Musk, is eliminating data collection and defunding programs related to gender and racial equity. USAID is already defunct; support for the United Nations and other multilateral institutions is eroding. At the 2025 spring meetings of the IMF and World Bank, U.S. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent criticized the Bretton Woods institutions for devoting ‘disproportionate time’ to issues such as gender and climate, arguing instead for a return to core financial mandates.

And yet, in this atmosphere of repression, there is still room for hope. The experiences of subaltern actors – especially feminists from the Balkans, Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and Asia – offer vital epistemologies of resistance. If physical travel is limited, digital platforms remain a space for connection, however surveilled. Feminist political action must demand more than descriptive representation. It must seek structural transformation. Investments in social reproduction benefit everyone – not only women, not only feminists.

War economies cannot produce soldiers. They cannot produce security. Only women can produce life. Politicians must be reminded that the crisis of social reproduction is their most urgent problem – and one that militarization cannot solve.

We must also tell different stories. In the media, in literature, in film. Feminist narratives of war are elliptical, non-linear, and defiantly non-nationalist (Wibben 2010). In these dark times, I find inspiration in the work of Vesna Ljubić, the first female director from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Her 1970s film *Prkosna Delta* [Defiant Delta] chronicles life in a small Herzegovinian village ravaged by natural and man-made disasters. Despite waves of violence, the film offers a lyrical, tragic, and beautiful portrait of gender equality forged through hardship. Watching it, I was reminded that our history was rich with resilient women, transgender figures, and feminized male heroes. Our culture remains interwoven across ethnic and religious lines. We know what must be preserved – and why.

As Seno Musabegović (2023) has argued, Bosnia is inherently heretical. Perhaps now is the time to embrace that heresy as our feminist path forward.

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Discussion

Discussion: Global Right-Wing Politics and Anti-Gender Narratives

Zilka Spahić Šiljak:

In all *these words that freeze the blood in our veins but also give hope*. Our future is not as bright as you yourself showed through your analysis. But there is a way to be heretics, to return to our primordial exhaustion.

Biljana Kašić:

First, your talk about heresy, dear professor Hozić, reminds me of one exceptional woman who could respond to this topic in her own special way, as she did it by deconstructing the character of Hasanaginica more than twenty years earlier. I am thinking of Nirman Moranjak-Bamburać, who unfortunately passed away 2007, too early. Her interpretation of peace in our region and her postcolonial insights referring to Bosnia and Herzegovina belong to the most creative areas of elaboration. She showed us how the poetics of life and the poetics of survival are interconnected and how subversive gestures are of importance. Some women opened for us the space of resistance to the brutal life during the war(s) in which she also lived, and in which we live today. In a way, that gives me the opportunity to connect your speech with all the problems and hopes in these regions. At this moment, I will touch upon two important questions you raised. One question is about the economy of war and how the economy of war is part of the capitalist scenario, part of the capitalist logic of life and necropolitics that is happening. At this moment, I was reminded of a great Italian theorist, Sandro Mezzadra, who examined how social reproduction, in which women play an extremely important role, always provides resources and in a way enables capitalism to function. Women function as a resource in the global circulation of capital, where they serve as cheap

labor, and this primarily refers to women from the periphery, women from the margins, women from the Global South. On the other hand, you raised a very important issue that is also a function of capitalist logic, namely the transnational politics of suffering, which operates according to the model of racialization, the model of using various migrant bodies for this very purpose. Another question refers to your observation on alternatives – when you pointed out that the alternative actually can be created within microspaces, which means that we shouldn't rely on this macrospace of power. I wonder how we can withdraw from that space of power, especially when we talk about geopolitical war scenarios we are facing today.

Aida A. Hozić:

This is a wonderful addition and explanation of what I may have said, and what I did not say. Currently, this semester, I am teaching feminist political economy. This is a postgraduate course. At my university, they will probably abolish women's studies and gender studies. I am waiting for the decision to be made at any moment. So, while I teach, my students and I are most afraid that, at some point, someone will come to our office and say that we can no longer meet. So, I constantly tell my students about alternatives. And they range from radicals who expect some kind of world revolution and dictatorship of the proletariat to conservatives who turn towards privacy. But in all of that, what becomes clear is the necessity of organizing in microspheres and not only the necessity of organizing, but as we talk about it – the need for micro-organizing. It becomes clear how actively micro-organizing is being prevented and how many obstacles exist for micro-organizing. And to return to our region, I see this based on my childhood friends with whom I still spiritually live in Sarajevo. How burdened they are, how their lives are devastated, how difficult it is to find time to meet and chat over coffee. So, I think precisely because these obstacles are so huge, and if we become aware of them, there is a resource for resistance and organization. Honestly, I have *no other faith but in the Balkans, in women and maybe*

the youth. And the issue is how to start. We are missing protests, but I think these protests should be focused, that we should help those who focus on the symptoms and manifestations of injustice in society and demand structural changes. And I think there isn't enough organization and pressure. The protests are about how healthcare is not organized, but most of them relate to dysfunctions in social reproduction. But we really need to focus on and demand a greater restructuring. And *we definitely need to defend against militarization* and the idea that the only form of security is one that can be achieved by acquiring weapons and joining NATO and additional militarization.

Nerzuk Ćurak:

I have a question that intellectually and morally provokes me. It's your text "The Florida Frontier", which is so disturbing for both the state of Florida and globally. What I am interested in now is whether we can ask the relevant question: *Can the borders of Florida become the borders of the United States? Can the processes happening within the political economy and university autonomy in Florida become a common ground for American universities and even spread to the East Coast? What does this mean for global academic knowledge? Are we heading towards a terrible regression?* That was my question.

Aida A. Hozić:

Yes, Florida has objectively become the epicenter of global right-wing politics. The entire Trump administration comes from Florida. So, what was experimented with in Florida has now become a blueprint for U.S. politics, especially regarding education, but not only education. The same goes for domestic and national politics, as all of this has been implemented here in the past few years. What kind of model is this? What's fascinating about Florida is that it's an escapist zone. It's a variant of capitalism that is very attractive to people. This is a *state where people come not only to*

rest, but also to forget how capitalism works. So, even workers... that mythical worker from the automotive industry, workers from MIT, people working in car factories, when they come to Florida, they forget they're working. They go play golf and then forget they're working. They have the illusion that it could be Donald Trump... So, Florida sells a very attractive variant of forgetting capitalism. That's what's most dangerous here. The attraction. It's not just brutally endless, but it's also very appealing. So, the population here is large, unlike in other parts of America. The whole economy revolves around the constant growth of the population. It's a complete exploitation of land floating in the ocean, but that has nothing to do with it. So, I think this is truly a utopian-dystopian space. But the essence of this policy isn't much different from Erdoğan's policy at one point in Turkey, or from Orbán's policy, which is the politics of the stripped-down liberal center. So, in this dichotomy between the East and Florida, I think it's a false dichotomy. I think that everything that happened at American universities after the Palestine protests, which were just an excuse for the removal of university presidents on the East Coast, is proof that these spaces are actually synchronized. So, what's happening with education, what's happening with universities, especially in this Anglophone space, is destruction. University funding is now being cut. Right now, in the UK, research resources are being abandoned from university to university. In Australia, the situation is similar. In Canada, the situation is similar. I think that, in some way, this techno-revolution we're living in, which all of you mentioned... 'technofeudalism' by Varoufakis, the political elites have concluded that education is no longer necessary for them, that a knowledge-based economy is not necessary, and that it shouldn't be invested in.

Elma Softić-Kaunitz:

Thank you, Aida, for the extraordinary presentation which left a lump in my throat, and I think it did for everyone in the room. I wouldn't have asked this question in a serious society until just now.

I will ask you – *are we already in the Third World War? And if we are, who are the parties involved?*

Aida A. Hozić:

I think we are, in a way, already in the Third World War. A few months ago, *I wrote that Europe, in a way, is sleepwalking us into war.* Maybe what worries me the most is Europe, because it is divided, because the political elites in Europe are absolutely deaf to what is happening among people, among ordinary people, and they panic that they will lose their positions. And so, in a way, this very rapid militarization is their way to preserve their positions, not to defend against any threat. I keep saying here in America, I think, in the Balkans we were able to notice the arrival of Russia 20 years ago, it didn't start yesterday. Far from it, I'm not interested in any rapprochement with Russia, as it is now. But at the same time, *militarization that is not wise*, that doesn't take into account who your enemy is, what you need to do, and a totally undemocratic militarization, will not defend Europe from Russia, nor will it achieve anything else. *It will rather push Europe further into war.* Demographic fear behind all of this is another reason. I was reading Marinetti and the futurists, they considered it a hygiene of the people. It seems to me that now some people think it's a hygienic process, that we will purify ourselves that way. That scares me terribly. Who are the conflicting parties? It all looks like the First World War, when we didn't really know who was fighting whom. And today we can guess who started it and why, this is a war that is a product of internal conflicts and unarticulated alternatives. Unfortunately, it's not optimistic at all. That's why I think the solution is not to look at the big powers – they will do what they do. We should step aside.

If we can withdraw, if we can be as small and insignificant as possible, that will be a better alternative.

Jasmina Husanović:

What are the first steps that we can take to strengthen the transnational feminist movement? Shall we seek allies on the periphery, in the South, where the real primordial allies are?

Aida A. Hozić:

This conference is really fantastic. In terms of numbers, fifty women can do more than 2000 people. Each of us here needs to think of another ten names we could connect with, no matter where they are in the world. We need to start writing to each other. We need to organize Zoom meetings every month. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, my colleagues and I organized a group of feminists from Western Europe, Eastern Europe, Ukraine, and from the Global South. It worked for a while, then it didn't, but it doesn't matter. Those connections were made. That's the model I would recommend it. I think we have enough contacts to make a good start.

Zilka Spahić Šiljak:

We are already working on this, but we can certainly expand the network and invest more time in connecting women and men across the globe to fight for human rights and gender equality.

Ernada Avdibegović:

I just wanted to add that in America I see a lot of connections between education and the military industry. Whether through financial investments of the military industry, or through recruiting young scientists to work in ways that enable more sophisticated military technologies for killing people. And here the ethical dilemma arises. There are many ethical dilemmas. Should science serve this? How, from a feminist perspective, could we bring ethics back to education and research?

Because it seems to me that education has lost its shape.

Aida A. Hozić:

This is a very important question. I think that the resistance and repression regarding student protests in America are precisely because of this – that’s why I said that *Gaza and Israel were just an excuse for that repression*. The key is that students were actually demanding a halt to investments in the military industry and severing ties between universities and the military industry. That is the reason for the repression. I truly don’t have an answer, but I see that my university, in the past five years, has invested enormous amounts of money in artificial intelligence. Honestly, I don’t know where that money comes from, or what these supercomputers are currently being used for. Our students are trying to organize, but they are forbidden from doing so. So it’s personally a question for me – how do I function at my own university? But that’s true. I think that feminist analysis was very precise before, and that is what we need to return to right now. Unfortunately, once again, *the co-optation and the dominant narrative imposed by the military industry and the forces that rule the world*, convincing us that investments in the military are the only way to be safe, are so strong that it is becoming harder and harder to resist them. And maybe what is even more problematic is that women are increasingly being co-opted into that narrative. If we look at Europe, *the women leading European politics are militarized to the core*.

Zilka Spahić Šiljak:

Thank you Aida. Somehow this was hard to hear, you really presented it all to us as clearly as day, even though we know and feel that everything that was said is true, but it’s hard to see all of it so clearly in front of us. I feel like we’re tense here... and the atmosphere is one of concern. But, on the other hand, there’s hope that we can organize and act, even in these microspaces,

and it seems to me that Biljana emphasized that too.

Ana-Marija Raffai:

I wouldn't dwell too much on that. You've already spent a lot of time on this external analysis, which means a lot to me. But *for action, it's crucial to know where we stand*. However, what I think you said is that there is a possibility for micro-organization. And actually, when things are tough, it doesn't mean that all is lost. I just want to remind you of a thought by Václav Havel that's very dear to me – *hope is not in the belief that what we want will happen, but that what we are doing makes sense*. That's why I think we should view what we've just heard from an activist perspective.

Aida A. Hozíć:

I completely agree. I think right now is the moment when we need to use all the emotional and social resources we have for organizing and activism. Because we know that if women wait for some other political solution, for other political problems to be solved first, to stop the war, and only then fight for their rights – women will lose. So, we must act preventively. We need to claim our seat at the table in advance, not wait for the "more important" problems to be solved. I think this is not just important for women – it's the only way for society to survive even in a time of crisis. And again, if I have faith in anyone, I have faith in women's ability to organize – without funding, without donations, without the help of wealthy countries. We've always known this. We just need to remember it again and nurture that strength.

Discussion: Reinventing the Idea of Globalization with a Leftist Perspective

Vesna Janković:

I really appreciated your political analysis professor Ćurak, but although I'm not an economic determinist, I did miss some attention to the economic processes behind political ones. Toward the end you did touch on that. I believe that certain economic interests significantly influence political processes and the structure of the economic system itself. So, related to that, what do you think about the concept of "technofeudalism", a term introduced by Yanis Varoufakis, which quite aptly describes American society today? And my second question relates to what you mentioned at the end of your talk, the experience of Yugoslav socialism and the Non-Aligned Movement as a potentially inspirational reference.

Nerzuk Ćurak:

I don't think it's possible, nor should we try to reproduce the same model, but *certain principles and structures* we experienced can *serve as inspiration for rethinking*, for generating new forms of knowledge, new kinds of theory, maybe a fresh story. A story that doesn't add to our current anxiety, because *we really are standing on tectonic fault lines* that are shifting beneath our feet.

Vesna Janković:

Exactly, our region holds certain seeds that could become fertile ground. With that in mind, what do you think of what BRICS is doing? I found it very interesting that the Shanghai group at their

meeting last year started to invoke the principles of Bandung, which were foundational for the Non-Aligned Movement and now we see, from the other side of the world, a revival of a story we once played an important role in. It's also telling that the last BRICS summit, held during the height of the American presidential campaign, ended with declarations strongly aligned with the UN climate goals, a topic completely absent from the U.S. campaign, especially considering Trump's known climate denialism. So, I think there has been a shift. Even though I have no illusions about China, I also don't buy into the media-generated caricature of China. When thinking about what is progressive today — and who carries progressive ideas, we need to stop only looking to the West.

Nerzuk Ćurak:

I agree. And on top of that, we are being bombarded with information we don't know what's real, what's misinformation, what's a half-truth. There's not a day we're not connected to a network flooded with "information". And because of that information overload, we have no time left to think. Lately, I've started to believe in the need to trust my own mind to reduce exposure to information so that I can actually understand.

These so-called "facts" are deliberately constructed by someone, for a purpose. We're prevented from thinking, from creating ideas that can compete with the ones fed to us. So yes, I truly believe we are witnessing a triumph of the rulers of the technosphere, those directing billions of people toward meaningless entertainment, generating insane financial profit. And we, especially due to the deficits in social sciences and education, have lost the ability to see how modern oligarchic capitalism or technofeudalism works. It's no longer about capital tied to land or production. The richest people in the world today build their empires on the human need for gossip. Imagine if 800 million people suddenly said: "We will no longer use Facebook". But unfortunately, we don't

think in those terms that the masters of our lives are owners of immaterial production. And we even glorify them, forgetting they are no different from some local genius working in mechanical engineering or manufacturing except that someone like Musk is lucky to have a globally scalable industry. We've fallen into a trap. The challenge now is: how do we get out of it politically, without replacing it with another ideology that's equally non-liberating?

I personally think leftist ideologies must break with the legacy of the Soviet Union, with Bolshevism. We need to ask: What is the leftist idea in today's world? Why shouldn't the left support small family-run businesses people who are not capitalists but live off their own labor? Why shouldn't that be a leftist idea?

When you mention BRICS or the "Eastern world", I must say I despise regimes that jail people for expressing opinions. That alone disqualifies any potential admiration. Putin, it seems, has had countless journalists and independent intellectuals killed. So why should I even entertain the idea of engaging with that country politically? I may feel empathy for its people, but what we really need is a breakthrough of pacifist ideas into Russia, so that they learn what Putin is doing in Ukraine. How can I engage with a regime like China, after Tiananmen, a regime that was willing to send tanks to kill its own students? No so-called humanistic or internationalist project interests me if that's the cost. And yet, our own socialist history contains sparks we must reclaim, like free healthcare. What's so evil about that? Or free education? How is that harmful, while we now live in a world where brilliant minds can't pursue a PhD because they lack money?

We must break out of this neoliberal octopus that keeps convincing us we live in the best of all possible worlds. Yes, there's a problem of directionlessness, what to return to, what to stand on and that's why I argue: The time has come to rely on ourselves, our own strengths, our local networks, to generate relevant ideas that can be materialized in real spaces. We have nothing to wait for. Maybe what's unfolding between Europe and America will result in a new self-identification for Europe, based on the best

values of the EU's founding imaginary. Maybe the EU is the only place where people from other cultures will be able to live and build their futures. And if we apply that to our region migrants must be welcomed in Europe based on the principles of universal hospitality if I may invoke Kant. The European Union only makes sense if it is cosmopolitan, if it transcends national borders, and if it does not exclude people. To put it Hegelian: The future meaning of the EU must be to become a republic.

Vesna Janković:

I agree with you that what happened at Tiananmen was horrific, but hasn't America done significantly worse things? A million people died following the intervention in Iraq, after the Arab Spring which was instrumentalized to destabilize the entire region. Americans were beating and are still beating their own students who protested for Palestine. And if we just consider the number of human lives — only a few examples from recent history, not even going into colonial history and what was done and how many people died...

Nerzuk Ćurak:

Even today we've heard that we are dealing with a new sinister totalitarian power, which is evident in the attack on students in America protesting for Palestinians and America is no longer part of the "free world". ...The question for all of us is: what can we turn to now? Will there emerge a new global idea, like "clash of civilizations" or "the end of history"? You can now count public intellectuals in the West on one hand. Edward Said would say "public intellectuals have almost disappeared". There's no one who is standing against this de-socialization and the radical triumph of private passions, social Darwinism, etc. One bright light, I refer you to him, is the Italian leftist historian Enzo Traverso, who recently gave an interview to *Jacobin* about Gaza and

Germany, which is really worth reading. Much has been said about him. There are very few new creative ideas; those ideas must emerge from rebellions, from activism, from protests against the current reality because there's no alternative. Honestly, I don't see any contribution from social science books that address these questions. Why has the West historically triumphed so far? Because of the organized use of violence and because of democracy.

Amra Pandžo:

I'd like to challenge something, and it's related to multilateralism that you spoke about and the idea of the survival of international organizations that have existed so far, like the UN, the OSCE, etc. I think these institutions are so bureaucratized, so faceless, so in service of imperial agendas, so globalized and uniform, structurally violent that they are incapable of producing anything that can be considered a peace objective in a broader sense. I believe that the internal culture of these organizations has greatly contributed to what is happening politically. And I truly don't see how these organizations could transform into something that won't be apologetic, something that stands on the side of justice and today that means standing with Palestine while also showing powerlessness to act in concrete situations.

Nerzuk Ćurak:

How dire our situation is, when such bureaucratized organizations appear as a possible means of salvation because everything else has failed. Of course, I'm aware of what kind of bureaucratic mastodons we're talking about. At the end of the day, as long as some countries have veto power in the Security Council, we have a problem of equality. But America did resolve one long-standing issue, Brazil and Germany becoming permanent members of the Security Council, meaning they now have veto power and that's

some kind of progress. Yet the best countries in the UN are the ones without veto power.

My thesis, however, was that *losing international organizations* of this type *would be a catastrophe*. We live under a principle of international relations called anarchy among states meaning, there is no one and nothing that can prevent a country from acting however it wants. If America wants to invade Canada, there's no force in the world that can stop it. Right now, the only thing we can do is express some form of moral dissent or write a resolution. Developing autonomous international organizations that operate on different principles — that would be one way forward. And that's a long path, where feminist politics, feminist curiosity, should act. So, organizations like UNICEF, UNESCO, etc. where we have a significant number of women in key positions must not remain trapped in male patterns of power. It's about not losing these organizations. I know how many times UN resolutions had no effect. But here's one example: without the UN, there would be no Hague Tribunal. And that tribunal did important and meaningful work. So, we shouldn't overestimate nor underestimate the importance of international organizations. In a world where Trump and his team want to divide the world into large pan-regions with the U.S. ruling the Americas, Russia over Asia, China over the Far East in such a world, we must not even think about being left without organizations that bring together small, medium, and large countries.

Renata Jambrešić Kirin:

This discussion prompted me to share one of my doubts, which perhaps stems from a misinterpretation of our socio-political reality. It seems to me that in all our analyses, politics is misrepresented; we understand it only as representational politics. But what remains overlooked is the politics of interest, which Vesna excellently problematized. That is, the economic sphere, which today, I believe, is actually the most *virtual*. By

virtual, I don't mean what is presented to us, but rather what is hidden in a secret politics that's not visible to us.

And so, in these analyses, when we search for a solution or a direction, it all feels weak, it doesn't satisfy my mind or my feminine curiosity to act radically, to bring about real change, or to see results. So, my question would be: has globalization truly become the greatest enemy of society, and is there a solution in alter-globalist movements? That's one question. And the second question is considering the technologization of society, and is there any kind of info-therapy available to us?

Nerzuk Ćurak:

I agree, but feminism cannot offer a quick solution. *Feminism is* in fact a *kind of journey*; anything else is a continuation of patriarchy. Which means: there is no fixed solution. Feminist politics is always new politics; it is always the application of new politics onto the existing world. That new politics is unfolding even here, while we talk, even if we are not fully aware of it. We had brilliant lectures today, and many brilliant ideas were expressed. We should not expect from ourselves any axiomatic, unquestionable solutions that will take us to some glorious plateau where everything will shine. We are simply on a path. And the human being is a being of the path, the only being in the world that still journeys through its own possibility. Will we destroy ourselves? That's another question.

But feminism is one of humanity's authentic possibilities. I was and remain an ally of globalization. Leftist movements, I would say, committed an "original sin" by condemning globalization already in the 1980s, reducing it solely to an imperial process of transnational unification by capitalists. Globalization was never thought through as a leftist idea. Isn't that the greatest absurdity?

Unlike the left, we now find ourselves in a situation where the right has been uniting for decades, while leftists are the

staunchest supporters of national states instead of becoming internationalist. Even though globalization was a phenomenal platform for the left to dismantle imperial hegemony, nothing was done in that regard. Even Chomsky, while criticizing American hegemonism, fell into such traps that he would say things like there was no Omarska war camp, no genocide in Srebrenica, such nonsense. Despite all my respect for Chomsky, I still think of journalists and reporters like Ed Vulliamy or Penny Marshall, the ones who uncovered the war camps or Roy Gutman, who spoke of genocide. Those are the leftists. That is the leftist idea we should be defying the world with.

It became accepted that globalization is naturally a capitalist hegemonic process, just an economic agenda and that's it. This allowed not only the economic agenda, but also the communication, climate, and every other agenda to be led effectively from a single center. That is, to have a single ideological tint. So, I believe that alter-globalism should mean: *let us reinvent the idea of globalization with a leftist signifier.*

Anti-Gender Discourses and Populism

THEME

02

CHAPTER 4

The “Common Sense” Revolution or the Tragedy of Intellectual Arrogance: Political Manipulations of the Gender Concept?

The “Common Sense” Revolution or the Tragedy of Intellectual Arrogance: Political Manipulations of the Gender Concept?

Abstract

The paper elaborates the controversial topic on the “Common Sense” Revolution or the Tragedy of Intellectual Arrogance: Political Manipulations of the Gender Concept, aiming to present clearly defined and hidden anti-gender content that appears not only among (extreme) right-wing groups, but also other political options and some feminists. It is important to emphasize that anti-gender arguments are not based on common sense, but on the arrogance of ignorance. Political science, sociology, and other scientific researches that could provide insights into the contemporary political, economic, social, and other factors leading to conflicts, insecurity, unemployment, poverty, exclusion, etc., are ignored. In defending naturalization and biological determinism, violence is committed against nature by denying bodies that exist in nature, but do not fit into the binary framework. While nominally acknowledging that God is above humans, the factual role of God is taken over, and with political will, it is decided which bodies can be human and which cannot.

Introduction

The choice of the topic entitled “The ‘Common Sense’ Revolution or the Tragedy of Intellectual Arrogance: Political Manipulations of the Gender Concept” as relevant for analytical discussion

nowadays was prompted by the recent inaugural speech of the U.S. President Donald Trump. In that speech, he announced the beginning of a “complete renewal of the United States” and a “common sense revolution”, repeatedly emphasizing the central role of “common sense” in his political platform. This platform also includes a political decision that normatively recognizes only two sexes: male and female (Trump 2025). Similar positions on binary sex categorization are publicly supported by the Russian President Vladimir Putin, the Russian Academy of Sciences, and the Russian Orthodox Church (Moss 2017). After the first publicly released phone call with President Putin, Trump reported that Putin had referred to his campaign slogan “common sense”, indicating their ideological closeness in this aspect of political discourse (Fišić 2025).

The category of “common sense” can also include solutions proposed by political options that are not (extremely) right-wing, as well as by some feminists, particularly when it comes to women’s human rights (especially those of Muslim women) and the issue of gender-based violence. In such cases, there is no claim that only two sexes exist, but rather that populist measures – presented as self-evident – are used to address complex social issues.

In this paper, I aim to critically examine “common sense” positions on gender issues and present some of the ways in which especially right-wing political parties manipulate anti-gender discourse to create division within society. I begin with a brief reflection on the terms used in the title: intellectual arrogance and common sense.

Intellectual Arrogance and the Arrogance of Ignorance

In scholarly literature, a distinction is made between intellectual arrogance and the arrogance of ignorance. Intellectual arrogance (epistemic arrogance) refers to the overestimation of one’s cognitive abilities and the refusal to accept corrective information (Battaly 2014; Cassam 2019). An example would be

a scholar who refuses any criticism or alternative perspective on a subject of discussion, believing their own knowledge to be unquestionable. In contrast, the arrogance of ignorance is based on an unconscious overestimation of one's knowledge due to a deep lack of awareness of one's cognitive limitations (Dunning and Kruger 1999), or more broadly, due to profound ignorance combined with the illusion of competence (Kidd 2016; Cassam 2019). While both types of arrogance lead to a closed-mindedness toward new knowledge, the former stems from actual (albeit exaggerated) self-confidence, while the latter arises from a fundamental misconception of one's own competence.

When it comes to the understanding and interpretation of gender within the anti-gender movement, both forms of arrogance are present. There are people who know nothing about the topic, and those who believe they know everything and arrogantly reject any criticism or information that does not align with their views. Since the discourse is shaped by scientists, politicians, religious leaders, etc., who could and should be familiar with the content of gender theories, this paper places particular emphasis on intellectual arrogance.

An illustrative example comes from Croatia. Nikola Grmoja, a sociologist and politician from the MOST party, in the enthusiasm following Trump's inaugural speech, posted an offensive image on Facebook in which all symbols not representing male or female sex were labeled as "mental illness". He captioned the image with the words: "Always on the side of common sense". In response to criticism, he wrote: "I know very well the difference between gender and sex. There are two genders, inseparable from sex, and you can continue with your idiocies. I'm not one of those who will back down and give up" (Vijest SD 2025). In doing so, he not only demonstrated a lack of understanding of gender theory and research, but also revealed intellectual arrogance – considering his own knowledge unquestionable.

“Common Sense”

Donald Trump does not offer a definition of “common sense”. Based on his speeches and political decisions, one can infer that the term for him encompasses: the belief that the average person, using basic logic, experience, and instinct, is better equipped to deal with issues and problems than academics or politicians; and decision-making aligned with the views of his electoral base, particularly in relation to traditional values, national security, and the economy (Sawyer 2025; Cohen 2025). His voter base includes the anti-gender movement, which has both religious and secular components: members of various religious communities, scientists, politicians, and especially billionaires like Elon Musk. Political commentator Marijana Grbeša-Zenzerović interprets the phrase *common sense* in Trump’s rhetoric as follows: “... for many of us it has nothing to do with being reasonable, but it sounds convincing to his supporters” (Topić 2025).

The term “common sense” can, however, have a very different meaning. Since Trump and his team invoke religion, particularly Christianity, the example of the great Catholic theologian St. Thomas Aquinas, whose philosophy is often described as a “philosophy of common sense” should be considered. Aquinas begins with pre-philosophical assumptions, but does not remain at that level. He systematically and critically analyzes what every person intuitively and vaguely knows and feels (Zelić 2015). If we were to apply this to Trump’s “common sense” decree that only two sexes exist, Thomas Aquinas would begin from that common sense belief – but then proceed to systematically and critically examine it, based on the fact that multiple sexes do exist.

Donald Trump, however, is not interested in facts. He begins with the claims of his anti-gender supporters – specifically, their belief that only two sexes exist by nature and God’s will – and transforms that belief into political decisions. Through political authority, he determines what is considered natural and in line with divine will-and what is not. This is not about respecting or preserving nature, but about “mutilating” or “violating” it.

While doing this, his followers praise him as a messiah, a savior (Smith 2024).

Political Manipulations of the Gender Concept

The term “common sense” fits into the linguistic metamorphoses used by the anti-gender movement to capture public attention, simplify complex social issues, and present its negative policies as positive ones – those that allegedly protect traditional values and humanity as a whole. Here are a few examples:

Anti-gender authors and activists turn their homophobic agenda into an alleged “Christianophobia” of feminists and LGBTQI+ organizations. The campaign “Every child deserves love, no matter who the parents are”, which advocates for adoption rights for same-sex couples, is countered with the positively framed slogan “A child’s right to a mother and a father”. The feminist demand for the right to abortion, captured in the slogan “My body, my choice”, is opposed by the phrase “March for Life”. The slogan “Marriage for all” is reframed as “Protest for all”, “In the Name of the Family”, “Familyphobia”, “Heterophobia”, etc. Calls for the protection of minority human rights and ecological justice are labeled as “woke ideology” and countered with the so-called “common sense revolution”.

Just as Donald Trump is uninterested in facts, neither are anti-gender authors. They continuously repeat their claims and ignore counterarguments. Historian Daniela Rüter analyzed how the far-right German political party Alternative for Germany [AfD] does this. She argues that the AfD uses a tried-and-true Nazi strategy: collecting statistical data not to understand or analyze it, but to identify enemies. The data itself does not interest them, as they continue to repeat false claims. For example, they demanded data and evaluation of gender studies programs. When the evaluation was completed, AfD showed no interest in the results.

AfD also engages in “discourse shifting”. Terms such as “gender-sensitive language” or “gender-just language” are turned into the pejorative term “gender language”. Through frequent usage, the term entered mainstream media as if it were a neutral professional term, without critical examination of its origins. The Christian Democratic Union [CDU] party adopted the term “gender language” into its platform, and it also appears in the joint CDU/CSU election program. Interestingly, it no longer appears in the AfD’s platform – Rüter interprets this as proof that AfD’s discourse-shifting strategies have entered the political mainstream. Their goal of delegitimizing the concept of gender and gender studies has been achieved. She calls this approach an “info-smog strategy”: by flooding public discourse with repetitive, misleading information, it becomes harder to understand the issue, which allows manipulation of public perception (Beaufäys 2025).

This strategy is used by other (right-wing) parties and the broader anti-gender movement: they reverse the roles of victim and perpetrator, construct conspiracy theories, rely on politics of fear and the arrogance of ignorance. Fear politics aim to provoke anxiety over real or imagined threats. In this context, “The Other” plays a key role. The primary “Other” is typically marginalized groups; the secondary “Other” are corrupt elites promoting diversity and backing the primary “Other” (Wodak 2020).

Intellectual arrogance and **the arrogance of ignorance** are key tools used by anti-gender authors and activists. By invoking “common sense”, they sidestep the need to justify or argue their positions. A common tactic they employ is to distort the opposing side’s arguments. They define so-called “gender ideology” by combining accurate and inaccurate claims from various theoretical frameworks. These definitions are intentionally vague and contradictory, making them difficult to refute. Gender is thus not interpreted according to its scientific meaning or international documents but used as a “catch-all basket”

into which all evils of the world are thrown – depending on the context and the imagination of the author.

The following are examples of statements made by popes, Catholic bishops, and individual theologians who have adopted narratives from the anti-gender movement. According to these statements, gender and gender-aware policy

refers exclusively to women, not men, introduces rivalry and war between the sexes, completely ignores the meaning and language of the body, erases sexual difference because it cannot confront it, denies that physical embodiment is defined by nature, rejects nature and its givenness, seeks to destroy humanity and create a “new genderless human”, promotes homosexuality (as a code word) and pedophilia, hides a “culture of death” or a “sodomite ideology” behind noble terms such as “gender equality”, aims to gradually legalize euthanasia or eugenics-eliminating the sick, weak, and disabled, is a greater threat than fascism and communism combined, constitutes ideological colonization being imposed in Europe, the U.S., Latin America, Africa, and parts of Asia (Anić 2011; Marschütz 2014; Graff and Korolczuk 2017).

Similar statements are made by leaders of other religious communities. Anyone familiar with gender theory, gender-conscious policy, and gender studies research knows how baseless and inaccurate these claims are.

Let us pause briefly on the narrative of “ideological colonization”, which is adapted to different political goals and contexts. At its core lies the logic that the West-allegedly under siege by gender ideologists-is simultaneously imposing gender ideology on the rest of the world. In post-socialist countries, this is framed as ideological colonization by neo-Marxists. According to this narrative, gender as ideological colonization threatens national identity, culture, and traditional (mostly Christian) values.

Countries that oppose gender ideology are portrayed as beacons or bastions of civilization. These typically include Italy, Hungary, and Russia (Evang 2022; Mares 2023).

Right-wing populist parties use anti-gender campaigns in different ways to pursue political goals – especially against (Muslim) immigrants. In France, homophobic rhetoric has been used by right-wing parties to attract conservative voters from immigrant communities who traditionally support the Left (Brustier 2015). In contrast, homophobic rhetoric in Hungary targets immigrants, promoting the narrative that corrupt elites are trying to destroy the Hungarian nation by promoting homosexuality. Because homosexuals “cannot reproduce”, Hungary will face demographic collapse and be forced to accept immigrants, leading to the erasure of the Hungarian nation (Kováts and Pető 2017; Anić 2016).

In the Netherlands, France, and Italy, right-wing parties avoid overt anti-gender rhetoric and instead promote **homo-nationalism** and **femo-nationalism**: “We support the rights of women and LGBTQI+ individuals and fight against (Islamic) immigrants who threaten those rights”. They invoke **homo-nostalgia**, implying that queer people were safer in Europe before immigrants “endangered” them (Camille 2022; Farris 2017). AfD activists in Germany defend (non-queer) homosexuality against gender ambiguity, based on an assumed preference for one clearly defined sex (Dietze and Roth 2020).

“Traditional Values” of Russian Orthodoxy

The “traditional values” of Russian Orthodoxy are not only an integral part of the contemporary Russian national identity, but have also become a central element of a populist ideology with a dual function: domestically, they serve to homogenize the population, while internationally they position Russia as a messianic power. Russia appears as the savior of Europe and the chief defender of “true European values” and the traditional

heteronormative family. In this context, “decadent Europe” is mockingly referred to as “Gayropa” (Foxall 2017). In a call to the faithful to support Russia in the war against Ukraine, Patriarch Kirill I declared in January 2023 that the West attacks Russia because it rejects “the worst forms of globalization” and offers an alternative. In his view: “People see Russia as a country that upholds fidelity to traditional values such as family, duty, and patriotism” (IKA 2023). Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, the loss of lives, and destroyed families go unmentioned—as if those lives and families are excluded from the definition of “traditional values”. It is also worth recalling the existing ties between American, Western European, and Russian anti-gender authors, activists, and politicians – such as cooperation within the World Congress of Families or lectures by Aleksandr Dugin – which further confirm the transnational nature of this discourse (Moss 2017: 200).

Gender also functions as a ‘glue’ that unites right-wing populist parties, some feminists, and left-wing parties in calls to defend women’s rights against the perceived threat of Islam. Right-wing actors seek to restrict women’s equality in their own societies while claiming to defend the “rights” of Muslim women. The contrast between East/Islam and West/Christianity is illustrated through women’s bodies: the uncovered/western/Christian woman is seen as liberated and modern, while the covered/eastern/Muslim woman is viewed as oppressed, backward, traditional, and intellectually inferior. These are harmful generalizations that fall into the category of **neo-colonial sexism**: they assume two homogeneous groups of women, ignoring class, educational, professional, and other differences; “we” are modern and egalitarian, “they” are premodern, patriarchal, and sexist. Election posters of right-wing parties in Europe show how the body of Muslim women is used as a marker of cultural, religious, and ethnic difference, illustrating the perceived threat of religious fundamentalism and the failure of multiculturalist ideologies and policies (Wodak 2020).

In line with anti-Muslim campaigns, right-wing populist parties are currently endorsing **pseudo-emancipatory gender policies**. For example, American Republicans claim to support “right-wing feminism” (women’s rights within traditional values, emphasizing women’s roles in family and society, and patriotism) and “border feminism” (protecting women and families from perceived dangers such as illegal immigration, human trafficking, or crime). They advocate “freedom for women” solely for Muslim women who wear the hijab or burqa, perceiving these garments as symbols of oppression. “Freedom for women” is thus positioned in opposition to fundamentalist Islam, with the assumption that every woman who wears a hijab is both oppressed and potentially dangerous in terms of terrorism. Security concerns are simply linked to the so-called “freedom of women” (Wodak 2020).

As an example of how even some feminists fall into the trap of neo-colonial feminism, we can point to Marlène Schiappa, a key figure in Macron’s government known for promoting feminist policies and raising awareness about gender-based violence. In 2020, she stated: “If your neighbor’s house collapses, you take him in. But if he starts beating your sister, you kick him out!” (Harchi 2020).

Under her leadership, the plan “Harasser-Free Neighborhoods” was proposed, aiming to identify “red zones of street harassment”. In both cases, the implication is that state policy is “feminist”, while the perpetrators of violence are predominantly men of other races and lower social classes. This reflects **culturally defined violence**: the notion that violence is present only in certain cultures and absent in others-which is entirely false (Harchi 2020).

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CHAPTER 5

The Impact of Anti-Gender Movement in North Macedonia on Gender Equality and Peace

The Impact of Anti-Gender Movement in North Macedonia on Gender Equality and Peace

Abstract

In the paper “The Impact of the Anti-Gender Movement in North Macedonia on Gender Equality and Peace” the author analyzes the impact of anti-gender movement in North Macedonia on gender equality and peace. She explores the development of the movement from sporadic attacks on women’s and LGBT+ rights to organized coalitions supported by right-wing and pro-Kremlin actors. She gives a particular focus on the narratives used by this movement, including the manipulation of gender equality terminology and the spreading of misinformation through media campaigns. Additionally, she examines how these initiatives have weakened the implementation of the international Women, Peace, and Security [WPS] agenda, creating obstacles to the implementation of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 at the local level. Through the paper she highlights the growing threats to the rights of women and marginalized groups, emphasizing the need for strategic responses, strengthening alliances within the community, public education, and political advocacy to counter polarization and the erosion of democratic values.

Introduction

The paper provides a detailed chronology of the anti-gender movement development in North Macedonia, from its inception as informal, poorly organized groups to its evolution into an organized and financially supported movement that becomes a

legitimate actor in policy-making. The focus of anti-gender actors in North Macedonia is put on several key issues, such as gender studies, the Istanbul Convention, abortion rights, gender-sensitive education, LGBTQI rights, and comprehensive sexual education. Organizations and groups, formal and informal, gathered in the Coalition for Protection of Children are among the main anti-gender actors. Additionally, religious groups, the Church, and some right and extreme right political parties represent added value to the networked anti-gender movement. Understanding the most commonly utilized narrative, ways of action, and narrow focus of different groups represents a departure point in identifying ways of dealing with the anti-gender movement.

The concept of 'gender' is also a key component of the UN's thematic Resolution on Women, Peace, and Security (2020), thereby indicating the possible direction for broadening the anti-gender narrative in relation to the implementation of Resolution 1325. In North Macedonia, the implementation of the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda through the National Action Plans for Resolution 1325 (2013; 2020) indicates that there is a lack of progress in the application of the Resolution at the local level, including within local self-government units.

The country's anti-gender movement has made the civic sector more divisive, especially at the local level, which could lead to conflicts with grave repercussions and endanger peace. The division among NGOs highlights the lack of a coordinated and unanimous approach in building a strong resistance front that will uphold the country's already achieved gender equality.

The Emergence of Anti-Gender Actors in North Macedonia

The early rise of anti-gender actors in North Macedonia can be traced back to between 2008 and 2013. At the time, the country's anti-gender actors were informal, isolated, and poorly structured groups that carried out sporadic attacks on specific issues. Their focus during this period included opposition to abortion

rights, gender studies, the then-anti-discrimination law, and the opposition to the ratification of the Istanbul Convention.

To begin with, I would like to explain the context regarding gender issues. The gender study program in the country was opened for the first time in 1999 at the Euro-Balkan Institute. In 2007, the gender studies were accredited at the Faculty of Philosophy in Skopje. In March 2012, a postgraduate program of gender studies was accredited at the Institute for Social Science and Humanities in Skopje. The accreditation of the program was justified by the necessity of gender-sensitive teaching, the adjustment of the educational system to EU standards and the need to mainstream gender in the educational curriculum (Antonovska 2018). As soon as gender studies gained traction, the opponents became very vocal, claiming that there was no need for gender studies because science is gender neutral and that the scientific knowledge of gender studies is questionable. At its core, the opposition to gender studies consisted of both academics and representatives of the right-wing government who argued that the idea of a gender-defined scientific subject was inherently unscientific (Koložova 2011). At the same time, a family study program was launched at the Faculty of Philosophy, justified by the unfavorable demographic image of the country. The Ministry of Education justified its stance by claiming that there was no need to expand disciplines within the social sciences and humanities, arguing instead that the labor market demanded a greater focus on technical sciences. It is important to emphasize that the then government was led by the biggest ethnic Macedonian Christian Democratic party in coalition with a party from the Albanian political bloc. The gender study program was put on hold from 2012 until 2017. In 2017, with the political shift to the left, the gender study program was reopened at the Faculty of Philosophy, confirming once again that the debate around gender studies is largely a political issue.

The country's abortion law, which dated back to the '70s in the former Yugoslavia, was quite liberal until 2013. In 2013, the Republic of Macedonia's Assembly passed a new law in an urgent

procedure without consulting the civic sector. The newly adopted law in 2013 made the procedure harder by requiring a mandatory written request from women, consultative sessions about the advantages of pregnancy, a three-day waiting period, and fines imposed on medical professionals who violated the law's mandatory steps (Antonovska 2023a). Alongside the legislative shift, pro-life (women's) organizations around the country worked to change the attitude about abortion, especially among young women and girls. Phrases like "Abortion is murder" were shown not just on posters in public spaces in Skopje, but also on national television, that presented a spot with a doctor congratulating a patient on a successful abortion, saying "Congratulation your abortion was successful; you just killed your healthy baby" (Radio MOF no date).

On the other hand, pro-choice women's and feminist organizations mobilized jointly with medical professionals, opposition parties, and other pro-choice activists, demanding the law to be lifted and broad consultation to be held. Another form of organizing of pro-choice organizations in 2013 was the creation of a platform titled Matka [Uterus] to raise awareness for the impact of the law. Forty-one non-governmental organizations signed the Declaration in support of abortion rights (Tiiit inc, no date). However, the law was signed by the president and came into force. Again, the shift in the political environment in 2017 led to changes in the laws. In 2019 the new Law on abortion, was adopted including the elimination of the requirement for women to go through an approval process in front of a commission, the introduction of medical abortion, etc. (Antonovska 2021).

Despite being signed in 2011, the Istanbul Convention was not ratified until 2017. One of the main causes of the six-years gap between signature and ratification was the then-Christian Democratic government's lack of political will, but other factors included the influence of a few organizations and groups who tended to misunderstand the convention, especially by opposing the definition of gender. Also, sexual orientation was not included as a ground for discrimination under the 2010 Law on

Prevention and Protection against Discrimination. This reason for discrimination was initially included in the original draft law, but it was later removed. People with varied sexual orientations were generally seen as a danger to traditional values. The first LGBT support center in the country that opened in 2012 was targeted many times, and LGBT activists were attacked. The perpetrators are still unknown (Okno 2013). In 2020, the newly adopted anti-discrimination law took sexual orientation as a ground for discrimination. The law was adopted as soon as social democrats came to power.

Throughout this period, the primary opposition in key areas came mainly from political actors, with the resistance largely rooted in political agendas and narratives. While individuals from civil society organizations and academia were also involved, their participation was occasional, less visible, and generally overshadowed by the political figures. Although certain researchers and academics do not perceive this period as the emergence of anti-gender movement, the forms, the thematic areas that were in focus, and the ways of reaction correspond to what was happening in the same period in European countries that were under the influence of strong anti-gender movement.

The Development Strategy of Anti-Gender Movement (2020 - 2024)

During the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, some groups and organizations started to take more coordinated, strategic, and large-scale actions against gender equality, comprehensive sexual education, gender-sensitive education, and LGBTQI rights, particularly transgender rights.

These groups and organizations are part of the counter-movement that resists and goes against the original movement when the goals of the original movement are perceived as a threat to a certain group of people (Fadaee 2014). For the first time, these groups utilized the term 'gender ideology' framing it as harmful and

unnatural, not belonging to science and representing opposition to tradition and religion (Cvetkovik and Velickovska 2022). Among these organizations and groups in North Macedonia, the most vocal are Take Responsibility [Преземи одговорност], From Us For Us [Од нас за нас], Textbooks Must Be [Учебници мора да има], To Preserve Marriage and Family [Да го зачуваме бракот и семејството], Parental Front [Родителски фронт]. They are all members of the Coalition for the Protection of Children, which is made up of over 38 formal and informal organizations and groups, political parties, and religious groups (Koalicija za zastita na decata – no date). Within the coalition, several groups and organizations have distinct, focused goals. Some are opposed to transgender rights, gender-sensitive education, and laws that promote LGBTQI rights and gender equality. In order to combat the so-called ‘gender ideology’, the anti-gender movement in North Macedonia allied with the Church and (smaller) extreme right-wing parties. This was especially evident in 2023 when a new Law on Gender Equality was proposed, which included provisions for the creation of a distinct Secretariat for Gender Equality as well as definitions of gender identity. The Orthodox Church organized a massive protest against the newly proposed law in front of the main church in Skopje in June 2023 (Sakam da kazam 2023). The Coalition for the Protection of Children, right-wing political parties, the Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Church supported the protest. The pro-Russian choreography at the protest, including flags, demonstrated the tendency towards Russia. The country’s Islamic religious community avoided speaking out much about the issue. Their official representatives did not attend the protest. Nonetheless, they ethically endorse the protest. As a result of the strong mobilization against it, the Law on Gender Equality was withdrawn. The anti-gender actors were also very successful in lobbying for the withdrawal of the Law on Civil Status from the parliamentary procedure. The law contained an amendment for the legal recognition of gender. Both laws [Law on Gender Equality and Law on Civil Status] were framed as ways to ideologically indoctrinate children and an attempt to erase the biological differences between women and

men and a way to modify the 'objective reality' (Krushkarovska 2024).

Another issue that provoked a fierce reaction by anti-gender actors was the new Concept for Primary Education that envisaged gender-sensitive education and piloting of sexuality education. They were successful in lobbying against the introduction of these concepts in the Law for Primary Education and Law on Textbooks for Primary and Secondary Education (Roditelski Front 2025).

North Macedonia is an example of a very fierce and quick anti-gender mobilization, whereas Strumica, the country's largest city in the southeast, became a center for anti-gender activists. Teachers, journalists, doctors, intellectuals, and priests were among the individuals who made up the grassroots movement of activists. They take a variety of initiatives, including public debates, film screenings, petitions, and protests (Zaharijević 2025). Strumica essentially turned into a small ecosystem of citizens who were persistent in intentionally misinterpreting the actual meaning of human rights and gender equality in order to align with their conservative beliefs.

Anti-Gender Narratives and Impacts

The screening of the film "What is a Woman" by Matt Walsh marked the beginning of a large portion of organized activities. The film was screened in a large number of municipalities, mostly in the southeastern and central parts of the country (Eleusa Fondacija 2023). Afterwards, the activities continued in the form of public debates for 'distorting the true face' of gender equality, gender-sensitive education, and comprehensive sexual education. Small towns gave their support, but in Skopje, the support for these events was insignificant. Besides offline forms of activism, the anti-gender actors were very active online on social networks almost on a daily basis.

The representation of anti-gender actors in the political parties (left and right wing political parties) in municipal councils paved the way for influence in creating and changing already adopted local policies on gender equality. In many official documents, the term gender equality was completely excluded and/or replaced with either sex equality and/or with the term from the current law “equal opportunity between women and men”. In one municipality, the official definition of what a woman is was provided in the official local documents (Nezavisen 2023). The effect of this is serious and unequivocally large, since some politicians at both the local and national level are already adopting the language of anti-gender actors, which makes the movement more legitimate.

The primary narrative utilized by anti-gender actors is around the trope of ‘saving the children’ and is rooted in religious, traditional, and cultural concepts. Anti-gender actors see themselves as saviors of children from the ‘gender ideology’, especially ‘transgender ideology’, which will destroy tradition, religion, and the natural order of things. Presenting themselves as ordinary citizens who suffer as a result of the rise of gender equality, transgender rights, and human rights generally, they portray gender and gender equality as an imported idea from the ‘Rotten West’ (Cvetkovic and Velickovska 2022). Besides this narrative, disinformation and misinformation are regularly used as part of their strategy.

Between 2020 and 2024, the anti-gender movement has become more organized and strategic, targeting specific issues in relation to which human rights defenders and gender equality advocates were pushing for reforms. Their messages tend to be populist, aiming to gain broad support especially at the local level, among ordinary citizens. The movement gained legitimacy in local governments through political support, thus actively working to change existing gender equality policies. While the earlier discourse (2008–2013) was mainly political, the current discourse has evolved to religious and cultural elements, promoting conservative values and undermining democratic principles. In

recent years, the movement has also received coverage in the media, particularly local outlets, which has, in a way, helped strengthen their influence.

Two consecutive Progress Reports for North Macedonia noted the significant influence of the anti-gender movement. According to the 2024 Progress Report, “The anti-gender movement has continued to gain traction in the country, and this has had an impact on the legislative and policy-making process” (EC 2024). The 2023 Progress Report pointed out that the reason the gender equality law hasn’t been passed is due to a nationwide anti-gender movement and anti-gender campaigns that are at times backed by political, religious, and local government representatives (EC 2023).

The Potential Impact on the UNSCR 1325 and Its Implementation Through NAPs

In October 2000, the UNSC Resolution 1325 was unanimously adopted at the 4213th meeting of the United Nations Security Council. It is the first thematic resolution on Women, Peace, and Security. The Resolution emphasizes the role of women in conflict prevention and resolution, peace building, inclusion and contribution to the preservation of lasting peace and security. It provides a normative framework for relevant institutions to integrate a gender perspective into the security sector. National action plans [NAPs] for the implementation of the WPS agenda are the main tools by which the global WPS agenda is translated into concrete strategies, actions, and outcomes at the national level. Responsibility for the implementation of these NAPs lies with national governments as outlined in the Resolution 1325.

In North Macedonia, the first NAP was officially adopted in January 2013 at the request of the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, supported by the Ministry of Defense. The NAP covered a three-year period (2013-2015) and contained one-year operational plans for implementation. The adoption of NAP was preceded by the

establishment of a working group composed of representatives from all relevant institutions, as well as representatives of three women's organizations and representatives of international organizations. Prior to the adoption of NAP, few projects and peace activities were conducted during the armed conflict in the country in 2001 and afterwards, when Women's Civic Initiative Antiko advocated for inclusion of the strategic goal WPS within the first NAP for Gender Equality. Later, other women's organizations worked on peace projects and advocated for a culture of peace, thus trying to raise the level of awareness and knowledge about the UNSCR 1325. It was alarming that a significant percentage of the people did not recognize the link between women's rights and the peace and security agenda. In early 2001, women's organizations and women peace activists were the first ones to take action during the armed conflict. They focused on refugees and internally displaced persons, the majority of whom were women and children. Women's organizations helped to ease the impact of the conflict on civilians by providing psychological help, opening helplines, and delivering hygiene and food packages for children and women. During the conflict, these organizations built informal networks and alliances, which have remained active even after the conflict (Antonovska 2020a).

Although there were certain shortcomings, the first NAP made a key contribution to implementing the Women, Peace, and Security agenda at the national level. The second NAP should have been adopted in 2015; however, the country was without NAP for 5 years. The second NAP (2020-2025) was adopted in July 2020, whereas the Ministry of Defense was in charge of coordinating all activities planned for implementation. Other ministries, and institutions such as the Crisis Management Centre, and the Directorate for Protection and Rescue, were in charge of preparing operational plans for the implementation of the NAP. The novelty of the second NAP was the recommendation given to the local self-government units to develop operational plans, which was seen as a step towards the localization of the NAP. It was planned to localize the Resolution through local operational

plans and to bring the resolution closer to women (Antonovska 2020b). The Progress report for North Macedonia for 2023 states that “The Ministry of Defense continues to implement the operational plan for implementing the Second National Action Plan on the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 Women, Peace and Security (2020-2025); there is no progress in implementing the objective on communication and capacity building for the implementation of Resolution 1325 at the local level, including the local self-government units and the Association of the Units of Local Self-Government” (EC 2023).

The main question that emerges, given that 2023 was a year with major setbacks for gender equality, is if the resolution’s localization setback was caused by all of the local developments pertaining to gender equality and other related concepts in the same year. The second question that arises is whether the NAP is seen only as a low-profile matter, a symbolic tool for increasing the number of women in the security sector and as a tool to demonstrate the adherence of institutions to meeting international standards. These questions have to be taken into account because to date there is not much research on the potential impact of the rise of the anti-gender movement in North Macedonia on the WPS Agenda, and further investigation on this issue is needed. It is expected that such setbacks will occur at the national level when they are already occurring within institutions such as the UN itself. In 2019, UNSCR 2467 became the first-ever follow-up resolution to UNSCR 1325 that was not adopted unanimously due to the pressure by some of the permanent members of the UN SC. Sexual and reproductive health and access to sexual and reproductive health services were excluded from the original draft of the Resolution 2467 (Security Women 2023). In 2025, the NATO weakened the language around gender and diversity and women and security.

Lately, any language around ‘gender’ or ‘women, peace, and security’ is being avoided by NATO officials in order to get things passed by all 32 member countries, including the U.S. (Politico 2025).

Response from Women's and Feminist Organizations to the Anti-Gender Movement

According to the findings from the survey *Landscape analysis of the current state of feminist collective actions and movements countering the anti-gender justice movement in North Macedonia* (Antonovska 2023b), anti-gender mobilization is a considerable (serious) threat for feminists and LGBTQI organizations in North Macedonia. While on the other hand, women's organizations and organizations that work on gender justice consider it a moderate obstacle. Findings from focus group discussions from the same analysis confirm that there is no organized movement against the anti-gender movement and actors. Firstly, because there is no single position among women's organizations, LGBTQI organizations, and feminist organizations on several issues, including transgender rights and legal gender recognition, which have been predominantly under attack by the anti-gender movement in the last few years. Secondly, some of the organizations, mainly women's organizations, still do not recognize the threats and the danger that come from the anti-gender movement.

At the moment, only organizations networked in the Platform for Gender Equality and the Network for Protection against Discrimination act in some form of organized response to anti-gender actors. The response primarily consists of written letters of protest or written reactions addressing various issues, including the adoption of the new Law on Primary Education and the Law on Secondary Education, which fail to acknowledge discrimination as a type of violence and, in addition to physical violence, do not recognize emotional, psychological, and sexual violence. Also, a written reaction to a Textbook Law that removed topics like gender equality and sexual and reproductive rights was sent to the competent authorities (Platform for Gender Equality 2025). Another method that members of the Platform and the Network use is to submit letters or pleas to the president asking her to consistently implement the commitments assumed in relation to gender equality and to refrain from signing decrees that alter laws

in a damaging way. This also includes digital activism, i.e., sharing written reactions and appeals from member organizations of the Platform and the Network.

Organizations are more active in conducting research on how the anti-gender movement influences gender equality and providing trainings on communication approaches to the anti-gender movement. Within the framework of projects implemented by certain organizations, campaigns are being conducted to identify the risks and threats coming from anti-gender actors; however, these campaigns are time-limited and only cover certain organizations. Yet the response must be proactive rather than reactive, and it is about time for women's and feminist organizations to unite and to realize that the deep polarization not only between them but also between their beneficiaries and target groups, i.e., citizens, could deepen the marginalization of already marginalized communities and could lead to potential large-scale conflict. The strategic and united approach is of the utmost importance.

Conclusion

The rise and development of the anti-gender movement in North Macedonia reflects a larger worldwide pushback against gender equality and human rights, but with unique local characteristics derived from political, religious, and cultural narratives. Over time, what started as dispersed opposition has grown into a unified and powerful movement with important implications for democracy, human rights defense, and policy-making process. The viability of gender-sensitive policy-making is called into question by the failure to adopt several laws of great importance for the country. Anti-gender narratives represent a serious risk of solidifying in institutional discourse and public policy and thus undoing hard-won gains and cutting North Macedonia off from larger international human rights obligations.

Along with growing institutional backing and populist rhetoric, the politicization of gender issues has weakened policy implementation and affected the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, among others, especially at the municipal level. To reverse these trends and reinforce the values of equality, peace, and democratic inclusion, a thorough, multi-sectoral, research-based response is required. The response needs to be proactive rather than reactive, and it is necessary to strengthen the presence and influence on social networks. It's time for feminist and women's organizations to come together and recognize that the extreme polarization between them could spark a major conflict jeopardizing the peace.

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CHAPTER 6

Patriarchy in Regression: Anti-Gender Ideology on Social Media and in Women's Literary Discourse

Patriarchy in Regression: Anti-Gender Ideology on Social Media and in Women’s Literary Discourse

Abstract

Anti-gender ideology has been gaining momentum over the past few decades, fueled by various contemporary trends that once again encourage women to return to a time when their daily lives were shaped solely by domestic work in their husband’s home, a servile position toward his demands, and a complete absence of their own desires and ambitions. This patriarchal project, which we once believed had been abandoned forever, is once again being promoted – via social media, but also within women’s discourse – specifically advocating for the subordination of women to their husbands/men. Therefore, this paper problematizes the regressive patterns that, through the social media platform TikTok and the Tradwife trend, as well as through certain patriarchally inclined female authors (with Sara Sabri used as an example), once again campaign for women to willingly renounce everything that the feminist struggle has achieved over the past hundred years.

Introduction

Although the term “anti-gender ideology” has become prominent mostly over the past twenty years, it can be said that anti-feminist activity has existed since the time of the first suffragette movements, when some women stood in defense of the patriarchy – and by extension, male dominance over the

female gender. Things have not changed to this day, and the situation is even more concerning now because an increasing number of young women around the world are embracing these ideas. In the United States, the anti-feminist agenda has had a long-standing presence, from the first suffragette protests to the “pro-life” activists who opposed the legalization of abortion. Similarly, the aversion to the phrase *women’s writing* also appears in women’s discourse as a means to degrade the difference that women bring to writing.

The beginning of the development of the main strategy of the anti-gender movement is tied to the Vatican’s construction of the concept of “gender ideology” (...) “Gender ideology”, one of the most widespread and frequently used discursive frameworks for interpreting the concept of gender as a social construct, stands in contrast to the Vatican’s understanding of sexual difference between men and women. This framework emerged as a reaction to the introduction of the term “gender” at the International Conference on Population and Development in 1994 in Cairo and the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 in Beijing. (...) During the Beijing conference, the Vatican used “progressive language” which until then had been exclusive to feminist theory and activist discourse. By adopting – and then subverting – the feminist narrative, the Vatican used it as a tool to oppose feminist demands during the conference (Buss 1998 in Gregorić 2020: 149–150).

The dangers that “gender ideology” posed to the Christian worldview primarily revolved around the fear of same-sex marriage, however, mechanisms were also activated that not only jeopardize LGBTQ rights and the laws protecting them in some countries, but also weaken the position of women. Feminism is once again perceived as a plague aiming to destroy a religion-centered world and create a society shaped by the feminist agenda.

In 1997, the first book aimed at the public warning about the so-called dangers of gender was published – *Gender Agenda* by Dale O’Leary. The book popularized conspiracy theories about an alleged radical feminist plan to create a post-gender society, paving the way for a flood of books, lectures, pamphlets, and websites spreading similar ideas. What began as a conflict between two concepts – gender complementarity versus gender equality – eventually developed into a global mobilization against gender ideology (Kuhar 2024: 14).

As in Europe, anti-gender campaigns have been emerging in Latin America since 2011.

Through misinterpretation of the concept of gender, “gender ideology” – also referred to as “gender theory” or “genderism” – was constructed. The attack on Judith Butler in São Paulo at the end of 2017 was the result of fear and anxiety fueled by the dangers of “gender ideology”, which in Latin America are spread by Catholic right-wingers, populists from the right, but also from the left. (...) While in Croatia and Europe the discourse around “gender ideology” can be understood as a right-wing monopoly, in South America it is also adopted by leftists and liberals. While in Croatia this discourse is monopolized by the Roman Catholic Church, in South America it is also used by evangelicals. No less important, the authors also mention other interest groups, extremists, activists, from both the left and right, theists and atheists alike, and it is precisely the defense against “gender ideology” that serves as the cohesive element that unites them (Corrêa, Paternotte nd Kuhar 2018 n.d.).

In the Bosnian-Herzegovinian context, the anti-gender ideology is most prominently present through the activities of right-wing political and religious movements, with the entity of Republika Srpska being particularly involved in such ideological practices. In recent years, legislative initiatives in this entity have attempted to remove the term “gender” from legal texts related to the protection

of gender identity. The influence of anti-gender narratives from neighboring countries – such as the “kneeling” movement in Croatia and the views promoted by the Serbian Orthodox Church in Serbia – has left a significant mark on the political, social, and media landscape of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In such a context, feminism and gender equality are now perceived as threats, even though this society – where the rights of women and other gender-sensitive groups are especially endangered – stands in great need of them. Gender issues are often mistakenly reduced to demographic challenges in the Balkans, while broader social and economic factors contributing to demographic decline are overlooked. At the same time, the idea is spreading that the West is trying to impose values allegedly unnatural to the Balkan understanding of sex and gender identities.

The Anti-Gender Movement on Social Media

Perhaps one of the most dangerous ideas today in the field of gender equality is the anti-feminist—and by extension, anti-gender—agenda currently present on social media, especially through the highly popular *Tradwife* trend on TikTok.

The first and most obvious criticism often directed at the *Tradwife*’ concept is that it is inherently sexist: it portrays women as subordinate to men and unequal in society. Women who participate in #Trad culture express a desire to return to ‘traditional’ gender roles, where men are ‘strong’ leaders and patriarchs, and they can be submissive helpers (...) (Proctor 2022: 8).

The essence of the videos made by traditional women is the same: they promote a distinctly conservative (Christian) ideology that considers a woman’s/wife’s place to be in the home. Yet this content is in fact another patriarchal trap, promoting precisely what (patriarchal) men desire. These influencers on social media, such as Hannah Neelman – the so-called queen of traditional women – are very popular. Most of these young women often

wear 1950s-style clothing to appear as modest as possible in their viral posts, gladly submit to their husbands, enjoy cooking, cleaning the house, raising children, and follow what the Bible prescribes for women.

Is this trend a patriarchal strategy to return women to a 19th-century role, or is it simply a new way for many young women to earn money without considering how their content might influence their followers? Most of them oppose feminism and women's liberation strategies. To them, being a feminist means being against marriage, family, and men, and they view the identity of feminist-oriented women as equivalent to that of LGBTQ individuals. The traditional woman today does everything a patriarchal man needs, while being somehow convinced that it is her choice and that she enjoys this kind of life. When such marriages are viewed from a feminist perspective, they appear to be formed in an era when the system granted "sovereignty—or more accurately, authority" (Pateman 2001: 59) to the man/husband over the wife. It seems that ideas about marriage set forth in Enlightenment-era debates have not fundamentally changed – or at least, some women have not insisted on that change. If a talented ballerina entered into such a marriage by completely subordinating all her ambitions to the marriage (or rather to her husband's wishes), isn't that a clear admission that even in the 21st century, "only men naturally possess the characteristics of free and equal beings. Women are naturally subordinate to men, and this natural order is reflected in the structure of marital relations" (Pateman 2001: 59). Instead of pursuing her own dreams, Hannah Neelman chose a traditional life in which she is absolutely submissive to a man's desire for the ideal patriarchal wife. Marital status arises from "an implicit pact and voluntary subordination of the woman. Thus, the status of women as 'individuals' is already lower in the natural state" (Pateman 2001: 59).

Influencers are essentially seeking the attention of followers and the money they earn by posting videos, which are often made solely for the audience—even though, for example, cooking and

sharing food content could serve other purposes. Nara Smith, for instance, does exactly this: she creates food-related content, claiming it's for her children, but the essence of the videos – the kitchen she cooks in, the clothes she wears – is actually intended for the audience (“Oppressed by Choice...” 2024). These influencers are, in fact, true businesswomen who are exercising their right to express personal opinions – thanks not only to past feminist efforts, but also to the feminist fight that continues today, even as they post videos saying they just want to stay home, bake bread, give birth, and raise children.

Their business opportunities and the freedom to choose even to advocate for a traditional lifestyle in the 21st century were made possible by feminism – yet they often renounce and criticize it in their videos. Their mothers and grandmothers longed to become visible, to step outside the confines of the home – the four walls – to explore the stars like men could, as Betty Friedan described in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Once, this kind of domestic life inspired women to seek change, but today it is the chosen lifestyle of many young women around the world. Instead of resisting a submissive role, influencers embrace it and claim to enjoy it.

A significant anti-feminist and anti-gender campaign is also being led within women's discourse in the South Slavic region. Since the 1990s, certain female authors, influenced by rising nationalism and the retraditionalization of societies, have shaped their writing to support those ideas rather than critique them. Such is the literature published by Sanela Karišik, under the pen name Sara Sabri, who promotes patriarchal ideals in her books (Sabri 2014, 2018). Particularly troubling is her distortion of facts. Like other similar influencers, she is widely read and followed; her book promotions – where she discusses all kinds of topics – are well attended. She mostly gives advice to women, daughters, and sons, whispering to them in the same voice that women here have used for centuries – because their voice was never considered important, not even in the private sphere. But this is nothing new; the abandonment of women's writing and feminist

struggle has often occurred alongside the very fight to inscribe difference into the text.

Since the early 1980s in the Western context, awareness of the importance of women's writing began to change. By 1984 Nathalie Sarraute sarcastically remarked in an interview, "There's no such thing as *écriture féminine*, I've never seen it," and elsewhere in the same interview stated that the discussion about 'women's or men's writing (*écriture féminine ou masculine*) was completely meaningless (Moi 2008: 259–271).

The insistence on women's writing and inscribing difference in the text may have been challenging and irritating for many writers in the 1970s and 1980s, as Moi notes (Ibid.), but abandoning or erasing that concept has had serious consequences.

Anti-Feminist and Anti-Gender Campaigns in Women's Discourse

At a time of increasingly powerful movements and protests against gender equality, it is clear that we once again need to re-evaluate ideas about women's language—writing through the body and replacing the phallic pen with a gynocentric discursive project. Is this merely a matter of political positioning – for or against feminism – or is it part of a capitalist (more precisely, patriarchal) value system in which words opposing gender ideology and feminist consciousness sell better?

Whatever the answer, young women promoting traditional farm life and indirectly encouraging millions of followers to imitate them, as well as female authors who write books centering around a silent and passive woman/wife/mother who unconditionally serves her man/husband, are negating everything feminism has made possible for them – namely, the right to choose. However, this right to choose does not include the right to forget or deny all the achievements of feminist research and the academic contributions of feminism, nor the fact that women have

throughout history (a history that was never on their side) fought fiercely for their visibility.

There is ethnographic evidence that women developed private forms of communication due to the need to resist the silence imposed upon them in public life. (Showalter 1988: 233).

When it was not possible for women to play a significant role in society, they had to find ways to build a subcultural identity on the margins of a phallogocentric world – one that opposed male domination. From that margin came critical questioning of male language, which left no space for the woman or for representing the female subject – only the woman as an object within the male linguistic field.

The deconstruction of phallogocentrism by French feminist theorists finally challenged the idea of language as a masculine domain of power, because

in such a phallic economy, women are a kind of capital for men to possess and exchange, with the aim of accumulating as much as possible, while their exploitation and social inferiority is reinforced by the impossibility of accessing language except through male representation (Žimbek n.d.).

Such a shift finally opened the door to questioning the uniform representation of the female subject/body in male discourse, and initiated change

within socially determined linguistic practices relating to sexual differences in communication and positioning in language in relation to others, whose transformation would enable the expression of what had previously been silenced—a distinctly female identity (Ibid.).

Luce Irigaray observed that the exclusion of the female subject operates throughout the patriarchal system without exception.

The entire history of philosophy, which Irigaray confronted in a series of texts on Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, Nietzsche, and other philosophers, culminated in her book *Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1984), in which she revealed that the supposedly gender-neutral subject of Western philosophy actually reflects only the male perspective, while the woman is relegated to the position of the Other (Ibid.).

In the work of Sara Sabri, the female subject is primarily presented from a religion-centered perspective – one against which early 20th-century feminists fought fiercely. The stereotypical roles that women had liberated themselves from – or tried to – are once again being offered to them in trivial prose or video creations by various ‘writers’ and ‘advisors.’ These figures are once again advocating for a culture in which the private room – the center of a woman’s world, from which every self-aware woman once fled to the library, the temple of knowledge and freedom – is reclaimed. Today, such confinement is ‘voluntarily’ accepted under the belief that it is the best choice for a virtuous woman.

Make your home the most pleasant place in the world, a place that will be your kingdom. Be the one who is interested in everything: poetry, faith, science, film, culture, politics, cooking, design, etc. (Sabri 2015: 18).

Isn’t the author, like the advocates of the Tradwife trend, telling us that the struggle against the division between private and public space is meaningless when, in the 21st century, women are choosing the home – and specifically the kitchen – as their space?

All the contributions of feminist struggle seem in vain, especially when we recall the progress seen during the 1980s, when women in liberal-democratic societies achieved the highest levels of equality and gained nearly equal access to public space alongside men – something that is now a regular feature of life in modern societies.

What many women who follow and read Sara Sabri's texts and interviews fail to notice is that she often uses the same vocabulary employed by patriarchal advocates when discussing gender equality. In a video interview (2017), Sabri states that women are frustrated by equality (whatever that may mean), and that if they really want to be equal to men, they should work the third shift in a mine. It is troubling how uninformed the author is about the fact that women do, in fact, work in mining pits – even in Bosnian mines – alongside their male colleagues. Yet this still doesn't mean that equality has been achieved.

The author seems to imply that women simply haven't earned equality, or that they can only be equal if they perform the same physical labor as men. Consciously or not, she places the male – and his physical strength – once again at the center of the concept of equality. This reflects a literal understanding of equality (primarily on the basis of sex, not gender) and a notion that it can exist only in cases where women match the physical strength possessed by men. Sabri is a proponent of highly patriarchal ideas that serve to control female sexuality as one of the main points of controlling women.

Slave! Be his slave and he will be yours! Fulfil his desires. Everything you do around him, do it perfectly – not carelessly, not just for the sake of doing it. Perfectly! Make an effort! Sometimes force yourself even when you're not dying of desire, but please him – it will benefit you on the other side! (Sabri 2014: 39).

The author is essentially trying to explain that a woman's body is reserved solely for the man, and that her role is to satisfy him and his sexual needs.

Surprise your husband with a short lace nightgown, lace stockings up to the thighs, impeccable hygiene, perfume, fresh breath, a neat hairstyle, dyed hair, etc. Prepare yourself for him the way singers prepare for a performance.

(...) Let your mornings not always be ordinary. Try to get up before him at least occasionally, make him coffee, prepare breakfast, scatter a few rose petals over him while he sleeps... write him a note saying you love him and place it in his hand or on a tray next to his coffee and bed. And sometimes be cheeky when it comes to him! Crawl under the blanket with him and wake him up the way every man would love to start his day (Sabri 2014: 50).

Essentially, through her advice, Sabri tries to convey that the man should be the center of a woman's life – that his desires and mood should dominate her thoughts, and that she should always be ready to cheer him up and constantly play the role of an entertainer in the man's/husband's life.

Additionally, this advisor also promotes anti-gender ideology, as she expresses explicitly negative views about men who reject a macho appearance, noting that (all?)

...women love strength, firmness, stability. I get nauseous from these half-half types who don't even know what they actually are! Who they are! Confused personalities! Unfinished. And this deranged world even nurtures them, cultivates them, gives them names, makes something out of them. Something 'in between'. Horrible. Painful. Disappointing (Sabri 2018: 31).

This attitude toward gender identities and the rights of non-binary gender groups is typical of those who oppose feminism and gender equality. Here too, Sabri once again places the heterosexual man at the center – as the model of masculinity within the patriarchal value system.

Conclusion

Has the stereotypical perception of feminism contributed to the regression of patriarchal norms we thought we had long left behind – or is it ignorance and disinterest in how women came to be in a position to choose? We certainly cannot ignore the fact that, in this consumerist society, only superficiality sells. Should we, for the sake of capitalist goals, accept and betray the freedoms feminism has enabled us, and in doing so, betray all the women who have yet to gain those rights and freedoms? Can money truly be exchanged for the freedom of future generations of women? Is the hard-won right to choose worth trading today for profit, which will impose obligations on the next generation of women through a new wave of anti-feminism and anti-gender agenda? These are certainly questions that both feminists and anti-feminists need to consider.

Feminism urgently needs a new strategy of closeness with all educational systems—one that explains the positive sides of feminism and does not allow patriarchal and right-wing ideologies to once again turn feminists into witches. It is essential to dull the edge of misogyny and homophobia again, so we do not find ourselves, in the next decade, once more on the streets demanding rights we now believe are impossible to lose.

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CHAPTER 7

Do You Accept
Being Returned to
the Past?

Do You Accept Being Returned to the Past?

Abstract

The paper portrays the current status of women in Serbia, which is largely shaped by growing nationalism. At first glance, it may seem that the state, by adopting the Gender Equality Law, has enabled women in Serbia to free themselves from centuries-old patriarchal constraints. However, this seemingly optimistic picture conceals the obstruction of gender equality by the state itself, which continues to promote the most important role of women as mothers. The obstruction of the implementation of the Gender Equality Law, which prescribes measures for achieving and improving gender equality, alongside promoting the obligation of childbirth and the state's announcement that compulsory military service will be reintroduced, demonstrates that women in Serbia are deliberately kept in a subordinate position in the 21st century, with their rights and freedoms manipulated. The payment of allowances, which are presented as earnings, rather than achieving equality with men in areas such as labor, information and communication, defense and security, transport, energy, culture, public information, sports, etc., raises the question of whether women in Serbia accept being taken back to the past.

Introduction

The title for this text was taken from the feminist and peace activist Neda Božinović. The text "Do you accept being returned to the past?" was published by Neda Božinović in August 1994. In this text Neda Božinović expresses concern that young women are

unaware that their predecessors fought for the rights they now enjoy peacefully. As a result, they do not consider the possibility that these rights could be restricted or even taken away. Neda was particularly affected by the fact that when the topic of women's rights is brought up, young women often respond with: "Oh no, I'm not interested in that," or "I don't understand politics," or "I have children, I don't have time to engage in politics," and most frequently, "I'm not a feminist" (Božinović 1994). In fact, this part of Neda's text inspired my work, as I believe that the situation today is similar. Gender equality in Serbia is being questioned, many women's rights are under attack by the government, but most young women are not affected by it.

At first glance, it may seem that the state has enabled women in Serbia to free themselves from centuries-old patriarchal constraints. However, this seemingly optimistic image conceals the obstruction of the state regarding gender equality, while continuously promoting the role of women as mothers as the most important. Although gender equality is legally well-regulated in Serbia, numerous legal issues persist due to the interference of the Church and conservative forces in the implementation of certain laws. As a lawyer, I will discuss two laws: the Law on Gender Equality and the Law on Financial Support for Families, primarily focusing on the relationship between the state and the church toward these laws, as that relationship actually speaks to the current position of women and roles intended for women in society.

Gender Equality, Laws and Troubles in Serbia

The Law on Gender Equality came into force on June 1, 2021. The goal of this law is to establish, improve, and maintain gender equality. Among other things, this law prescribes measures for achieving and improving gender equality, which include creating equal opportunities for participation and equal treatment of women and men in the fields of work, employment, self-employment, social and health protection, education, upbringing, science and

technological development, information and communication technologies, defense and security, transportation, energy, environmental protection, culture, public information, sports, in bodies of governance and supervision, political activity and public affairs, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and access to goods and services. Additionally, the Law on Gender Equality mandates that public authorities and employers, who operate in the fields of education and upbringing, science and technological development, and public information, begin to use gender-sensitive language (Articles 37 and 44) three years after the law's adoption (Article 73). Since its adoption, the Law on Gender Equality has been subjected to negative criticism from nationalist and conservative circles in Serbia. A particular debate arose concerning the provisions about the mandatory use of gender-sensitive language. Critics of the law disputed these provisions, arguing that they were not in line with Serbian language. On June 27, 2024, the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Serbia initiated a procedure to determine the constitutionality of the Law on Gender Equality and suspended the execution of any individual acts or actions taken based on the provisions of this law (Constitutional Court 2024). This decision by the Constitutional Court was significantly influenced by activities such as consultations and scientific conferences organized by the Committee for the Standardization of Serbian Language, the Serbian Orthodox Church, and the state leadership.

On June 28, 2023, a “Consultation Meeting on the Harmfulness of the Law on Gender Equality” was held. A statement from this consultation meeting mentioned that this controversial law had stirred considerable interest and concern among a wide range of experts, not only in Serbia, but also in Montenegro and Republika Srpska. During the consultation meeting, the Serbian Patriarch Porfirije engaged in discussions with eminent Serbian linguists. The law was characterized as one of the “most serious problems faced by the Serbian people” (Serbian Orthodox Church 2023). The consultation meeting also highlighted that “the relevant authorities were not preventing, but were rather more than

tolerant toward a group of non-governmental organizations that persistently and systematically promote gender ideology, politics, and practices, including advocating that even the youngest children can choose their gender and sex (up to the possibility of medical gender reassignment)”. A statement from the consultation meeting also noted that

Serbian linguists informed His Holiness the Patriarch that there was a great interest among the broader scientific community, particularly linguists, lawyers, political scientists, sociologists, educators, and others, in overcoming this great challenge faced by Serbian science, education, culture, and society as a whole – the majority population and other nations living in Serbia (Serbian Orthodox Church 2023).

In conclusion, the participants expressed “satisfaction and gratitude for the initiative, participation, and support provided by the Serbian Orthodox Church in fundamental issues related to preserving the spiritual identity of the Serbian people and every human being with personal dignity (Ibid.).

On January 16, 2024, a scientific conference titled “Serbian Identity, Serbian Language, and the Law on Gender Equality” was organized by the Serbian Orthodox Church and Matica Srpska. The conclusions of this scientific conference mirrored those from the consultation on the harmfulness of the Law on Gender Equality (Srpska pravoslavna eparhija Žička 2024). Another scientific conference, “Legal Aspects and Consequences of the Application of the Law on Gender Equality”, took place on March 16, 2024, also organized by Matica Srpska and the Serbian Orthodox Church (Serbian Orthodox Church 2024). At this scientific conference, it was concluded that “the Law on Gender Equality alters the constitutional identity of the Republic of Serbia by fundamentally interfering with human rights, fundamental freedoms, and the entire value system and ethical foundations on which the citizens of the Republic of Serbia live” (Ibid.).

Following the decision of the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Serbia on June 28, 2024, concerning the Law on Gender Equality, the Committee for the Standardization of the Serbian Language held a session on October 3, 2024, to examine how this ruling is respected in the public sphere, particularly in the media and state institutions. A statement issued after the session confirmed that the Constitutional Court's decision clearly indicated that the implementation of the Law on Gender Equality was suspended, and all acts and activities based on it were to cease. "Until the completion of its evaluation procedure, the Law on Gender Equality practically no longer exists" (Committee for the Standardization of the Serbian Language 2024). Furthermore, the statement emphasized that this "applied to provisions related to language, or rather, the violence against the Serbian language, which was probably the primary reason for the suspension of this law" (Ibid.). The Committee's statement also emphasized that

all who use the Serbian language were obliged to use the standard Serbian language, and gender-sensitive language was not part of it", particularly referring to "media and all state institutions when writing in Serbian" (Committee 2024 Ibid.).

The statement noted that "genderizing the Serbian language continues in both government and non-governmental media, which is a part of the 'woke' ideology, condemned by the President of the country" (Ibid.).

On the other hand, the Committee acknowledged that there were exceptions in case of which certain professions and jobs may be referred to in the feminine form, as women can be associated with certain professions where the nature of the work requires it, and Serbian grammar accepts this without imposition (Ibid.).

In the statement, state bodies are criticized for continuing to use gender-sensitive language despite the decision of the Constitutional Court and a question is raised as to whether

these state bodies were following “the orders of ideological organizations”. In this regard, the Committee points out the website of the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue, which states: “Vedrana Perović, Head of the Youth Sector of the Ministry of Tourism and Youth, Sonja Tošković, Executive Director of the Belgrade Center for Human Rights and Coordinator of the Platform of Organizations for Cooperation with UN Mechanisms, Prof. Ivana Krstić, PhD, Professor at the Faculty of Law, ... Milica Borjanić, member of the Youth Council” – which, according to the Committee, is unacceptable in the light of the Constitutional Court’s decision (Ibid.).

The Committee’s statement reads that gender-sensitive language is being forcibly imposed by individuals and that it cannot be accepted because it is contrary to the internal structure of the standard Serbian language. The members of the Committee hold the view that the use of gender-sensitive language is promoted by individuals who have attended trainings on gendering language, and that gendering language is contrary to Serbian culture. This stance of the Committee implies that language is forever unchangeable (Krstić 2024).

In contrast to the Law on Gender Equality, the Law on Financial Support for Families with Children, which came into force in 2018, was promoted by the highest state authorities. The explanation of this law was given by the president, who stated that “a mother who gives birth to a third and fourth child will receive 30,000 dinars per month from the state, doing nothing, and residing in Serbia” (Danas 2018). Namely, the significantly increased parental allowance, paid in monthly installments, was seen by the state leadership as a replacement for the income women would earn through work. With this statement, although referring to parental allowance, it was made clear to women that the state does not expect them to engage in the workforce, but rather in childbearing. Accordingly, their activities should be oriented solely toward caring for the family and household. One of the few critics was Borka Pavićević, who viewed the law’s explanation as a threat to women’s rights and freedoms in Serbia. In this

regard, she warned that relieving women from work represented “freeing women from their own will in favor of serving the nation” (Pavićević 2018).

The government also involved Serbian citizens in the campaign for increased birth rates. In February 2018, the state announced a public call for creating slogans to encourage birth rates (Radio-televizija Vojvodine 2017). The statement following the contest indicated that the slogans would be “used in a campaign to promote population policy measures aimed at encouraging giving birth in the Republic of Serbia”. The first place was shared by the slogans “Love and baby – the first things we need!” and “Give birth, don’t postpone!” The second place was won by the slogans “Mom – I don’t want to be alone, Dad – I want a brother” and “Enough words, let it cry.” The third place was taken by the slogans “Miracles don’t happen. Miracles are born.” and “Let children be born and good things happen” (Vlada Republike Srbije 2018). It is important to note that the state’s approach to women is identical to the views of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which also publicly reminded women of their duty to bear children. In 2017, Patriarch Irinej told women in Serbia that they were obligated to have children, stating: “We are obligated to renew our people and to remind our mothers that they are duty-bound to have children with God’s blessing, so that we remain in history, even though we have suffered. It is difficult to list all the sufferings of Serbs in Bosnia, Herzegovina, Lika, Dalmatia, where entire villages disappeared” (Portal 021 2017). Another senior church official, Metropolitan Amfilohije, questioned a woman’s freedom to decide about having children. Offending women’s dignity, he stated: “Serbian women have become child murderers, who kill more children in their wombs in one year than Mussolini, Hitler, and Tito, and those here in Kosovo and Metohija” (Blic 2017).

Women's 'Duties': Church and Nation

The synchronized messages sent to women in Serbia by the Serbian Orthodox Church, in coordination with the highest state authorities, show that women in Serbia "are treated "exclusively as mothers, that is, as "natural means for the renewal of the Serbian nation" (Papić 1998:318), and therefore their "national duty is to surrender their bodies to the nation" (Ibid.). These messages aim to promote a "return to patriarchal traditions" as well as the "cultivation of the mythical role of the mother who sacrifices her children for the homeland" (Božinović 1998). They are particularly alarming in light of the wars of the 1990s in the territory of the former SFRY and the current preparations of the Army of the Republic of Serbia to begin conscripting soldiers for mandatory military service in September 2025. Moreover, war-tinged rhetoric effectively silences the voices of women in Serbia and overlooks their long-standing joint efforts with women from across the former Yugoslavia in building peace. The actual position of women in Serbia today is best illustrated by several real-life statistics. Regarding the reasons why men and women work less than full-time, the female population predominantly cites care for children or dependent individuals, at 93.7%, while only 6.3% of men work fewer hours for the same reason. Women spend twice as much time as men on unpaid household labor and caregiving. Women who are married with a child under seven years old spend almost the entire workday on unpaid domestic work (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia 2024).

Only 13.3% of women serve as municipal presidents/mayors, and 37.6% of women are councilors in municipal and city assemblies (Ibid.). These figures indicate that men still dominate decision-making positions. The current situation shows that measures are needed to improve the social status of women and achieve gender equality, rather than forcing women to be slaves to their "biology" (Petrušić 2010) for the sake of their nation. There has been no broader response from women to all these events.

Concluding Remarks

The image of society we are witnessing nowadays as well as social attitudes towards women in Serbia show a diametrically opposite stance towards above mentioned laws and their certain progressive trends. The obstruction of the implementation of the Gender Equality Law, which prescribes measures for achieving and improving gender equality, along with the promotion of the obligation to give birth and, at the same time, the arming of the state and the announcement that compulsory military service will be reintroduced, demonstrates that women in Serbia in the 21st century are deliberately kept in a subordinate position and that women's rights and freedoms are being manipulated. Given the minimal percentage of women in decision-making positions, their voices in favor of preserving peace are ignored, while at the same time they are implicitly reminded that their sacrifice is expected in any potential future war. The satisfaction of allowances presented as income instead of achieving equality with men in the decision-making processes in the fields of labor, information and communication technologies, defense and security, transportation, energy, culture, public information, sports, etc., raises the question of whether women in Serbia accept *being returned to the past?*

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CHAPTER 8

Populism in Media Discourse on Language Policy

Populism in Media Discourse on Language Policy

Abstract

The paper is about populism that as a style of communication appears as an integral part of political messaging in media discourse, including messages related to language policy. Over the last two decades media headlines in Serbia have revealed a distinct ideological trajectory in the state language policy. This approach, deeply rooted in the national identity, reflects the broader political currents of post-communist transitional societies, where right-wing populism thrives on national homogenization and a persistent sense of external threat. Language issues – such as the use of Cyrillic script, naming conventions, and gender-sensitive language – are often reduced in tabloid discourse to a simplistic and populist dichotomy, namely “us” as the defenders of tradition and “them” as the perceived enemies of national heritage. This framing marginalizes efforts to use language as a means of promoting gender equality and regional solidarity, portraying such initiatives as dangerous or subversive. As a result, it not only shapes the national discourse, but also poses a serious obstacle to peacebuilding efforts and reconciliation processes across the region. The aim of this paper is to highlight the populist elements in the messages conveyed by linguistic experts in Serbia through the media, based on an overview of media headlines published from 2002 to 2024.

Populism and National Threats

Most theorists (Canovan 2004; Mudde 2004; Mazzoleni 2008) view populism in a negative light, perceiving it as a societal pathology and a threat to the stability of liberal democracies. In both public discourse and the media, the terms *populist* and *populist rhetoric* are frequently used to discredit political opponents, accusing them of making unrealistic promises and engaging in demagoguery to stir up base emotions and gain stronger voter support (Šalaj 2012:23; Ernst 2014). What theoretical and empirical studies consistently identify as a common feature of all populist parties, whether left- or right-wing, is the invocation of “the people” and opposition to “the elite”. The political elite is seen as having ‘stolen’ democracy from the people, and the core mission of populists is to return power to the hands of honest, ordinary citizens (Šalaj 2012:23; Atlagić 2017).

In principle, populism is described as an ideology that divides society into two homogenous and antagonistic groups: *the pure people* and *the corrupt elite*. Within this framework, the role of politicians is to represent the general will of the people (Mudde 2004:543) and to protect it from *dangerous others* who are perceived as threatening their rights and freedoms. While this ideological structure applies broadly to all populist movements, they differ in terms of values, ideological orientations, political programs, and in the specific “enemies” they identify. A group of authors considers populism more as a political discourse or a style of communication than as an ideology; specifically, as a form of political mobilization that employs nationalist and anti-intellectual rhetoric to glorify “ordinary people” (Jansen 2011 in Šalaj 2004:26; Atlagić 2017). Populists tend to use simplified language in order to make complex social issues more accessible to the general public, reinforcing rebellion and resistance against the *dangerous others* in stark black-and-white terms.

In recent decades right-wing populist movements have achieved significant success in liberal democracies. These movements are typically positioned in opposition to mainstream politics, with

agendas grounded in nationalism, Euroscepticism, and anti-immigration sentiment (Canovan 2004:242). Many see the rise of the political right as a result of these programmatic orientations and the charisma of its leaders (Canovan 2004; Mudde 2004), while some authors also emphasize the significant role of the media (Mazzoleni 2008; Ernst 2014). In an era of mediatization, the media have become an integral part of politics and society, serving as “the main communicative infrastructure through which politics is represented to the public” (Ernst 2014: 2). The evident effects of the mediatization of politics include the transformation of political language into spectacle and the personalization of political leadership (Mazzoleni 2008; Ernst 2014). These effects are especially pronounced in tabloid media, where the interests of these outlets often align with the goals of populist movements.

Post-Socialist Serbia: Language, Ideology of Nationalism, Communication Styles

In addition to the growing strength of populist parties in Western European democracies – where dissatisfaction with European integration and the migration crisis is widespread – right-wing populism is also gaining momentum in former communist countries. In these contexts, national homogenization emerges as a key instrumental value (Canovan 2004; Atlagić 2017; Savić 2022). Serbia, like the neighboring republics of the former Yugoslavia, provides a socio-political environment conducive both to the spread of nationalism – most effectively promoted through populist communication styles – and to the tabloidization of the media landscape. Central to the ideology of nationalism is the concept of identity, through which a nation constructs a positive image of itself, its culture, and its traditions, while cultivating a sense of being threatened by other nations perceived as a danger.

Consequently, the primary demand of nationalism is the defense of identity against external influences, which may be military or economic, but also cultural – manifested through language and the arts. In this context, fear and suspicion of “the others” are

sustained in public discourse, even in times of peace (van Dijk 2008:200-201).

Since language and culture emerged as key markers of identity during the formation of nation-states in the 19th century – serving as symbols and indicators of belonging or not belonging to a particular nation (Shohamy 2006: 25-26) – it is no surprise that, following the wars of the 1990s, the language policy in Serbia, as part of the broader national policy, came to serve the goals of national homogenization and the mobilization of the population (Savić 2022).

Language policy is a deliberate and institutionalized activity aimed at regulating the public use of language within a social community. It is carried out through language planning and standardization, in which a particular language variety is selected and promoted as prestigious (Radovanović 2003). Language planning is a continuous process in which language is directed toward desirable linguistic behavior (Filipović 2009), and it is always aligned with dominant ideological orientations and the broader framework of national policy (Radovanović 2003; Shohamy 2006). In addition to determining the status of a linguistic variety, language planning also shapes discourse – that is, it influences people’s mental states, behaviors, and belief systems through language-mediated ideological action by institutions (Lo Bianco in Starčević et al. 2019).

Following the breakup of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the establishment of independent republics – marked by civil war and the expulsion of those belonging to the “other” nation – the linguistic community also began to fragment. It was expected that the standardization processes of what was formerly known as the Serbo-Croatian/Croato-Serbian language would proceed independently within the newly formed states. However, fueled by heightened nationalism, these processes often involved deliberate interventions into the language, intended to artificially create as many distinctions as possible. Serbia’s language policy, largely influenced by the

Board for Standardization of the Serbian Language formed in the 1990s, focused primarily on symbolic expressions, namely on protecting Cyrillic as the sole national script and promoting the Serbian language as “the only scientific name” that transcends the borders of the Serbian state.

The legacy of the war years remained palpable in public discourse even at the beginning of the 21st century. It manifested through national homogenization and xenophobia, hate speech, mythomania, and the populist misuse of language – a legacy difficult to overcome, further burdened by a declining level of literacy and public discourse quality (Bugarski 2013:100).

Narratives within Serbian Language Policy and *Dangerous Others*

Narratives within Serbian language policy had already been established and found their way into the pages of daily newspapers. An analysis of media content from 2000 to 2024 reveals that narratives portraying the language and script as being under threat from neighboring nations have consistently dominated for over two decades. In recent years, following the adoption of the Law on Gender Equality – which mandates the use of gender-sensitive language – the role of the *dangerous others* has increasingly been assigned to the feminist movement.

The thematic areas that have dominated Serbian language policy are clearly evident from media headlines: first, the status of the Cyrillic script in relation to the Latin alphabet; second, the fragmentation of the former Serbo-Croatian language, and third, gender-sensitive language.

Related to the first, the Cyrillic script emerged during the 1990s as an issue of national importance, one that needed to be regulated both legally and constitutionally. It was believed that the 1990 Constitution gave too much space to the Latin alphabet (as it was retained for official use), which, in linguistic practice, was clearly

pushing the Cyrillic script aside (Politika 2005; Novosti 2005a). The Latin alphabet is labeled as the *Croatian* script or *foreign/alien*, meaning an adversarial script that has overly dominated the Serbian space, causing *an injustice to the marginalized Cyrillic script* (Ekspres 2003; Glas 2005). The need for the Latin alphabet is a reality that is completely ignored in the face of the claim that equal recognition of both alphabets would lead to a *national demise* (Glas 2005).

In 2006, when Montenegro separated from the state union with Serbia, the Constitution was amended, and the Latin alphabet was completely removed from official use. Although motivated by nationalism, this constitutional change regarding the status of the alphabet was intended to be the most effective state mechanism for protecting Cyrillic. However, the narrative of its endangerment continued in the following years. With apocalyptic descriptions and metaphors of war, such as *Cyrillic is weakening, under attack, expelled*, in the past decade, there has also been an emphasis on targeting other nations, particularly Croats, as the main culprits for the diminished use of Cyrillic, accusing them of *attacking, stealing, and abrogating it* (Srbin.info 2015). Cyrillic is generally spoken of as an inseparable part of Serbian identity, which is said to be at risk of disappearing unless the state, in cooperation with the Serbian linguistic profession, takes appropriate measures. It is warned that with the disappearance of Cyrillic, the nation itself is being lost (Politika 2018, 2022; Novosti 2023a).

The second point I would like to address is the fragmentation of the once-common Serbo-Croatian language into four standards – Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian, and Montenegrin – that was also a central focus of Serbian language policy. After Croatian and Bosnian, which had already been established in the 1990s in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the question of the Montenegrin language became prominent, especially during the time of the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro (2003-2006). Many linguists and writers opposed the use of a “non-Serbian language name for the language of Serbs”, arguing that this could lead to the erasure of the Serbian language (Novosti 2008).

Another challenge for language policy in Serbia arose with the request of Bosniaks in Sandžak and Raška (regions in Serbia with a predominantly Muslim population) for the official use of the Bosniak language, or rather Bosnian, as Bosniaks themselves requested (Novosti 2003b). Serbian linguists generally rejected any alternative language name (Novosti 2003b), or debated the appropriateness of the term, insisting on “Bosniak” (Novosti 2005), which would refer only to Bosniaks, and not to Serbs and Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The polemics continued even after Montenegro was established and the existence of four names for essentially the same language became a political reality. The regulation of language matters within neighboring countries is perceived as an offensive against the Serbian language, as theft, and as a path leading to the disappearance of the Serbian language and identity (for example, Radio Trebinje 2016). The Croatian reaction to the Declaration on the Borders of the Serbian Language – which formalized the stance of Serbian linguists that the entire Shtokavian-speaking area falls within the scope of the Serbian language – was portrayed as an attack by Croats on the Serbian people and their language (e.g. Novosti 2022).

The third issue through which this theme was reflected was the debate over gender-sensitive language. It has been ongoing in Serbia for many years. On the one hand, there are feminist linguists advocating for the prohibition of sexist language in public communication and for the consistent use of feminine occupational titles (Savić 1998; Filipović 2009; Savić and Stevanović 2025). On the other hand, there are linguists, mostly affiliated with the Board for Standardization of the Serbian Language, who oppose such interventions in the language, insisting that the masculine grammatical gender carries a neutral value, and that feminine forms are not necessary – that their use should be left to language practice (Miloradović 2011; Piper and Klajn 2013).

The media were particularly drawn to feminine occupational and title forms – how they sound and whether they conform to the

norms of the Serbian language (Politika 2002, 2009). Following the announcement of the Law on Gender Equality, which mandates the official use of gender-sensitive language – and especially after it came into force in 2021—linguists associated with the Board for the Standardization of the Serbian Language and Matica Srpska began to oppose the law in an overtly confrontational tone, finding allies in the Serbian Orthodox Church. The Law itself has been described as unconstitutional, imposed, contrary to the standard Serbian language, and even violent, as it allegedly introduces a form of verbal offense by preventing people from using their own language (B92 2017; Novosti 2024a). It is portrayed as an attack on the Serbian language and identity, on tradition and family, with warnings of grave consequences. The Law is said to have been imposed by “them” – mostly unnamed “enemies” acting from ideological positions with the intent to erase the Serbian roots upon which national identity is based (Nova 2023; Novosti 2024b).

Conclusion

Even thirty years after the breakup of the Yugoslav state, public discourse in Serbia remains burdened by nationalism and xenophobia, which is clearly reflected in the field of language policy. The messages communicated through the media by language authorities – from the early 21st century to the present – reveal an obsession with the nation’s identity markers, while consciously neglecting other important issues such as the decline in general literacy. Topics such as the traditional Serbian script, the political naming of the former Serbo-Croatian language, and gender-sensitive language as a crucial aspect of gender equality policy have provided a convenient framework for the populist misuse of language, ideological confrontation, and the strengthening of institutional and social power. For decades, neighboring nations and, more recently, feminist groups have been portrayed as the main enemies who steal, threaten, and destroy the Serbian people, their language, culture, and tradition. By tying language exclusively to the preservation of the nation,

Serbian linguists suppress the idea of language as a means of promoting gender equality and fostering connection with neighboring peoples.

The narratives that have been cultivated within the domain of language policy and embedded in the socio-political climate of an impoverished and semi-educated society – reinforced by the intense tabloidization of the media scene – pose a serious obstacle to building peace, tolerance, and cultural cooperation in the region, advancing human rights, and furthering the democratization of society.

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Discussion

Discussion: How to Respond to the Arrogance of Ignorance?

Zilka Spahić Šiljak:

Thank you very much. All four of you kept to the time and we've heard four excellent presentations that complement each other. We started with a global perspective from Rebeka on how the anti-gender movement operates and what has unfolded in the last two decades in Europe and globally. Then we moved to the evolutionary argument: Is patriarchy an evolutionary error? And the example from North Macedonia presented by Daniela, which mirrors examples across the Balkans, doesn't differ much. And finally, the presented laws in Serbia, showing how state institutions can support anti-gender tendencies, often with the backing of religious communities and churches and that support carries real responsibility. We'll address this further in a panel on religious resources for peacebuilding in intersection with gender. But in the context of the anti-gender movement, we see strong voices from religious institutions. Now, I am opening the floor for your comments, discussions, and suggestions.

Biljana Kašić:

I have a question for Rebeka. This is an extremely important topic and the discourse analysis you've demonstrated invites a new kind of conversation on the idea of peace and what peace and nonviolence really mean. By deconstructing the so-called common-sense narrative, you've revealed its inherent deceptions.

Often, war itself is approached with this "common-sense" logic. It has always existed, it's part of a civilizational pattern. This narrative makes us uncritical toward the intention of war and closed to alternatives, that is anti-war imaginaries. That same

logic permeates how we discuss conflict. But what is important and what you articulated so well is this idea of the “arrogance of ignorance”, or anti-intellectualism that goes with it, which lies at the heart of anti-feminist discourse. Thus as a feminist, what I want to ask is: What are the exit routes or responses? Are there creative feminist strategies? Over the past two decades, we’ve witnessed the rise of anti-gender movements that now occupy and contaminate our discursive space. How can we respond to this, how can we resist?

Jadranka Rebeka Anić:

Thank you. That’s not an easy answer. But as I listened to colleagues describing the situation in Macedonia and Serbia, I thought of something Professor Ćurak once said about globalization. Why must we all keep asking the same question from the beginning, like Daniela did in case of Macedonia: “Who’s behind this?”

I remember when the anti-gender movement first started, we all wondered: is this a campaign? A movement? National or international? It took years to realize that this is a transnational, well-funded, ideologically connected movement with its own networks and digital platforms CitizenGo, and tons of materials. By the time we realized this, the movement had already flooded Europe. What we in Croatia experienced from 2013 to 2018 before the Istanbul Convention was ratified, is now happening elsewhere in the region.

So, if they can connect globally, why are we still so fragmented? That’s what Zilka and I keep discussing: we must stop dividing ourselves into secular and religious feminist groups. We need to exchange experiences. What we know from our religious communities, secular feminists may not. Let’s share that knowledge. The anti-gender agenda is now at the center of the 2025 political strategy; this has become a political problem.

So how do we respond? They've mastered the short, appealing messages that resonate with the public. What Daniela mentioned about Macedonia, framing it as a concern for children, Roman Kuhar's book on the anti-gender movement shows how powerful that was in Slovenia. They mobilized grandparents. At a roundtable I attended in Switzerland in 2018, a woman came up to me and said: "Sister, I'm a grandmother and I'm worried about my granddaughter. They'll turn all of them into something I don't recognize." She was terrified. So how do we frame our own public discourse?

One more thing: A German sociologist analyzed how the AfD [Alternative for Germany] used the parliament not to govern, but as a stage for ideological messages. They researched gender studies just to identify the "enemy". Once they had started, they didn't even show up to the presentation – facts didn't matter. Like Trump, they're not interested in truth. They only want the public to identify a target, and they succeed. For example, with gender-sensitive language, which we call "gender-just language", they distorted it into "gender language". We know the difference between gender-sensitive and "gender language", but they manufactured fear by claiming that the national identity was threatened. They used this term so often that it became normalized in the media. Now even media outlets use "gender language", and the CDU political party in Germany included it in their platform. They implanted the misinformation into the public consciousness and moved on.

All of this is to say: we must find ways to communicate positively and persistently. They have power now and we respond reactively, always one step behind. When they lie, we exhaust ourselves by disproving them and the public gets bored. We must be hopeful and strategic. They frame themselves as guardians of tradition. But tradition must be deconstructed and that's what we, as theologians, are doing. We need to show that there's not one singular Tradition, but many toxic mini-traditions poisoning the larger one. We need to make that visible. I have a question and would appreciate a response or comment from the panelists.

Today we've mentioned Donald Trump several times, and if we look at one of his first executive orders, the one that defines there are only two sexes, male and female – we'll see that it's titled as being in defense of women from the extremism of gender ideology. I'd like to hear your thoughts. What do you think about this kind of discourse, which frames all these anti-gender actions as something that's actually *for* women? And secondly, what do you think about the phenomenon where we have dominant churches and religious communities that are socially powerful institutions, and at the same time we have secular institutions that are also full of men, for example, science academies. Yet, their discourse portrays them as some oppressed minority being threatened by so-called gender ideology or so-called gender language.

There is indeed that kind of discourse that they're not against gender stereotypes, but are rather *protecting diversity*. You'll now find writings in Croatia justifying the establishment of separate schools for boys and girls, supposedly in order not to promote stereotypes, but to preserve diversity. Under that label, what they really want is to preserve the *specificity* and *specialness* of women. But when you look more closely, these are classic gender stereotypes. I analyzed such articles in Croatian theological journals, and in them the authors aren't even aware that they're reinforcing stereotypes; they keep claiming distance from them.

In these schools, for example, boys are supposed to be active, they're allowed to move, jump during class, they must be spoken to authoritatively. And all those differences are allegedly the result of hormone effects on male vs. female brains. Meanwhile, girls must sit still, be polite, and teachers must speak to them gently, calling them *dear* or *sweetheart*. I may be caricaturing slightly, but really these are the messages found in literature, lectures, and in schools themselves, which are gender-segregated.

Behind all of this is Opus Dei, the Catholic organization. The school programs claim to preserve "diversity", but it's actually the preservation of rigid gender roles. So, when Trump uses that

narrative, he presents himself as someone who *protects women* from harmful gender ideology, the kind that tells them they can also be or do things associated with men, for instance.

Željko Šarić:

I'm not sure I have an answer, but perhaps a comment on the first point. I don't think Trump is good or doing anything good, but in this case of gender ideology, it seems to me that the influence comes more from Musk and his personal family story where his son transitioned. So I think Elon Musk has more influence on Donald Trump than this being Trump's original idea.

Daniela Antonovska:

I believe you mentioned that churches and religious communities are powerful. To support that as far as I've understood, in North Macedonia, it's not so much about the power of religion or tradition per se. Rather, it's about church-based foundations and organizations that have money, they have financial resources and even fund local governments and their projects.

Jadranka Rebeka Anić:

I think that's what Roman Kuhar identified as the *NGO-ization* of religion. Now, even religious institutions are registering as NGOs and supposedly act in a secular way, but the church is behind them. So someone like me, if I speak critically or address human rights, I have no space in the Church. But someone like Željka Markić or Vice Batarelo, yes, at times the Church might slightly distance itself from them when they go too far or when there's public backlash. But they are always welcomed back. Likewise, the theological narrative on gender that I showed you is *completely twisted* compared to what we know is written in

international documents and gender studies. That's the Church's narrative and anyone who wants to speak against gender can always lean on it. This is the game we must expose.

On the topic of men feeling threatened:

We should still acknowledge that male identity hasn't kept pace with the development of women's identities. Women have been more organized, more proactive and we've moved forward, while men have lagged behind. We know that in the West, there's cooperation – even men's groups exist. In the Catholic Church in Germany, there are Catholic men who *aren't conservative*. They follow what's happening with women, read the Bible through that lens, seek to find their identity, and gain strength for their changed roles. Unfortunately, in Croatia, we only have *conservative movements* that try to remake men into hunters and conquerors who feel threatened when women are strong.

They advocate for men to pray in public squares and ask that women do not “provoke” them with their clothing. That performance is de facto political Catholicism. It has nothing to do with faith. The difference and I'll mention Trump again is that he's surrounded by crowds of men. Young men also voted for him. His message is: *We will make America great again*. He gives them back an identity. We can critique that identity, of course - but imagine a young man coming to one of our events and what do we say? Oh, *that's toxic masculinity*. He would walk away from our agenda.

Daniela Antonovska:

I also think it's a matter of *our narrative*. One journalist once said to me: “Please, just reduce that narrative to something simpler and try to explain it to us ordinary people in a clear and simple way and don't spread demagoguery”.

Zilka Spahić Šiljak:

It's complex. It just occurred to me to joke a little that maybe, just like in the U.S. you have *The Bible for Dummies* and other such titles; maybe we need *Gender Equality for Dummies*, or some simplified version, because what we're discussing, theoretical insights and the conceptualization of the whole issue simply do not register with the general public. Most people are looking for simpler messages. So now the question is - how can we simplify it, and how far can we go in that simplification?

Nermina Mujagić:

The way I understand it, narrative or discourse as we now refer to it in public space is something that can be changed. Narratives are mutable, and that, at least from my point of view, is optimistic. History has shown that narratives shift due to crises, peace agreements, the rise or fall of power, etc. We need a *new story*, a different story. As Zilka said, it's a question of what fills that narrative. This scientific language is no longer popular and doesn't mobilize people the way political media narratives do, with their binary "us vs. them" rhetoric. We can't even have serious political strategies anymore; there are no debates, everything is "us and them", and it's largely anti-intellectual, if not also anti-institutional. The second issue of relevance here is: in which direction do we go when creating a new story? Should we focus on deconstructing their story? Or should we build an alternative narrative, one that is maybe not spectacular, not populist, not massive, but strong enough to stand on equal footing, to challenge the primacy of these dominant narratives that you have outlined so brilliantly here.

Jadranka Rebeka Anić:

We need our own positive story, and we need to disseminate it in a way that counters the info-smog. As I mentioned, AfD (Alternative for Germany) created *info-smog* by flooding the public with false information, polluting the discourse so much that it becomes impossible to respond adequately. We don't need to produce *info-smog*, we need to do something else: flood the space with positive new ideas. I remember when the public debate about trans people began, it was terrible. I expected people to respond rationally and with distance to theory, but when confronted with personal stories, everything changed. I was deeply moved when I researched these issues and read, for example, that when an intersex child is born, parents are forced to immediately decide which sex to surgically assign. I was shaken to learn that there are people who don't even have sexual glands who are completely asexual and yet we are forcing them into something.

Individuals don't need to share their own stories publicly, but we can make a documentary to show that diversity exists. If we claim to respect diversity, then we must recognize that there are trans people, intersex people, homosexuals who suffer simply because they're different from us. On the one hand, we're "protecting" male-female differences while on the other, we're destroying people because of those same differences. We need to send out good words, good messages, to awaken empathy in people. We must not give up. But we must go forward with our own positive story. We need to uncover positive models of relationships in other cultures and societies and show that they existed in history and exist today. The problem is that we have naturalized our bad patriarchal social relations, justifying them as "natural".

Nermina Mujagić:

I just wanted to offer a brief observation and perhaps a question for you, Rebeka. As a sociologist, I've been trained

to observe my surroundings, and one thing that makes me happy, which I've noticed in recent years, is that in my neighborhood, there are many young fathers actively spending time with very small children and slightly older ones too. This reminded me of a wonderful book I loved during my studies, Bronislaw Malinowski's *The Trobriand Islands* that showed completely different models of fatherhood and everything else. I don't know if there are any sociological studies on contemporary models of fatherhood. Can this change be documented sociologically with data? Because based on personal impressions, I feel that we have moved away from the dominant model of fatherhood that existed during my childhood, where fathers didn't show emotions or barely did, if ever.

Jadranka Rebeka Anić:

Yes, there's the GENMOD study. We've conducted that in Croatia on three occasions: around 2005, again in 2018, and now a new one is being completed. It shows a real change. I did interviews with both men and women, and I found it very interesting to hear men say things like *It's just better this way - I come home and start cooking lunch, she comes in and we finish together. After that, we both have free time. I realized it was stupid to just lie around waiting for her to come home exhausted and then do everything.* There are enough such examples, and they deserve praise. This shift in fatherhood, especially in a world that's so fractured and atomized - shows that you can't rely on rigid family or gender roles. Adaptability is what matters. GENMOD also showed a shift in gender stereotypes: Both men and women began attributing "rationality" to women, previously seen as a male trait. Women attributed nearly all traditionally male traits to themselves while keeping their own. Men, on the other hand, largely kept their own traits, but didn't attribute many new ones, though some, like emotionality, are slowly gaining ground. So, yes, change is happening.

Daniela Antonovska:

I'd like to add something. Last year I conducted a similar *study* at the Faculty of Philosophy in Skopje on *work-life balance*, and one chapter specifically focused on fatherhood. I did a chronological analysis of how many fathers in North Macedonia took parental leave from 2010 to 2024. It showed progress: in 2010 only 4–5 fathers took leave, but by 2024 that number had risen to 56–78. However, we face a major problem: there is *only* maternal leave. There is no paternity or parental leave. People, especially men, are unaware that they can even take leave. So, the problem is also a lack of information. It's important to highlight these positive examples.

Biljana Kašić:

Just two short comments. Firstly, in the 1980s, when men's studies were introduced in Nordic countries, inspired by feminist and gender studies, they were genuinely focused on exploring *alternative models of masculinity*, as opposed to hegemonic masculinity. That was already a significant shift. Secondly, I believe that we must never pander to anti-intellectualism. We may need to craft another model, another language. And I think the intersection between *liberationist* and *decolonial* feminism and their effects could help us here. We must not stay defensive; we must be capable of crafting and transmitting powerful messages. And yes, we know that anti-gender movements have already hijacked many discursive variants and concepts.

Ana-Marija Raffai:

Ah, I'd like to ask a question to Dragana, you've been quiet, but your presentation was very interesting. Thanks for what you said about those laws. I am referring here to another issue: We more or less know what's happening there, but I wanted to connect

it to the current situation, especially the student awakening and protests in Serbia. I'd love to hear your thoughts on this, knowing how difficult it is. Namely, do you see a potential for future change in this student movement, or in at least some of the people involved in it? And could their demands help in this struggle that is far from over?

Dragana Pejović:

Yes, the process is not yet over, it's ongoing. Whether there will be positive outcomes, like the adoption of gender-sensitive language and similar, it is uncertain. Let me tell you, my personal impression is that young people are quite nationalistically inclined. Also, I didn't want to stay silent about this. Even in my own neighborhood, I see young men, but when I ask where the wife is, the answer is usually: "She's cooking or tidying up."

I don't know. But I do know that at workshops held at universities, I always see the same faces, the same small circle of people. I think the influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church is enormous and all research confirms this. When people are asked which institution they trust most, the Church comes first, followed by the military, so that's not a very optimistic message.

Ifeta Mejremić:

I'd like to share something from my own rural community, and say how encouraged I am by what I've heard today. As a child and high school student, I often heard from fathers that they weren't allowed to touch or hold their own children. The patriarchy suppressed that. But today in my community, it's very different: young men take care of their kids, spend time with them, cook for them. So I want to say there has been progress, especially in rural areas where women were always "less than".

Through the NGO sector and our education programs, many young women have awakened, and I'm truly grateful to be here today. When I think back, even as a child, I had to fight with my mother who didn't want to let me go to school. But my late father, and my older brother who was later killed, both stood by me. My brother would say *I won't go to school, Ifeta will. I'll dig ditches, unload sacks of flour at stores — but she must go to school.* It's very important that we pass these messages on to young people in rural areas.

We're starting in our own community, with children many of whom are part of the returnee population. The refugee return strategy was such that we were basically dumped back there in Bratunac area to figure it out on your own. The large funds intended for us were taken by others. We know all of this. And now our children... A young woman once came to a meeting and I asked her what was going on. She said, *I'm sitting in front of the school and my child is crying.* That's why we are now fighting to open a small day-care center, a safe play space for these children and to create opportunities for mothers to work.

Zilka Spahić Šiljak:

Thank you so much, Ifeta. There is hope – women like you are doing real work in small communities, and that encourages us. It's easy for us to theorize from the comfort of our offices and organizations. But it's necessary to go to Konjević Polje, Bratunac, Srebrenica, and other small towns to do this concrete work that truly demands we speak with respect about everything you're doing. Thank you all for the discussion and your contributions to this panel.

Feminist Legacy and Women's Peace Activism

THEME

03

CHAPTER 9

The Discomforting Legacy of Anti-War Politics: Croatian Feminists in the 1990s and Today

The Discomforting Legacy of Anti-War Politics: Croatian Feminists in the 1990s and Today¹

Abstract

The political articulation of feminist anti-war engagement, as well as the organizational and ideological divisions that followed, were guided by the complex social constellation in which women's/feminist and anti-war groups operated. Primarily, it concerns the ambivalent and contradictory socio-political matrix of the Croatian state, which underwent multiple processes of "transition", and was both a victim of aggression and an aggressor against the neighboring state of Bosnia and Herzegovina, with its citizens exposed to nationalist ideologization, economic and state violence, as well as war destruction. Some Croatian feminists took a consistent anti-war stance, which included condemning nationalism, militarization of society, and questioning the responsibility of "their" state for the war. This position became the basis not only for epistemological reflection, organizational growth, and expansion, but also for a fruitful process of articulating a new feminist political subject, partially facilitated by new information and communication technologies.

Anti-War Positioning: Context(s)

The charter of the Antiwar campaign Croatia, written on July 4, 1991, served as a platform for gathering anti-war voices over three decades ago. In the final paragraph, there is a statement that

¹ This work is created within the framework of the IEF project Normality and Discomfort partly funded by the NextGenerationEU.

would become a defining feature of Croatian anti-war activism in the years to come, which reads: “We will communicate and collaborate regardless of differences in political views and future relations between republics”. This commitment to maintain contact with the other side quickly became one of the reasons for friction among feminists. However, it’s important to note that the charter was supported by several dozen women’s, green, and spiritual activist groups, as well as several hundred individuals. We often faced criticism for not being able to stop the war, but despite these challenges, we were very active in the 1990s. To better understand what we were actually doing, it’s essential to consider the social context in which we were operating. Behind the mythology of the just and defensive homeland war, the reality was quite different. Croatia faced a complex, multi-faceted transition, that included three major processes: first, the establishment of an independent state based on liberal political principles; second, the transition to a capitalist economy characterized by the privatization and expropriation of socially owned industries and firms; and third, the process of constructing a national identity, which was influenced by historical revisionism, the rise of ethnonationalism, and deeply rooted in the warrior mythology of the homeland war. The social processes involved in this multiple transition included the national homogenization and militarization of society, the political instrumentalization of violence, and the acceptance of lawlessness. This atmosphere permitted political murders and torture, military mobilization of criminals in prisons, and the evictions of “undesirable” citizens and their families from their homes (Petković 2013).

Historical revisionism and the rehabilitation of the Ustasha regime occurred simultaneously with the rejection of the antifascist past, symbolized by the destruction of nearly three thousand antifascist monuments in the Republic of Croatia (Hrženjak 2002). These processes were accompanied by media control and mass dismissals of journalists deemed politically “undesirable”. Moreover, there were processes of retraditionalization and repatriarchalization of society, which were largely supported or

even led by the Catholic Church. Finally, this period was marked by rampant criminal privatization and the expropriation of public property.

Feminist Positioning, Feminist Choices

Regarding the aforementioned issue of economy, it is important to emphasize that we were unable to address the political economy and its concrete implications related to the war at that time. This was partly due to several pressing issues that required our attention, such as widespread human rights abuses, the refugee crisis, and the establishment of an openly authoritarian regime. As a result, we had to prioritize these matters. Initially, our numbers were small, and soon, as perhaps the most radical opponents of the war, we faced attacks from state-controlled media. Therefore, our focus was more on the political than the economic sphere². However, it also took some time for the geopolitical implications of these processes to become clear.

Different theoretical tools were necessary as well comprehending the geopolitical and economic forces behind the manifest socio-political reality. Additionally, a new generation of feminists needed to emerge in changed socio-economic conditions, helping to critically examine the commodification of war and post-war reconstruction from a leftist position, as Nela Porobić Isaković does in her texts, advocating for a feminist political economy.

² A more significant revival of interest in political economy and critique of capitalism in Croatia was instigated by the great economic crisis in 2009 and the student movement of the same year, which resulted in the blockade of several faculties, accompanied by rich discussions at plenums and prolific theoretical production. For almost two decades, Marxist theory was largely excluded from academic curricula in Croatia. It was precisely the students – through their struggle for free and accessible education for everyone – who helped bring (neo-) Marxism and its critique of political economy back into public discourse. Some actors in the student movement have expressed criticism towards anti-war activists from the 1990s, particularly targeting their emphasis on political processes, accusing them of being “liberals” not “leftists”.

We translated³ her analysis on the commodification of war (Porobić Isaković 2023). We are grateful to her for opening up this topic, because we believe that pointing to and analyzing that material base is crucial for understanding these processes that occurred in the superstructure, if we may use Marxist terminology. In short, in the words of the Croatian feminist Đurđa Knežević, it was a “war for the domination of the nation over the individual, the state over society, the ethnic majority over the minority, and patriarchy over women” (Knežević 2012:261). Our opposition to nationalism and the related processes, as well as our advocacy for maintaining contact with Serbian anti-war feminists, quickly led to a public witch hunt, as well as division into so-called “patriotic” and “abstract” feminists (Miškowska Kajevska 2017). As the late Croatian feminist and journalist, one of the “witches from Rio”⁴, and co-founder of the Centre for Women Victims of War, Vesna Kesić, said:

women were used as victims upon whose bodies nationalism wrote its nation-building projects and millennial dreams (Kesić 2003:11).

Apart from groups like the Centre for Women Victims of War, no one cared about the real victims for a long time, nor organized help and support. The Centre did a tremendous amount of work in providing support to refugee women, closely collaborating

³ After founding an informal Ad Hoc Feminist Anti-War Coalition in 2023, few members of the group began to translate anti-war texts, which were published on the media portal H-alter as a section titled “Reading Room of the Ad hoc Feminist Anti-War Coalition”. The very first text published in the Reading Room was a translation of Porobić Isaković’s text “Commodifying War: The Political Economy of Disaster Capitalism in Ukraine and Beyond”.

⁴ “Witches from Rio: Croatian Feminists Rape Croatia” was the title of a newspaper article published in the Croatian weekly *Globus* in November 1992. The article represents one of the most shameful episodes in Croatian journalism. Five Croatian writers, journalists and publicists - Jelena Lovrić, Rada Iveković, Slavenka Drakulić, Vesna Kesić and Dubravka Ugrešić - were accused of allegedly lobbying against the holding of the next PEN congress in Dubrovnik during the PEN congress in Rio de Janeiro that year. In the article, almost in the form of a warrant, intimate details about these women were presented. Subsequently, these women faced numerous threats, and three of them left the country.

with the aforementioned Medica from Zenica. To illustrate our commitment to maintaining cooperation with the enemy side, we will quote from the programmatic poem by Biljana Kašić, titled *Crossing the Lines* that was written in 1994:

We walk across the earth
Out of lines
When we see each other
We know we are together
When we think of each other
Miles far from together
Remembering our dreams and goals
The wholeness
Despite lines and sides
Senseless war
We are not alone
Imagine
Out of lines.

Cyberfeminism in the Midst of War

Based on the author's testimony, the poem was written as one of the first email messages sent late at night to women from Bosnia and Serbia. This leads us to a project that we will just briefly mention, which serves as a reminder of the potentially emancipatory use of digital technologies that have since advanced significantly and shaped our lives much more deeply than we could have anticipated back then. This refers to a proto-Internet system called BBS, which stood for Bulletin Board System. This technology was used for the creation of the digital

transnational network ZaMir⁵. It was a relatively simple system that primarily enabled the exchange of emails but also had space for public discussions, sort of semi-public forums, which we called "conferences". Actually, ZaMir emerged out of political necessity. By the end of 1991, telephone lines between Croatia and Serbia were disconnected due to political reasons rather than technical issues. Subsequently, as the conflict in Bosnia intensified, telephone lines to Bosnia were also significantly disrupted. Political reasons prevail because the telephone cables weren't physically cut; it was the need to limit communication with the other side in order to control the media and political narrative in both countries. At that time, our anti-war friends from Germany proposed this new communication technology. As Paul Stubbs argued:

ZaMir was innovative in global terms, unique in the region, and certainly ahead of its time, in linking CMC (Computer Mediated Communication) and social movement activism (Stubbs 2005:73).

The avant-garde nature of ZaMir was also demonstrated through the implementation of two pioneering cyber feminist projects. Although we didn't call them "cyber-feminist"⁶ at the time, they truly were. One was the Electronic Witches' project, where two foreign volunteers — since they could travel more easily around the region — visited women's groups and taught women how to use this technology.

One of these volunteers, American Kathryn Turnipseed, noted:

At the time, computers were generally perceived as not very friendly to women, mystified and generally seen as a male domain. In such circumstances, the education provided by the Electronic Witches didn't focus only on teaching skills,

⁵ It was great to notice that among the participants of the Conference were several activists who were users of ZaMir in the nineties and still remember it fondly.

⁶ It is also worth noting that two out of the four system operators ("sysops") of the BBS ZaMir-Zagreb node were women!

but also on liberating women from fear and low self-esteem regarding the use of technology (Turnipseed 1996:22-23).

The second cyber-feminist moment was the very ZaMir/Women “conference”, where we exchanged information, made agreements, and held discussions. This “conference” represented the first digital feminist public space in the region. According to the words of the feminist activist Nela Pamuković:

It was important that the feminist scene that emerged in the former EU space kept this electronic space as feminist, beyond state borders, as a parallel world, a ghetto with its own rules, independent from the local mainstream influences” (Pamuković in Janković 2009:21).

It was precisely this combination of online and offline interactions that became fertile ground for feminist political socialization and the articulation of a new feminist subject. This development led to the formation of new women’s organizations and areas of activism (Janković 2009).

Myriad of Tasks for Myriad of Women

To sum it up: during the 1990s, we were engaged in a wide range of activities: from humanitarian work and work within the local community to the fight for the criminalization of domestic violence and the recognition of specific women’s human rights. We also fought for the preservation of achieved women’s rights, such as the right to safe and legal abortion, and for upholding the legacy of anti-fascism. Additionally, we’ve produced our own media, including feminist journals *Bread and Roses* [Kruh i ruže] and *The Third* [Treća] or *Arkzin*, fanzine/magazine of the Anti-war Campaign, which became one of the most important independent media voices in the 1990s (Bilić 2012). Not only was *Arkzin*’s long-time editor-in-chief a woman – still a rarity in the media landscape, particularly outside of the so-called women’s magazines – but *Arkzin* also regularly covered the

activities of women's and feminist organizations and published feminist articles and analyses. We also worked on the systematic production of antimilitarist feminist knowledge (Kašić 1997) and the documentation of the history of women's/feminist organizing in this region. Notable organizations include Women's Infoteka and the Centre for Women's Studies in Zagreb, which was established in 1996. Additionally, women's organisations provided logistical and other support to the first LGBTIQ+ organizations. An important change that took place during those years – right in the midst of the war – was the expansion of female activism and feminist ideas beyond the major centers (Pula, Rijeka, Split, Osijek) into smaller towns such as Karlovac, Pakrac, and Dubrovnik.

In the book on the Anti-war Campaign Croatia/ARK (Janković and Mokrović 2011), a diagram was presented depicting the first and second generations of approximately fifty organizations involved in the anti-war movement. These organizations include peace, women's, human rights, media, and youth groups that were connected through the network established by ARK. This diagram highlights a powerful and creative anti-war response to the socially pathological circumstances we faced at that time. It also emphasizes the crucial role women have played in peace efforts and resistance to the war (Kašić 2003).

Feminist Anti-War Legacy, Feminist Anti-War Acting Today

Given Croatia's rich and fertile antiwar legacy, one might expect a stronger engagement from Croatian peace and women's organizations in response to the escalating war in Ukraine. All the more so because we witnessed the same mechanisms of forging the war as in the 1990s, only this time on a global scale. These include media blockades, the demonization of the enemy, as well as the vilification of war opponents, invoking victory regardless of the cost in human lives.

Unfortunately, there have been only two public gestures⁷ as a response to the Russian invasion. One came from the Centre for Peace Studies in Zagreb, and the other was the Women's Appeal for Peace. This Appeal was initiated by a group of feminist anti-war veterans from Zagreb and has been signed by several hundred women from the region and around the world. It has also been translated into a dozen languages. Just like in the 1990s, the Women's Appeal for Peace, written in 2022, does not overlook the geopolitical and financial interests of the states and alliances (most notably the NATO) that Croatia became a part of. Similar to 1991, the Women's Appeal for Peace provided a platform for gathering feminists' anti-war voices, which led to the establishment of an informal ad hoc feminist anti-war coalition a year later, in February 2023.⁸

We believe that the lack of significant and widespread anti-war engagement of Croatian NGOs in recent years can be attributed to several factors. We have highlighted a few key ones. Firstly, there has been a consolidation of the neoliberal political order in Croatia, which has led to the transformation of grass-roots activist groups into more structured civil society organizations. Secondly, there is the project-based nature of work within these organizations, which are often trapped in an ongoing struggle for survival while adapting to various 'catalogs' of topics and goals set by national or international foundations. Thirdly, we see a fragmentation of associations, particularly within the women's

7 There was also a third public statement titled The Appeal for Peace, issued by the civil initiative Believers for Peace, as Ana-Marija Raffai, a participant at this Conference recalled during the discussion.

8 In February 2023, the Ad Hoc Feminist Anti-War Coalition issued a second public statement titled "Stop the War in Ukraine Now!" This statement was accompanied by a public protest action as part of broader peace actions organized across Europe, on the occasion of the first anniversary of the war in Ukraine. In October 2023, the coalition released another public statement, titled "Appeal for Peace in Israel and Palestine". Since then, members of the Coalition have regularly participated in public actions organized by the Initiative for Free Palestine. The most recent public statement from the Ad Hoc Feminist Anti-War Coalition was issued around the International Women's Day, March 8, 2025. Titled "NO to War Economy, NO to a Europe of War!", the statement opposes the ReArm EU plan adopted at the summit of European Union member state leaders on March 6 in Brussels.

network, where new forms of organizing, gathering, and primarily digital activism are developing. This fragmentation further deepens generational divisions among activists. The fourth point is about depoliticization, or more precisely, disciplining of civil society. The impact of this phenomenon, known as *Gleichschaltung* [enforced uniformity], can be clearly seen in the response of a foundation managed by a consortium of Croatian civil society organizations. This response came when the Ad Hoc Feminist Anti-War Coalition requested funding to continue translating articles for the aforementioned “Reading Room”⁹ section on the Croatian media portal H-Alter. The funding request was rejected, with the explanation that our project was deemed irrelevant, inappropriate, and methodologically unsound (Janković 2023). A year later, the same foundation also rejected a request to support the work of the Initiative for a Free Palestine (Bužinkić and Lulić 2024).¹⁰

In conclusion, feminist peace activism has never depended on sponsored activism, rather, it is grounded in the firm conviction that we will not accept a world order in which violence is considered not only legitimate, but also a desirable means of conflict resolution, with the growing militarization and securitization as the normalcy of life.

9 In addition to Porobić Isaković’s article, some other published translations include: Liz Fekete’s “Civilisational Double Standards and the War in Ukraine”, statement by Ukrainian pacifist Yurii Sheliashenko on “Being Prosecuted for Pacifism”, Medea Benjamin and Nicolas Davis’ “Leaks Reveal Reality Behind U.S. Propaganda in Ukraine”, Anna Matveeva’s “Despite the war, Russia is still part of Europe” and “Shut Down Colonial Feminism” by the Palestinian Feminist Collective.

10 The Free Palestine Initiative was launched in May 2021 as a response to the so-called Fourth War, which included eleven days of relentless bombing. At that time, a public event called “Reading for Palestine”; was organized, where poetry by Palestinian poets was read. In October 2023, the Initiative began to organize again, this time as a much larger social movement that now gathers dozens of people involved in the daily organization of protests, actions, and interventions in public spaces, as well as media and cultural work (Bužinkić 2024).

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CHAPTER 10

Solidarities and Resistance – the Women's Movement in Kosova

Solidarities and Resistance – the Women’s Movement in Kosova¹

Abstract

By depicting the women’s movement in Kosova, the author aims to illustrate the potential of multiple instances of solidarity for social transformation and the ways in which such mobilization is enabled in contexts of oppression and violence. The production of feminist subjects in Kosova went hand in hand with community activism, solidarity, political mobilization, and attempts at internationalizing peaceful resistance. Women who participated in the struggle and networked at the international level emerged from this process changed. Women’s movements in Kosova, which became most visible during the 1990s, reveal the complexity of transformations under conditions of authoritarian regimes and systemic violence. In this attempt to organize feminist communities and regional and international connections, new spaces for the emergence of women were opened, allowing them to be politically active in ways they had not previously had the opportunity to experience. The production of feminist movement was accompanied by community activism, solidarity, political mobilization, and efforts to internationalize peaceful resistance. Through the analysis of these practices, she explores the thread of feminist solidarity in the context of an authoritarian regime and violence. The challenges of regional and international solidarity, as well as the challenges of practicing solidarity in a pluralistic register – beyond the need for unity and the homogenization of the nation in the struggle are also addressed.

¹This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999.

Introduction

In this paper I will attempt to offer an insight into strategies and spaces of resistance that emerged through the '90s in Kosova. As we are all collectively facing critical conjectures around the questions of resistance and social movements and inspired by the current moment of rethinking our collective political engagement, this presentation examines how women's activism and movement from the past can broaden and aid our understanding of current struggles. This paper argues that the activism of the women's movement in Kosova allows us to see the importance of solidarity with other movements as well as creates an opening to consider the constitutive role of ethnic racism and colonialism in the context of the region. Racism and colonialism have been largely absent from the dominant account and have either not been part of historical analyses of feminist movements in former Yugoslavia or have remained disconnected from its historical understanding of the region. Introducing such concepts and experiences in the context of the region allows for a new threshold of not only inclusion, but also multiplicity and complexity of the historical analysis. Women's stories from the margin as an epistemic starting point, offer complexity and novelty in the ways to look at the events of war and peacebuilding from the perspective of the historical experience of 'othered'. Viewing the world from behind the veil (Du Bois 2007) so to say and through lived experience of racialization and violence allows us a more nuanced understanding of the past, but also of the current crisis.

As a starting point, such laborious endeavors would include inserting the examples of agency of structurally oppressed and marginalized people, in particular Albanian and Roma in the former Yugoslavia, in the existing historical narratives of the region. Introducing feminist modes of agency, their entanglement with historical context, involves inserting also experiential starting points into existing narratives, which are rooted in specific historical situations that can offer a more nuanced understanding of violent events (wars) that unfolded

in our region. The feminist and decolonial frameworks continue to motivate many of us, in post-occupied, post-war, post-socialist, post-independent subjects to speak and write about aspects of our lived experience of systemic and structural violence. The incentive is driven from the urgencies of global crisis and wars ushering today's global context, not only because we know first-hand the desperation of being stripped of rights and living in systematic violence, dehumanized in a state of emergency, but it has also become our burden to try to find ways to show the most important lesson we have learned from the '90s and our resistances in particular. Sharing the experience of the 1990s is somehow also sharing strategies and hoping that some of the tactics might work in today's context, although in completely different times. Our empirical examples and theories aim to illuminate these situations with the purpose to act upon them. Furthermore, the way we – feminist scholars, are analyzing the past is mostly an attempt to offer a roadmap, of a lesson learned, share our failures and limitations. Our concepts and arguments refer to concrete historical situations and historical actors situated in contingencies of a particular space.

Kosova's independence and statehood, its very existence, possibility and future remains constantly contested, especially in the context of the region. There is a general epistemic distrust when it comes to scholarship or narratives coming from Kosova, particularly in the former Yugoslavia, this constant contestation creates a precarious position. Taking inspiration from Judith Butler, I would like to extend on probes of these ontological conditions that these precarious positions create as in allowing for a different, more complex view. For Butler a precarious position, geographic, subjective and others can serve as a starting point of contemporary ethical politics around recognition of mutual vulnerability and interdependence. It is the vulnerability that offers a potential to reimagine new communities and to move forward (Butler et al. 2016). It is this reimagining that can offer not only a novel view, but also create possibilities of future solidarity and resistance. Attempting at showing where this precariousness

of our position and our context is coming from and what we have learned from it, I find it useful to juxtapose my experience and research with feminist and decolonial frameworks. The logic of colonialism has manifested differently in different times and has adapted and involved different technologies of violence across different historical periods. I will attempt to illustrate this by rendering visible the events during the 1990s in Kosova.

‘State of Emergency’

It has been pointed out that one can’t comprehend Kosova political and cultural landscape without understanding its nineties; the period of the breakup of Yugoslavia, and resistance to systematic violence. What came to be known simply as the ‘nineties’ is a dynamic decade of enormous structural and cultural shifts under the conditions of precarity, state violence, and adversity. The ‘nineties’ consisted of multiple moments of peaceful collective action and resistance that brought people from various political and ideological backgrounds together, shaping the emerging political movement. This movement maintained that it was democratic in its core, based on principles of human rights and peaceful resistance, and that it was mobilizing for basic rights, while avoiding a bluntly nationalistic framework. By locating its main demands on the framework of human rights, democracy, and freedom, it not only invited the involvement of western democracies, but also maintained the commitment to peaceful resistance for many years.

The ‘nineties’ and the events that unfolded also laid bare the Serbian nationalist claim that Albanians are non-human, barbarians, namely the ultimate ‘other’, only able to participate in the Yugoslav modernity, or exist only under the iron rule of the Serbian Republic, thus articulating a discourse much familiar to that of colonizers. If we were to understand the nineties, we must take into account precisely the colonial and racist discourse inherited in previous structural conditions. This discourse has led to an accelerated inequality, unequal levels of access, precarity, and

the systematic violation of rights. Kosova was marked by uneven strata, being the poorest region with the highest unemployment, with one of the most marginalized and vulnerable populations both economically and politically. This underlying register of oppression and racialization constituted the basis for the social construction and reproduction of discrimination, particularly put to action during the Milošević regime in Serbia. State violence and racialization during the nineties left no room to maneuver inside the existing system, stripping Albanians from all rights by imposing the state of late colony, or what people at the time simply called the 'state of emergency'.

The 'state of emergency' that lasted the next nine years consisted also in what was often compared to an apartheid state, based on ethnic segregation and systematic state violence. In March 1989, the Milošević regime imposed a "martial law" on Kosova, following the revocation of Kosova status as an autonomous province. As is usually the case, the legal framework to accommodate such structural changes followed. The amendment of the constitution was supported by the Serbian Parliament, which had approved the creatively and ironically titled, *Political Action Platform of the Central Committee of Yugoslavia in the Political Circumstances of the Province of Kosovo* and the *Plan of the Republic of Serbia for Peace, Freedom, Equality, Democracy and Prosperity in the Socialist Autonomous Province of Kosovo*, which was made official in March 1990. This set the agenda for special measures to be implemented in all state sectors, from factories to police forces. These special measures, backed by heavy police force and violence, pushed Albanians away from the public space. Furthermore, militarization took hold of all forms of public and institutional life: tanks and police force patrolled day and night in the streets and racially profiled Albanians, police forces took over Prishtina's radio and television station RTP, stopping the news during a live transmission. Albanian journalists and workers were demoted from heads of factories to ordinary workers, and almost all government employees began to be removed from state institutions, the judicial system, banks, and local police forces. The

mass expulsion from the workforce was implemented under the pretexts of economic reduction (notoriously called redundancy, somehow only affecting Albanian workers) or participation in strikes organized by unions (which was the case for my mother and her co-workers that worked in Municipality of Prishtina, that were participating in the general strike of 3 September 1990) or not signing a pledge to the new laws or loyalty to directors appointed under new measures or was simply fired. Alone in 1990, an estimated 45% of Kosovar Albanian workers lost their jobs under these measures, reaching almost all public sector employees by the end of the following year. Specifically, 146,025 lost they jobs from a total of 164, 210, employed according to the Independent Workers Union. In total, 222 enterprises, 99 government institutions, 8 publishing houses and 8 agricultural cooperatives were under the special measures and their workers fired (Clark 2000:74). Albanians had never been fully and massively integrated into the labor market in the socialist system. The mass expulsion from the workforce left Albanians without any social security, health security, the right to pension insurance, allowances and social benefits and the entire social network of state support was lost.

It must be noted that Yugoslavia was going through a severe economic crisis; in 1987, Kosova, Macedonia and Montenegro were bankrupt, and the country was facing 20 billion dollars in foreign debt and a 250% inflation in 1988 (Magas 1993: 190). The deterioration of the economic situation as well as the political stagnation resulting from the declining belief in ideology and apparent inefficiencies to face the economic crisis amplified the underlying inequalities. This difficult economic situation translated into a general fear and distrust, dramatically affecting Albanians as the weak link to Yugoslav state.

The new measures and the state of emergency dramatically affected all services, in particular the health care and education systems, making children and young people extremely vulnerable. I want to point out that Kosova had the youngest population in Europe, with 50% of the population being under 25. The majority

of Albanian doctors and nurses were fired and not allowed to practice in hospitals, creating a health crisis. The high schools and the University of Prishtina were also closed marking the beginning of a decade-long homeschooling system that came to be one of the most central infrastructures of resistance during this time. Theatres, galleries, youth centers and all forms of formal cultural life were closed for the Albanian population and the majority of artists lost their jobs. Under Milošević's authoritarian regime, crowds were also deemed illegal; no more than three people could walk together in public spaces. No one was left outside of the omnipresent totality of segregation and exclusion; Kosova became a divided place with Serbs, making up less than 10% of the population, in power at all institutions and Albanians subjugated.

In this angst without any rights, stateless and under military occupation, new social practices based in solidarity formed, which would come to constitute the very fabric of the nineties resistance. The first reaction to the events described above consisted of months of massive protests, which the police met with brute force. It was reported that only in March and April of 1990 more than a hundred people died in protests and thousands were arrested, all under suspicion (Clark 2000:52). Protesting took many others apart from demonstrations; turning off all the lights at our apartments in Prishtina at exactly 7:30 in time for the main evening news, to protest propaganda and what was named information darkness, after the closure of all but one media outlet in Albanian language. Also, pounding pots and keys from our windows and balconies, like prisoners, ensured our presence during the curfew in the militarized city. These kinds of protests made us audible, formed a sense of belonging and released some of the anger.

Refusing Yugoslav state authority, which by 1992 was reduced to Serbia and Montenegro, Kosova had declared independence from Serbia and Yugoslavia, ratified a new constitution, established numerous political parties, including the green party, elected literary critic Ibrahim Rogova as president, and established

a taxation system that included the diaspora to support this infrastructure of peaceful resistance. The resistance became peaceful, mainly for pragmatic reasons, initially also wanting to challenge and break the prevailing prejudices regarding Albanians as “primitive” and “violent”, but mainly wanting to avoid further escalation of violence. Albanians at that time had no alternative, the peaceful path was the only option. Apart from the fact that we did not have the weapons to go to open war with Serbia, which possessed one of the most powerful armies in Europe, we also did not have international support for armed confrontation.

Citizens and the intellectual elite among them found themselves fighting for survival, so that the interdependency that was created strengthened the sense of community and solidarity. With disobedience being based on a kind of do it yourself logic, a new infrastructure of mobilization and a new system of pushing back came to existence. If we were banned from entering our school, teachers would invite us to their living rooms for afternoon classes and homemade cookies, intuitively starting a new homeschooling system. We turned our houses and garages into schools, more than 3.000 private spaces were turned into classrooms, creating a homeschooling system that would see the graduation of nine generations of high school and university students, putting in place the unique infrastructure of resistance with education. If the doctors were not allowed to practice medicine, they continued in makeshift clinics and offered their services from private spaces or went to home visits for rural communities and the most marginalized. If going to the theater, galleries and concerts was not a possibility, we created alternative spaces.

Activism, Solidarity, and Hope

The place from which women can speak is often hidden from view and continues to be omitted and unrecognized. However, the civil resistance that emerged during this time was not

only rebelling against the Milošević regime but also against racialization and militarized coloniality and, most importantly, it was a movement that was aiming at a more radical transformation of society. Women's voluntarism, community solidarity and political activism, created a solid ground from where women's movement flourished. Women especially came to embrace a new identity enabled by increased activism as something new and outside of the control of political parties and as something that gives them agency. "We called ourselves activists. Activists of human rights and women's rights, we were active in resisting the Milošević regime, and active in our communities", as Sevdije Ahmeti (Ahmeti in Gusia 2017:97) named them.

Women's movement that became visible during the nineties reveals the complexity of the nineties and is the best illustration of the struggle and controversies of transformations of social practices. It posed a great challenge in terms of how this social transformation and these networks of solidarity could be practiced in a more pluralist register, moving beyond the need for unity and homogeneity of a nation under struggle. Losing all the rights collectively and being pushed out of institutions and the public controversially opens up new possibilities. Internationalizing the cause of civil resistance movement and struggles in Kosovo was one of the most important tenets of the nineties resistance, where women were taking a lead. In this attempt to organize in communities and to network regionally and internationally, new spaces of appearance surfaced that allowed women to experience being political and active in ways they had never experienced before. Speaking from the perspective of being subjected to the conditions of an authoritarian and violent system and attempting to articulate these experiences of being a woman and being Albanian and the intersecting oppression that they produced in case of international feminists was challenging.

Solidarity has always been at the heart of feminist practice. Ideas of 'global sisterhood' were also challenged by experience of black feminism and colonial context; these perspectives coincidentally also rose to prominence during the nineties. More importantly

and more tangible for women activists in Kosova at the time, the nineties also gave rise to a new vocabulary, that of human rights within this international feminist framework. The human rights and democracy framework and discourse in the nineties was comprehensive, while the social and political context was adjustable – it was possible to travel to the most remote parts of Kosova. After all, raising two fingers in the sign of victory and democracy had not only become a signifier of all of our protest, but it sometimes even became the way people greeted each other. This new grammar created diverse repertoires, and a new mode of relating locally and internationally. The production of feminist subjects went hand in hand with activism in communities, solidarity, political mobilization and the attempts to internationalize peaceful resistance. Women that went into a struggle and networked internationally came out of it altered. They made space for other women and girls that would exceed the limits of temporality and reconnect across generations, class, ethnicity by sharing strategies, skills, and, most importantly, by evoking hope.

It is with this vision and the support of global feminist solidarity that such spaces surfaced. Vjosa Dobruna and Sevdije Ahmeti received a small donation in 1993 after a feminist gathering in Italy, where they articulated the need for a place of their own, a women's center. A crowdfunding event was organized in support and a small donation gathered the worth of a couple months of rent for the Center for Protection of Women and Children, a place that would become a landmark of feminist movement in Prishtina during the nineties. Motrat Qiriazhi was the first women's organization in Kosovo founded in 1990, by Igballe (Igo) Rogova and Safete Rogova. After being fired along with all others that same year, Safete Rogova, an actor, and her sister, Igballe Rogova, who also lost her job at Radio Television of Prishtina, started volunteering for the Mother Theresa humanitarian organization. They quickly realized that there was a gender dimension of the struggle in the nineties and founded the first women's organization. They had located their activism in most rural places

in Kosova, and engaged intuitively in what they later learned to be grassroots feminist activism. By 1997, more than a dozen non-governmental organizations were operating in Kosova.

These organizations focused particularly on women's issues and building a strategy for feminist activism that involved coming together in the community building, aid, raising awareness, petitioning, organizing, protesting, writing, translating and creating networks of solidarity, locally and internationally. This snapshot from the women's movement illustrates the potential that multiple solidarity has for transformation, and how such mobilization is enabled under duress.

The streets became spaces of appearance and the protest entailed not just visibility for women, but also the bodies that mattered in the struggle and willingness of these persons to confront the violence with their bodies. All women protested on March 8 of 1990, near the Boro and Ramiz youth center, gathering women as mothers for peace and against violence. On that occasion, they read an open letter to the Yugoslav leadership and army leaders and signed a petition against violence 'Appeal to mothers of Yugoslavia'. These were years that would come to be known as passive resistance, aiming at avoiding any kind of physical confrontation with the police, who were looking for an excuse to start a war. The Dayton Agreement in 1995, which marked the end of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, was supposed to provide a solution for Kosova. It failed completely to account for years of peaceful resistance and systematic violence. Kosova was not even mentioned and Milošević was declared a peacemaker. This complete omission pushed many activists to re-evaluate passive peaceful strategies.

Protest and Visibility of Women's Movement

Peace and freedom continued to be the main line of action for women's movement as they were constantly protesting during 1998, after massive killings began. Women started to protest,

as mothers, strategically adjusting to the patriarchal language, exploiting the normative patriarchal order of the police as well as the population that ascribed particular vulnerability to women's bodies. While doing this, women were not just blindly following a patriarchal script, the act of protests worked also to subvert these norms and grow the movement and negotiate their positionality. By expanding modes of resistance by sharing resources, legitimacy, multiplicity of voices, they changed the models of protest, negotiated the belongings and ultimately shaped the resistance. In thinking these two movements together, civil resistance movement and women's movement, we make room for complexity of analysis. It also stresses the role interconnection of movement and in strategies of resistance that would be relevant today. As Audre Lorde put it: "There is no thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives" (Lorde 1984:137). That emphasizes that women's only movements are a luxury that women living under oppressive regimes, coloniality and racism simply don't have.

Making these conjunctions visible also rejects narrow views of linear understanding of history and decenters the western narratives of emergence of feminist movements.

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Where Are the Women
and Why Are They So
Few? Insights into
Women's Leadership
in Negotiating Peace
and Rebuilding
Communities in Bosnia
and Herzegovina and
Kosovo

Where Are the Women and Why Are They So Few? Insights into Women's Leadership in Negotiating Peace and Rebuilding Communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo

Abstract

In the framework of the Balkan conflicts in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, women have been starkly under-represented in peace talks and conflict resolution efforts. Although the conflict prevention and management and peacebuilding processes are not only highly political, but also highly gendered, women seem to be invisible and/or marginalized. Where are the women and why are so few engaged in peace processes; and what are the effects of their exclusion using a gender lens and how gender plays a pervasive part in the shaping of any peace process. In the search for answers, this paper looks at the challenges women face(d) and lessons learnt using Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo as case studies. It has been observed that, while the pervasive patriarchal systems in both countries impacted women's engagement in peacekeeping and peacebuilding processes, both during and after the conflict, women showed that they have an "agency" (capacity, skills and advantages) to become involved on a top political scale well beyond the grassroots and community levels, contributing to peace building processes and reconciliation.

Introduction

Over hundred years ago, women activists championed for peace after WWI based on the fundamental principles for democracy and social justice. In 2025, we remember 2,000 women delegates from all over Former Yugoslavia who travelled to the liberated Belgrade to attend the first Congress of the Women's Anti-Fascist Front [AFŽJ] 80 years ago, in July 1945. This is an anniversary marking the foundations of gender equality and organized women's struggle against patriarchy, the beginnings of women's political and socio-economic empowerment and their engagement in rebuilding their country after the destruction of WW II. Women played a major role in WW II, yet they were nowhere seen in peace talks.

2025 also marks the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Conference and the 25th anniversary of the Resolution 1325. In 2011, the UN General Assembly recognized "the importance of full and effective participation of women" within peace processes and noted that "further efforts are necessary to address the lack of women as chief or lead peace mediators" (General Assembly Resolution 65/283 2011 3). Still, the pursuit of a "comprehensive, just and lasting peace" involving women remains a challenge, although a growing body of research and case studies of current and past peace processes reveal how women's participation – whether in official negotiating roles or through grassroots efforts – contributes to reaching lasting peace agreements.

Where are women and why there are so few of them engaged in peace processes; and what are the effects of their exclusion using a gender lens and how gender plays a pervasive part in the shaping of any peace process. These issues are explored below using Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo as case studies.

A Case Study in Bosnia and Herzegovina

The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) lasted from 1991 to 1995. It had a high toll. Over 100 000 civilians lost their lives, and over 2.2 million men and women were displaced, with neighbor-on-neighbor killing, mass atrocities, ethnic cleansing, genocide, concentration camps, torture, and rape as weapons of war characterizing the most violent conflict in Europe since the end of World War II (Gaon and Verbole 2024).

The Dayton Peace Agreement was adopted in Paris on 14 December 1995, after being negotiated by the Presidents of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and the Federation of the Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) in Dayton (USA) on 21 November 1995. It was signed only a few months after the Beijing Conference, as the first major peace agreement adopted after the Conference. The peace process in Bosnia and Herzegovina was complicated and complex. There were at least four international peace plans proposed by the European Community and United Nations and several other peace plans proposed by Bosnian actors before the conflict was settled by the Dayton Agreement in 1995. McLeod (2019) called the peace efforts in Bosnia and Herzegovina “a dialogue by men” as they notably lacked female participation. One exemption was Tatjana Ljujić-Mijatović, the Serb member of the Presidency of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina from December 1992 to October 1996. She was the only woman in the seven-member Presidency and was a vocal opponent of the division of Bosnia and Herzegovina during the Dayton negotiations advocating for a multiethnic Bosnia and Herzegovina. Below are some of her reflections on negotiations as written down in Bošnjak and Gavrić:

It's easier for me to negotiate, if my people are not dying, and to draw some maps there. And if you are in a position where people die for you every day, that's not really a simple case. Then you have different people in the Presidency and everyone has opinions. So it was quite difficult and painstaking. When I saw how Milošević was reshaping the

country, he was drawing borders with a pencil, I got up and went out right away, even though it might have been rude, I couldn't stand it. I've been there maybe three or four times and I said to myself, this is a waste of time, I can't do it.... I would not allow him [Milošević] to play tricks, and then they tell me, you are awkward, you are not for negotiations (Bošnjak and Gavrić 2015:31).

Bošnjak and Gavrić (2015) noted that her refusal to negotiate can be interpreted that as a woman she did not have the “stomach for politics”, or that she simply, like most male politicians, stuck to her beliefs and goals, and was not ready to make compromises.

Kavaz-Siručić (2009 in Bošnjak and Gavrić 2015) noted that women are often perceived as more flexible, less nationalistic and more willing to compromise. She continued that this very perception may be the reason why they (women) are not present at negotiations – their perceived peacefulness is seen as a threat to political ideals and goals. On the other hand, when they stick to their principles, their inflexibility is less valued than men's, it is seen as capricious and thoughtless. A woman walking out in the middle of a negotiation is considered rude, while the same act by men is daring.

Interestingly, although Tatjana Ljujić-Mijatović played a significant role in the peace process, Holbrooke has not mentioned her in his memoirs which are, as McLeod puts it “packed with overt expressions of various masculinities”(McLeod 2019 n.d.).

Kavaz-Siručić focusing on the negotiations in Dayton noted similarly that the negotiations in the military base in Dayton were extremely ‘masculine’ in nature from the very beginning; the participants (males) used their time at the military base to play sports, throw dinner parties, and attend the local nightclubs (Kavaz-Siručić in Bošnjak and Gavrić 2015:32).

Hunt (2004) remembers the process of signing one of the documents in the White House –with only five women in the

room, all five American, alongside 99 men adding: "The US hosts did not think to invite them, and the Bosnian leaders did not think to bring them". That is precisely the issue with the lack of women in executive power – their participation and roles are decided by men who can choose whether or not to include them.

Another two (invisible) women were in Dayton, namely Amira Kapetanović and Sabina Berberović (Bošnjak and Gavrić 2015). Amira Kapetanović was the Secretary and official interpreter of the Bosnian delegation in the Dayton, Ohio, peace talks on Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992-1996) and a member of the Bosniak peace negotiations team at all international peace negotiation conferences on Bosnia and Herzegovina (Lisbon, Geneva, Paris, New York, Dayton, Ohio, from 1991 to 1996). In Dayton, together with Berberović, she served as translator for the BiH (male) negotiators, and basically their participation consisted of conveying and interpreting the political ideas, but they were not the ones creating them. Amira Kapetanović later became Ambassador of Bosnia and Herzegovina to United Nations in Vienna, but at the time when the Dayton Peace Agreement was taking place, she was also an Advisor to the Prime Minister.

Some of the key issues observed in case of Bosnia and Herzegovina include a general perception that there were no women taking part in the negotiations or that were part of various delegations, which made women invisible, and that women participating directly in negotiations referred to inequality in power relationship, while the international community missed the opportunity to bring women to the negotiating table. It can be concluded that the peace process in Bosnia and Herzegovina marginalized women, their needs and perspectives, overlooked the significant impact of the conflict on women and failed to address gender-specific issues.

A Case Study in Kosovo

The Kosovo conflict known also as Kosovo War – was an armed conflict in Kosovo that lasted from February 1998 until June 1999. It was fought between the forces of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), which controlled Kosovo before the war, and the Kosovo Albanians with the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). The conflict ended with the NATO intervention – air strikes in March 1999, which resulted in Yugoslav forces withdrawing from Kosovo. About 1.5 million Kosovo Albanians were forcibly expelled from their homes. In addition, the conflict was marked by violence, including sexual violence and rape, destruction of property and disruption of means of living and psychosocial harm, amongst others (Ariño and de la Morena 2008).

Before the Kosovo conflict entered its final phase, the international community made an attempt to reach a negotiated settlement. Representatives of the Kosovo Albanians and the FRY/Serbian authorities were invited to Rambouillet (France) in February 1999, with a follow-up meeting in Paris in early March. The Kosovo peace talks were held under the auspices of the six-nation Contact Group that included Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Russia, and the United States. A powerful woman, Madeleine Albright, the US Secretary of State at the time, played a crucial role in the negotiations at Rambouillet. The proposed agreement included, among others, a Constitution for Kosovo and provisions aiming at protecting minorities and human rights.

Only one woman from the Balkans attended the peace negotiations. Edita Tahiri, a member of the Kosovo Albanian 15-member delegation, while the FRY delegation was composed of fifteen men.

Tahiri recalls her earlier engagement in politics in this way: In the first days of the independence movement, Kosovo's best and brightest nominated her to be the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the still non-existent country. There were two main reasons for that, she says:

I came from a credible, patriotic family that fought in defense of Albanian rights, and I was already educated in the West, so I was not only English-speaking, but also exposed to Western culture and its system of education (Tahiri in Dimitrov 2022 n.d.).

Tahiri's reflection sheds a light on how and why she became a member of the negotiating team; she was chosen by a man because of her qualities and background. Since the 1999 negotiations, she has become a very important and crucial figure in many negotiations for Kosovo in her roles as the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of Dialogue, Minister of Public Administration, Peace Negotiator and Member of Parliament in five terms. In addition to participating in the international peace processes such as the Rambouillet International Peace Conference on Kosovo (1999), Pre-Rambouillet Peace Negotiation (1998), London Conference on Disintegration of Former Yugoslavia (1992), she also served as the chief negotiator of Kosovo at the EU facilitated Dialogue on Normalization of Neighborly Relations between Kosovo and Serbia (2011-2017). As the chief negotiator of Kosovo in the EU mediated peace talks with Serbia, she was the signatory of first ever-reached agreement between Kosovo and Serbia, after 20 years of peace talks.

In one of her reflections, she recalls:

I remember, in the beginning, they would not even receive me in their offices, but in corridors or at cafés at international conferences. Cafeterias were where I did my lobbying. I defined this diplomatic journey as from the corridors of diplomacy to the White House (Tahiri in Dimitrov n.d.).

Tahiri has very much exposed one important question, how seriously women negotiators are taken, to what extent their knowledge and competence are recognized, and her story also illustrates how attitudes towards women negotiators are diminishing recognition of their role in peace processes. Today

Tahiri is a member of the Women Waging Peace Network and the Mediterranean Network of Women Mediators, and she chairs the Regional Women's Lobby in South East Europe (RWLSEE) that is dedicated to empowering women in politics, peace, security and justice.

Decades after the Rambouillet negotiations, Edita Tahiri remains the only woman peace negotiator involved in high-level peace processes. She successfully brokered agreements by using her power to create solutions, not dominate others. Despite demonstrating the effectiveness of women peacebuilders, she remains the only female peace negotiator in the Balkans involved in international peace processes.

The Rambouillet negotiations have been described as "gender neutral". Kvinna till Kvinna (2001) has been very critical of it, claiming that the Rambouillet agreement perpetuated and institutionalized the marginalization of women in the political process after the conflict. It has been also critical towards the basis for the work of the United Nations, Resolution 1244, pointing out that it did not make any specific references to gender issues.

The key challenges in Kosovo case study are similar to many noted in case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, with one difference – that a woman has been part of the official negotiation team discussing and influencing directly the developments. She continues to share and disseminate her experiences and knowledge in an attempt to get more women engaged in peace processes.

Lessons Learned

What can be learned from the two case studies?

For both peace processes in Kosovo and in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it was believed that they were gender neutral. However, they were not gender neutral, they were simply gender insensitive.

The two case studies show that women have played different –

almost invisible and marginalized – roles in peace negotiations and conflict resolution processes except for a very few exemptions. It was noted that they were seen *by men* engaged in peace processes as a lesser threat, as not flexible enough or as too emotional, too loyal to their principles or even too tame to engage in high-level stake negotiations. They were also described as “not having a stomach” for politics. Men, on the other hand, were perceived as holding the rightful position of dominance and power. Further, looking at the different peace negotiations, it can be observed that men often bond through the performance of the heteronormative masculinity despite their different goals and agendas.

In both cases, the pervasive patriarchal systems impact women’s engagement, but women, in spite of everything, have an agency – the capacity and skills to become involved on a top political scale, which means not only at the grassroots level and the community level, but also in tier one diplomacy.

Based on an analysis of the case studies of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, it can be also observed that there was a number of actors who determined the extent to which gender participation and incorporation of a gender perspective in peace processes was ensured, including the international community. The international community’s efforts lacked in terms of including women in peace negotiations and post-conflict reconstruction. Thus, this calls for a serious criticism on the international community, which has facilitated peace processes.

Looking Forward

The challenging times in the Balkans as well as beyond the Balkans, now more than ever, need women negotiators and peace builders. Looking at the ways forward, it is important to investigate how women can get from the second and third track to the first track diplomacy.

There are two initiatives worthwhile mentioning. The first one is the Regional Women's Lobby for Peace, Security and Justice in South-East Europe [RWLSEE] – a regional peacebuilding organization established in 2006 by women leaders from politics and civil society from seven countries of Western Balkans with the support of UN Women (then UNIFEM). The RWLSEE has played an important role in bringing women in negotiating reconciliation between women and men in the Balkans, providing mediation services in track two peace processes between women politicians and parliamentarians from Kosovo and Serbia, supporting the Brussels Dialogue on normalization of neighborly relations between Kosovo and Serbia. Its biggest success has been the continuation of the process even in times when official track one peace process of the Brussels Dialogue was stalled in the period from 2017 to 2019, showing that breakthrough is possible when vision and peace reason prevails.

This joint peace journey of women started with big difficulties and under polarized atmosphere. However, in many years of this negotiation exercise, it not only has produced a greater mutual understanding but also shaped the dialogue approach into one of trust and rapprochement. It narrowed down differences and broadened the views on possible peaceful outcomes [RWLSEE].

The RWLSEE continues to support regional dialogues and lobbies for a greater engagement of women in peace processes. At its 2024 meeting in Prishtina, the RWLSEE explicitly exposed the issue of how to engage more women in negotiations through their increased participation in decision-making and called for the revision of the UN Resolution 1325 and promotion of women role models. The RWLSEE also called for drafting of the "WPS of the Western Balkans" and requested the Berlin Process to establish a permanent framework for the empowerment of women through the establishment of a Regional Office for Women's Cooperation in order to achieve gender equality and promote implementation of the women, peace and security policy.

Another initiative which started more than ten years ago, has

unfortunately refocused and potentially lost its edge. In 2012, the OSCE initiated the so-called Budva process, which brought together prominent women from Kosovo and Serbia to talk about how to normalize the relationship between the two countries focusing on joint issues of concern, such as women in politics, dialogue and mediation, gender equality and women's empowerment. In 2015, the OSCE, building upon the values and the ideas enshrined in the Budva process, established the Dialogue Academy for Young Women [DA] from Prishtina and Belgrade building a network promoting peace, confidence-building, solidarity, women's empowerment and dialogue. It is a pity that the Budva process did not continue also at the level of prominent women while working with young women leaders to ensure complementarity of peacebuilding efforts.

In the light of the RWLSEE recommendations, before concluding, a quick reflection on the UN 1325 might be valuable. O'Connor too was very critical about the UN1325 resolution saying that it fails to address the structural causes of inequality.

In attempts to mainstream gender within the UN, the focus is always superficial, a trait reflected by UNSCR-1325. ... Under UNSCR-1325, women are invited to participate only after the decision-making processes and limitations have been established. The inclusion of women is largely nominal, inviting them into existing institutional structures and then rendering their involvement ineffectual and their voices absent. Women are brought into the dominant structures of hegemonic militarism and war. This 'add women and stir' approach renders UNSCR-1325 ineffectual, as it doesn't allow women to determine the terms of the dialogue, which keeps them as the 'other' and prevents them from contributing meaningfully to women's peace and security (O'Connor 2014).

This paper shows that, while the pervasive patriarchal systems both in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo as well as in the international structures impacted women's engagement in peacekeeping and peacebuilding processes both during and

after the conflict, women showed that they have an “agency” (capacity, skills and advantages) to become involved on a top political scale well beyond the grassroots and community levels contributing to peace building processes and reconciliation.

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CHAPTER 12

Facing Patriarchal Commemoration of Wars and Erasing Women's Contributions

Facing Patriarchal Commemoration of Wars and Erasing Women's Contributions

Abstract

The paper will focus on highlighting the importance of documenting and valuing women's actions in pre-/post-war periods. Women were highly engaged in all social areas during wars, without hierarchical positions or socially assigned roles, but after war conflicts ended, women were systematically relegated to positions with little or no power. During the 1990s, the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina was marked by women's contributions in all segments. They were caregivers, typists, soldiers, guards, and very often on the 'first line' of male supremacy. Today, their contributions are erased, as memorials either do not contain or only marginally include the dimension of women's peace culture of remembrance. One reason for this is the institutional lack of support for engaging women and listening to "women's voices" in peacebuilding. This paper brings the "activist voices" of women working to preserve feminist peace culture of remembrance and to the activities of the "Peace with a Woman's Face" initiative in particular, whose members, representatives of women's organizations, are actively advocating for the institutionalization of December 8 as the Day of Remembrance for Women's Suffering during the War in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Introduction

I want to say something about peace culture of remembrance and what motivated me as a woman to be involved in that. When I started my path as an activist and entered peace-building processes, the question was whether I truly wanted to be engaged, as this is not an easy topic to <digest>. Answering in the affirmative, I knew my role. My motivation comes from personal reasons, mostly because I am a child of war, socially pressured to forget and move toward reconstruction. We were somehow forced to forget things, suppressed them deeply inside us, and focused on rebuilding buildings, rather than reconstructing what we carry in our hearts, in our souls. And so, the feminism within me immediately spoke up. I asked, “But where are the women in this process?” Because I saw my mother, who, during the war in the 90s in Bosnia and Herzegovina, was both a man and a woman during those horrible events. She carried water, chopped wood, prepared food, and so on. She was a hunter and everything possible. Where are the women on this path? Well, there were none. Patriarchy thus immediately emerged at the start of my peace-building activism. Even when I entered the process, I didn’t know that it was called the peace-building process. I didn’t know that it was about building peace, but my colleagues, such as Mrs. Zilka Spahić Šiljak, and other peace activists, encouraged me and helped me learn that it’s called peace-building. Women’s participation in peace processes, memory culture, and so on. Working on this, I learned a lot, observing women on many fronts, who are otherwise excluded from all societal segments where they should receive some nominations, where they should receive recognitions, where they should receive some ‘Oscars’ and awards. When such things are distributed, it is usually men who are called to cut the ribbon and receive all possible accolades.

“Peace With a Woman’s Face” – A Joint Feminist Drive

So, quite simply, along this activist journey, the initiative “Peace with a Woman’s Face” was established in 2013, which I joined as an

activist. I truly wanted to be part of a process where the twelve of us – organizations from all across Bosnia and Herzegovina – could come together and work collectively. My colleague Lana Jajčević from Banja Luka, from the United Women’s Foundation Banja Luka, is also part of this initiative. We truly wanted to demonstrate that women have been part of peace processes, contributing to peace-building in various ways. The only issue is that sometimes they have not been aware that this is activist work; some of them have not been aware that this is their feminist contribution to peace-building, but they continuously work on it daily, even though the recognition of this ‘new’ type of work remains silent. And, of course, patriarchy plays a significant role in this. Here’s an example: when a little girl says she got an A, they say, “Don’t brag, you did well, so what?” But when a boy gets an A in the school, they say, “Well done, great job, your mom will buy you a ball.” It starts from a very young age – when we brag about something we did well, but I think we need to be proud of ourselves. And I have always said that we need to create something visible for the younger generations in the framework of the “Peace with a Woman’s Face” initiative, like publications, books, exhibitions, audio-video materials, which the TPO Foundation publishes on their YouTube channel, so we can listen to all conferences again, prepare for other conferences, and send to younger colleagues on our activist path to review – it’s a valuable resource.

So, I sincerely wanted to be engaged in the “Peace with a Woman’s Face” initiative, particularly focusing on memory culture, that is, feminist memory culture.

We made changes by producing exhibitions, numerous publications, and lexicons in the framework of the initiative. A true example of that is the publication *100 Women – 100 Streets Named after Women* that was released in 2021. It tells the story of women’s names not being erased from streets in Bosnia and Herzegovina each year. In some places, numerous material things have emerged, representing a feminist culture of remembrance, which will serve in the future for young generations of women who will continue this activist path – becoming a feminist critique

and voice of the public. Along with criticism of institutions in a way that prevents patriarchal patterns, this activity dismantles patriarchal structures in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and teaches what we often say to girls: that *they can lead revolutions*. Just as they can cook lunch, they can also lead revolutions and change social realities. Here's an example – we are still largely invisible.

The survey and interview responses, as another feminist contribution, were obtained as part of the research *Feminist Contributions to Systemic Peacebuilding Processes in Bosnia and Herzegovina: A Feminist and Women's Peace Culture of Remembrance*. The survey was carried out using a questionnaire entitled Feminist-Peace and Women's Culture of Remembrance within the "Empowering Female Peacebuilders" [EFP] 2024 program of the European Institute for Gender Equality [EIŽ] by Vildana Džekman. By highlighting the importance of education, the findings also emphasize the need to open academic circles toward a feminist culture of remembrance and to connect activist and academic communities in peacebuilding processes. It is in this context that we recognize the potential for developing a mechanism that would contribute to making the feminist approach to peacebuilding more visible within institutional settings.

Feminist memorialization could be said to be a compass for succeeding generations of women as future peacebuilders, to direct them in opening space for women's voices. On the other hand, the interview and survey findings in the above mentioned survey speak both to this and the fact that women activists in Bosnia and Herzegovina believe that the responsibility for the lack of awareness among women of what peace activism and peacebuilding actually is lies with the society as a whole.

I've mostly drawn on this example. Right now, the initiative "Peace with a Woman's Face" and many colleagues who are part of this initiative are fighting for more streets to be named after women. For instance, based on the 100 women, 100 streets edition, a study was conducted in 12 cities and municipalities in

Bosnia and Herzegovina. Out of a total of 4,076 streets, only 115 streets, that is, 2.82%, are named after women or are related to women's activism and experiences. There are even areas where there are none at all, such as Bosansko Grahovo. We also have cases like Banja Luka where there are more streets named after women than in other places. Banja Luka stands out as a city where streets most frequently bear the names of women.

In some areas, our path is truly just beginning – we are lobbying and advocating for this situation to change, but everything is moving very slowly. Let me give you another example: the initiative “Peace with a Woman’s Face” also started at the very beginning of its work in 2013, launching on December 8th – a symbolic day of remembrance for women who were killed in the war. It’s an informal date, with the goal of preserving a culture of remembrance. However, we did not receive approval or support, not even from the Commission for Gender Equality of Bosnia and Hercegovina. A petition was written and submitted – so this struggle is still ongoing. We are making an effort, we are fighting, but when it comes to talking about women, especially women who participated in peace processes, then the role of women is not recognized. We can take the Dayton Peace Agreement, for example – it was signed by three men. Women were present only as interpreters, standing somewhere in the background.

Towards Recognition – *I Want My Name to Be Mentioned*

We are usually in the background, doing the majority of the work, and when it comes time to signing or acknowledging the contributions, somehow we end up being forgotten. That’s why it’s important to talk about this, and to keep talking. To say: *Yes, I did that. I want my name to be mentioned. We did this together, through a collective effort.* We have a publication, we have an exhibition, and there are many of us doing phenomenal work. We need to speak up about our fellow women colleagues who are doing amazing things.

I must also mention the book *Shining Humanity* by Zilka Spahić Šiljak, published in 2014, which discusses the contributions of women activists: these are stories of women who have been active in making a difference. It's only part of it, of course; we believe we'll continue to build on it. There is certainly space to expand it with even more great activists, especially young ones, who are now part of this process, bringing in new, fresh energy. But this is one of the rare books that actually talks about us. I believe *we have to start talking about ourselves and what we do every single day*. Here with us is Ifeta Mejremić, a famous activist from Konjević Polje. Very few of the younger activists know about Ifeta, but I am fortunate to know her. I know that, ahead of July 11 in Srebrenica, she prepares food for all the participants of the Peace March. These are amazing things – things we need to talk about and highlight. In every possible place, we need to speak about what we do every day. Because if we don't celebrate our own achievements – if we don't say that we got straight A's – no one else will praise us either. For example, one of my good colleagues from Tuzla, back when she was politically active – I was working on a story and told her I had trouble finding a woman who had done something meaningful in the area of healthcare. And she told me: "During my term, I got the medication Clexane, which costs around a thousand marks per year, added to the non-essential drug list so that pregnant women can get it for free, if they're Rh-negative". And I answered, but I didn't know that. We spend time together! She replied, I never told you. Why? Out of shame, out of modesty, out of habit – we've been taught not to talk about the good things we've done.

If we don't speak up, if we don't write, and if we don't connect our activism with the academic community – where there are amazing women (and amazing men, as well) in academic positions publishing books, research, and different editions – we miss the chance to collaborate with them, to have them write about all of us.

Presence of Women – Women’s Perspective of Remembrance

Why is the presence of women important in the culture of peace and remembrance? Because we have a moral responsibility to remember and record everything that is morally, politically, culturally, and emotionally important to us. Because we want to fill the historical void and silence when it comes to women’s contributions. Because we want to honor experiences and deepen the understanding of women from Bosnia and Herzegovina—their struggles and efforts to contribute to a better and more just society through personal and social acts of engagement. Because we want public space to belong to women as much as it does to men – this is my favorite point. Because we want the streets of Bosnia and Herzegovina to carry the names of deserving women from Bosnia and Herzegovina, and for us to be present wherever men are – because, as our fellow activist Rada Borić once said, when a member of radical conservative party asked her on a show: *What more do you women want?* she replied: *Neither more nor less than what you have.* That says it all. Because we want women in Bosnia and Herzegovina to be part of the culture of remembrance in public spaces, and to reduce the exclusion of women from processes of memorialization.

Because we want the erased women to return to the culture of memory – those who were erased because of their names or their social engagement that didn’t fit the current ethno-political agendas. I didn’t even mention – since the lexicon doesn’t cover it – just how many women have been erased. There were streets named after them, and then those names were removed. That process is still ongoing. Because we want local communities to remember that women also lived there; because we want this lexicon and the stories it contains to serve as a foundation and motivation for new women’s achievements and creations. Somewhere in this lexicon: 100 women, 100 streets named after women. The most important thing is for the younger generations to continue this story, to keep fighting against patriarchal norms, to raise their daughters to know that every color is okay, that

pink isn't just for girls, and blue isn't just for boys. And to know that highlighting our contributions isn't boasting. It's our right to take up space in the same places men have easily taken, and still take, even now.

Conclusion

Despite numerous initiatives and the constant efforts of women activists and feminists in the domain of peacebuilding, the culture of peace does not provide sufficient space to the women's and feminist perspective of remembrance. Although the legislative framework in Bosnia and Herzegovina guarantees the respect for women's human rights and gender equality, the institutional implementation of feminist memorialization is, unfortunately, still at a low level. The efforts of women activists and representatives of women's organizations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, that created the environment out of which the "Peace with a Woman's Face" initiative was born, prove that it is possible and necessary to erase both visible and invisible borders, whether institutionally established, or national, ethnic and religious ones. Women's heroism disrupts the patriarchal order of homogeneous communities and highlights women's humanity and innate capacity for building peace through networking and collaboration.

The "Peace with a Woman's Face" initiative and this study I elaborated lay the groundwork for future feminist memorialization processes, enabling peace values and knowledge to be passed down to new generations of women and girls. Many women still lack awareness of how important their own participation in peace work is, which is a pre-requisite for a greater presence of women's histories in the culture of remembrance. Raising awareness can, therefore, be one of the mechanisms to reaffirm the women's culture of remembrance. Through all elements of memorialization, the "Peace with a Woman's Face" initiative seeks to move women beyond the role of victim and present them as active participants in peacebuilding processes, thus

breaking the patriarchal patterns of male domination and ensuring equality. A feminist and women's peace culture of remembrance is necessary, if we want to oppose the ruling and dominant male and political ethno-national narratives that take it upon themselves to dictate what we should remember. Documenting women's contributions, both past and present, is a useful tool in preserving the women's and feminist culture of remembrance.

The majority of survey respondents found that the contributions of women in peacebuilding processes, including the work of the initiative itself, were not sufficiently visible, and agreed that the feminist and women's culture of remembrance should be formalized and institutionally acknowledged in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The visibility of these processes is diminished through the lack of support from institutions such as the Commission for Gender Equality of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The lack of institutional support for the women's and feminist culture of remembrance is also confirmed by the – still fruitless – long-standing efforts of the initiative's members toward institutionalizing December 8 as a day of remembrance for women killed in the war. All written sources and available literature on the "Peace with a Woman's Face" initiative, as well as advocacy documents including written and audio and video materials, testify to the enormous, practically immeasurable, contribution of the initiative to the women's and feminist culture of remembrance. The tenets upon which the initiative's practices are based are, without doubt, important in putting an end to the exclusivity of male heroism in peace processes, as well as in providing a feminist perspective to memorialization in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

To sum it up, feminist memorialization could be said to be a compass for the coming generations of women as future peacebuilders, to direct them in opening space for women's voices.

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Testimonies of Resistance in the Balkans



Strength Lies in Unity and Solidarity

I'm not prone to generalizations, but as time passes, I increasingly recognize that *women are the true champions of peace*. Often unknowingly, without assigning great importance to their actions, it is women who effortlessly build safe harbors of trust. They are the ones who bravely, with open arms, go wherever help is needed – wherever life itself is at stake. Calmly and steadily, with vision, they break down invisible barriers of prejudice and hatred.

These steps often seem as small as drops in the ocean, and therefore go unnoticed. That is why it is important to pause and remember them, to leave a record. The sustainable return of people to their homes remains a current issue, and creating spaces of peace and freedom is our shared obligation. In 2017, a group of people from Stolac, wishing to create such a space, launched the project "Library – A Place of Encounter". Wanting to help, I initiated a book donation drive on behalf of the Municipality of Centar. The people of Sarajevo responded enthusiastically, and in record time over 3,000 titles were collected. We delivered the books to Stolac, and a few months later, the City Library "Mehmedalija Mak Dizdar" was opened. The library remains a meeting place for all residents of Stolac, a space for promoting literature, culture, and the arts.

To ensure that return is truly sustainable, returnees must also be granted the right to work and access to stable and secure income sources. Economic empowerment of women plays a crucial role in this process, which is why my collaboration with the women of Srebrenica – initiated with support from the Municipality of Centar – is particularly meaningful to me. These hardworking

women know how to feed themselves and their families by cultivating the land. They know how to prepare the most delicious delicacies of traditional Bosnian cuisine – but not how to market their products. We worked on that, and the results followed.

However, the unshakable pacifist in me – bearing the knowledge of the devastating aftermath of war – continues to advocate for peace. *Peace is my commitment*. I am a proud member of the Feminist Anti-Fascist Network [FAMa], which operates across the post-Yugoslav region. Together with my colleagues, I firmly oppose policies that promote militarization and conflict. Our work is grounded in the principle that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”. In line with this, one of FAMa’s first actions was joining the European citizens’ initiative for one million signatures supporting the right to abortion for all women in the European Union, which we carried out in May 2024. In the context of commemorating 80 years of victory over fascism, we, the members of FAMa, launched a strong advocacy campaign for peace.

Amidst war-mongering rhetoric, we joined our colleagues in Croatia and formed the Bosnian Anti-War Ad Hoc Coalition. Our Peace Proclamation is a call to all relevant actors in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the region, Europe, and the world to intensify efforts toward preserving peace and stopping all wars and armed conflicts in the interest of humanity.

Unity and solidarity are our greatest strengths, which is why we refused to be silent observers of the regime torture faced by our sisters in Serbia. This year, we joined the vocal fight for the release of our friend, Professor Marija Vasić, who, along with six students, was held for over two months under inhumane conditions as the only political prisoner in Europe. Public pressure led to Marija’s release and inspired us to continue fighting for the ideals of justice, truth, and freedom. Faced with the rise of authoritarianism, nationalism, and revisionism – which undeniably lead to war – peace must remain our only option.



Reclaiming the Sacred After War

In the aftermath of a war, it is tempting to lose faith not only in humanity, but in the sacred. But there are those of us who come from religious traditions as carriers of hope, reminding others that God is not found in violence, but in the quiet acts of resilience, care and remembering. I would like to offer a feminist theological reflection shaped by lived experience during and after the Bosnian war, proposing that a new image of God is necessary for healing – one born from women’s embodied resistance and a commitment to peace.

My life like the lives of so many women in Bosnia and Herzegovina was marked by war and trauma. I survived the siege of Sarajevo, endured a complex marriage with a man suffering from PTSD and raised children through the collapse of social and moral structures. But out of this suffering emerged a fierce commitment to peace and truth.

When I first publicly *declared myself an “Islamic feminist”* in an interview for the weekly magazine BH Dani, *it was a radical act*. It distanced me even from those closest to me. But it was a necessary declaration of self-authorship, a refusal to remain voiceless in a society that asked for silence from its women. Feminism for many women was a survival strategy in order to be acknowledged.

The crisis of faith that accompanied the war also opened space for a new theology, a reimagining of God as compassionate, inclusive and on the side of the wounded. We began to speak of a God who does not demand revenge, but calls us into a relationship with the enemy – not to free them from guilt, but to transform the

world through engagement, dialogue and non-violence. In many ways, the war transformed every woman into Mary (Mariam) – not the passive, distant Madonna, but the grieving, solitary mother who stands at the heart of suffering. We, like her, were left alone, forced to bury our dead, care for our children and make meaning of what remained. And the men around us – husbands, brothers, sons – were often framed as Jesus: sacrificed, martyred, sanctified by violence. However, while Jesus is lifted into transcendence, Mary remains on earth. She stays with the pain. She walked through the ruined streets of Sarajevo, Srebrenica, Prijedor. As I reflect on the women I've worked with across Bosnia, I see in them the figure of Mary after the crucifixion – not broken, but destined to keep living. We do not ascend. We root ourselves in life and in doing so, we become the ethical and spiritual center of our communities.

John Paul Lederach, a peacebuilder and author, speaks of the “moral imagination” as the capacity to “envision and enact a web of relationships that includes even our enemies”. For me, Mother Mary's presence at the site of death models this: she is present, even when redemption seems impossible. In this sense, women are not only the caretakers of memory, but also the midwives of the future. In my peacebuilding work I used to sit with war criminals. I have shared rooms with men responsible for immense violence. It is not because I forgive their actions, but because I recognize that truth, justice, and transformation must include the enemy. As Gandhi reminds us, “You may never know what results come of your actions. But if you do nothing, there will be no result”.

This ethic of inclusion is not naïve. It is a radical position grounded in trauma, faith and refusal to let hate define the future. This resonates with what Johan Galtung said that peace is not the absence of conflict, but the presence of creative alternatives for responding to conflict. I choose to be one of those alternatives. This is not easy. My Muslim community has also failed to fully address its complicity. Over decades, I never heard prayers condemning war in our mosques. But I respond not with hatred,

but with a prayer of my own: that justice will be done and that hearts will change.

Love is at the center of my practice – not as sentiment, but as a discipline. A deliberate, daily choice to include, rebuild and care. I find inspiration in permaculture, in small local systems that resist collapse by returning to balance and interconnectedness. I find it in interfaith circles, feminist NGOs and trauma-informed groups led by women who carry more than they ever should have. Zilka Spahić Šiljak in her book Shining Humanity. Life Stories of Women Peacebuilders in Bosnia and Herzegovina describes such women as “guardians of humanity”, those who hold communities together when institutions fail. It is not enough to deconstruct systems of violence. We must build new ones rooted in compassion, justice and resilience.

In the ashes of war, we are given a strange gift: the opportunity to become new. I believe in a God who lives not in heaven, but in the body of a woman who is determined to choose life and rebuild relationships. We need a God who teaches us that we can begin again. We are not destroyed – we are transformed.



Politics in a Woman's Way in the Post-War Time

While listening to the presentations and discussions during the excellent "Gender and Peace in the Balkans" conference, I was reminded of the time when, as Minister of Labor, Social Policy, Displaced Persons and Refugees in the Government of Sarajevo Canton, I was confronted with countless problems that needed solving – problems faced by people who simply wanted a normal life, one that seemed to have disappeared during the war and the difficult post-war years. This was just a few years after the war, when the return of displaced persons to their homes was progressing very slowly and with numerous obstacles – perhaps the most difficult being the lack of political will to accelerate and implement these processes. Whether it was about creating conditions for people to return to Sarajevo Canton or to leave the Canton for parts of Republika Srpska from which they had been expelled – it was all equally urgent.

Once I found myself in a position of power, I knew I had to find ways to speed up the process and create conditions that would allow people not only to return, but also to stay in the places they returned to. At that time, international donors provided great support by funding the reconstruction of destroyed houses and other infrastructure, significantly facilitating the process. I decided to visit municipalities in Republika Srpska – Višegrad, Foča, Žepa, Srebrenica, Bratunac, and others – to talk with local leaders about possible joint projects that would ensure dignified conditions for the return of displaced Bosniaks. *I always came prepared, with concrete proposals: what we would invest, and*

what we expected from them. I also had a detailed overview of how many people had been expelled from those municipalities and were living in Sarajevo, how many wanted to return, and more.

Many tried to dissuade me, thinking it was reckless – something no one had done before me – but I didn't give up. I had a strong support from a group of international organizations gathered around the OHR, OSCE, and UNHCR, and they themselves were surprised by my determination and initially skeptical about the outcomes. But I felt good doing it – because I was doing something in a way no one had before. I knew that *without direct contact and open dialogue, we couldn't succeed.* I wasn't afraid, nor did I harbor animosity toward some of the people I had to speak with, even though I had been warned they were "dangerous". Of course, there were various kinds of scenes – some funny, others tragic. I remember the beginning of a conversation with the deputy mayor of Višegrad who immediately accused me of not allowing Serb returns to Vogošća, while demanding that Bosniaks return to Višegrad. He fell silent when I responded that I still live in Vogošća, that I spent the war there, and that I know very well what happened. The rest of the conversation proceeded normally and productively. I also went to Montenegro and Belgrade to meet with Serbian refugees, who were surprised that someone from the government was addressing them as fellow citizens, without arrogance – something that always helped create a positive atmosphere. I recall the state minister for refugees, a man, criticized me for attending these meetings, claiming I had "overstepped my authority" as I was only a cantonal minister. But I kept working. In Žepa, which already had a cooperative, I donated a truck. At Tjentište, where the first returnee Bosniak baby was born in the hospital – and where I became the child's godmother – I donated a cow so they could have milk and cheese. In one local community in Bratunac, I asked the mayor whether he would allow us to renovate a former clinic that had been turned into a stable.

And there are many more stories like these. This is just a small

part. I realized that a lot can be done if we are ready for dialogue, to confront problems directly, and if we avoid hollow political excuses about why something “can’t be done”. I call this *our women’s way*, because our innate drive to protect life enables us to search for different methods of action – especially in difficult and crisis situations.



There Is No Lasting Peace Without Justice

As someone who works professionally in the field of human rights, I always reiterate how important it is to uphold the fundamental values guaranteed in international and European human rights documents – above all, the sanctity of human life. No one with even a trace of humanity and common sense can say anything good about the horrors of war that struck Bosnia and Herzegovina and the region in the early 1990s, when hundreds of thousands of lives were lost.

Yet, the war was stopped, and part of the new constitutional and legal framework of Bosnia and Herzegovina includes Article 2 of Annex 4 of the Dayton Peace Agreement, which enshrines the idea of human rights as a foundation of this country. In addition to the Constitution, the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, together with its protocols and numerous other international human rights documents, take precedence over all local legislation – formally allowing human rights to be protected within a broader international legal framework. Although the guns fell silent thirty years ago, the war continues to claim victims indirectly. Its accomplices are the unfinished and poorly implemented transition, as well as the persistent remnants of patriarchal power structures. The result is widespread violence in its many forms, which disproportionately affects women and marginalized groups. To make matters worse, in recent years, there has been a growing global trend of rejecting the achievements of human rights and the progress made in that area over past decades.

Considering the scale of anti-gender, right-wing forces in the world – and here in the Balkans – I am convinced that the only way to resist them is through a persistent, united struggle by all progressive forces in the Bosnian society. This primarily includes a broad coalition of representatives from academia, civil society organizations, religious communities, the private sector, and the political sphere. In its work, such a *coalition must be guided by the belief that there is no lasting peace without justice* – and that justice is not justice, if it is not justice for all.

We cannot build social cohesion only in large cities and majority communities, and it cannot be based on unequal gender relations. If women from minority groups or rural areas remain on the margins of the economy, politics, and society at large, we are building on sand. This requires not only overcoming ethnic divisions and gender stereotypes; it means achieving real gender equality in participation in decision-making mechanisms and the labor market, as well as in access to protection from violence and legal security. Only then can Bosnia and Herzegovina truly overcome the legacy of war and begin to live in accordance with the spirit and provisions of the aforementioned Article 2 of its Constitution. Although constitutional and legal norms may sometimes seem dry and unenforced in practice, they remain a crucial framework we must adhere to. For sustainable peace, we need law, justice, and fairness.



Community: Joint Work for a Better Future

Lately, in the post-war period, I have been returning more and more to that phase in Srebrenica – how we survived, how mothers, sisters, heroines fed their children, how children went to school, how they fed that poor army up there on the hills, with pitchforks, without weapons, just waiting. *What activists, what feminists – they didn't even know that they were.*

When I returned in 2003 to Konjević Polje, we founded the “Women’s association JADAR” that was established at the initiative of a group of local women, but I immediately got connected with the organization “Maja” in Kravica and its leader Nada. Bosniak women from Konjević Polje and Serb women from Kravica helped each other and started working together. It was a very difficult gesture at the time. One’s ‘head’ was never safe. They burned Nada’s doors, they burned mine too, but we did not give up. We wanted to be united, to work together.

In our municipality of Bratunac, patriarchy still prevails in rural areas, not allowing girls the right to education. Parents often decide to take away their daughters’ right to schooling and attending high school. After finishing elementary school, they impose marriage on them, leading to early family formation and childbirth. Very often this happens without even asking the girls what they actually want or allowing them the right to make decisions about their own lives. Thus, they are deprived of their rights and choices. Earlier, the mothers of these girls were also similarly endangered and they too were not asked, so most of them remained uneducated and later passed this down to their

daughters. Parents in such rural areas are mostly focused on male children, ensuring that they attend school, while girls are neglected. This is very common in such areas, and they often cite the lack of money as the main reason for not educating girls.

Within my community, I advocate a change of mindset of many mothers, so that they do not do the same to their daughters. Gradually, I am succeeding in making certain changes for these young girls, who are starting to fight for their rights themselves. What I try to do is to secure scholarships for them, and thus encourage mothers to get involved, because together we are stronger and can bring about change. Another big problem we have is the socialization of children; we lack a space for children to start school or preschool, because mothers who live off agriculture must work, and usually, in the first year of school, they have to wait for their children in front of the school because most of the kids cry, don't know how to behave, and cannot function in a group with other children. This creates problems.

We have been preparing a playroom for children where they will have their own corner to play and socialize, aiming to change this situation. I always say that children in rural areas have no opportunity to show what they know through their work and, unfortunately, talents die in the villages. Children do not have a chance to prove themselves. We plan, God willing, to give them that opportunity through various creative workshops, and in this way, we will help our community to start making changes toward a better future and a better life.



My Spaces of and for Peace

While participating in the conference Gender and Peace in the Balkans, I had a profound realization. As a child from a multiethnic family, growing up during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and enduring discrimination, I learned early what it means to live in the shadow of conflict. Those experiences marked me deeply – they shaped my longing for peace, not as an abstract ideal, but as something urgent, necessary, and deeply personal. The search for spaces of belonging, healing, and safety became part of who I am – woven into both my personal journey and my professional calling. Growing up in a war time, I witnessed the brutality of conflict – its dehumanizing force, the way in which it shattered communities, and the long shadows it casts on everyday life. What made this experience particularly painful was the discrimination I faced, both during and after the war. I did not belong easily to any group. I was too much of the “other” for everyone, and that precarity became central to how I experienced both violence and resilience.

These early experiences made me intimately aware of how identities – especially those that do not conform to dominant national, ethnic, or religious narratives – can become sites of exclusion and vulnerability in times of a conflict. But they also planted the seeds of my commitment to peacebuilding. Not the kind of peace that is negotiated in formal agreements or imposed from above, but a feminist peace that is built from the margins – through care, dialogue, education, and the labor of reweaving torn social fabrics. As a researcher, teacher and an activist in education, I have devoted my work to building pedagogies of peace, collaboration and inclusion that are grounded in feminist ethics. I see education as a space where we can challenge inherited narratives of

division, exclusion and violence, and instead cultivate critical consciousness, empathy, and civic responsibility. I strive to create learning environments that are inclusive of all identities and that honor the lived experiences of students, particularly those who, like myself, carry complex and often painful histories.

Peacebuilding, from a feminist lens, means acknowledging and addressing not only the visible scars of war, but also the quieter forms of violence – structural inequalities, everyday discrimination, and the silencing of women’s voices. My research into women in politics has shown me how women, especially those coming from diverse and marginalized backgrounds, often become key actors in peace advocacy – not because they are inherently more peaceful, but because they carry the burden of conflict in specific and often gendered ways. They are frequently the ones holding families and communities together in times of collapse, yet their contributions are rendered invisible in formal political spaces.

Through this work, I have come to see feminist leadership for peace as leadership that disrupts the hierarchies of power, that listens more than it speaks, that builds coalitions across differences rather than reinforcing silos. It is leadership that does not shy away from discomfort or complexity, but embraces them as conditions for a transformative dialogue.

My personal history compels me to believe that peace is not simply the end of war. It is a daily struggle to humanize one another across lines of difference. It is about recognizing the dignity of people like me – people with mixed identities, people who don’t fit easily into the boxes that conflict demands. Feminist peacebuilding insists that no one is expendable, and no identity is too complicated to belong. In my work – whether in the classroom, in community activism, or in research – I carry forward this belief. I know what it means to grow up in a world fractured by violence and mistrust. And I also know that healing is possible, but only if we dare to imagine peace not as silence or order, but as justice, recognition, and relational care.



Brave Women Build Peace

I want to touch upon two things: first, what immediately comes to my mind, when some people praise Banja Luka for having the most female street names in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is true, as we found in our research. However, I must mention some things that reflect a different history of Banja Luka than what it is now. We all know that Banja Luka was ethnically cleansed during the war, and these street names, which are now known as female street names, would make someone from outside think that no one but Serbs ever lived in Banja Luka. Unfortunately, the streets are mostly named after Serbian heroines, like, I don't know, Mother Paraskeva, the Serbian Sisters' Circle, the Mother of Jugović, and so on. The rest of Banja Luka's women's history, not to mention wartime heroines, is mostly forgotten. The best known is Vahida Maglajlić, who currently participates in the "Peace with a Woman's Face" initiative. Two organizations from Banja Luka are advocating the return of street names honoring Vahida Maglajlić, a World War II heroine. Besides Vahida, there are many other women who have contributed greatly to Banja Luka, and we, as two organizations from the initiative "Peace with a Woman's Face," are working to restore those street names. Unfortunately, the current situation obstructs our goal. So, one should not think that we are particularly advanced in this regard.

I also agree that women were not present in peace processes. We are aware that *women were absent from peace processes in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in the region*. I remember only a few women serving as secretaries, interpreters, etc. I don't know if the situation is better globally, but there are some bright examples. I wanted to say that we, women from the NGO sector,

were the first to cross entity borders. From Republika Srpska, the first three women who crossed these borders were my friends Nada Golubović, my colleague Lidija Živanović and me. We, let's say, put our heads in a bag when we went to Banja Luka, and it was really dangerous for our lives.

This unfortunate war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, however you call it, aggression, civil war, or whatever, was still a war, and to everyone it was equally a war. Today, we smile and joke about some of the headlines in Banja Luka newspapers back then, which read something like: What are Banja Luka ladies doing, with a smaller subtitle below that said, Going to have coffee with the Bosnian Army general, Atif Dudaković. I was amazed, wondering, Why with the general? I would understand if they had said Izetbegović, but why with the general? Then, my friend Nada explained that he was around, but I didn't even see him. In any case, *women from both entities crossed the borders and helped each other during the war.* This is what I wanted to share with you because women were brave and decisive to build peace.



Authenticity and Vulnerability of Peace

Regardless of how peace is named in Bosnia and Herzegovina – be it unjust peace, negative peace, or delayed peace – our post-Dayton political and social reality is deeply shaped by the mass atrocities committed between 1992 and 1995. Nearly three decades after the establishment of peace, Bosnia and Herzegovina continues to face the denial of the most horrific crime committed in Europe since World War II. The denial of genocide, questioning the number and identity of victims, and revisionist narratives prevent Bosnia and Herzegovina from constructively confronting the legacy of the war, establishing a “positive peace” (Johan Galtung’s term), and developing a concept of responsibility – both individual and collective.

Because of these facts, which are clearly present in our public space, I am often overwhelmed by a sense of helplessness. I am deeply aware that there is something fundamentally wrong and disturbing in the indifference toward such a past – especially among those who share group and ethnic identity with the perpetrators.

Conferences like this one, Gender and Peace in the Balkans, give me – first and foremost as a political scientist – deep hope for the healing of this region. At this conference, there were no claims that such a past is “irrelevant”, and I felt I was among my own. The participants were not indifferent to the injustice inflicted on the innocent victims of the wars in the Balkans, nor did they privatize or commercialize narratives of pain and suffering – as is often the case with certain social groups and organizations. This rare reality made me more aware of my own vulnerability, but also

opened a new path in my academic reflections. I am therefore deeply grateful to Zilka Spahić Šiljak, who does not allow feminist theories to fade away – those that perhaps teach us most deeply about the processes of authenticity.

Like many others who have gone through trauma, I myself have felt how much Bosnian society lacks authenticity. Politics has been reduced to strategy, to media image, to power without presence. As a political scientist, I knew that as a state and society we were losing essence – not in what we do, but in how and why we do it. In practice, I observed that people increasingly speak not from their own truth, but from uniformity of discourse and narrative.

Of course, I also saw the problem in the very architecture of the Dayton peace, which failed to establish a “unity of the political body” that could serve as the foundation for social progress and justice. In the name of apparent stability (ending the war), territorial divisions and ethnic domination were legalized, sacrificing political freedoms for the sake of ethnic sovereignty – something I have written and spoken about publicly. A system that institutionalizes differences based on ethnic and religious identity further reinforces the inequalities and injustices from which the war emerged in the first place.

That is why conferences, roundtables, and public events that build peace from a different perspective – through vulnerability and authenticity – are valuable and meaningful to me. Researchers spoke of peace through awareness of pain and vulnerability, and that was when I realized how deeply this is needed – not only in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but across the Balkans. *Encouraging us to articulate the troubles that surround and unsettle us is in fact an encouragement of our right to authenticity, which carries transformative potential* – especially when we confront nationalist and patriarchal narratives that distort our inner truths and peace.

In an era of global anti-gender politics, this requires true commitment to justice and human rights. This is precisely where the power of this conference lies – it inspired me to reflect on political authenticity as a new form of social strength, one that is willing to acknowledge, confront, and be open to both one’s own and others’ vulnerability. Perhaps it is time to stop imagining peace as silence, and to start living it as a space where truth – our own and others’ – is allowed to speak.



Women Demanded Peace

Sensing the danger of the war events from Croatia spilling into Bosnia and Herzegovina, women from the Municipality of Ilidža organized the Ilidža Women's Movement at the end of July of 1991 as a non-partisan organization that I presided over.

Guided by the experience that *women have always remembered the good in order to repay it, and the evil in order to atone for it*, watching over the lives of their sons, fathers, and brothers, the women of Ilidža publicly raised their voices against those who, for personal ambition and interests, spread discord, hatred, fear, and violence, fueling national differences and preparing for war. Unfortunately, the pleas of the Ilidža Women's Movement, like the demands of other anti-war organizations across the former state, were ignored.

We watched and read stories in the media about mothers and fathers searching for their sons, conscripts under military service, and pressures on the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina to stop mobilization and the dispatching of young men to the battlefields in Croatia. Like many mothers, I rushed to the Secretariat for National Defense with a draft notice for my son, seeking to intervene and express my disagreement with the mobilization and deployment of young men to war.

Out of public view, the authorities in the Municipality of Ilidža [the Serb Democratic Party, SDS and the Party of Democratic Action, SDA] agreed to divide the territory and power into "Serb" and "Muslim" zones according to the 1991 census. Names determined not just where people could live, but whether they could survive. I spent the first three months with my husband, son, and a

sick, bedridden mother-in-law on the territory of the so-called “Municipality of the Serb People”, witnessing the captivity and dependence of non-Serbs on personal names and individual will. This was a time of psychological harassment, humiliation, and maltreatment, driven by national hatred and intolerance, becoming increasingly frequent and brutal – a time of summoning non-Serbs for questioning, imprisonment, “routine controls” day and night by local and foreign Serb paramilitary groups (Šešelj’s men, Arkan’s men, White Eagles).

My role as a “defender” was to protect my husband and son from direct encounters with these groups. I was the first to answer the door at knocking or ringing, cared for them and my mother-in-law, and stayed informed about the situation on the free “Muslim” territory (Hrasnica), where my daughter, married to a Serb, lived. Despite the difficulties, I managed not to show fear in front of paramilitaries, refusing public statements about alleged propaganda from the “Muslim radio” about maltreatment and persecution of non-Serbs, as they said the public would believe me as a well-known woman.

I showed courage even when I was called in for questioning, asking at the end, “Who have I spoken to?”. The captivity lasted until my husband was taken away by Serb soldiers with the message: “There can be no Muslims here”. Friends found and buried him honorably. After the war ended, they showed me the burial site. My son narrowly avoided the same fate, thanks to Croatian neighbors who took him to Split a month earlier. After everything, I gathered the strength to seek help from good people to move with my mother-in-law to my parents’ home on the “Muslim” territory under the control of the legal government of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Upon moving to the territory controlled by the legal government of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, I realized that all pre-war municipal institutions had been devastated, both in terms of human resources and materials, and needed rebuilding in wartime conditions. As a law graduate, I was the “fourth attempt” by the authorities to

find a secretary of the war-time Presidency, which also functioned as the Municipal Assembly, tasked with strengthening the military and civil defense. Accepting the call meant joining my daughter, son-in-law, and his family. I was aware that my values and political affiliations made me different from most persons in my new environment, but this was a challenge to promote civilizational values – equality, justice, and solidarity. Women and young girls made up most of the staff in rebuilding displaced government institutions: administration, civil protection, education, healthcare, judiciary, humanitarian organizations, and more. *Women made a difference, for sure.*

An Unseen Heroine

Far from public view, in Hrasnica, a civilian act by an ordinary, unknown woman, Ivanka Šučur, was decisive for saving the life of an 18-month-old boy. On October 16, 1993, during shelling, she rushed into an abandoned room and found a dirty little boy crawling toward broken glass, wearing filthy clothes and holding a bottle of spoiled milk. She took the boy to the police, but no one was looking for him. She took him home and found a note stating his name was Elvis Salkanović, born on January 9, 1992, in Čapljina; his mother had died and his father had fled. Ivanka raised Elvis alongside her three children without any help.

It Is Honorable to Preserve Truth from Oblivion

Based on my experience, I can confirm that even amid national and religious hysteria and war suffering, there was human goodness and moral norms, personified in individuals willing to sacrifice for others. Such values gave me hope not just for the survival, but also for the possibility of a life together after the war, and the clear distancing of many people from the crimes committed in Ilidža.

Therefore, I decided to preserve my experience and publicly

express my stance toward myself, my family, politics, people, and events. I believed that my fellow citizens – men and women – and especially my children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and my innocently killed husband deserved it. On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of reintegration, I published the book *Municipality of Ilidža 1990–1996 – a Reflection of Politics and People*. On its cover is the Roman Bridge, symbolizing both the site of my husband’s death and the message of reconnecting “shores” separated by hatred and war.



Commemoration of Wars through the Prism of Patriarchy

My engagement focuses on the activities of veterans, former fighters from different armies who participated in the conflicts of the 1990s and who now work together to overcome war trauma, break stereotypes, and promote non-violence and dialogue. Their efforts are centered around reconciliation, confronting the past, and building peace, and I am a direct participant in this work. This is a well-developed network of veterans visiting places of suffering, holding silent commemorations, and connecting with people in local communities, political parties, the media, and government authorities. In addition to veterans, who are now peace activists, the network includes former camp inmates, civilian war victims, and journalists, all with the ongoing support from the Center for Nonviolent Action in Sarajevo. Many participants have faced challenging situations, especially women, as they have not always been accepted in their own cultural, national, or religious communities.

After the Yugoslav wars, public and political narratives in post-conflict societies often ascribed collective guilt to entire nations involved in the hostilities. These narratives left little space for critical reflection on individual or group accountability, including the roles and experiences of women. Empathy for others, acknowledgment of wrongdoing by one's group, and a deeper understanding of the legitimate fears people experienced during the war were largely ignored. This pattern of selective memory and moral simplification mirrored the dominant narratives of the Second World War that shaped the region's

collective consciousness, structured around rigid binaries: aggressor vs. defender, fascist vs. anti-fascist, just vs. unjust. These were uncritically repeated in interpretations of the more recent conflicts. Many combatants did not join the war out of personal conviction but were persuaded that their actions were necessary to defend their nation, territory, homes, and families. In the post-war period, a large number of these individuals have come to recognize the importance of pursuing alternative, non-violent mechanisms for resolving political conflicts. Crucially, this includes embracing personal responsibility and fostering a shared commitment to preventing the recurrence of war.

My involvement in these activities began with confronting the past. You think you can carry certain things deep in your soul, but then you find yourself in a situation where you're forced to face them, and you experience a kind of catharsis. Then you realize that you have to talk about it. It needs to be discussed. Women should not remain silent. Women in the military had different roles, but now feminists say, "You don't have to be in the military." Unfortunately, armies still exist. So what do we do now? If they are to be abolished, then let the great powers be the ones to abolish them. But for equality to be achieved, we must be part of them. Activism is difficult without access to institutions. But when you have like-minded people within an institution, everything changes. It's much better because women who, for example, wore the uniform didn't do so because they wanted to fight in a war. The question always follows: "If you're such peacemaker, why did you participate in the war in the first place?" The key lies in understanding the process that everyone has gone through over the past 20 or 30 years. I joined the army because I wanted to. Why shouldn't both men and women have that choice? It was a challenge, I liked it, I was capable, and I had the right to choose. That's the point: everyone should be able to do what they love. The war took us all by surprise, except, of course, those who prepared it. That in itself caused trauma. Sometimes you don't even realize it's there. But it stays deep inside you, and you keep coming to it. Of course, it doesn't hurt anymore; the wound has

healed. But the scar remains. And whenever something reminds you of it, you should talk about it. The first time is the hardest, when someone provokes you, and you finally break through that barrier. But after that, it becomes like therapy, and it's no longer difficult to talk about it, whether it's the 65th time or the 165th.

Women on all sides experienced the war in similar ways. Yet even today, at commemorations, women are barely visible. The Center for Nonviolent Action created a network of veterans from different militaries, and that diversity has enriched the quality of our work. The stories of people who were once enemies, now friends and true peacebuilders, are the best examples for politicians of how problems can be overcome. But now there are only two of us in this network: me, a former officer of the Yugoslav People's Army [JNA], and a woman who joined the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina [ARBiH] with her husband. It is documented in the publication *We Come in Peace* (2025). I say, "That's good. How was it in the beginning? There was no one. Now there are two. Let's aim for more."

We keep forgetting that half the world is made up of women. And is patriarchy just an evolutionary mistake? People who weren't directly involved don't truly know what happened. That's why we must speak. Let's speak. The differences between women and men lie in empathy, in how we think, and that deserves discussion. Women are often invisible at commemorations, present mainly as mothers, the "keepers of memory". Male figures dominate, male speeches, and memory is militarized, while gender-specific traumas are ignored. It isn't the same to sympathize with a woman who has been raped or when a woman who has been raped speaks to you. That's why we must continuously change the standards. We need practices of remembrance that include women's contributions to the politics of war and peace, without erasing their individual identities or political engagements. That's how we create a standard worthy of the message: peace is priceless. And that message must be passed on to future generations. And what I believe is ultimately most important: no crime can be committed in my name, or

anyone else's. Not in the name of a people, not in the name of a nation. Every crime is simply a crime. And every mother grieves her loved ones. Crime has no religion, no nation, no gender. Our goal is to continuously highlight the importance of a culture of dialogue and tolerance, and to transcend national and religious boundaries. Reconciliation and cooperation among people, even those who once fought each other, are not only possible, but essential conditions for a lasting peace. In this process, veterans become messengers of reconciliation and symbols of hope that societies affected by war can rebuild better relationships. However, women must play an important role in that process.



Challenges for Men in Peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Building and advocating for peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which experienced the nightmare of a brutal civil war thirty years ago, should be an ethical principle of every conscious, responsible, and normal adult citizen. That is my opinion, one I wish all my fellow citizens shared – but unfortunately, they do not. Why do I feel entitled to say that? Because of the simple fact that the ruling parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and especially in Republika Srpska, continuously generate political crises and confrontations with “other” nations and citizens – yet still have been enjoying the support of most voters for decades.

What’s the problem? Why do people who have suffered physical and mental trauma in trenches, living in constant fear for their own and their loved ones’ lives, allow themselves to be led by political figures who invoke conflict, unrest, and hatred? Why don’t those who have lost a child, sibling, or parent cry out to the heavens demanding that no one else suffer the same pain?

This question cannot be answered in this short reflection – it would require a far more serious study addressing socio-psychological, psychopathological processes, even collective paranoia. Of course, I don’t wish to generalize – many who have experienced loss deeply desire peace and contribute to it through their actions. Sadly, they are not loud or visible enough. Conversely, some allow their tragedy to be manipulatively used to incite further division and hatred.

In such a society, contaminated by dirty political struggles

that constantly threaten the fragile peace, what choices does a politically aware and responsible individual in Bosnia and Herzegovina really have?

One option is to fall into defeatism, disbelieving in the possibility of building a better, fairer, and more democratic society. These individuals often choose to emigrate or retreat into apolitical indifference, focusing on their own small personal goals. But as Erich Fromm warns, it is nearly impossible to develop as a productive and good person in a sick society. These two choices, then, often act only as defense mechanisms for coping with the grim reality.

Emigrating may seem like a step toward improving one's life, but often it is simply an escape – the loss of hope for a better future in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The second choice – turning a blind eye to political reality and isolating one's life from society – is also a defense mechanism, which eventually breaks down.

These two paths resemble the dilemma described by the French philosopher Alain Badiou in *The True Life*, where young people feel they must choose between burning through life (through obsessions like sex, alcohol, drugs, or gaming) or carefully positioning themselves in society to build a career. Badiou, like a 'corrupter of youth', reveals a third path: the path of building a more humane and egalitarian society in which everyone is equal.

We find ourselves in the same situation. We want to stay in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but we also want to live in a more humane, egalitarian society – one where "otherness" represents richness, and where encountering different religions, nations, and cultures is an opportunity, not a threat. Those who say this is impossible are mere defeatists and fatalists who do not believe in human change or the possibility of a fairer, more humane world.

Let us remember that slavery and colonialism were once widely accepted. Women in many countries had no civil rights. Today, we live in a better world, as Steven Pinker has extensively written.

We also lived well in the former Yugoslavia – until war brought us back to a Hobbesian state of nature where man is wolf to man, and life is poor and filled with constant fear of death. If history is the teacher of life, then our recent past should teach us that peacebuilding must be the foundation of our actions. Yet for men who want to dedicate themselves to this mission, there are serious obstacles.

Firstly, Bosnia and Herzegovina is still a deeply patriarchal society, promoting inequality between men and women, and nurturing a culture of power, authoritarianism, and violent conflict resolution. In our society, a man, a young man, or even a boy who avoids a fight is labeled a “sissy”, branding him as weak or effeminate. The fear of mockery and rejection often pushes young people into violence against their nature.

It is no wonder, then, that we have political leaders characterized by power, authoritarianism, and violence. This is why I strongly believe that *peacebuilding* must include the *deconstruction of patriarchal life patterns*. From kindergarten to higher education, we must teach – especially young people – that all persons are equal, that both they and others have value.

Of course, education is important, but all aspects of society – especially work – must be imbued with the principle of equality. What a responsible and conscious man must do is allow himself to be *taught by vulnerable and marginalized communities*. These may include sexual minorities who face stigma in patriarchal societies, ethnic minorities like the Roma who face decades of discrimination, and women who still lack full equality. The individual must become sensitive to their voices, hear their injustices and traumas, and act to eliminate discriminatory laws and customs. Through his example, he can inspire others to be better, fairer, and help build peace and a better future for all.

Interfaith Feminist Approach to Peacebuilding

THEME

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CHAPTER 13

Gender and Peace:
Results of Research
in Women's Studies
and Research from
1998 to 2025

Gender and Peace: Results of Research in Women's Studies and Research from 1998 to 2025

Abstract

A key part of the paper consists of the insights into the project "Interreligious Dialogue and Women" (1998-), which analyzes the contribution of women in religious communities to peace and reconciliation. The project began with an international conference on feminist theology (1998), followed by two more conferences (2001, 2008) that focused on the gender perspective in interreligious dialogue. The paper also addresses the role of Protestant clergywomen in Vojvodina and their contribution to peacebuilding. Feminist theology and peacebuilding were part of an alternative higher education program entitled "Women's Studies and Research" [WSR], later included in academic studies at the University of Novi Sad. However, in recent years, the interest in this topic in scientific and academic circles in Serbia has declined, as compared to the European and global context. The paper emphasizes the need to continue research and educational initiatives on the contribution of women from various religious communities in peacebuilding in Serbia, in order to strengthen their role in interreligious dialogue and social tolerance.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to present the contribution of the Association "Women's Studies and Research" [further: WSR] to the study of the role of women in interreligious dialogue and

peacebuilding over the past thirty years. The WSR, established in 1997 in Novi Sad, is an interdisciplinary alternative higher education program that integrates teaching, research, publishing, and documentation on women's issues. Its goal is to improve the status of women from diverse national communities in Vojvodina, with a particular focus on groups with less social power. WSR operates through four main programs: scholarly research, which includes long-term projects such as Life Stories of Women from Vojvodina, Remarkable Women from Novi Sad, Feminist Theology, Feminist Linguistics, School of Romology, Gender and Play¹, along with numerous short-term initiatives. They include educational activities, centered around an alternative, interdisciplinary higher education program in Women's Studies [WS]; publishing, with a catalogue of 53 titles to date, produced as the result of scholarly research and cooperation with academic institutions, women's organizations, and experts from Serbia and the broader region; documentation activities through the Documentation Center, which houses a collection of audio and printed materials, transcripts, video recordings, and other relevant documentation. The multilingual, multi-confessional, and multinational character of the Vojvodina region provides the broader context for all of WSR's activities.

Women in Interreligious Dialogue

One of WSR's most significant long-term initiatives is the project Interreligious Dialogue and Women (also referred to as Feminist Theology), launched in 1998 by Svenka Savić, the founder of WSR and the project coordinator. The central aim of the project is to explore and highlight the contributions of women from various religious communities to processes of peacebuilding and reconciliation.

Interreligious dialogue is understood as a process of open and respectful communication and cooperation between individuals and groups from different religious traditions, with

¹ The outcomes of these projects are regularly published in book form.

the objective of fostering mutual understanding, dismantling prejudice, and cultivating inclusive and peaceful societies. Genuine interreligious dialogue, however, must move beyond mere tolerance; it must engage with structural questions of power, gender, and social justice, and ensure the inclusion of marginalized voices – especially those of women (cf. Savić 1999, 2017; Savić and Anić 2009; Spahić Šiljak 2010a, 2010b, 2020). Within the framework of this project, interreligious dialogue is approached as a transformative and inclusive practice that centers women's experiences and contributions. This approach not only deepens theological inquiry, but also addresses systemic gender inequalities and fosters participation in shaping shared ethical frameworks for coexistence. Together with collaborators such as sister Rebeka Anić and Zilka Spahić Šiljak, Savić emphasized the necessity of women's active involvement in both religious and interreligious spaces – arenas that have historically silenced or excluded them. By advocating for women's participation, the project challenges patriarchal structures and asserts that women offer vital perspectives, particularly in matters of peacebuilding, community resilience, and social justice (cf. Savić 1999, 2017; Savić and Anić 2009; Spahić-Šiljak 2007, 2010, 2020).

Insights into the origins and motivations behind the Interreligious Dialogue and Women project are provided in an interview conducted by Zilka Spahić-Šiljak with Svenka Savić (2020). According to Savić, her engagement with religious discourse from a linguistic and gender-sensitive perspective began in the early 1990s, following an encounter with a Franciscan theologian who introduced her to biblical texts. This encounter ignited a sustained interest in feminist theology, leading to extensive self-directed study in the field.

Between 1994 and 1998, Savić, together with Ana Bu, one of the co-founders of WS, attended the European Women's College in Zurich, where they focused on the contributions of influential women in religious traditions. Concurrently, regional initiatives in interreligious dialogue were gaining traction, including those led by the Belgrade Open School and Fra Marko Oršolić, a Bosnian

theologian based in Sarajevo. International collaborations and networks further enriched Savić's engagement with these themes. Through these connections, she participated in global events dedicated to fostering coexistence, tolerance, and interreligious understanding (Spahić-Šiljak 2020: 103–105).

The project Interreligious Dialogue and Women started with an international conference entitled "Feminist Theology: From Theory to Practice", held in 1998, and it was the first project of its kind in the region at that time. The proceedings from the conference were printed in a book of the same title and edited by Savić (1999). The volume includes a total of twenty five contributions by authors from the region and globally, comprising scholars, theologians, and activists, addressing the interdisciplinary framework of feminist theology and the role of women within various religious traditions (Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, etc.), with a particular focus on the intersection of feminist theory and ecumenism, emphasizing the importance of embracing diversity. In 2001, the second international conference was held, but due to a lack of funding, most of the papers were not printed in a single collection, although some were published sporadically when individual authors submitted them. The goal of the third conference "Gender Perspective on Interreligious Dialogue in the 21st Century" (March 7-8, 2008, Novi Sad) was to present data on the contribution of women to the development of interreligious dialogue in the past decade (1998-2008) in the region and to examine the possibilities for dialogue in the future, with a focus on the contribution of women to it. The proceedings from the conference were published in the book with the same title, and edited by Svenka Savić and sister Rebeka Jadranka Anić (2009).

Female Clergy in Vojvodina

In 2017, to mark the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, Svenka Savić collected and published the life stories of thirteen female clergy from three Protestant churches in Vojvodina in a volume

titled *Contributions to Peacebuilding: Female Clergy from Protestant Churches in Vojvodina*. The study centers on

the continuity of the presence of female clergy in the religious life of multi-religious Vojvodina in peacebuilding, in order to gain a better insight into their long-standing contribution to peacebuilding in everyday life, which includes social tolerance, especially the building of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue (Savić 2017: 9).

This work is particularly significant for its documentation of women's sustained involvement in religious life within the multi-confessional context of the Vojvodina region. It underscores their often overlooked contributions to peacebuilding through their religious practice and community engagement. Savić foregrounds the voices of these women, who have played instrumental roles in promoting social cohesion and dialogue across religious divides. Their peacebuilding efforts are deeply intertwined with their clerical responsibilities, encompassing the promotion of tolerance, ecumenical cooperation, and interreligious dialogue. By compiling and interpreting these life stories, Savić not only amplifies the contributions of female clergy to peacebuilding and interfaith understanding, but also addresses gendered omissions in both religious and historical narratives. Her work makes a strong case for integrating these narratives into the broader framework of Women's Studies and contemporary peacebuilding theory and practice. Included as an appendix to the book is a map that visually situates the women and their communities – serving, alongside WSR's long-standing *Interreligious Calendar* (produced annually in collaboration with Marijana Aizenkol from Zemun), as a tangible tool for raising awareness about the roles of women from diverse religious traditions in fostering ecumenism and peace.

Women's Studies as a Seedbed of Ecumenical Activism

Savić integrated the topic of women and religion into the

educational programs of Women's Studies [WS] in WSR, with one of the thematic cycles specifically dedicated to feminist theology and peacebuilding. This topic was initially developed in collaboration with the European Women's College [EWC] in Zurich, and later expanded independently in cooperation with lecturers from various countries. Through this collaboration, the program broadened knowledge about women in different religious traditions in diverse ways: through the interpretation of biblical texts concerning women (primarily from the New Testament), the analysis of female representation in religious periodicals, the application of gender perspectives in religious education textbooks in Serbia (Savić 2018), and the examination of women's roles in various churches in reconciliation and peacebuilding processes.

The first participants of the EWC program were Ana Bu, who worked for many years at the Ecumenical Humanitarian Organization [EHO] in Novi Sad, and Svenka Savić (1996–1999), and they concluded their studies by founding the WSR in Novi Sad, successfully implementing their final project. The next generation of EWC participants (2001–2002) were already active members of WSR: Biljana Sikimić, Erdős György Kavečan, Sara Savić, Zorana Antonijević, Ankica Dragin, Veronika Mitro, and Slavica Mamužić. Each contributed significantly within their respective contexts, particularly at the intersection of women's studies and religion. Today, they are engaged as scholars, researchers, and activists across various social sectors, advancing women's human rights and promoting peacebuilding efforts.²

Importantly, the thematic focus on feminist theology and peacebuilding within WSR has fostered personal connections and

2 Zorana Antonijević, Ph.D. in Gender Studies (GS), at ACIMSI Center for Gender Studies (CGS), University of Novi Sad (UNS), independent researcher and activist. Ankica Dragin, MS in GS at CGS, UNS, a collaborator with EHO and WSR. Veronika Mitro, Mgr. in GS, a co-founder and an associate of WSR, program manager at the organization "Iz kruga... Vojvodina" in Novi Sad and editor of the "Portal o invalidnosti". Sara Savić, Ph.D., scientific advisor at the Scientific Institute of Veterinary Medicine "Novi Sad", a lecturer at CGS, UNS, an associate of WSR. Biljana Sikimić, Ph.D., a senior research associate at the Institute for Balkan Studies in Belgrade, lecturer at the CGS, UNS.

enabled effective collaborations with civil society organizations such as EHO, as well as with prominent regional theologians. These include the Islamic scholar Zilka Spahić Šiljak (Sarajevo) and Catholic theologian Rebeka Jadranka Anić (Split). A particularly significant outcome of these collaborations is the ongoing exchange of scholarly literature among centers and organizations, which has played a crucial role in enhancing peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts.

In this regard, WSR has fulfilled one of its primary goals, which is to educate and connect women across the region. Perhaps the clearest evidence of its success lies in the fact that many of those who completed their MA and PhD studies in Novi Sad, in connection with WS programs, have become widely recognized academic and civil society activists.

The Role of Feminist Theology in Women's Studies

The question of women's status in society has undergone a notable academic transformation. One of the key achievements in this regard was the successful integration of an alternative higher education program focused on and for women into the formal academic curriculum at the University of Novi Sad. This was accomplished through the ACIMSI Center for Gender Studies [CGS], beginning in the 2004/05 academic year. The program attracted students from across the former Yugoslav region, effectively establishing itself as a regional initiative. Courses were conducted in the languages of the participating countries and, occasionally, in English (cf. Savić 2020). Through this integration, feminist theology also found a place within academic discourse. This was reflected in the introduction of the elective course *Women and Religion* within the doctoral studies program (cf. Barát 2010; Spahić Šiljak 2010; Subotički 2014),³ as well as

³ For example, Zilka Spahić Šiljak, who significantly enriched scholarly dialogue in the field, achieved a doctoral dissertation (2007) thanks to this program and her PhD thesis was published in 2007 in Bosnian and in 2010 in English language.

in the doctoral dissertations. The inclusion of these academic offerings marked a crucial advancement in embedding feminist perspectives within higher education, enabling interdisciplinary research and fostering critical discussions on women's roles in religious contexts. These developments contributed meaningfully to the expansion of feminist scholarship and to increasing the visibility of women's issues in academic debates on religion, gender, and peacebuilding through interreligious dialogue.

Despite these achievements, it is important to acknowledge that the doctoral program was subsequently discontinued. As of 2020, the ACIMSI Center – previously the institutional home of the doctoral program in gender studies – was restructured into the UCIMSI Center, which no longer holds accreditation for doctoral-level studies. For several years, no master's program in gender studies was offered either. Two primary factors contributed to this outcome: the university administration failed to issue new calls for applications, and the program's accreditation was allowed to lapse without any apparent intention of renewal.

Notably, in the 2024/25 academic year, the master's program in Gender Studies [GS] has been reinstated under renewed accreditation. However, due to the current socio-political climate in Serbia, particularly the ongoing protests against systemic corruption, many faculties and universities are facing significant administrative and operational challenges. As a result, the program has been temporarily suspended despite its formal accreditation.

Headquarter of Women's Studies in Subotica

In 2020, a branch of the WSR was established in Subotica, and by 2022, the educational program of WS was revitalized. In January 2025, the headquarters of the organization were officially relocated to Subotica, a development that holds particular significance within the broader context of generational transitions. The agenda of WS in Subotica continues to prioritize

the exploration of women's contributions to peacebuilding across different historical periods, including World War I, World War II, and the post-war era, often in collaboration with other feminist researchers and activists, such as the Women in Black. A core element of this agenda is the commitment to fostering solidarity among women from diverse religious, linguistic, and national communities.

This approach, rooted in feminist principles and inclusive methodologies, is also reflected in the research carried out by the WSR. A case in point is what may be termed the 'evolution of research', illustrated through the example of a biographical entry on a prominent Jewish woman from Subotica. In 2020, WSR published a brochure titled *Notable Jewish Women from Subotica*, which included a biographical sketch of Lenka Krausz. She was the first female bank director in Subotica during the interwar period and, like many of her fellow citizens, she was deported and executed in Auschwitz 1944. In 2024, this biographical entry was revisited in light of newly accessible digital sources, including interwar periodicals, which offered deeper insights into Krausz's life and work. These sources revealed that Krausz had served as president of the region's first feminist association (Hun. Feministák Egyesülete, founded in 1917) and had authored several articles in local newspapers. Among them was "War and a Woman" (Hun. Háború és a Nő), in which she encouraged women to participate actively in public life and contribute to peacebuilding efforts. Based on these newly uncovered materials, Krausz is now more accurately identified as a feminist, peacebuilder, and philanthropist (cf. Bašaragin 2024).

Conclusion

Over the past three decades, the WSR made a significant and sustained contribution to research on women's roles in interreligious dialogue and peacebuilding in Serbia. Through its long-term project Interreligious Dialogue and Women (initiated in 1998 and coordinated by Svenka Savić), the WSR highlighted the peacebuilding efforts of women from various religious communities. The project encompassed three international conferences (1998, 2002, 2008), resulting publications, and educational activities within the framework of WS. With the institutionalization of GS at the CGS, UNS (2004/05), these themes entered academic curricula. WSR's legacy continues through its pioneering work at the intersection of gender, religion, and peace, offering a model for feminist engagement in both academic and activist spheres.

Educational programs such as WS and GS, apart from playing a crucial role in fostering feminist activism and academic development, have taken a special part in interreligious dialogue by cultivating both engaged scholars and institutional capacity for gender studies in the region. For interreligious dialogue to be meaningful, it must go beyond elite theological discourse and include the lived experiences of marginalized women, whose perspectives on faith, exclusion, and resilience are essential to addressing justice and coexistence in multiethnic and multireligious societies. In this regard, women's life narratives challenge dominant religious paradigms, incorporate feminist epistemologies into peacebuilding frameworks, and illuminate the interconnections between religion, social justice, and inclusive community building.

This is especially important in a context in which contemporary scientific and academic discourse in Serbia shows a noticeable lack of interest in exploring the intersections of feminism, ecumenism, and theology, as well as in fostering interreligious dialogue among women themselves: feminists, believers, peacebuilders, theologians, and scholars. This stands in stark

contrast to developments in many European countries, the wider region, and globally, where issues related to gender, faith, and peacebuilding occupy a prominent position.

Thus, continuation and expanding research and educational initiatives within the framework of WSR, focusing on the contributions of women from diverse religious communities to peacebuilding efforts in Serbia, are of exceptional significance.

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CHAPTER 14

Feminist Interreligious Approaches to Peacebuilding in the Balkans: From Practice to Theory

Feminist Interreligious Approaches to Peacebuilding in the Balkans: From Practice to Theory

Abstract

Feminist interfaith approaches to peacebuilding combine principles of gender equality and interfaith dialogue to address conflicts, promote reconciliation, and build sustainable peace. The key strategies of feminists in the Balkans were to ensure representation of secular and religious women from various faith communities who worked together against different forms of discrimination. Their peacebuilding efforts started from practice and grassroots work that was later informed by peacebuilding theories and effectively combined by bringing together knowledge and experience, academic research and activism. Their approaches to peacebuilding can be seen as a form of “practice-based knowledge”, where the practical realities of conflict and the dynamics of their communities inform their strategies and actions. The process by which women build peace can also be explained through concepts of tacit knowledge and practical wisdom, theory of practice. Women in conflict settings often use tacit knowledge drawn from generations of social roles, caregiving, and community leadership to address the complexities of peacebuilding.

Introduction

As a feminist scholar and peacebuilding activist, I would like to begin with my own understanding of the three key words:

feminism, peacebuilding, and interreligious work. They are crucial for my work and the work of many women and men in the Balkans. When women become tired of being neglected and treated as others in their own stories, they raise their voices and gather together to send the message that they are human beings, that their stories matter, and that their contributions to family and society should be valued and recognized. As feminists, they want equal participation, to be recognized, and to be taken into account.

For the past three decades, feminists in the Balkans have been building peace, understanding peace in a broader sense – connecting, reconnecting, building and rebuilding, communicating despite differences and borders, resolving conflicts, and finding solutions (Kašić 2012; Stojanović, Zajović and Urošević 2012; Spahić Šiljak 2014; Popov-Momčinović and Zaharijević 2022). Among neighbors in the Balkans, some are believers, some are not, but thanks to feminist peacebuilders, all are accepted at the peace table. This resembles organizing a dinner on the “potluck” principle, where everyone brings their favorite dish, and no one argues over whose recipe is best. Instead, they enjoy the diversity of tastes! The tastes of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – the three main religious traditions in the Balkans – and as an important spice to this evening, agnostics and atheists bring a humanistic flavor. Since 1990, the majority, almost 90% of the population, declares their religious affiliation, meaning that atheists are a minority, but an important spice that maintains the balance.

The Balkan Context

I want to remind us of the Balkans context, which was affected by the wars from 1991-1995 that to a great extent destroyed social fabric and connections among people who used to live together in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia [SFRY]. Historically, women were neglected; their stories were neither recorded nor

integrated into the mainstream knowledge production. When secularization processes swept through Europe in the 20th century, women in the Balkans also gained an opportunity to actively participate in public life. The discussion about the status of women under the socialist regime and later in the democratic system in the Balkan countries represents a significant example showing the influence and limitations of different forms of secularism on the advancement of gender equality (Drezgić 2010; Spahić Šiljak 2013).

The era of the socialist secular state (it approximately covers the period from 1945 to 1990) brought increased opportunities for women in the workforce and political life, reflecting the state's official commitment to gender equality (Tumbaš 2022). However, during this same period, private life remained deeply shaped by traditional gender roles rooted in patriarchal religious traditions and customs (Bobić and Anić 2023; Majstorović 2011). The end of the socialist era enabled ethnonational and ethnoreligious elites to implement the policy of so-called retraditionalization of gender roles, which nearly returned women entirely to the private sphere of the family (Spahić Šiljak 2013). Three decades of democratization did not lead to a further emancipation of women, but rather to the public revival of patriarchal religious-cultural traditions and a deeper entrenchment of a long-standing gender relations model that restricts women's freedom and development solely to the household. Referring to the socialist period, the state was infused with atheist socialist ideology, while religion was pushed out of the public space. Although it did not disappear, religion remained hidden from the eyes of the official socialist state. With the fall of socialism, religion returned to the public space as a key identity marker for the opposing nationalities that are among Bosnian Muslims, Catholics, and Orthodox Christians – communities otherwise linked by a common language, South Slavic origin, and similar culture (Mojzes 1994; Vrcan 2001). While today gender equality and women's human rights are better defined, this formal equality does not automatically translate into

gender equality in political life, at work, or at home. There are many divisions and a great degree of marginalization, and they are also visible in peacebuilding and the feminist movement. However, there have been initiatives and individuals efforts on connecting the secular and religious, academic and activist, and interreligious and ecumenical. When it comes to Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, Ecumenical Women's Initiative from Omiš, RAND Zagreb, TPO Foundation from Sarajevo, Medica Zenica, United Women from Banja Luka, Lara Bijeljina, and many others stand out among them.

The goal of feminist peacebuilders who have collaborated and continue to collaborate through interreligious initiatives has been twofold: to build peace at the local level amid war and destruction, and to contribute to the production of knowledge after the war through continued education and sharing of their experiences.

Feminist Interreligious Peacebuilding Approaches

Traditional peacebuilding process approaches ignore everyday experiences of women, especially those related to structural violence, gender-based violence, and economic injustice. However, genuine peace must go beyond ceasefires to include transformative justice, care ethics, and healing of trauma (Reardon 1993; Cockburn 2007). Therefore, women's roles in peace are not just symbolic or maternal, but political, strategic, and justice-oriented. Dona Pankhurst (2003) calls for the inclusion of women's voices and perspectives in peacebuilding efforts, highlighting the need for transformative approaches that challenge patriarchal structures and promote gender equality. By integrating feminist insights, peacebuilding can become more inclusive and effective in addressing the root causes of conflict and fostering sustainable peace.

Similarly to feminist peacebuilding, feminist interreligious approaches are inclusive, justice-oriented, and responsive to the complexities of global interfaith dynamics. Rosemary Radford

Ruether (2013:11-20) conceptualizes feminist interreligious peacebuilding as a collaborative process that centers women's experiences by recognizing the lived experiences of women across different religious traditions. She emphasizes their roles in challenging patriarchal structures and promoting peace through conversations between women of various faiths to identify common values and shared goals and to support a global feminist movement that transcends national and cultural boundaries. Finally, Ruether integrates ecological concerns by acknowledging the interconnectedness of social and environmental issues, advocating for ecofeminism as a vital component of peacebuilding efforts.

Feminist interreligious peacebuilding approaches encompass several elements which I will try to elaborate very briefly.

Intersectional Approach to Gender and Religion: Feminist interreligious approaches recognize the complex way in which gender and religion intersect, shaping individual experiences of conflict and peace. Women often face unique challenges in both religious and secular contexts, which can further increase their vulnerability during conflicts. Addressing these intertwined identities is crucial for effective peacebuilding.

Inclusive Dialogue: Traditional approaches to peacebuilding often marginalize women and the perspectives of religious minorities. Feminist interreligious approaches advocate for inclusive dialogue that amplifies the voices of women and minority community members, ensuring that diverse experiences and needs are represented in peace processes.

Reconciliation and Healing: Feminist frameworks emphasize the importance of relationships in peacebuilding processes, focusing on healing and reconciliation rather than solely on political solutions. By incorporating women's perspectives on forgiveness, community-building, and restorative justice, these approaches foster deeper societal healing and address the root causes of conflict.

Empowering Women: Feminist interreligious peacebuilding prioritizes empowering women as change-makers. By providing tools and platforms for women to actively participate in peace processes, these approaches challenge patriarchal structures within both religious and secular spheres and promote gender equality and sustainable peace.

Shared Values Across Religions: Many religious traditions share core values such as compassion, justice, and solidarity. Feminist interreligious approaches use these similarities as a foundation for dialogue and cooperation between different religious communities, fostering mutual respect and understanding.

Peace as a Lived Experience

When women are engaged in peacebuilding “from the bottom up,” without formal theoretical knowledge, they often bring a unique and valuable perspective based on their own life experiences. Their approach to peacebuilding can be considered a form of “practice-based knowledge”, where the practical realities of conflict and the dynamics of their communities shape strategies and actions. This differs from traditional, hierarchical peacebuilding models that often rely on abstract principles or “top-down” solutions that are not universal or applicable in all contexts.

The process by which women contribute to peacebuilding can be explained through the concepts of implicit knowledge and practical wisdom. Implicit knowledge refers to the knowledge that individuals possess but may not be able to easily verbalize or explain in formal language. In contrast, explicit knowledge is codified and documented.

Women in conflict situations often draw on implicit knowledge derived from generations of social roles, care, and community leadership to address the complexities of peacebuilding. While their strategies may not initially be theorized, they can later

contribute to or enhance existing theoretical frameworks.

Theory of Practice as a Framework for Understanding

The theory of practice helps to understand this phenomenon by asserting that knowledge does not arise solely through academic study but is rooted in practices. Women's efforts in peacebuilding can, therefore, be seen as knowledge emerging from real-world practice, rather than from abstract theories. This approach contributes to the development of peace theory that prioritizes local engagement, community mobilization, and context-specific solutions.

Here I refer to the thoughts of Pierre Bourdieu and Sherry Ortner which provided a basis for understanding social and cultural practices and the patterns on which they function. Pierre Bourdieu, in his work *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977), laid the groundwork for understanding social practices through the interplay between habitus (internal patterns of behavior), the structure of the social field, and different forms of capital (social, cultural, economic, symbolic). Sherry Ortner, in her book *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject* (2006), that is built on Bourdieu's theory, examines how everyday practices are rooted in political and cultural contexts and how they are shaped by power dynamics. Ortner explores how cultural practices shape political actions and vice versa.

Women's contributions to peacebuilding often stem from the roles they occupy within families, communities, and local networks, where social relationships and the need for cooperation are crucial. They often mediate in conflicts, rebuild trust, build bridges between divided communities using empathy, communication, and mutual support, and they apply a feminist ethic of care and responsibility. Thus, these efforts are often focused on reconciliation, restoring social cohesion, and healing the community, as opposed to political or military solutions that

are focused on power and control.

I would like to support this with an example of feminist approaches to peacebuilding from the Balkan region. Given that ethno-national and religious divisions in the Balkans politicize the issue of gender equality and often divide women, and to a certain extent mobilizing some of them to support anti-gender policies, it is crucial to overcome the divide between the secular and religious spheres. On the one hand for reasons that foster better connections between feminist knowledge production and feminist practice, and on the other hand between secular and religious feminism in order to avoid exclusion and marginalization.

An interreligious feminist perspective should be an integral part of policies and practices aimed at achieving gender equality, as religious norms, intertwined with cultural norms, greatly shape the lives of many women in this region. The Feminism and Religion [FER]¹ School represents one way to bridge this gap and provides a platform for dialogue between different religions and secular and religious perspectives on gender equality.

Through engagement with everyday realities of life in conflict zones, peacebuilders often develop strategies that emphasize inclusivity, “bottom-up” governance, and the importance of local knowledge, thereby challenging traditional approaches to peacebuilding.

In order to translate universal human rights norms into cultural and religious languages that are understandable and acceptable to a broader population, feminists have jointly initiated the FER school that uses resources from both secular and religious understandings of human well-being. The school is preceded by the long-standing project *Believers and Citizens*, launched by the secular civil society organization the Transcultural Psychosocial Educational Foundation [TPO] from Sarajevo.² Between 2008 and 2011, with the support of UNIFEM (now: UN Women), TPO

1 Feminism and Religion School. Available at <https://ferschool.org/en/home/>

2 Transcultural Psychosocial Educational Foundation. Available at www.tpo.ba

Foundation developed educational materials along with the accompanying text *Believers and Citizens* (2009). The goal of the program was to bridge the gap between secular and religious understandings of human rights and gender equality. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women [CEDAW] and UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security were the foundation of this program, alongside religious documents on human rights. This was the first comparative study on women's rights from religious and secular perspectives and today it represents one of the most important programs in the local languages in the Balkans region.

In collaboration with other NGOs, the TPO Foundation has published several publications that partially include a religious perspective in the promotion of women's rights and peacebuilding.

Since 2016, the Ecumenical Women's Initiative from Croatia³ has started the same training program *Believers and Citizens* for women human rights activists in the Balkan region who consider faith an important argument in debates about gender equality and peacebuilding. The Ecumenical Women's Initiative financially supports women from the Balkans in their peacebuilding work, including feminist research and activism.

In 2021, we launched the FER school. The idea was to overcome the secular-religious dichotomy in the process of dismantling gender stereotypes, which still represent a significant obstacle to the full implementation of gender equality guaranteed by the laws of secular states.

The anti-gender movement, which became influential in these countries after 2013, advocates the preservation of such stereotypes, claiming that the deconstruction of gender stereotypes will lead to the destruction of the theological anthropology of their religious traditions (Anić and Spahić Šiljak 2023). However, by overcoming the secular-religious gap and

3 Ecumenical Women's Initiative. Available at <https://eiz.hr/en/about-us/>

questioning both secular and religious support for gender stereotypes, we can come to new insights as well as uncover the fact that gender stereotypes are not based on religion, but on philosophical – primarily Aristotelian arguments of a secular nature. Since philosophy is not a mandatory part of theology, returning religion to its own theological sources and building egalitarian anthropological gender models based on these sources is not only possible, but a necessary consequence of questioning gender stereotypes within the religious and secular societal frameworks.

Why is the inclusion of women necessary in all phases of the peace process? There are many reasons, but here I will mention the most significant ones.

Conflict dynamics are gendered – women are affected by conflict, and thus by peace agreements.

Justice (51% of the population) – there is no social justice without women; their voices are important and they matter.

Gender identities – expressing femininity and masculinity in the context of conflict and peace shapes perception and action.

Gender vulnerability and resilience – conflicts affect men and women differently, but women often show extraordinary resilience in crises.

Women's presence changes perspective – the inclusion of women helps to better understand the roots of conflict and brings practical issues to the table, such as education, healthcare, and social welfare, while also ensuring that all other societal issues are simultaneously women's issues.

Conclusion

Feminist interreligious peacebuilding in the Balkans demonstrates how grassroots, practice-based approaches – grounded in women’s everyday experiences and interreligious cooperation – can offer more inclusive, sustainable alternatives to traditional, top-down peace models. By centering empathy, relational responsibility, and a feminist ethic of care, these initiatives challenge hierarchies of knowledge and power while fostering reconciliation and social cohesion. The integration of implicit knowledge from the field with academic and theological frameworks, such as through initiatives like the FER School, illustrates how feminist actors translate universal human rights into culturally resonant, locally grounded practices of peace.

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CHAPTER 15

Ecumenical Dialogue: Women's Demiurgic Power in Peacebuilding

Ecumenical Dialogue: Women's Demiurgic Power in Peacebuilding

Abstract

This paper aims to document and analyze the experiences of women activists motivated by their religious beliefs who, in Vojvodina – the most ethnically and religiously diverse region in Serbia – were engaged in ecumenism and were recognized as actors in peacebuilding in the former SFRY during and after the wars of the 1990s. Based on the intersection of gender, religion, and peace activism, applying a feminist approach and conducting semi-structured interviews with representatives of seven Christian denominations, it examines their experiences of ecumenical peace activism, motivation for this engagement, and perception of their legitimacy. The research compares the experiences of these religiously motivated activists from Vojvodina with those from Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia, as documented in a similar analysis focused on interreligious dialogue under the auspices of a regional feminist ecumenical organization. The research found that the experiences of women who perceive themselves as believers, who were involved in ecumenical peacebuilding activities in Vojvodina, are largely similar to those of activists in neighboring countries. Religious beliefs are perceived as an important and potentially strong motivator for dialogue among churches and religious communities in local communities.

Introduction: Ecumenical Dialogue: Pleonasm or Necessity?

The hegemonic cultural discourse in Serbia and the Western Balkans maintains that the word 'dialogue' needs the adjective 'constructive' in order to be perceived positively. Additionally, 'ecumenism' is still commonly frowned upon as a kind of nearly sectarian 'Western' ideology, a doctrine proselyting against 'the (more) traditional', 'the original', 'Eastern' Christians, making 'ecumenical dialogue' seem like a pleonastic trendiness and double trouble (Tucić and Nikoletić 2025). On the other hand, knowing the local 'churches and religious communities' and regional history (Kuburić 2010), one would expect that engaging in a dialogue tackling religious matters comes across as an apparent necessity. Looking at today's dominant Serbian public discourse, it seems that this, unfortunately, is not the case (Zaharijević 2025). However, at the level of local grassroots communities, the reality of ecumenical / inter-religious dialogue [EIRD] over the last several decades appears somewhat different. It is a practice-based experience of living among and with diverse 'others', not only alongside them, despite all odds. Consciously or not, such dialogue is practiced by many, often initiated locally, led and inspired by women, who are typically modest about it. On higher social levels, it is commonly taken over from them and, unfortunately, led astray by more powerful actors.

It struck me numerous times that most people in my immediate surroundings found my, a woman's need and drive for engagement in faith-driven peacebuilding somehow unorthodox, even odd at times. Today I know that I am who I am thanks to ecumenical dialogue. This is why this research tackles the experience of a convenient sample of seven Christian women and community leaders of various local denominations from Vojvodina, a province in North Serbia, born from mid-1940s or early 1950s (like my parents), in late 1950s or early 1960s, as well as in mid-1970s (my own age). It is a qualitative, intersectional, ethnographic research (Fetterman 2008) into gender, religion and peacebuilding. Applying a feminist and autoreflexive approach (Dowling 2008),

I used a semi-structured questionnaire based on the oral history method (Dragin 2015) for interviews conducted in January and February 2025. The research sample is convenient, comprised of women recognized as ecumenical and peacebuilding activists in their local communities and beyond for several decades now. Their oral histories bear witness to the following: faith-driven grassroots women activists consider ecumenism inseparable from peacebuilding and consider dialogue to be its main method.

Ecumenical cf. Interfaith Dialogue in Feminist Religious Peacebuilding

Whereas its origins lie in the concept that believers of various Christian denominations should work together to develop closer relationships among their churches and promote the original, apostolic Christian unity in diversity, today's ecumenism worldwide is commonly perceived in two general ways. The first is more or less similar to the original notion of ecumenism as dialogue solely among Christians. The second tends to equalize ecumenism with EIRD, meaning that believers of all religions, not only Christians, are called to engage in dialogue among themselves. In the latter meaning of the term, there is a narrower and a broader understanding of it: one is that interfaith dialogue involves only the three Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), the other that it involves other religions as well. Regardless of the scope of its definition, the common perception of ecumenism among its practitioners is that it relies on connecting believers based on similarities among their beliefs and their aspirations to foster dialogue in today's churches and religious communities. Depending on the ethnic and religious composition of its population of a specific country or sub-region in the Western Balkans, the common public perception of ecumenism is either interdenominational or interreligious, implemented predominantly by the (male) clergy or religious officials who meet formally to discuss exclusively religious matters.

Speaking of the contemporary and fairly recent European religious developments, two documents need to be mentioned in the context of ecumenical dialogue and activism pertaining to this paper. One is the *Charta Oecumenica – Guidelines for Growing Cooperation among the Churches in Europe*, adopted by the Conference of European Churches [CEC] and the Roman Catholic Council of European Bishops' Conferences [CCEE] in 2001. The other is the document titled *Ecumenical Call to Just Peace*, a declaration adopted and commended by the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches in February 2011. Both of them call churches to dialogue, whereas the latter also acknowledges and values 'women's gifts for building peace' and recognizes 'the unique role of religious leaders', and 'the power of religious wisdom and insight in promoting peace' (*Ecumenical Call to Just Peace* 2011:9), as well as the role of the media in the process.

In our 2022 case study of the grassroots women-led engagement in interreligious dialogue in society as implemented by the Ecumenical Women's Initiative [EWI], Julijana Mladenovska-Tešija and I have come to the conclusion that 'women's faith or belief-based engagement in social dialogue and peace building [...] leans on Dorothee Sölle's concepts of her political theology and nonviolence, Hawkins's claim that 'people's experience of reality is inevitably mediated through society and through the world', along with Boff's assertion

that practicing one's religious beliefs for the benefit of the oppressed [...] in a nonviolent way is a personally and socially liberating moral imperative (Dragin and Mladenovska-Tešija 2022:5).

Despite women's extensive engagement in grassroots EIRD even prior to the 1990s, as well as their ever more intensive involvement with it later on, 'their pioneering roles in the field have still not been fully recognized' (Ibid.:6). Since their cultural and religious traditions have been denying women leadership roles with access to high-level dialogue endeavors, grassroots EIRD became an

important field for women's activism and affirmation (ibid.). Moreover, influenced by the spreading of the Western anti-gender movement towards the East, as a 'Balkan semi-periphery' (Spahić Šiljak and Anić 2023:92), dominant churches and religious communities in the Western Balkans 'reject the gender equality movement as a project that works against traditional values and family' (Ibid.).

Finally, in her discussion of the Tearfund theological framework to peacebuilding, Swithinbank argues that it starts from following an idea, a conviction or belief and engaging in worship, communion or witness with an ultimate aim of becoming a better person in a better world (Swithinbank 2016:22-25). A Christian peacebuilder's traits are thus humility, hospitality, courage and risk. Another trait is comfort with complexity along the lines of the Mennonite theologian Shirley Showalter's reflections that some Christian denominations have more pronounced peacebuilding practices than others because they have been focusing on orthopraxy (i.e., adapting one's religious practice to realities of everyday life) rather than orthodoxy (i.e., implementing religious doctrines at any cost), 'rooting their shared practices in a community of like-minded people, whose shared values and approach to life is founded on moral obligation and commitment' (Showalter in Swithinbank 2016:30). A peacebuilder's indispensable trait is also imagination (Jennings 2010; Lederach 2010) as 'the possibility for peace to be born out of conflict, given a vision and a catalyst' (Showalter 2017:31).

Women Living Their Beliefs

All interviewees testify about *living their* [Christian] *beliefs*, often as ethnic and religious minorities, since early childhood. It is their social habitus and a way to remain authentic by adhering to their personal values and *bearing an authentic, not proselythic witness of my faith*, convinced that *believers should be able to engage with peacebuilding more than non-believers*.

Living by such values means acceptance of diversity, *asking honest questions along the way*, which may be challenging even within a single, seemingly homogenous community. The focus must be on *giving people a chance, having an open mind, accepting someone who is different from us; we are praying to the same God*. Both ecumenism and peacebuilding are therefore inseparable from and innate to churches and religious communities because *all Abrahamic religions consider peace an important notion*. Those with formal religious education among them became aware of the term 'ecumenism' during their studies, while others had learnt its meaning during their professional or activist engagement with religious or (international) development organizations and movements advocating EIRD. They perceive ecumenism inseparable from and innate to peacebuilding, dialogue being its principal method and interchurch cooperation being every religious leader's responsibility, duty. More specifically, one of the women pastors specifies that it is about *interchurch collaboration as an integral part of our mission and every leader, Bishop, accountable person should follow this way*. Consequently, to all of them ecumenism means *interchurch efforts aimed at collaboration, acceptance and decision-making for a better, more consistent witness of our Faith*.

Reflecting on their experience, all women agree that *earlier there used to be many more meetings and trainings*, as well as that *it is difficult to bring people together even in the Church after the Sunday service*. The consequence of it is *alienation within the churches [i.e., congregations] themselves*. While most of them claim that the benefits of such activities were *coming closer to each other*, two women pastors resolutely claim that *doctrinal differences* are obstructing their implementation. Despite formal agreements being signed concerning *mutual recognition of sacraments, even interchange of preachers among churches*, there are still hostilities among 'bigger' churches directed at minority ones.

'You Cannot Do it Unless You Have it in You'

In order to make ecumenical dialogue and, consequently, peacebuilding, effective, believers *need to meet and engage in various, diverse* [impl. not only religious] *topics*. All women also agree that *the clergy need to meet, to be a role model for the believers* because *people need to see the dialogue, a meeting, a conversation, good relations*:

The [Roman] Catholic Church today even allows me, a woman pastor, to give a sermon or lead a prayer or a praise in the presence of the Bishop in the Catholic Church. We also do ecumenical marriage ceremonies, occasionally also funeral sermons as well.

The women hold that ecumenical activities are empowering: they *benefit all people, develop their tolerance, facilitate cooperation, social development and trust* among people, especially at the grassroots level, *bringing both personal peace and global peace* after periods of social turmoil, such as wars or *bombing*. One of my collocutors even states that *maybe we need a threat of some sort to make us unite in common peace prayers*, while the other states the same by citing a proverb that says that *there is no joint prayer to God without an adversity*. Ecumenical activities *respond to various people's needs by providing a context-specific response taking into account the dignity of every individual person*.

The interviewees believe their legitimacy (re)lies primarily on/in their faith and conscience: women, esp. pastors, *are called to do it* and they do it *honestly, authentically, selflessly*. The gain from it *is not material but meeting great people and growth in faith*. They hold that they *don't need any justification* because they are doing *the right things they believe in*. Despite often being *hard and challenging*, ecumenical peacebuilding is considered a *rare space where you could advocate for peace, humanity, tolerance and mutual understanding*.

Still, there is some apprehension concerning the nature of their engagement in their communities. One of them testifies that even the clergy *do not understand the need of a woman they perceive as clever to engage with other women*. In churches, *there is a certain reserve towards the others when it comes to denominational dogmatics because everyone likes to stick to it*. Ecumenism seems outside most people's comfort zone, so they are reluctant to engage in it due to *prejudice, fear of the unknown or proselytism and even power greed*.

'Without Love, Ecumenism is Just Another Chore'

The most common ecumenical activities are attending each other's church services on various religious holidays. One of the women pastors recalls that they used to attend *the so-called Week of Prayer for Christian Unity organized locally by the Roman Catholic Church and the Church patron saint festivities of the Serbian Orthodox Church*. Joint (peace) prayers, such as WDP, prayers of the local Fellowship of the Least Coin [FLC] or Peace Prayers are their second most frequently mentioned ecumenical engagement:

Since 1993 up to signing the Dayton agreement, EHO organized its inter-religious peace prayers in Novi Sad on Wednesdays. They were attended by members of the Islamic and Jewish Community as well. It used to be a unique initiative in the entire ex-Yugoslavia at the time.

Various trainings, educational and round table events tackling diverse religious issues, dialogue and peace(building), as well as a range of other socially relevant topics, are also highly valued by all women. Attending ecumenical events is perceived as the most educational and empowering: *people feel mutual acceptance, prejudices melt away and tensions ease up once people look into each other's eyes*. My collocutors from the Greek Catholic Church, the Lutheran, the Methodist and the Christian Reformed Church all testify about it in a similar way:

Being together was very impactful [...] People have noticed differences in teachings, but they have also quickly understood that what seemingly differentiates us is no big deal if we have mutual respect and God's love. [...] We have learnt a lot from each other.

We even have people from the Roman Catholic and the Serbian Orthodox Church attend our services; there is even a lady who is half Roman Catholic and half Jewish! I've asked them once why they keep coming to our services and they all said that they liked the rite.

Ecumenical concerts and festivals, women's group meetings, participation in the work and events of international ecumenical women's associations or funds, printing various publications and field visits are somewhat rarer. During the war years (1991-1995) and the NATO bombing in 1999, ecumenical activists also engaged in humanitarian aid distribution and psycho-social support provision to the needy. International organizations were in a position to provide even *education for employees of printed religious media, support the work of various interreligious councils, as well as foundation of a religious radio station in Central Serbia*. Initiatives that would somehow document the experience of ecumenical diversity and dialogue in action, like the *interreligious calendar* which is a *women's initiative* and has *remained a hit to this day*, remained very popular.

'The Will to Act is Decisive'

There are never enough events that would bring people from diverse ethnic and religious communities together, especially young people, who *seem to be missing from this field of activism*. On the other hand, both the clergy and lay people should be more motivated to get engaging in ecumenical dialogue and *deal with the doctrinal differences* more constructively.

The effects and impact of ecumenical activities aimed at

peacebuilding are perceived as threefold (personal, grassroots and social) and working bottom-up. This process takes time and effort and its effects or impact *are not immediately perceivable*. Because they usually affect *simple, every day and honest people*, the most 'visible' immediate effects are perceived as personal. Community and wider social impact is more challenging. *It is difficult to change people and long-term effects require substantial consistent effort and engagement* because they concern *identities, values and changing those requires both time and other [impl. non-ecumenical] activities*. Another *positive effect is that it is obvious that churches are acknowledging each other now: gossiping and humiliating each other has stopped, but it used to be very apparent*.

Most of the interviewed women hold that ecumenical activities affect *people who participate in them* the most, *especially women in churches and those from marginalized social groups*, which is significant because *women bring up future generations*. One interlocutor's positions overtly reflect stereotypes indicating both lack of understanding of women's role and potentials in the churches and internalized essentialist, patriarchal attitudes of women closer to the 'church ranks' concerning gender roles, just like those in the *simple, every day and honest people* remark mentioned above. Despite acknowledging that *women are mostly initiators and carriers of ecumenical activities, far more aware of certain things, stronger and have more ideas*, she also notes that *men only follow us in them and are not taking us seriously*. Accenting that *women feel that there is a need for progress*, she controversially also states that *it is not good when only women get together because they get carried away and waste time*, that the lack of focus makes them *poor leaders*.

'Continuity of Ecumenical Dialogue is Crucial'

All my interviewees are unanimous in their claims that *continuity of ecumenical dialogue is crucial*. They acknowledge that *there will still be doubts about it, but we must build trust despite*

differing opinions. Meetings, exposure to diversity and travelling are perceived as most useful in this respect. Both women and men must be involved in it, yet stereotypes pertaining to gender roles and feminist perspective on diversity, as mentioned above, still seem to have major influence on some church-bound women recognized as engaging in ecumenical activism.

When asked about the resources, most of my collocutors agree that there are *never enough people actively engaged*, as well as that *material [impl. financial] resources are always more than welcome*. *Activists burn out doing such work voluntarily*. Nevertheless, most of them hold that *contributing to a better world must be an integral part of a person's culture*.

As for the future topics of ecumenical dialogue, some women hold that *gender equality and the role of women in churches is always a burning issue*. They hold that *churches should be a corrective factor in every society* and stand up to overall corruption of values, especially in the media.

Besides, *unstable, insecure political and social environment in Serbia and suspicion towards civil society organizations*, major obstacles to ecumenical activism are balancing 'the tradition' with contemporary global trends, followed by *ethnic and religious prejudice and conflicts, inactivity, politization and ethnicization of churches and religious communities*. Still, most women perceive *low motivation for this kind of engagement among younger generations* due to the *overall value system shifting for the worse*, along with (current) *activists' fatigue and lack of free time* as the greatest challenges along the way. *People lack money and are working in multiple jobs in order to survive and free time is a luxury in a poor country*.

Those who have future prospects of ecumenical dialogue hold that there is a great potential in bringing youth who have had intercultural experience in touch with those who have not had it (e.g., involve *youth from diaspora*). Ecumenical activists should *resort to the Internet, podcasts and the social media because*

today's times are far more dynamic than they used to be. Applying ecumenical approaches and tools in local problem-solving needs to point out how they are related to global problems and future generations.

Grassroots Ecumenical Peacebuilding Chiefly Equals Women

Women are often initiators and chief implementors of grassroots activities aimed at EIRD and peacebuilding both in Vojvodina, as well as in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and North Macedonia. They are most effective in local communities with an already existing culture of EIRD. Faith-driven grassroots women activists consider ecumenism inseparable from peacebuilding, recognizing dialogue as its main method and finding the entire process empowering. However, the gap between the so-called secular and faith-driven (women) activists is still apparent, as well as hesitation of formal church authorities to give this type of women's activism a more resolute and open support. Despite evident displays of the feminist ethics of care in their activities, the role of faith-driven (women) activists remains thus somewhat obscured (Dragin and Mladenovska-Tešija 2022:35).

This research has confirmed that women activists' focus on orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy (Showalter in Swithinbank 2016) relies on their personal conviction that truly belief-driven persons, including non-religious ones, are called to engage in dialogue and peace despite facing patriarchy, and ethnocentrism, religious discrimination, abuse of religious dogmatics by power-bearers to cause divisions, as well as activist fatigue primarily due to overall impoverishment.

Despite all odds, faith driven women activists for peace in Vojvodina and the region have been managing to transform xenophobia, turning '*hostis into hospes*' (Nouwen in Swithinbank 2016:43) relying on 'moral imagination' (Lederach 2010), operating creatively in a way in which 'potentiality moves from the realm of possibility to the world of the tangible' (*ibid*:39), advocating

'embrace' (Volf in Swithinbank 2016:35-38), paving the way of not only to grassroots peace, but to 'PEACE writ large' (Anderson in Dragin and Heinrich 2019:91).

Documenting and researching faith-driven women's peacebuilding efforts in the future is necessary because dialogue employing values of ecumenism for peacebuilding has proven a personally empowering, even life changing experience for entire local communities, reiterating that 'true humanity lies in people's hearts and [they] keep reminding us of the importance and sanctity of life' (Spahić Šiljak 2015:9).

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Peace and Non-Violence: Research and Activism

THEME

05

CHAPTER 16

Feminist-Informed Analysis of Patriarchy and Militarism

Feminist-Informed Analysis of Patriarchy and Militarism

I first studied militarism before I was a feminist, before I was a gender specialist equipped with a feminist curiosity. Today I try to remember what I missed when I lacked both a feminist awareness and an attentiveness to militarism. First, I missed the many forms – both blatant and subtle – that power can take. Thus, I underestimated power. Second, I missed the ways in which those seeking to maintain unequal power relations depend on their also sustaining patriarchy. In fact, back then I didn't even know where to look for patriarchal dynamics. Third, I missed how patriarchal gender systems are fueled *by* sustaining militarism.

By missing all three political realities, I failed to understand the crucial difference between hollow peace and authentic peace. Many of us today have taken up the question, "What is peace?" because our own analytical findings have exposed the stubborn persistence of the patriarchal ideas and practices that perpetuate women's exploitation, marginalization, objectification and insecurity. The coexistence of this cruel quartet, we now realize, prevents the establishment of genuine peace. Simultaneously, this same foursome sustains a misogynist, militarized non-peace.

I spend a lot of time watching military organizations – state and insurgent – in Colombia, Myanmar, Sudan, but also in Russia and Ukraine as well as in Sweden, South Korea, Britain, Japan and, of course, in the United States. I've learned never to treat any military as monolithic. Every military I've delved into is shaped by its own distinctive regional, generational, and historical dynamics, also by its own racial, class, ethnic, gender dynamics, and its own

institutional bureaucratic and cultural dynamics.

Yes, those can take a lifetime to grasp, even if you stick to just two or three militaries.

Nevertheless, becoming a feminist-informed, feminist-curious researcher (and teacher, also) has taught me that if I focus solely on what militaries are doing – how, why and with whom – as intellectually intriguing as that may be, I will not get a reliable analytical grip on the obstacles to creating and sustaining a genuine peace. I won't.

I've learned that instead, I must widen my feminist investigatory lens, multiply my feminist research tools and deepen my feminist curiosity. It means to look beyond militaries, though never losing sight of them; to examine the surprisingly multi-layered processes of militarization. To do that, I must investigate how cultural, social, economic and emotional processes of militarization work. I must investigate, specifically, how those militarizing processes exploit contested femininities and masculinities, how those processes wend their sneaky ways through the complex lives of diverse girls and boys, diverse women and men.

I have three explorations especially to recommend.

First: Start with your own country, the country you know best. Write down the three institutions you deem currently to be wielding the most power in your country. Yes, I know. Choosing those three won't necessarily be simple; it will take informed consideration. As feminist analysts, we weigh all sorts of power, not just power wielded with a gun, with overt violence.

Now, consider which of these three you and a team of your graduate and undergraduate students might select to conduct a feminist-informed gender analysis. The Finance Ministry? The State Telecoms? The Intelligence Service? The church? Then ask: How precisely patriarchal and militarizing dynamics interact within that institution and between that institution and other sectors of society today? Keep an eye out, as ever, for confusions,

contradictions, resistances and reversals. Watch for resistance and reversals. Never presume there is no resistance. Assuming that patriarchy or militarization are unstoppable gives them more power than they may actually have.

As researchers, especially as feminist researchers, we know we need to eavesdrop on senior officials, ethnographically observe officials interacting in informal settings, so we are frustrated by the non-transparency of the most powerful organizations in our societies. While it is understandable to focus on accessible targets, that alone is not enough to understand the true patriarchal and militarized barriers to peace.

For example, we study media's intersectional gender representations, which is valuable, but we more rarely put the top levels of media organizations in our feminist sites. Is there a single feminist-informed gender analysis of the Rupert Murdoch media empire or of Facebook? Likewise, is there a feminist-informed investigation of Tesla, or, better, of Starlink, currently underway? Is it feasible to launch a feminist investigation of Ginex, the largest Bosnian ammunition manufacturer?

Second: I'm hoping for a feminist-informed gender investigations of a national political party. We have almost no coherent feminist-informed – that is, a power-conscious, power-curious gender analysis of an entire political party in any country. Thanks to feminist scholars and journalists, we know most, perhaps, about particular political parties' – right, center and left – gendered ideologies. Candidate recruitment, election campaigning, voter turn-outs and voting choices also are being tracked in many countries where electoral processes are free and fair. Where parties dominate policy crafting, feminist scholars have supplied us with an abundance of insights into the gender dimensions of legislative maneuvers. The gendered financial sources of some parties in a few countries are becoming clearer, though most remain hidden.

This means that we do have the building blocks for constructing a full and coherent feminist-informed, historically specific, top-to-bottom profile of at least some political parties. Maybe as part of this first “assignment”, a team of feminist researchers might do a trial run using a party whose gender dimensions have been most richly explored: France’s Socialist Party? Japan’s Liberal Democratic Party? Vietnam’s Communist Party? Nicaragua’s Sandinista Party?

The feminist exploratory team could put together the existing pieces of gender knowledge for that single party. Ask when and how strands of patriarchy and of militarization have intersected in that political party. When have they strained against each other, even unraveled? Then select a single political party in your own country here in the Balkan region. Where are women? Which women? By class, age, religion, education, region, sexuality, marital history. What precisely do they do in those parties – at whose direction? What kind of influence, if any, do they ever exercise inside that party – with what consequences?

Of course, with our feminist lens polished, we will take a close intersectional look both at men in this political party and at the contests over ideas and practices of manliness that shape the party. This, as all feminist explorations do, requires us to be historically explicit. Any political party’s formal membership, local and senior leadership, relationships to rivals, major financial donors, affiliated media outlets or armed militias, as well as its popular “base” can change over time. Are any of those changes gendered? If so, they are important to track over time.

Have the masculinities (always plural) that seem to rise in party influence been the same for the last fifty years? For instance, one can pay feminist analytical attention to whether men who claim to have had military experience – in state, militia or insurgent military organizations – rise in party influence at particular times. Do women with similar military experience gain party clout in that party’s internal affairs at that time? It is likely that the party’s politics of femininity play out distinctly from those of masculinity?

Third: it is about “assignment” a feminist-informed, militarization-curious study of one of the region’s police forces. Thanks to decades of feminist research on violence against women, we have valuable insights into the patriarchal cultures of policing. We know about the biases embedded in training, promotion, locker-room banter, and the avoidance of domestic violence cases by male officers fearing feminization. This is the result, since the 1980s, of so many feminist researchers pointing their investigatory search lights on men’s violence against women. In asking why men who have wielded violence against their domestic partners have enjoyed state-granted impunity in countries as different as Turkey, Brazil and Britain, feminists have dissected the patriarchal cultures of police forces. They have questioned how those masculinity-privileging presumptions and routines have been embedded in police training courses, male-bonding rituals, promotion criteria and locker room humor.

The first time I tried to track the militarization of any country’s police force was in the late 1970s, when I was invited to meet with – learn from – a small group of researchers in Berlin who were critically charting the sale of rifles to police forces around Europe. They – rightly – understood that when any police force escalates the violence capacity of their police officers’ weaponry, those police forces are taking steps toward militarization.

Back then, I was studying the ethnic and racial politics of dozens of militaries. Thanks to these welcoming Berlin researchers, I realized that militarization of any police force that was skewed ethnically or racially affected not only that police force’s relationships to their country’s military, but to their country’s politically privileged communities and to that country’s politically marginalized ethnic and racial communities. This was at a time, however, when I still was not asking feminist questions.

It was only in the 1980s that I began to be curious about how the change in any police force’s weaponry affected ideas about and hierarchies of masculinities inside that police force. It was only when I shone a feminist light on policing that I started to

be curious about all the women in male police officers' lives: wives, fellow officers, clerical workers, judges, trainers, therapists, journalists, victims of violence, anti-violence activists.

Today, I am certainly not a policing specialist, but as I explore the gap between hollow and authentic peace, I return to feminist questions about policing. "Security sector reform" has become standard in post-war "nation-building" and deserves feminist scrutiny. That's why my third wish is a feminist-informed, militarization-curious study – top-to-bottom – of specific police forces in the Balkans.

Feminists have devised a set of tools for researching police and policing. They have learned to scrutinize with care the wielding of notions and measures of "security". When, for instance, do police officers dismiss diverse girls' and women's experiences of insecurity? We know to track men's fear of feminization. This means that we need to be alert for signs that a fear of being feminized by fellow male officers can motivate many men in policing to avoid being deployed on domestic violence cases. Likewise, we have learned to exercise our feminist ethnographic skills in monitoring the masculinized rituals by which veteran officers teach policing newcomers what they must do to "belong". What you may still be honing your feminist observational skills to analyze, however, is how weaponry and equipment – for instance, armored vehicles, computerized data collection, bicycles – either reinforce or dismantle gendered militarizing police hierarchies and shape police interactions with civilian women and civilian men. As feminist researchers today we have learned to multiply the physical sites where we go to study the gendered dynamics of any institution. To sharpen our feminist analyses of a police force, therefore, we know not to limit ourselves to the police station, courtroom or police squad car. We know, instead, to ask where police officers "hang out" together after work or on holidays, what happens inside of police officers' homes, what happens when police officers are sent to another town or country on training courses.

Then there is the gendering of the global policing industry. I can still remember my surprise when a generous British colleague showed me his copy of a police industry magazine. It was thick and glossy. In between the feature articles were scores of advertisements paid for by dozens of for-profit companies, aimed at world-wide potential policing customers. The companies' products ranged from helmets, communication devices and uniforms to pistols, water cannons, rubber bullets, handcuffs, sniper rifles, armored vehicles and helicopters.

With our feminist glasses on, we will be able to determine to what extent each globalized policing company markets gender. Specifically which policing masculinities, which policing femininities do they wield to maximize their sales? In addition, we will assess which of their products are most explicitly masculinized. Each company also conjures up in their advertising campaigns a policing scenario that is at least somewhat militarized, that is, shaped by allegedly violent enemy gang, protesters, insurgents or invaders. Alternatively, media-savvy skills will enable us to determine how and when any police-focused advertiser stages their commercial product in the setting an authentic peacetime.

In closing, I must apologize. By setting out my own personal feminist investigatory wish list, I've perhaps been indulgently ambitious. But I believe that, together, we have the drive and skills to investigate the deep workings of patriarchy and militarism. Individually and collectively, with our feminist questions, tools and approaches, we are making the world smarter about what undermines the creation and preservation of genuine non-patriarchal peace.

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CHAPTER 17

Queer Linguistics of Peace in the Post-Conflict Balkan Context

Queer Linguistics of Peace in the Post-Conflict Balkan Context

*Language is not only what we speak,
but also what we are permitted to imagine.*

— Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (2006)

Abstract

In the post-conflict societies of the Balkans, language does not appear as a neutral means of communication, but as a space of political power and cultural regulation. This paper explores the ways in which queer linguistics of peace destabilizes hegemonic discourses in the region through the analysis of legislative, educational, and cultural practices. Starting from the thesis that queer identities produce semantic ruptures in the symbolic architecture of the nation, the paper connects theoretical insights from Bovan, Butler, Campbell, Ahmed, Kajinić, Huremović, Mignolo, and others. Using the methodology of critical discourse analysis, the paper maps affective regimes, institutional euphemisms, and media narratives through which queer subjects are positioned as symbolic Others and as bearers of knowledge that is considered excessive or disruptive to dominant epistemological frameworks. Special attention is given to the discursive practices of “linguistic violence” and the potential of a language of resistance articulated through artistic performances, digital interventions, and collective actions. By applying the concepts of the “epistemologies of the South” by Boaventura de Sousa Santos and “epistemic disobedience” by Walter D. Mignolo, the paper explores how marginalized forms of knowledge can reshape hegemonic frameworks of meaning. It argues that queer linguistics of peace does not merely seek

the inclusion of queer subjects into existing narratives, but aims for their radical reconfiguration.

Introduction

In the post-conflict societies of the Balkans, language is increasingly recognized not as a neutral vehicle of meaning, but as a political tool for shaping reality. This perspective becomes especially evident when analyzing the position of queer identities within societies marked by war trauma, ethnonationalism, and authoritarian forms of modernity. This paper starts with the premise that queer linguistics of peace is a theoretical and methodological approach that enables both the exposure and reshaping of hegemonic regimes of meaning through language – in legislative and educational discourse, as well as in media, art, and everyday practices of resistance.

Inspired by the works of Judith Butler, who defines gender identification as a “reiterative act” within regulatory discourses (Butler 2006: 191), and Sara Ahmed, who shows how affects guide social orientations (Ahmed 2006: 3), this paper explores how the queer subject in the Balkan context is positioned as an epistemological excess – a symbolic Other that destabilizes the narrative coordinates of the nation and collective identity.

Queer existence in the Balkans, in that sense, faces not only institutional marginalization but also a specific form of discursive exclusion, often encoded through euphemisms, affective rhetoric, and symbolic language of “protection”. As David Campbell points out, the nation is not given, but discursively produced – through constant articulation of the boundaries of belonging and exclusion (Campbell 1998: 12). In this context, queer identity functions not only as a social entity, but as a semantic threat to narrative coherence. National discourse is maintained through the exclusion of those subjects who disrupt its unity – and queer subjects enable precisely that disruption. Therefore, responses ranging from legal prohibitions to censorship in the arts are

symptomatic, not incidental. Regional research confirms this logic. Sanja Kajinić shows how institutionalized queer visibility in the post-Yugoslav context most often does not function as an affirmation of subjectivity, but as a fulfilment of the EU's foreign policy requirements. Such visibility is conditional and "silent" – permitted only insofar as it does not disturb the symbolic order of the nation (Kajinić 2016:92). Similarly, Danijela Huremović points out that formally inclusive legal language often conceals a semantic void in which the queer subject exists formally, but not practically (Huremović 2020:107). Marko Đorđević (2022:131) emphasizes that the right to linguistic self-naming is inseparable from the right to existence.

This paper therefore poses the following research questions: How does language in post-conflict Balkan societies produce and regulate queer subjectivity?; How are the boundaries of queer visibility constructed through affective rhetoric, euphemisms, and discursive strategies?; and In what ways does queer linguistics of peace open space for linguistic intervention and epistemological resistance?

The aim of this paper is not only the deconstruction of exclusionary linguistic practices, but also the mapping of potentials for articulating alternative discourses of resistance. In this sense, queer linguistics of peace is not viewed as an analytical model that merely "reveals", but as a political practice that produces new meanings. Grounded in Boaventura de Sousa Santos's concept of the epistemologies of the South (Santos 2014:156) and the decolonial critiques of dominant knowledge regimes developed by Walter D. Mignolo (Mignolo 2009:162), this paper starts from the premise that knowledge emerging from marginalized positions is not only epistemologically valid, but necessary for destabilizing hegemonic discursive norms and transforming existing power relations within institutions.

The paper will also consider the practice of linguistic violence, as developed by Nataša Bovan (Bovan 2021:44), in which formally neutral language actually functions as a mechanism of exclusion.

Special attention is given to artistic practices, such as the initiative “Јазик на отпорот” [*Language of Resistance*] from North Macedonia, which through poetic deconstruction of the state language generate what Mignolo (2009) calls “epistemic disobedience” – a practice of dismantling the linguistic privileges of hegemonic knowledge.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

In post-conflict Balkan societies, language is not merely a means of communication, but a space of struggle for power, identity, and recognition. Linguistic practices act performatively: they not only reflect social reality, but also constitute it, reinforcing existing norms and creating fissures in their stability (Butler 2006: 191). Through this lens, queer linguistics of peace becomes a strategy for exposing linguistic regimes of control, as well as for articulating new meanings of resistance.

When certain expressions become legitimized – such as “family values” or “national interest” – they do not simply reflect collective values, but regulate what can be considered “normal”. This regulatory function of language allows the meaning of nation, body, gender, and sexuality to be articulated through repetitive speech acts, thereby reproducing a sense of coherence and belonging (Fairclough 1995). However, every speech act carries the possibility of subversion. The concept of performativity, although often associated with gender, refers to the way identities emerge through speech. Identity is not a stable ontological category, but a series of acts that become “identity” only if consistently repeated through language and social practices. When someone refuses to repeat that act in a familiar code—as queer subjects often do, the order of meaning is destabilized (Butler 2006: 191). The affects that accompany queer bodies in public space – fear, disgust, discomfort – are not spontaneous, but carefully regulated and distributed.

In Balkan societies, where moral panics are often channeled through media, religion, and education, affects function as tools of political control (Ahmed 2006: 3). This “affective economy” (Berlant 2011:7) maintains an imagined continuity of the nation while simultaneously producing new forms of exclusion. Homonationalism (Puar 2007: 28) shows how selective tolerance operates as a disciplining strategy: states recognize “respectable”, normatively integrated queer subjects while marginalizing those who do not fit the dominant matrix. In the Balkans, this dynamic is evident in official LGBT parades that are supported when symbolically useful but politically neutralized. The language that enables such practices is rarely openly repressive; more often, it is euphemistic and formally neutral. This “neutrality” is actually a form of what Bovan (Bovan 2021: 44) calls “linguistic violence”, implying discursive strategies in which exclusion is carried out through rhetorical ambivalence. Expressions such as “protection of public order” or “inappropriateness for family spaces” enable institutional silencing of queer content. Such strategies also include the symbolic mapping of the Balkans as a space of deviation. In European political discourse, the region is often positioned as an “unfinished West” (Said 1978; Todorova 1997), which further complicates the position of queer subjects. In that double position – as queer and as Balkan – they are doubly Othered. These multiple levels of marginalization cannot be exposed within the dominant epistemology. “Epistemic disobedience” (Mignolo 2009:162) and the “epistemologies of the South” (Santos 2014:156) recognize the legitimacy of voices from the margins and enable the creation of new linguistic worlds.

The paper uses Critical Discourse Analysis [CDA] (van Dijk 2001) to interpret language as a politically constitutive tool that maintains and/or disrupts power structures and social norms. The analysis (2022–2025) covers four key domains of discourse: legislative discourse: official documents, draft laws, rationales, and political statements (e.g., the withdrawal of the recommendation of the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Serbia in 2025); educational discourse: curricula, teaching guidelines, and statements

from educational bodies and unions (e.g., the decision of the Slovenian Teachers' Union 2025); media discourse: content from tabloids and public broadcasters, analysis of euphemisms and affective narratives, and cultural discourse: artistic interventions, digital campaigns, and initiatives such as "Јазик на отпорот" (@JazikOtporot 2024).

Analysis of Discursive Practices: Legislative and Educational Discourse

This discourse in the Balkan region shows how institutional exclusion of queer subjects is often carried out through formally neutral, yet substantively exclusive language. The withdrawal of the Serbian Ministry of Health's recommendation from April 2025, which removed LGBTQ+ content from educational programs citing a "lack of social maturity", is a typical example of institutional euphemism that conceals the political motivation behind exclusion (Ministry of Health of the Republic of Serbia 2025; Bovan 2021). Similarly, in Slovenia, the Teachers' Union rejected a proposal for gender-inclusive language in schools in 2025, citing "disruption of linguistic tradition" as the main argument (Teachers' Union of Slovenia 2025). Such decisions are not isolated cases: the Croatian Ministry of Science and Education refused to include queer topics in school textbooks in 2023, invoking the "need for broader social consensus" (Kajinić 2016). In North Macedonia, although anti-discrimination laws formally exist, queer topics remain nearly invisible in school curricula. Activist groups report that teachers often avoid or censor content related to gender and sexual diversity, even when there are recommendations from international organizations (Kvinna till Kvinna 2022). In Albania, despite the adoption of a Gender Equality Law, studies show that queer identities remain a taboo topic in teaching practice, and teachers express insecurity or resistance toward their inclusion (Pitts 2017). A particular example is Bosnia and Herzegovina, where anti-discrimination laws at the entity level are formally aligned with European standards, but are rarely implemented in practice. In the Federation of Bosnia and

Herzegovina, efforts to introduce education on gender equality face resistance from school boards and parent associations, who invoke arguments such as “child protection” and “preservation of traditional values” (Kvinna till Kvinna 2022). These cases confirm the thesis that legal or administrative inclusion often remains superficial, while substantive transformation of social values is postponed through bureaucratic and discursive maneuvers.

Media Discourse

The media discourse in the Balkan region strongly shapes and reflects social attitudes toward queer individuals. An analysis of tabloid and public service content in Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina shows that expressions such as “danger to children”, “imposing foreign values”, and “family values are under threat” are among the most frequently used phrases in reporting on LGBTQ+ topics (Bovan 2021; Bragazzi et al. 2022). A quantitative analysis from 2024 shows that in leading Serbian and Croatian tabloids, the term “child protection” was used 37 times in the context of LGBTQ+ issues, “family values” 29 times, while “danger” and “imposing foreign values” appeared 22 and 19 times respectively. In Montenegro, although Pride in Podgorica receives institutional support, media narratives often emphasize the “need for tolerance” but also “public concern about the endangerment of traditional society”. In North Macedonia, reporting on the “Јазик на отпорот” (@JazikOtporot 2024) initiative is often accompanied by comments about “provocation” and “imposition of foreign values”. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, media coverage of queer topics is often limited to sensationalist headlines or incident reporting, while affirmative stories are rare. Among independent media and digital platforms, there are those that offer queer-affirmative content and shape alternative narratives. Platforms such as *VoxFeminae* in Croatia and the initiative *Јазик на отпорот* in North Macedonia enable queer communities to take control over their own representation and articulate resistance to heteronormative discourses. For example, the initiative “Јазик на отпорот” uses social media to spread alternative narratives,

create new terms, and offer public education, allowing the queer community to take control of their own representation (@JazikOtporot 2024; Flentje et al. 2020). Such platforms confirm the role of digital media as spaces for political imagination and the collective articulation of marginalized identities (Barker and Scheele 2016).

Cultural Discourse and the Language of Resistance

The cultural discourse in the region demonstrates remarkable resilience and innovation in articulating queer identities and resistance. The initiative “Јазик на отпорот” [Language of Resistance] from North Macedonia is a paradigmatic example of artistic and linguistic resistance. Through digital campaigns, public performances, and workshops, this initiative creates new terms, narratives, and poetic forms that do not seek recognition within the dominant language, but instead radically reshape it. In Belgrade, the collective “Govor koji ne pristaje” (*Speech That Does Not Suite*) uses performance and visual art to deconstruct heteronormative narratives, while the “Merlinka” festival annually brings together artists and activists from the region and the world, creating space for experience exchange and the creation of alternative lexicons of resistance. In Zagreb, the artistic and activist platform “Queer Zagreb” gathers actors from the region and beyond, enabling the exchange of experiences and articulation of alternative linguistic practices of resistance. In various post-Yugoslav urban centers, cultural workshops and artistic platforms bring together young people from diverse identity backgrounds, encouraging dialogue on language, social justice, and epistemological diversity (Đorđević 2022). One such example are the workshops in Sarajevo on the topic of “Queer Terminology.” These practices demonstrate that linguistic expression is inseparable from social transformation (Haritaworn, Kuntsman and Posocco 2024). In Albania, the “Terminology Guide for Queer Inclusion” project (2023) was developed in collaboration with local NGOs and international partners, aimed at educating teachers and overcoming linguistic

barriers in everyday communication. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the artistic collective “Kvir Aktivizam” uses mural art and public performances to highlight the invisibility of the queer community and challenge linguistic barriers in public space. These initiatives and artistic practices affirm Mignolo’s thesis on epistemic disobedience, whereby the right to language is asserted as a right to existence, and linguistic innovation is articulated as an act of political resistance (Mignolo 2009). Through art, poetry, digital platforms, and collective action, queer communities not only survive, but shape the future of language and society. These practices confirm the thesis that queer linguistics of peace is much more than an analytical tool – it is a living, transformative practice that changes the very structure of social meaning.

Language as a Space of Social Transformation and Resistance

The analysis of examples from the Balkan region shows that queer linguistics of peace is far more than a theoretical framework – it is a practical, political, and cultural strategy that enables and promotes social transformation through language. The first layer of this transformation is reflected in institutional and legislative discourses. Although some countries formally adopt inclusive policies, in practice they are often limited by bureaucratic, symbolic, and linguistic barriers. Decisions such as the withdrawal of the recommendation by the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Serbia or the rejection of gender-inclusive language in Slovenia are not exceptions, but part of a broader pattern where language is used as a tool of control and the pacification of social change (Bovan 2021; Kajinić 2016). Such actions confirm the thesis of “linguistic violence”, where formally neutral language is used to maintain inequality and exclusion, while euphemisms such as “child protection” or “preservation of tradition” serve as legitimations for exclusion and censorship.

The second layer concerns media discourse, which plays a key role in shaping public perception of the queer community. Dominant

narratives in tabloids and public broadcasters not only perpetuate stereotypes, but also incite moral panic, legitimizing violence and discrimination against queer individuals (Bragazzi et al. 2022). The frequent use of expressions such as “child protection”, “family values”, and “imposing foreign values” creates an atmosphere of fear and distrust, while affirmative and educational content is marginalized or excluded from public discourse. Among independent media and digital platforms, there is a growing presence of actors articulating alternative narratives, such as *Mašina*, *VoxFeminae*, and the initiative *Јазик на отпорот*, thereby enabling the queer community to autonomously define its own identity positions and experiences (Flentje et al. 2020; @JazikOtporot 2024).

The third layer of discussion encompasses cultural discourse and artistic practices, which show exceptional resilience, innovation, and potential for transforming society from within. Initiatives such as *Јазик на отпорот*, the *Queer Zagreb* festival, the collective *Govor koji ne pristaje*, as well as projects like the *Terminology Guide for Queer Inclusion* in Albania or mural-art actions in Sarajevo, not only deconstruct dominant narratives but also produce new lexicons, metaphors, and strategies of resistance (Mignolo 2009; Đorđević 2022). These practices affirm Mignolo’s thesis on “epistemological disobedience”.

A comparative analysis with other post-conflict and post-socialist societies such as Poland, Hungary, or Romania shows that patterns of exclusion and resistance are often similar, but that in the Balkans, the creative use of language and art as strategies of resistance is particularly pronounced. In Latin America, for example, similar strategies are used by feminist and queer movements in their struggle against linguistic and institutional discrimination, opening space for transnational solidarity and the exchange of good practices (Pitts 2017).

The analysis also highlights specific regional differences: while formal mechanisms for the protection of LGBTQ+ rights are more developed in Slovenia and Croatia, in Serbia, Bosnia and

Herzegovina, and North Macedonia, queer communities rely on informal solidarity and creativity, building parallel structures of support and resistance. In Albania, despite the existence of inclusive laws, social stigma remains a strong barrier to queer visibility (Kvinna till Kvinna 2022). These differences require locally specific strategies, but also stronger regional cooperation and experience-sharing.

A particularly important aspect of this conversation is the issue of education and media literacy. The analysis results show that the lack of education about gender and sexual diversity is one of the key factors that enables the reproduction of stereotypes and discrimination. Introducing queer topics into school curricula, training teachers, and developing gender-inclusive teaching materials are necessary steps for long-term social change. Additionally, developing media literacy and the critical reading of public discourse can empower younger generations to recognize and reject manipulative narratives and exclusionary linguistic strategies.

Finally, the analysis confirms that queer linguistics of peace does not function solely as an analytical tool, but also represents a form of engaged social and political practice aimed at transforming linguistic structures and social relations from within. By incorporating conceptual approaches such as performativity (Butler 2006), affective politics (Ahmed 2006; Berlant 2011), and alternative epistemological perspectives from the Global South (Santos 2014; Mignolo 2009), space is opened for transdisciplinary research and concrete interventions in various social fields. Language thereby becomes constituted not only as a site of conflict but also as a fertile ground for the formation of new forms of community and subjectivity. Through such a methodologically plural and participatory strategy, it becomes possible to envision and build a social order in which language becomes an authentic space of peace, resistance, and free expression.

Progressive measures are directed toward a systemic integration of education on gender and sexual diversity by mandating the

inclusion of these topics in school curricula and teacher training programs, alongside the parallel development of gender-inclusive and queer-affirmative teaching materials in collaboration with local communities. Special emphasis is placed on enhancing regional cooperation among queer initiatives, artistic collectives, and academic researchers, as well as on strengthening independent media and digital platforms that enable visibility and affirmation of queer narratives. Conducting comparative research in the context of other post-conflict and post-socialist societies is additionally recognized as a mechanism for sharing best practices and developing sustainable resistance strategies, thereby contributing to the construction of a more inclusive and socially resilient environment.

Conclusion

This paper confirms that queer linguistics of peace in the post-conflict Balkan context is not only a theoretical framework for analyzing language practices, but also a key tool for social transformation and building a more just society. Through analysis of legislative, educational, media, and cultural discourses, it is shown that language in the Balkans does not function as a neutral carrier of meaning, but as a dynamic space of political power, exclusion, and potential resistance. The paper shows that the exclusion of queer subjects most often takes place through euphemistic and “neutral” language, such as expressions like “protection of children” or “preservation of tradition”, while resistance is articulated through artistic, digital, and collective practices that create a new linguistic space and narratives. It is particularly important that regional initiatives such as “Јазик на отпорот”, “Queer Zagreb”, “Govor koji ne pristaje”, and the “Terminological Guide for Queer Inclusion” have demonstrated that the creative use of language and art is key to subverting hegemonic discourses and building spaces of solidarity and freedom.

These practices are not merely reactions to repression, but proactive strategies for creating new communities and identities, confirming Sara Ahmed's thesis that "affects are not private but socially oriented and politically usable" (Ahmed 2006:3).

However, significant regional differences remain: while Slovenia and Croatia have more developed formal protection mechanisms, in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia, queer communities rely on informal solidarity and innovation. In Albania, despite legal advances, social stigma remains a key barrier. These differences reflect the complexity of local contexts and highlight the need for contextually tailored strategies, along with the simultaneous need to strengthen regional cooperation and systematically exchange good practices. Queer linguistics of peace opens a space for the pluralism of meaning, for linguistic and social justice, for the creation of new worlds in and through language. Also, queer linguistics of peace seeks to achieve precisely this: it opens space for the pluralism of meaning without censorship or silencing, for linguistic and social justice, for the creation of new worlds in and through language.

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CHAPTER 18

How to Write About Women or Nomina Sunt Optata

How to Write About Women or *Nomina Sunt Optata*

Abstract

This paper addresses how women are written about in social contexts and points out the tendency for generalization, even when there is an intention to affirm women as a social factor. It particularly highlights the paradox in which the equality of women is often viewed through the lens of their relationship with men, rather than as an essentially independent value. The focus in this text is on the analysis of the contributions of Jewish women to the history of Bosnia and Herzegovina during the first half of 20th century. Despite the significant efforts of these women, their roles have been largely overlooked. The analysis explores how, in attempts to present women as equals to men, many authors – including feminist authors – often fail to acknowledge a crucial fact: equality is not an absolute category, but a social concept, derived from existing inequalities.

Introduction: Challenges and Responsibility of Writing About Women

Writing about women means confronting a double challenge: on the one hand, the historical silence born of centuries of exclusion; on the other, the risk that, in attempting to fill that silence, we produce narratives that are superficial, distorted, or methodologically unsound. Within patriarchally shaped historiography, women's presence is often reconstructed not as a dynamic historical force but as a collection of scattered anecdotes, marginal references, or stereotyped portrayals—frequently detached from deeper analyses of the social, political,

and cultural frameworks that shaped their lives.

The question of how to write about women, therefore, is not merely technical – it is fundamentally epistemological and ethical. It requires us to acknowledge the complexity of their identities and experiences, while simultaneously interrogating the very structures through which knowledge about them is produced. Writing about women demands a careful movement between the visible and the silenced, the documented and the suppressed, between the urge to represent and the obligation to understand. We must also critically reflect on the fundamental concepts we use – such as, for example, *equality*. While the term *equality* may sound appealing, in the context of women's equality it requires reexamination, deconstruction, and stripping down to its core in order to uncover and articulate the meanings that remain hidden beneath its surface.

When addressing peace and gender equality in the Balkans, it is essential to listen to marginalized voices that have historically shaped social currents, even while remaining invisible in dominant narratives. Women – and particularly Jewish women – were active in humanitarian, educational, and even athletic life, at times when public engagement was largely restricted by traditional expectations. By shedding light on these examples, we create space for new interpretations of gender roles in the context of peace, social resilience, and civic participation. It is precisely this intersection of gender, culture, and social engagement that offers valuable insights into how we might chart the path forward. This article approaches these issues through several key analytical lenses that will guide the critical reflection developed in the several conceptually designed sections.

The Perils of Generalization: Rethinking the History of Jewish Women in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Official histories have often rendered women invisible or diminished their roles, particularly through male-authored narratives that rely on stereotypes or fragmented references. Writing about women throughout history has been conditioned by patriarchal narratives that have, for centuries, neglected the contributions of women to the development of humanity. This paper seeks to explore whether history can be told through the lens of women's contributions, without necessarily relating them to male experiences. In other words, can history be presented in such a way that women are the focus as independent actors, rather than in the context of their relationships with men?

Understanding women's contributions requires a critical reading of sources and a conscious effort to place their experiences within broader historical and social contexts. In this sense, I will emphasize several important moments here, namely, multiple marginalization, the danger of generalization and empathy and ethical responsibility. All of them respond to the history of Jewish women.

The tendency to generalize is particularly evident in historical narratives about Jewish women in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where complexity is too often reduced to oversimplified categories. The answer to this question can be illustrated by a simple Google search: when we search for "Jewish women in Bosnia and Herzegovina", the first suggestion that appears is "Showing results for Jews in Bosnia and Herzegovina", which literally erases the visibility of women – the category of Jewish women is not even considered as a possible subject of interest. The only option is to open the article that is suggested – "Jews in Bosnia and Herzegovina" (https://bs.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jevreji_u_Bosni_i_Hercegovini). This article contains a list titled "Famous Bosnian-Herzegovinian Jews", where out of fifteen (15) names listed, only three (3) are women.

Let us imagine an alternative scenario: What if this list were reversed? What if the dominant names were: Berta Bergman, Marija Kon (née Bergman Kon), Lujza Krčmar (née Bergman), Laura Papo Bohoreta, Lotika Loti Celermajer, Rifka Riki Levi, Dr. Roza Papo, Berta Baruh, Rikica Ovadija, Gina Herman, Flory Jagoda, Lea Lajka Abinun Salcberger, Frida Filipović Grajf, Nada Ler Sofronić, Etela Pardo, etc.? Even without additional explanations, this list, conceived this way, would show that women contributed to the development of Bosnian-Herzegovinian society, but despite that, they were not ensured an equal place in historical memory.

However, so as not to make the same mistake myself, I will at least provide some basic information about these exceptional women.

Marija Kon was the first woman in Bosnia and Herzegovina to earn a doctorate, and her sisters were well educated: **MPharm Lujza Krčmar** and **Dr. Berta Bergma**, a physician. All three were born in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the last decade of the 19th century, all three completed their university studies in Vienna and returned to live and work in Bosnia and Herzegovina. And yet – no one remembered them. **Laura Papo Bohoreta** (born Luna Laura Levi Bohoreta), was an intellectual of broad education – a writer, translator, feminist, and guardian of the rich cultural heritage of the Sephardim of Bosnia and Herzegovina. She was also the first to write about the Sephardic woman in Bosnia whose publication was considered the first cultural and ethnographic study of the Sephardic woman. **Rifka – Riki Levi** was the first professional ballerina from Sarajevo, as well as the first Sephardic ballerina and prima ballerina of the National Theatre in Belgrade. She was regarded as the most talented Yugoslav ballerina in the stylized grotesque genre. The five Levi's sisters – including Blanka, Klara, and Simha (Nina) ran an elegant hat salon, "Chapeau Chic Parisien" that was a remarkable example of women's entrepreneurship. **Dr. Roza Papo** was the first woman to head the Military Medical Academy (VMA) in Belgrade and the first female major general in the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) as well as in the Balkans. She authored more than 50 scientific papers concerning viral hepatitis, hyperbilirubinemia, tuberculosis etc.

Nada Ler-Sofronić was a pioneering feminist, psychologist, and academic from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Born in Sarajevo, graduated in psychology in Belgrade and earned her PhD in 1982 with the dissertation *Marxism and Women's Liberation*, the first feminist thesis discussed in socialist Yugoslavia. She was the initiator of the first feminist conference in Yugoslavia, "Comrade Woman" [*Drug-ca žena*, 1978] which resonated across European feminist circles. A leading voice of second-wave feminism in the region, she published extensively, including the influential book *Neo-Feminism and the Socialist Alternative* [*Neofeminizam i socijalistička alternativa*] (1986). Nada Ler-Sofronić was a feminist who not only shaped feminist thought – she embodied it.

The problem of women's visibility is further deepened by generalizations that often oversimplify and inaccurately depict their non-historical role. Unfortunately, even in books explicitly dealing with women, we often find such prejudices. An example of this is the claim from the book *Recorded: Women and Public Life in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 20th Century*, which reads as follows:

Jewish women in Bosnia and Herzegovina were mostly Sephardic and lived in a very traditional environment. Most stayed at home after early marriages, and only in the mid-20th century did Jewish women begin to work. Like other women in Bosnia and Herzegovina, they started their education only in the 20th century, with family, children, marriage, and reproductive work still taking priority. However, Jewish women were actively involved in humanitarian work, founding numerous Jewish societies... (Spahić et al. 2015:54).

This statement ignores the fact that at least ten Bosnian-Herzegovinian Jewish women (writers, doctors, linguists, pharmacists, artists, entrepreneurs, ballerinas, musicians, etc., as listed in the earlier passage) began their careers before World War II, of which, to add that detail – seven were Sephardic. These women are only some of those highlighted in research based on

a sample of 537 Jewish women born in the last quarter of the 19th century and the first quarter of the 20th century. Generalizations in the way we approach women's history not only distort the historical reality, but also reinforce stereotypes of women as passive participants in social currents.

Jewish women have long been active in humanitarian work – one of the core values of Judaism and one that aligned with what has traditionally been referred to as “women's duties”. While we cannot dwell here on this vital aspect of Jewish women's social engagement beyond the narrow boundaries of family life, it is important to note that their contributions in this field were substantial and consistent. Less known, however, is the fact that as early as in the first quarter of the 20th century, Jewish women were also active athletes. The first women's sport in which they competed publicly was *hazena* – a Czech form of handball played by women. Among Bosnian-Herzegovinian Jewish women, *hazena* became widespread, particularly among Sephardic women.

From Category to Context: The Imperative of Historical Specificity

Overcoming prejudices is possible through affirmative writing that recognizes women as individual personalities with their own identities, who have their own names – not as generic representatives of their community or gender.

We are all familiar with the Latin saying “*Nomina sunt odiosa*”. I paraphrase it here: *Nomina sunt optata* – Names are desirable. Recognizing names and highlighting specific contributions are key to properly valuing women's presence, experience, work, history, and contributions. If women remain invisible in historical discourse, society loses important parts of its own past and not only negates their achievements, but also the achievements of society as a whole. Therefore, it is essential to approach the research of women's contributions with full academic integrity,

avoiding generalizations and insisting on specificity through individual examples. Regardless of your field of interest – give women a chance, they will not disappoint you.

Writing about women, our first and primary task is always to keep in mind the fact that the word “women” is not a collective noun, but a plural form of the noun “woman”. This means many individuals, each with their own name, each with their own voice, each with their own history, and each contributing to humanity in their unique way.

On Scientific Methodology and Social Responsibility in Writing Women’s History

I do not wish to delve into all the methodological shortcomings of the aforementioned quote, especially since the authors in the Preface of the book *Recorded: Women and Public Life in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 20th Century* emphasized that

the idea was to create a non-academic and non-historical book about the recent history of women”, and that “the absence of expertise in the process – the historians – was a coincidence and then grew into a methodological fact, which is why it is important that this book is evaluated by the experts (Spahić et al. 2015:8).

Despite the fact that it is clear that this is an attempt to distance themselves from the shortcomings they are aware of, certain questions simply “stick out”: How can a non-historical book be made about history? What is the purpose of a non-historical book about history? Furthermore, it is not clear whether the text refers to Jewish women in Bosnia and Herzegovina or only those of Sephardic descent, and why, considering that the reference criterion is that “Jewish women were mostly Sephardic” (Ibid. 8), an approach largely unknown to scientific methodology. Who are Sephardic women, and who are those who are not? What is the difference between them, and why is this difference important?

In this regard, it is particularly important to consider the authors' reference to Laura Papo Bohoreta and her work *The Sephardic Woman in Bosnia*. They note: "A detailed description of everyday life, customs, activity, and social position was provided by Laura Papo Bohoreta in her 1932 work *The Sephardic Woman in Bosnia*" (Ibid. 54). Precisely because this source is acknowledged, it is even more unclear why the authors of *Recorded* fail to engage with Bohoreta's own detailed observations, in which she writes:

Without exaggeration, we can say that Jewish girls are quick-witted. Those who do not succeed in school devote themselves to occupations brought by the times. Most of them have taken up tailoring. In recent years, since the world has changed and women, too, are expected to take care of their appearance, Sephardic girls quickly responded and many took up this craft. (...) One must acknowledge that even the illiterate can clean and wash, and the one who knows how to use her intellect can master highly skilled tasks that, in certain moments of life, may provide help in times of distress (Papo Bohoreta 1932: 131).

The omission of this perspective is especially puzzling given that Laura Papo Bohoreta – born in 1891 – was herself a Bosnian Sephardic woman, a writer, the author of the only known book on Sephardic women in Bosnia, an active participant in the Jewish community between the two World Wars, a preserver of tradition, a transmitter of knowledge, and a modern European feminist. Her work is not only an ethnographic and cultural study, but also a powerful testimony to the lived experiences of her contemporaries – Bosnian Sephardic women – and the only written historical record of their lives.

While this contribution cannot fully answer the above questions, it can provide evidence that the claim, which so easily erased Jewish women from the history of Bosnia and Herzegovina, is, at the very least, not grounded in facts – as demonstrated by the previously mentioned examples of prominent Jewish women from the early 20th century, of whom I have mentioned only

a few. These women were all born and raised in Bosnia and Herzegovina, while clearly positioning themselves within broader European intellectual networks. Their life paths speak not only to individual agency, but also to the presence of a socially engaged, educated female population long before the mid-20th century – a fact that is systematically overlooked in generalized historical narratives.

In recent years, since the world has changed and women, too, are expected to take care of their appearance, Sephardic girls quickly responded and many took up this craft... “, it’s how Papo Bohoreta explained their passion for advancement (Bohoreta 1932: 131).

The professional engagement of Jewish women in the period between 1921 and 1930 is further confirmed by an excerpt from an article by Milan Zon, which offers no support to the claim that, until the mid-20th century, “family, children, marriage, and reproductive work remained their primary priority.” Zon writes:

One more figure deserves special attention. Out of 1,023 insured Jewish individuals registered with the Sarajevo District Office within the city, as of August 1st, there were 455 women – 44.4%. This indicates a disproportionate proletarianization of the Jewish woman. The reason: the decline of the Jewish petty bourgeoisie, the social descent of merchants and artisans who lose their means of subsistence and send both their sons and daughters into trades. In this proletarianization of the Jewish woman lies the main reason for the rapid decline of the Jewish birth rate in Sarajevo” (Zon 1931: 13).

Indeed, it was precisely family-related priorities – such as care for children and the institution of marriage – that motivated Jewish women in impoverished families to seize every available opportunity for socioeconomic advancement. This included entering the workforce outside the home, which, in turn, led to a growing level of women’s public engagement – not only through humanitarian women’s associations, but also through the labor

movement, the women's movement, athletic clubs, and other forms of collective social life.

This expansion of women's roles beyond the domestic sphere opened the way for deeper political consciousness and collective action. As Jewish women entered the labor force and public life, many became active participants in the workers' and antifascist movements, where they advocated not only for class justice, but also for gender emancipation. Their involvement in these movements marked a significant shift – from private survival strategies to public resistance and organized struggle – particularly in the interwar and wartime periods.

Regarding the above mentioned publication, the issue of the labor engagement of Jewish women in Bosnia and Herzegovina is also presented without a deeper insight into the social, economic, and legal circumstances. The existence of historical facts about BH Jewish women who were economically active, in traditional crafts, trade, industry, medicine, culture, etc., even before World War I, clearly contradicts the claim about their alleged inactivity until the “mid-20th century.” However, the book *Recorded [Zabilježene]* represents a valuable contribution to the ongoing effort to reconstruct that part of Bosnian-Herzegovinian history which, within a patriarchal social framework, has remained largely undocumented – namely, women's history. The absence of a scientific methodology in the analysis of the past does not only mean the lack of a scientific approach, but also poses the danger of anachronisms, generalizations, and arbitrary interpretations that erase the complexity of historical processes.

Listening to Absence: Empathy in the Reconstruction of Women's Lives

A non-historical approach does not merely result in incomplete or inaccurate representations of the past – it has far-reaching consequences for collective memory. When women are reduced to marginal or invisible figures, absorbed into a homogenized

collective subject, rather than seen and written about as a plurality of individual lives – each with her own voice, her own decisions, her own contributions to the social and historical fabric of Bosnia and Herzegovina – their traces are not just forgotten, but deliberately erased. Such erasure is not a passive oversight; it is an active mechanism of exclusion that impoverishes both our understanding of the past and our ability to act meaningfully in the present.

In this context, the importance of an empathetic approach cannot be overstated. Empathy is not a luxury reserved for literature or personal memoirs – it is a critical tool, perhaps even more essential, in disciplines that rely on facts, statistics, and archival data. Precisely because we are often working with fragments, silences, and distortions, empathy becomes the means by which we can begin to reconstruct lives that were never granted full visibility in the official record. Far from compromising the objectivity of scholarly work, empathy grounds it in ethical responsibility. It challenges us not to impose meaning, but to listen carefully; not to conclude quickly, but to consider what has been left unsaid and why.

Empathy, then, is not the opposite of objectivity – it is its precondition. It is what allows us to ask better questions, to recognize the limits of the evidence before us, and to resist the temptation to generalize, simplify, or speak on behalf of others. Only through such a disposition can we begin to write about women in a way that does not reduce them to symbols, roles, or representative types, but restores their subjectivity, complexity, and historical presence.

This, ultimately, is the task: to build a historiography that does not merely include women, but that is transformed by their inclusion. One that sees them not only as victims of omission, but as authors of meaning – sometimes documented, often obscured, but never irrelevant to the story we are trying to tell.

Conclusion

Writing about women is never a neutral act – it is a task that carries particular weight due to the long history of their silencing, exclusion, and multiple marginalization. It demands responsibility, methodological clarity, and ethical awareness. To avoid reproducing the very injustices that once erased women from the historical record, we must approach this work with care, precision, and a commitment to rethinking not only the content of historical narratives but also their frameworks.

This includes confronting the distortions and absences within dominant historiographies, recognizing that women's stories – especially those of minority women – are shaped by intersecting layers of social exclusion. It also means resisting the temptation to generalize; women are not a homogenous group, and their historical experiences must be situated within specific social, political, economic, and cultural contexts. To write about women is to refuse simplification and to insist on the visibility of difference. Equally important is the ethical obligation to listen for the voices that were not recorded, to ask which stories were omitted, and why. This requires an empathetic engagement with sources, a willingness to read between the lines, and a conscious effort to recover not only what women did, but how they saw themselves – and how they shaped the worlds in which they lived, even when they were denied formal positions of power.

The historical presence of women in informal yet vital areas of social life reminds us that gender equality does not begin with a declaration, but with the recognition of what has already existed. If we are to build a peaceful and just future in the Balkans, these often-overlooked stories must be part of the path we trace forward.

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CHAPTER 19

On Our Everyday Populism and the 'Miracle' of Nonviolent Resistance

On Our Everyday Populism and the ‘Miracle’ of Nonviolent Resistance

Abstract

This paper analyses two forms of political action that characterize the current social moment in the Western Balkans region – populism and nonviolent resistance. The aim of this text is to highlight the fundamental differences between populism and nonviolent action, and to argue why populist politics should be resisted through nonviolent means. It is one of the first works to present nonviolent resistance in Serbia (from December 2024 to spring 2025) through the lens of nonviolent action strategies. In addition to its potential theoretical value, the paper also offers an activist contribution by encouraging the search for nonviolent responses in collective resistance to populism.

Introduction

Populist politics are gaining strength and increasingly occupying public space, with populism becoming normalized both locally and globally. However, the normalization of populist politics does not diminish the danger they represent. It is important to understand what populism is in order to grasp why it poses a threat and why it must be opposed. Understanding the issue of populism helps us focus on the problem itself, rather than on the individuals who “produce” it, thus allowing us to manage conflicts¹ more effectively.

¹ We remind here of an important axiom in conflict resolution that says: be strict with the problem, but gentle with the person.

The first part of this text addresses the indicators through which we recognize populism, as well as guidelines on how to resist it nonviolently. From the perspective of peacebuilding, the alternative to populism requires nonviolent strategies that transcend existing democratic structures – not to abolish them, but to restore their original purpose. This alternative, as seen in the example of nonviolent resistance in Serbia that has been ongoing since the end of November 2024², is now emerging as a qualitative leap, as an unexpected catalyst for change. That is why I call it a *miracle*³.

In the second part of the text, I will present some aspects of nonviolent resistance in Serbia. The purpose of this brief account of concrete and still active resistance is to remind us that nonviolent movements are real and are part of our present. This experience is valuable, as it helps us identify directions for future nonviolent political action. With this account, I also wish to express respect and gratitude to students and citizens who are investing themselves in building a more just society, and who have rekindled our hope that justice is possible – and worth striving for.

This contribution, based on a presentation delivered at the international conference “Gender and Peace in the Balkans: Charting the Way Forward” (Sarajevo 2025) is one of the first works to present nonviolent resistance in Serbia from the perspective of nonviolent action strategies. This resistance began with the blockade of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts [FDA] in Belgrade on November 25, 2024⁴. In addition to its potential theoretical value,

2 In November 1, 2024 the canopy of the newly renovated railway station building in Novi Sad fell and killed 15 people. The commemoration of the victims started spontaneously on the streets of the city, which at the end of last year turned into massive student and civil resistance.

3 In the etymological sense, miracle means a lot of something. In the ordinary sense a miracle is something which does not show that it arose from ultimate consequential necessity.

4 Some sources cite 22 November 2024 as the starting date when students and professors were attacked by a group of masked individuals during the commemoration.

the paper also holds activist significance, contributing to the motivation for seeking nonviolent responses in the collective resistance to populism.

Populism and Resistance to Populism: How Do We Recognize Populism?

According to a Dutch political scientist, Cas Mudde, populism is

an ideology that divides society into two antagonistic groups, the pure people and the corrupt elite, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people (Mudde in Šalaj 2012: 57).

The discourse about “the people” as a singular entity is, as a German political theorist, Jan-Werner Müller, writes, a “dangerous fairy tale” (Müller 2017: 10). Müller refers to the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, who insists that the people always appear as a plurality. It is a “dangerous” tale because it polarizes society by labelling all critics of populism as “enemies of the people”, as part of the corrupt elite (Müller in Vlašić Smekar 2017. n.d.).

Populism is not merely about fighting elites. According to Müller, its core feature is *anti-pluralism*. Populists are fundamentally anti-pluralist. While democracy thrives on diversity, multiple possibilities, and debate among actors who represent different options, populists in representative democracy declare themselves the only legitimate representatives of “the true will of the people”⁵. Furthermore, Müller notes that populism is marked by a moralizing approach to political issues, underpinned by the notion that politics is a morally pure and homogeneous space. Thus, in populist thinking, there is no such thing as legitimate disagreement in politics. “The core premise of populism is

⁵ Instead of the real will of the people, populism seeks the true will of the people, which is determined authoritarian, and beyond the rational process. That cannot even be argued because populist politicians would interpret their failure as the result of manipulation or some conspiracy. The key words used are, for example, “lying media”; or “foreign agents”, which are enemies of the people.

therefore a moralized form of anti-pluralism” (Müller 2017:28).

We talk about populism when someone in the political arena claims to speak “on behalf of the people as a whole” (Ibid.:29). However, in their view, only certain members of the population constitute the true people: “Only a part of the people is the people, and only populists authentically identify and represent this real or true people” (Ibid.:31–32). This moralizing character is also evident in the portrayal of the people as honest, innocent victims deceived by a corrupt elite that parasitizes them—where only populists are seen as the true representatives of the true people, and thus the ones who lead true politics (ibid.:33).

Resisting Populism – Dialogue and Inclusion

Populism is neither a corrective for liberal democracy nor a valid way to bring politics closer to the people. Populists must be criticized because they pose a genuine danger to democracy, argues Müller. Nevertheless, as long as they do not advocate violence and remain within the bounds of law and the constitution, dialogue with populists⁶ should be pursued.

Dialogue means taking seriously the issues that populists identify, but not the ways in which they frame those issues or propose to resolve them. Thus, dialogue does not mean adopting their rhetoric. “Talking with populists is not the same as speaking like populists” (Ibid.: 92). Dialogue is a method of democratic interaction; it is behavior that “abhors xenophobia but respects the interlocutor”. Dialogue is a different mode of conversation – one that avoids exclusion, polarization, generalization, and rejection of arguments. In other words, it means taking the political claims of one’s interlocutor seriously, but not at face value. A critical discussion is necessary, especially regarding how populists frame certain problems. While democrats see meaning

⁶ In the political arena, according to Müller, all actors are obliged to enter into a dialogue with populists. When they enter the parliament, representatives of populist parties are representatives of certain voters.

in a democratic debate, populists and technocrats do not (Ibid.: 104). One must also acknowledge that communication involves conflict, and it is essential to learn how to deal non-violently with resistance and tension.

Instead of belittling populist voters, we should ask how to achieve “symbolic affirmation of segments of the population that were previously excluded” (Ibid.: 93). Populism can be useful in exposing that certain parts of the population are not recognized or represented in public political discourse – whether concerning their identities or interests. Anti-populist politics begins with the question: “How can we address the concerns of populist voters as free and equal citizens, not as pathological cases driven by frustration, anger, and resentment?” (Ibid.: 109).

Resisting populism is guided by a political concept that supports pluralism – “finding fair conditions for sharing the same political space with others whom we respect as free and equal, yet irreducibly different individuals in their identities and interests” (ibid.: 90). Inclusion is an act of anti-populist resistance and one of the key responses to populist exclusion. Against the false premise that populists are the only ones who represent the people, an important counterargument is: “We are also the people.” The phrase “we the people” will not disappear from public political discourse, but every time it appears, we must ask whom this “we, the people” (Kašić 2017: 13–22) refers to.

Inclusion refers both to the excluded, the so-called superfluous, and to the rich and powerful, who must assume responsibility for society as a whole. Populism can prompt broader moral questions about the criteria by which someone belongs to a political community. Entering into dialogue at a symbolic level involves reflecting on “what the foundational commitments of a political community mean” (Ibid.: 92–93). Rethinking democracy and pluralism also entail rethinking justice in society. Justice is not only financial responsibility; it also requires mechanisms that institutionalize fairness. Dialogue is an opportunity to reflect together on why pluralism is worth defending – especially in a

time of crisis in democratic representation, the emergence of new issues, and the search for new forms of political engagement.

Nonviolent Resistance in Serbia: Nonviolent Resistance, A Definition

Before presenting some characteristics of the nonviolent resistance seen in the current blockades in Serbia, I would like to recall a definition of nonviolent action. According to a German theorist, Theodor Ebert:

Nonviolent (direct) action is a traditional method of conflict resolution. It is used by various parties in conflict situations where it seems difficult or even impossible to establish consensus on justice and necessary changes in a democratic way. The goal of nonviolent action is to dramatize the conflict so that it can no longer be ignored. (...) The aim of nonviolent action is to create psychological and social conditions in dictatorships or formal democracies where dialogue and democratic decision-making can once again, or for the first time, be regulated on a lasting basis. Nonviolent actions differ from coercive actions in that their participants, through their dramatic measures, do not inflict physical or psychological harm on their political opponents or those uninvolved in the action (Ebert 2011 n.d.).

In addition to these features, a characteristic of nonviolent resistance evident in the Serbian blockades is the resolution of conflict triggered by a specific event. More precisely, nonviolent resistance is focused on resolving a concrete conflict. Truth is not merely an abstract notion – it is recognized through a specific instance of injustice that is addressed with a just response.

Nonviolent Resistance in Serbia – An Existing Alternative

For the third consecutive month, we are witnessing nonviolent student blockades in Serbia. It all began with the collapse of a roof structure at the Novi Sad train station on 1 November 2024, which killed fifteen people⁷. Citizens of Novi Sad, followed by those in Belgrade and gradually in other parts of Serbia, began to spontaneously honor the victims by pausing in silence at streets and intersections for 15 minutes. They quickly developed a recognizable symbol of commemorative protest: red handprints bearing the message “Your hands are bloody.” The deaths were soon linked to allegations of corruption involving contractors closely connected to political structures⁸.

Attempts by those in power to absolve themselves of responsibility failed, and the politicians’ statements came across as dismissive of the public⁹. This behavior and the rhetoric of the Prime Minister and the President of Serbia only strengthened the resolve of Novi Sad residents to take to the streets and express their dissatisfaction. Citizens from other cities gradually joined them.

Nonviolent resistance, in the narrower sense of the term, erupted on 26 November 2024, when students of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts [FDU] in Belgrade began blocking their faculty in protest against a physical attack on students¹⁰ during the 15-minute commemoration held on 22 November, for the victims in Novi Sad. The blockades spread rapidly, soon involving the entire higher education system across Serbia. The blockades continue

7 At the time of writing, there were fifteen victims. Unfortunately, in the meantime, another person died in the hospital, so that the total number of victims was sixteen.

8 One of the striking slogans of the protest, which was created very soon after the fall of the canopy, reads: “Corruption kills!”

9 In the first days after the casualties, the public was offered a belittling of the number of victims, a denial that the canopy had been renovated at all, a performance showing a binder with supposed documents. The latter was denied very quickly thanks to the intervention of brave experts who worked on the reconstruction of the entire building.

10 Many videos have documented attacks on demonstrators. Thus, in the attack on students on November 22, 2024, several people dressed in black participated in the attack, who came in cars in front of the faculty.

to this day, sustained by a strong spirit and extensive support from citizens, parents, professors, teachers, farmers, and high school students. Support has also come from bikers and even war veterans.

According to Slavoj Žižek (Žižek 2025), a view shared by other analysts, this is the largest student movement in Europe since 1968. The protest revolves around four to five student demands¹¹, which I will elaborate on in the continuation of the text.

Methodological Innovation

It is important to emphasize that the resistance does not increase the number of demands, which aligns with the aforementioned characteristic of nonviolent resistance being tied to a specific event. Truth is sought in a concrete example. Students stress that fulfilling the demands does not mean “that the prosecution listens to students”, but rather that the prosecution simply does its job (Pajić 2024).

Concrete demands are an important element in understanding the process of nonviolent resistance. The expectation is that the experience of resolving a specific conflict will serve as the foundation for a new paradigm – a new institutional approach from which political action in accordance with democratic and constitutional principles will emerge. The way political structures function in reality is expected to be changed by one event – the prosecution of those responsible for the collapse of the station canopy. That event is the turning point, one that experientially and factually verifies a new reality. Methodologically, the resistance is *inductive*, meaning it moves from the particular to the general (justice, truth, in this case).

¹¹ These are: the publication of all documentation on the reconstruction of the canopy, filing a lawsuit, prosecution and political responsibility for the death of 15 citizens of Novi Sad, punishing all persons who committed violence against students (FDA and beyond), and the release of detained students. After the mass demonstrations on March 15, 2025, when a sound cannon was used to disperse the demonstrators, another demand was added, namely: clarification of the phenomenon of the sound cannon.

Žižek cites the position of students:

We do not have political demands and we keep our distance from opposition parties – we simply demand that Serbian institutions act in the interest of the citizens (Žižek 2025 n.d.).

Students' lack of interest in "seizing" power aligns with their goal of ensuring that institutions operate within their defined mandates – and only within those mandates. It is remarkable how clear the students' demands are and how much they confuse commentators on the blockade. Their simplicity causes a misunderstanding, Žižek notes. Criticism that students lack a political vision reflects a failure to understand nonviolent resistance. As film director Rajko Grlić said, "This resistance jumped out of politics; it doesn't fight politics with political means like the '68ers did" (Grlić 2025). The protesters' position is that new politics should not be just a revised version of the old game. According to Žižek, a simple call for law and order can be more subversive than anarchic violence – especially since this resistance is deeply political. The demonstrators don't wish to continue politics within the existing framework – they want to change the corrupt way state institutions function.

Organizational Identity

The blockades have a clear communication tool: the red handprints mentioned earlier. When a theatre play in Belgrade ends with actors coming on stage with raised hands painted red, it is immediately understood as an expression of support for the protests. As this example shows, the nonviolent resistance is supported by countless creative ideas that embody the spirit of nonviolence and the determination to persist despite the uncertainty of the protest's duration and the physical attacks on participants during commemorations.

Plenary decision-making, used here, is an appropriate organizational method for nonviolent action. Plenums are spaces for listening, discussion, and joint decision-making – spaces that gather differences and filter agreements into collective decisions. No one represents the plenum, no one represents the group, which means the blockade does not rely on a single individual. This makes the group more resilient to potential “beheading” of the movement. An egalitarian, non-hierarchical organizational structure is a natural environment for the nonviolent practice of sharing, cooperation, and service.

The students do not see themselves as the saviors of Serbia (unlike the president and his cult of leadership); rather, they see the impact of the protest as shaping the direction in which change should take place. As one student said: “It’s a big deal if even a small community ends up resembling the vision we are following (Student [youtu.be 2024](https://youtu.be/2024))”.

So far, our neighbors’ nonviolent resistance has demonstrated that a non-hierarchical model does not have to be disorganized (e.g., how they clean the protest space before leaving it), nor chaotic (e.g., how they organize accommodations during protest marches across Serbia).

Gender Equality

Some public commentary on the student protests noted the large number of female students being invited to speak on talk shows, giving statements, articulating their views clearly and confidently. For this reason, some refer to these protests as a “women’s revolution.” Indeed, the percentage of women/girls visible in the media with their comments during the protests is high (in contrast to later media analyses and second-hand commentary, which are again dominated by male commentators). I personally believe that the egalitarian organizational structure and a feminist ethics of care – being implicitly practiced here – are responsible for the gender-equal character of this blockade.

Spirit of Victory over Fear, Joy, Self-Awareness

Thanks to private and independent media broadcasters, there is a wealth of video footage documenting the blockade in Serbia. The atmosphere on the streets of this country has changed remarkably. Many testify they haven't experienced such a feeling in decades. A spirit of goodwill, hope, and emotional resonance¹² seems to have taken over. The self-organization characteristic of nonviolent resistance is, according to citizens and students, best described in one word: love. Several students said: "So much love—they're giving us love." The enthusiasm and emotional intensity are still present, three months into the blockade.

At the same time, students have been deeply in touch with themselves – their fears and their hopes. Already in the first days of the blockade, as more people stood with the students, many noted: "the fear is gone." Indeed, overcoming fear is one of the key preconditions for nonviolent resistance. Many interviewed students and citizens repeat: "They gave us back hope" (Vasojević 2024). In this atmosphere of hope and joy, words like justice, freedom, responsibility, and truth regain their meaning. No longer heard as mere slogans, they resonate as values lived and embodied by blockade participants, awakening others to stand beside them.

Alongside this disappearance of fear, students are realizing their power. This is not their last protest – this is only the beginning. Their goal is to continue working to improve society for themselves, their families, and the future. The power within each individual, when united in collective resistance, is the driving force of the nonviolent uprising. Power does not lie in material things (weapons, money), but in the awareness of "the power of our voice" (Pajić N1 2014) and the strength of unity. It is magnificent, even miraculous, how the spirit of joy and hope has

¹² There are countless examples of this such as the solidarity of the tractor drivers with the demonstrators, who drive across the fields to reach the students in Novi Sad and defend them from cars driving into the protesting crowds (while driving through the fields to bypass police blockades), or the action of taxi drivers who come from Belgrade to Novi Sad to take students who got blisters walking to Novi Sad.

been preserved despite repeated violent provocations against protesting citizens.

Nonviolent Resistance is Stronger with Broader Support

Inclusion is the power of nonviolence, as seen in the blockades in Serbia. Students extend inclusiveness even to those who disagree with the blockade. This significantly differs from populist strategies. “No one is against anyone... When these blockades are over, we’ll still be colleagues. What else do we have, if not each other?” said one student (Insajder 2024).

Meditative Protests

From 11:52 to 12:07 or just before New Year’s, 15 minutes of silence for the victims of Novi Sad – this was, in my opinion, one of the most powerful aspects of the entire nonviolent resistance in Serbia. The image of Belgrade welcoming 2025 with a hundred thousand people holding up lit phones in silence – like fireflies – is one of the most transformative messages. The shared 15 minutes of silence helped establish a nonviolent stance: a gathering and grounding of the self, silence as inner reflection and a source of strength for outward action. I wonder whether that silence at intersections, in the glow of mobile lights at night, in the city squares, helped students sustain the long breath of nonviolent protest. Student testimonies confirm the impact of these meditative commemorations: “It’s the most magnificent thing I’ve ever experienced. You know you’re doing something good for yourself and for others,” said a philosophy student from Novi Sad (Insajder 2024).

Nonviolent Response to Violence

Unforgettable is the photo of a Novi Sad student looking directly into the eyes of a baton-wielding officer invading his space. This image is one of the visual summaries of the blockade. Students have endured much violence – from being summoned to “friendly” interviews by the BIA (intelligence service), harassment of both students and their parents, vehicles charging into commemorative roadblocks, break-in attempts at blocked faculties, and street beatings. There have been broken jaws and police batons, threats, and attempted bribery with apartments. The threats continue. Even Ustasha were invoked because of Croatian student support¹³. Five Croatian women attending a seminar in Belgrade were expelled. There was also an attempted propaganda spin about an alleged Vojvodina secession plot¹⁴.

And yet, students proudly conclude that the blockades have shown “smart people can be angry, but fight in a cultured, calm way. They fight together for a common goal, care for each other, and are inspired by one another” (Diary of Blocade 2024). A key characteristic of nonviolent resistance in the face of violent threats is the discourse of the students: it is cheerful, hopeful, and not fear-based. Students speak of the valuable life experiences they are gathering, not about politicians. They thank the public, their parents, professors, and express how much the support means to them. They refuse to be provoked by the daily threats of violence.

¹³ Mentioning the Ustasha is common in propaganda, which quickly equates Croatia with the Ustasha. The reason for mentioning the Ustasha was the brochure *Blokadna kuharica* [Blockade Cookbook], which the students in Zagreb compiled on the occasion of the blockade of the Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb in 2009, a brochure that was used by students in Serbia. Ana Brnabić, The President of the National Assembly of Serbia interpreted that as a “proof” that the blockades are an imported rebellion of the so-called color revolution. On the other hand, students who have dual citizenship, Croatian and Serbian were mentioned with the adjective *Ustaški*, while the support of Croatian students who came to Belgrade was “proof” of the “color revolution”.

¹⁴ The pressure continues even after February 2025. Dozens of students are in custody in Serbia, and six of them have escaped to Croatia, waiting for the denouement of events.

I want to emphasize that the new paradigm of nonviolence has its own logic. The features of nonviolent resistance mentioned above make sense within the concept of nonviolent action. Refraining from violence is not only an ethical or spiritual imperative (*ahimsa*), but also a strategic necessity. Rejecting violence in a just struggle is based on the realization that “we can attract people who dislike violence, and it gives us the opportunity to respect police officers who are also citizens of this society” (Insajder 2024). The aim is to attract the public observing the conflict.

Furthermore, the path to achieving the goal shapes the participants: everyone becomes a slightly better person (Insajder 2024). If we understand politics as caring for the common good – and not just party conflict – then every nonviolent resistance is political. One student put it succinctly: “This is the first time we’re fighting to wake up society.”

In this sense, existing party structures are secondary. In fact, the boycott is preparing the ground for a just political organization, which will likely take a party form. In nonviolent resistance, it is essential not to be drawn into the opponent’s spiral of violence. This is why students distance themselves from potential ideological detours by opposition politicians. More important to them is humor and maintaining a spirit where they “raise their voices not out of hatred, but out of hope” (Insajder 2024).

Conclusion

When we compare the characteristics of the populist political approach with the political nature of nonviolent resistance, we observe key differences. While inclusivity (alongside broad participation) is essential for achieving goals and shaping the spirit and process of the struggle in nonviolent resistance, exclusivity – masked as concern for “the whole people” or the “true will of the people”, which populists claim to uniquely represent – is a defining feature of populism. Nonviolent resistance has the capacity to integrate pluralism: the strength

of the protest grows with the expansion and mass support of the public/people, whereas populism, by its nature, is anti-pluralist. A mass nonviolent movement, in its organization, includes instruments of direct democracy such as leaderless plenums and protests without official spokespeople – both inherent to nonviolent resistance. In contrast, populism fosters a cult of leadership and centralizes governance and decision-making. Populist leaders define the “spirit of the people” in a voluntaristic manner and symbolically embody the people in a “l’état, c’est moi” fashion. Unlike this understanding of the people’s will, the fundamentally democratic concept of nonviolent resistance demands consistency in representing plenum decisions. Those who speak publicly are aware that they only represent themselves or are simply conveying decisions voted on by the plenum.

While populist politicians attack elites – whose definition or identification is often unverifiable – pursuing goals driven by the myth of a “spirit of the people” for which no unit of measure or definition exists, nonviolent resistance demonstrates something entirely different. In the case of the blockades in Serbia, nonviolent resistance focuses on a problem (corruption in a specific case) that is measurable and provable. The students’ demands are quantifiable and empirically verifiable, clearly time-bound – it can be determined when they are met and when the blockade ends. In this way, they are transparent.

Finally, despite the weight and violence it faces, nonviolent resistance radiates a spirit of hope, joy, and enthusiasm. Unlike populist politics, which operate by sowing fear and invoking threats (e.g., from migrants, “gender ideology”), stoking hatred toward imagined enemies, the precondition for nonviolent resistance is precisely the absence or overcoming of fear. In the program *Behind the News* on December 30, 2024, during an interview with student Mila Pajić, it was announced that thirteen suspects had been detained and indictments filed – what she called “a small victory for the blockade”. Another guest, also a student, concluded that the blockades proved a nonviolent structuring of a large community is not a utopia, but a lived reality.

Referring to the plenums, he stated: “The way we are today – this is what should be extended to society”, pointing to a sustainable model of decision-making.

We are privileged to live in a time when we are contemporaries of a nonviolent resistance in our region. Let us try to document their experience in all its detail, because we will need it for the times ahead – times in which the violence of local and global populist politics looms. This experience is invaluable in helping us discern what, in the spirit of nonviolence, should be accepted through dialogue, and what must be actively resisted.

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Conclusion

Charting the Way Forward: Feminist Principles for Future Peacebuilding Actions

Grassroots women's organizations are the pillars of community resilience and peacebuilding, but they often operate with minimal support from governments and donors. Their embedded knowledge, experience and wisdom as well as long-standing commitment make them essential actors in any sustainable peace process. Feminist values are central to building genuine peace, both locally and globally, because these values emphasize gender justice through the ethics of care and responsibility. Just peace requires dismantling patriarchal structures and integrating gender justice into every stage of conflict resolution and reconstruction.

Despite increasing numbers of educated women, academia often remains patriarchal and dismissive toward feminist knowledge. Feminist and peacebuilding curricula are marginalized, and the public intellectual space is shrinking. Women and LGBTQAI+ still face structural barriers within political parties, where patriarchal norms and tokenism limit their influence. Internal party dynamics often undermine public-facing gender equality commitments. Social media platforms are also increasingly dominated by anti-feminist and regressive narratives, influencing younger generations. Feminist voices risk being silenced or distorted in the digital sphere and they are barely visible in the fog of arrogance and ignorance.

Today we need strategic engagement of women and men from academia, activists from local civil society organizations, media

actors, artists and all citizens who want to raise their voices against violence, militarism and destruction. We need to provide a knowledge transfer between generations, rural and urban actors, and across sectors in order to build resilience. This includes mentoring, storytelling, and practice-based exchanges that sustain feminist engagement over time. We also need to build alliances between civil society, academia, political institutions, religious communities, and men who support gender equality are necessary to create transformative, intersectional, and inclusive peacebuilding.

Feminist peacebuilding in the Balkans, grounded in the principles of UNSCR 1325, emphasizes the centrality of gender equality in post-conflict reconstruction by advocating for the full and meaningful inclusion of women, not only as participants, but as leaders in decision-making processes. It challenges patriarchal and ethnonationalist power structures, promotes intersectional approaches that account for diverse experiences of marginalization, and insists on survivor-centered justice for victims of gender-based violence. Recognizing peace as more than the absence of war, it calls for dismantling structural and everyday violence, while fostering transnational and local solidarities that transcend ethnic and national divisions, offering a transformative alternative to mainstream post-war politics.

TEN STEPS IN FEMINIST PEACEBUILDING

1. Strengthen Cross-Sectoral Feminist Networks

Building Robust Networks linking grassroots organizations, academia, socially responsible businesses, and policy actors. This collaboration enables mutual learning, coordinated advocacy, and resource sharing, preventing fragmentation and enhancing impact, as some peace activists explain:

When we speak about the path forward, I believe that grassroots organizations—those of us working directly in the field—have a vital role to play. Through our lived experience, we demonstrate that change is possible, that it's neither unfeasible nor out of reach. While this may sometimes sound idealistic, I don't see it as utopian. We've been doing this work for nearly 30 years, and we take pride in what we've achieved. That, for now, is the perspective I'd like to share. (Lana Jajčević)

I would also emphasize the importance of strengthening the relationship between local non-governmental organizations and the academic community, as well as socially responsible businesses and entrepreneurial initiatives. It is crucial to foster networks that can generate collaborative actions and reduce the existing fragmentation among sectors. This is especially relevant for those of us within academia. Personally, I often describe myself as “sitting on two or even three chairs”, as I am engaged both in academic work and civil society. I am acutely aware of how these spheres can be mutually exclusive, and how often we fail to truly see and engage with one another. The knowledge and experience that emerge from practice are of immense value—not only in their own right but also in allowing examine whether the theories and concepts we discuss within the Academy hold relevance and validity when confronted with realities in the field. (Zilka Spahić Šiljak)

2. Establish a Feminist Legal and Advocacy Support Hub

Form a regional team of feminist legal experts and visionaries to assist women's organizations with rights-based claims and political engagement. Legal barriers often impede feminist organizing, especially in hostile environments. Collective legal support can protect and empower movements.

Every rigorously considered idealism leads to reality, as Wittgenstein suggests. It is crucial that we make a concerted effort to conceptualize not only a regional but a global interdisciplinary mega project from which initiatives and actions could emerge. United under one umbrella, we must - philosophically, sociologically, ethically, politically, culturally, and in every other possible way - deliver the most powerful intellectual blow to patriarchal structures of violence. (Nerzuk Ćurak)

3. Reclaim Digital Spaces through Strategic Communication

Develop feminist digital campaigns, creative content (e.g., satire, storytelling), and partner with progressive influencers. Without counter-narratives, digital platforms perpetuate sexism and misinformation. Creative online presence can reach younger audiences and shift public perception.

In a world where algorithms amplify violence and silence dissent, reclaiming digital spaces is not just resistance, it is reconstruction. Strategic communication is our tool for truth-telling, coalition-building, and reshaping narratives that center justice and equality. (Zilka Spahić Šiljak)

4. Use Art to Channel Peace Messages

By using visual, performative, and literary forms, artists and activists can engage wider audiences emotionally and politically, transforming public spaces into arenas for dialogue, resistance,

and healing. Through art, peace is not only envisioned but actively practiced and embodied.

I would also like us not to forget a certain form of subversive action, in the spirit of what Professor Aida Hozić spoke about yesterday-heresy, particularly for those who are not from Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the Middle Ages, Bosnia and Herzegovina was referred to as Terra Heretica, because it became a refuge situated at the crossroads between the Western and Eastern empires. It was a place where those who were persecuted elsewhere would flee, and though they were later persecuted within Bosnia as well, the country nonetheless offered a space of freedom for ideas that may have seemed deviant from the perspective of the mainstream, yet carried profound meaning and found a free space in which to exist. This is precisely what the idea of this art embodies-creativity, and a kind of strength that we truly need in order to inspire one another. (Amra Pandžo)

5. Institutionalize Mentorship and Intergenerational Exchange

Create structured mentorship programs that connect younger and more experienced feminist activists. Mentorship reduces burnout, builds leadership, and preserves feminist memory, especially in under-resourced areas.

Upon entering the field of activism, one of the critical gaps I experienced was the absence of mentorship from more experienced women. This highlights the need to prioritize structured mentorship between seasoned activists and emerging younger women. Such intergenerational knowledge transfer is essential-not only for the transmission of experiential insights and strategic know-how but also for fostering resilience, confidence, and preparedness among new generations of feminist and peacebuilding actors. (Ernada Fatima Avdibegović)

6. Advance Peace Education in Formal Curricula

Integrate feminist peacebuilding into school and university programs through guest lectures, new modules, and activist-academic partnerships. Formal education can challenge patriarchal norms early, helping students develop critical and democratic engagement skills.

Anyone coming from a university background and working with female and male students can likely observe a noticeable increase in conservatism among young people compared to perhaps a decade ago. In light of this, one possible suggestion—or rather, a lesson for us—is that we must remain critically aware, and through the courses we teach and the literature we assign at universities, we must actively promote policies of peace and gender justice. (Jasna Kovačević)

7. Engage with Men and Religious Allies for Gender Justice

Build partnerships with male allies and progressive religious figures who support egalitarian values. Gender equality cannot be achieved in isolation. Including men and faith leaders helps challenge stereotypes and broaden the reach of feminist agendas.

It may be necessary to develop a form of alliance policy with individuals from monotheistic religious communities who categorically reject dogmatic conservative notions that position men as primary and women as secondary. Although we know there are not many such individuals, they could, in some way, become allies in this crucial struggle for gender equality. I say this because religion represents a significant form of social consciousness, which can lead either to a culture of peace or to cultural violence. Those few individuals who understand the importance of gender equality are, in my view, valuable allies in the work we are undertaking. (Nerzuk Ćurak)

8. Advocate for Structural Reform in Political Institutions

Pressure political parties to internalize gender equality through leadership quotas, gender audits, and accountability mechanisms. Formal inclusion (e.g., quotas) is insufficient without internal cultural and structural change in political institutions.

Within the broader context of institutional engagement, peacebuilding, and the role of women in political discourse, I believe it is imperative to critically examine how political parties can be transformed from within. (Medina Mujić)

9. Support Informal and Underserved Groups through Flexible Funding

Encourage donors to provide micro-grants and simplified application processes for informal collectives and rural women's groups. Many impactful initiatives go unfunded due to bureaucratic hurdles. Flexible funding models support rapid response and innovation.

Regarding financial matters, there are already established and tested program methodologies that have been implemented over several years. Existing methodologies applied in peacebuilding projects across the region can be examined and adapted to increase accessibility for women in rural areas. We should build upon the knowledge and practices that already exist. (Tatjana Perić)

10. Care and Responsibility as Foundations of Peace

Feminist peacebuilding recognizes that genuine peace is not achieved solely through political agreements or institutional reforms, but through the cultivation of relational ethics rooted in care, empathy, and mutual responsibility. Drawing from feminist ethics of care, this principle emphasizes the importance of interdependence, emotional labor, and community well-being

in healing fractured societies. It values everyday acts of support, listening, and solidarity—especially among women—as essential political work that sustains peace over time. By centering care, feminist peacebuilding challenges the masculinized logic of domination and reframes peace as a process of shared responsibility and collective nurturing.

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Amra Pandžo was born in 1970 in Sarajevo. Over the last two decades she has been actively involved in peacebuilding, trust-building, and recovery from war horrors of citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Her work was inspired by the “Bosnian spirit” of community, inclusion, and the power of her faith in Islam. She has worked in Kosovo and Ukraine, and with citizens from Afghanistan, sharing her own experiences of reconciliation from Bosnia. She compiled a manual for religious education teachers on the peace dimension of Islam and published the book *Path to Peace: Peacebuilding and Islam in Bosnia and Herzegovina*. She teaches at the Feminism and Religion [FER] School of the University of Sarajevo.

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Jasna Kovačević is an Associate Professor of Management and Organization at the Faculty of Economics at the University of Sarajevo. Her research area includes leadership and strategy, leadership in education, and ethics in organizations, with a special emphasis on gender and leadership, the development of inclusive organizational culture, social justice, diversity, equality, and inclusion. She is the author and co-author of several publications, including *Echoes of Change: Advancing Gender Equality in Higher Education in the Balkans* (2025); *The Prize of Impure Blood: Cultural and Economic Perspectives of Menstruation in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (2025); *Mainstreaming Gender Equality in the Balkans* (2023). She is also a feminist and an advocate for the rights of children and adults with disabilities.

Lana Jajčević is a peacebuilding activist and gender equality advocate with over 25 years of experience in the NGO sector. A certified trainer in strategic planning, mediation, and conflict resolution, she has led numerous initiatives supporting women and children survivors of domestic violence. Founder of “Udružene žene” and co-founder of Bosnia’s anti-human trafficking network “Ring”, she has influenced legislation on gender equality at both state and entity levels. A former board member of multiple women’s rights organizations, she also served on multidisciplinary teams for victim support. Honored for her humanitarian work and peace advocacy, including presenting at the international conference on UN Resolution 1325, she continues to inspire systemic change and empower marginalized communities across Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Linda Gusia is a sociologist and feminist researcher, as well as the Head of the Institute for Sociology at the University of Pristina. Her research interests cover topics such as gender, feminism, activism, space, social movements, memory, and violence. She is particularly focused on analyzing how gender and feminist engagement shape social dynamics and the issues of collective memory and spaces of resistance. As one of the co-founders of the Gender Studies and Research Program at the University of Prishtina, she actively contributes to the development of an interdisciplinary approach to the study of gender and social justice.

Margareta Bašaragin holds an MA in German Language and Literature from the University of Novi Sad. She obtained her PhD in 2017 at the Center for Gender Studies ACIMSI, Novi Sad. She has been a commissioner of the Novi Sad branch of the “Women’s Studies and Research” association in Subotica since 2020. She received the “Anđelka Milić” award from SeFem Belgrade (2022) and the “Bring The Noise” award from BeFem Belgrade (2023). Her publications include: *Gender, Culture, and Discourse in Classroom Conversations* (2019), *Notable Jewish Women of Subotica* (2020); *Antifascist Women of Subotica: Koms, Partisans, and AFŽ Members* (2021); *Contributions to the History of Women’s Studies in Vojvodina: Women’s Studies in Subotica* (2023); *Notable Women of Subotica in the 20th Century: Feminists, Artists, Peacemakers, and Philanthropists* (2024).

Marjana Stevanović is a philologist, lecturer, and journalist. She completed a Master’s program in Gender Studies at ACIMSI, University of Novi Sad. She is a doctoral student at the Faculty of Political Sciences at the University of Belgrade, focusing on media and communication. Her research interests include language politics, gender and language, feminism, and human rights. She is the author of several academic papers, *The Dictionary of New Reality*, and co-author of the *Guide for the Use of Gender-Sensitive Language*, as well as the *Grammar of the Serbian Language for Seventh Grade*. She has been a speaker at numerous panels dedicated to gender-sensitive language and media reporting.

As a member of the group Journalists Against Violence, she participated in analyzing media coverage of violence against women.

Nermina Mujagić is a Full Professor of Political Sciences of the Department of Political Sciences, University of Sarajevo. Her current research projects focus on constitutional democracy and states in the Balkans, political representation of minority groups, and the deficit democratic values in the 21st century. She is the author of *Pro et contra ustava* (2022); *Višegrađanstvo: analize i nove teorije na relaciji: država, građani i društvo* (2017); *Politika kao spektakl: bacanje mreže u susjedov ribnjak* (2013); *Tihi govor Bosne* (2010); and *Izvan politike* (2007). She has written dozens of peer-reviewed articles and chapters in edited volumes and a number of articles in journals and edited volumes. Her work has been supported by the Fulbright Program, Open Society Institute, Center for Global Communication Studies, and many other fellowships.

Nerzuk Ćurak is a professor at the Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Sarajevo. He is an essayist, scientific publicist, journalist, columnist, editor, intellectual, peace, and civil rights activist. His books include: *Dayton Nationalism* (2004); *Rebuilding Bosnian Utopias: Political Science, Political Philosophy, and Sociology of the Dayton State and Society* (2006); *Philosophy of the Hug* (2009); *Report from a Peripheral Country: Grammar of Geopolitics*; *Debate on Peace and Violence: (Geo) Politics of War – (Geo) Politics of Peace – Peace Studies* (2016); *From Eros to Polemos: Conversations* (2018); *Why Bosnia and Not Nothing* (2021). He is a corresponding member of the Academy of Sciences and Arts of Bosnia and Herzegovina [ANUBiH] and a member of the PEN Center of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Renata Jambrešić Kirin is a scientific advisor at the Institute for Ethnology and Folkloristics, a collaborator at the Centre for Women's Studies in Zagreb, and co-director of the postgraduate seminar *Feminisms in a Transnational Perspective* (IUC, Dubrovnik 2007–2025). She has published books *Dom i svijet: O*

ženskoj kulturi pamćenja [Home and the World: On Women's Culture of Memory] (2008) and *Korice od kamfora* [Camphor Covers] (2015), and co-edited fifteen volumes, including seven within the *Feminisms in a Transnational Perspective* publishing series. Her scientific and professional work in the field of war ethnography, war and refugee memory, feminist anthropology, and women's history has been published in both domestic and international journals and publications. She is a member of the Ad Hoc Feminist Anti-War Coalition.

Svetlana Janković holds an MA in defense, security, and protection sciences. She is a retired lieutenant colonel (2018), and she worked in the military from 1989. She is a doctoral candidate at the Faculty of Engineering Management, University "Union-Nikola Tesla" in Belgrade. She published more than 50 articles and two monographs. She won the Anđelka Milić Award in 2018. In the framework of the OSCE Mission in Serbia, she worked as a gender and security consultant for the Coordination Body for Gender Equality of the Government of the Republic of Serbia (2018–2019). She was a member of the working team for the development of the National Action Plan for implementing the UN Security Council Resolution "Women, Peace, Security" 1325 (2010–2015 and 2016–2020).

Suada Hadžović spent her professional career working in municipal administrative bodies. During the war, she was engaged as the secretary of the War Presidency of the Municipality, and later she worked on restoring administrative governance under wartime conditions, preparing and overseeing the process of peaceful reintegration of the municipality. She was elected to the House of Representatives of the Parliament of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (1998–2000; 2006). From 2001–2003, she was the Minister for Combatants and Disabled Veterans of the Defense and Liberation War in the Government of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. She is the author of the book "Municipality Ilidža 1990–1996: A Reflection of Politics and People". She has received numerous social awards, including the Lifetime Achievement Charter of the Municipality of Ilidža in 2023.

Tanja Antić is a doctoral student at the Department of Culture at the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade, where she researches contemporary social and cultural phenomena. Her areas of interest include topics such as identity, language, and love, with a particular focus on the LGBTIQ+ community, as well as folk and contemporary culture. She also explores mental health issues through the lens of cultural and social norms, analyzing their connection to contemporary identity politics and language practices.

Vesna Janković is a sociologist and activist who initiated several civic initiatives: Svarun (1986), the Croatian Anti-War Campaign (1991), the Women's War Victims Centre (1993), the Autonomous Cultural Factory – Attack (1997), the Initiative for a Public Orchard at Jarun (2022), and the Ad Hoc Feminist Anti-War Coalition (2023). She has co-edited books such as *Rat i ljudska prava* [War and Human Rights] (1993), *Žene oblikuju ekonomiju i politiku* [Women Shape Economy and Politics] (2002), *Women Recollecting Memories* (bilingual, English-Croatian edition) (2003), *Antiratna kampanja 1991.-2011. Neispričana povijest* [Anti-War Campaign 1991–2011. Untold History], and *Resisting the Evil: [Post-]Yugoslav Anti-War Contention* (2012).

Vildana Džekman is the president of the Women's Association "Make a Difference" and a long-time activist, feminist, peacekeeper, and fighter for women's human rights. She holds an MA in International Private Law at the Faculty of Law, University of Sarajevo from 2021. She held the position of the president of the Board of Directors of one of the largest peace networks in Bosnia and Herzegovina – the Peacebuilding Network, where she contributed to its registration as an organization, which continues to operate actively. She writes actively, as she considers writing to be part of social responsibility and the preservation of women's feminist and activist history. She is the author of the collection of texts *Journey through Activism*, which contains stories about women and activist heroines of today.

Zilka Spahić Šiljak is an Associate Professor of Gender Studies and Academic Director of the University Gender Resource Center at UNSA. She leads the TPO Foundation in Sarajevo and lectures as a visiting professor at the University of Zenica, University of Sarajevo and the University of Novi Sad. Her research interests lie at the intersection of gender, religion, education, and peacebuilding. Her publications include: *Echoes of Change: Advancing Gender Equality in Higher Education in the Balkans* (2025); *The Prize of Impure Blood: Cultural and Economic Perspectives of Menstruation in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (2025); *Mainstreaming Gender Equality in the Balkans* (2023); *The Balkans Labyrinth: Culture, Gender, and Leadership* (2021), *Sociology of Gender – Feminist Critique* (2019). She is a co-director of Feminism and Religion [FER] online school.

Željko Šarić is an Assistant Professor at the Philosophy Department of the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Banja Luka. He conducts research in the fields of existential philosophy, philosophical anthropology, philosophy of evolution, and philosophical posthumanism. He has edited the collections *Kritička teorija društva* [Critical Theory of Society] and *Holokaust i teologija* [The Holocaust and Theology]. He has participated in several international scientific projects, such as Sciences of the Origin and Biopolitical Aspects of Institutional Action. He is the founder and president of the Association for Philosophy and Social Thought from Banja Luka, He is a certified trainer in Philosophy for Children. He is also the organizer and coordinator of events such as Fil(m)ozofija, Philosophical Evenings, and Socrates' Café.

Photos



Conference Brochure



Cynthia Enloe



Dragana Gajić, Tatjana Perić



Elma Softić-Kaunitz, Vildana Džekman, Amra Pandžo, Zilka Spahić Šiljak



Elma Softić-Kaunitz



Ernada Fatima Avdibegović, Vesna Janković, Biljana Kašić, Uma Đurić, Lana Jajčević



*Ifeta Merjemić, Vildana Džekman,
Jadranka Rebeka Anić*



*Irena Praskac Salčin, Maja Savanović
Zorić, Ružica Ljubičić, Medina Mujić*



Jasmina Husanović



*Jasna Kovačević, Biljana Kašić, Nerzuk
Čurak, Zilka Spahić Šiljak, Medina Mujić*



Zilka Spahić Šiljak, Jasna Kovačević



Lana Jajčević



Linda Gusia



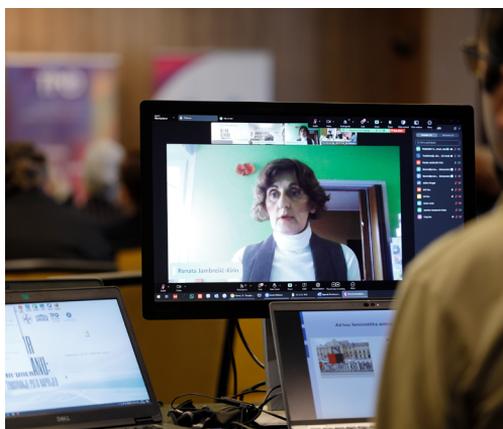
*Marijana Stevanović, Medina Mujić,
Tanja Antić, Edisa Gazetić,
Sara Arslanagić*



Nermina Mujagić, Gaj Trifković



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Suada Hadžović



Vesna Janković, Biljana Kašić



*Vildana Džekman, Adem Olovčić,
Dragana Gajić, Svetlana Jaković*



*Željko Šarić, Jadranka Rebeka Anić,
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*Zilka Spahić Šiljak, Suada Hadžović,
Anesa Karaselimović*



Aida A. Hozić



Amra Pandžo, Zilka Spahić Šiljak



*Ana-Marija Raffai,
Jadranka Rebeka Anić,
Lana Jajčević*



Ana-Marija Raffai - Final panel



Ana-Marija Raffai, Ifeta Merjemić



Ankica Dragin



Biljana Kašić, Svetlana Janković

Drawing on diverse experiences and research, the book provides insight into a wide array of local peace initiatives, peace projects, and peacebuilding activities, led by women and feminists across Croatia, Kosovo¹, Serbia, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. By exploring these feminist efforts for peace, the book raises important questions about feminist history, memory, peacebuilding, and how these movements have dealt with nationalism, new state policies, and the rise of populism. Central to this effort is the book's emphasis on different forms of knowledge and practice. It elaborates on the concepts of practice-based knowledge and tacit knowledge, i.e. the theory of wisdom, arguing that women in conflict and post-conflict settings often draw on generations of social roles, caregiving, and community leadership to address the complexities of peacebuilding. This feminist ethics of care is a cornerstone of the book's vision for a new way forward. The text argues that this framework, which emphasizes interdependence, affective learning and emotional labor, and community well-being, directly challenges the masculinized logic of domination.

- Dr. Larisa Kasumagić-Kafedžić, University of Sarajevo

Across the Balkans—and beyond—this timely anthology shows how feminist ways of knowing and doing can remake peace. Part field guide, part manifesto, it pairs rigorous scholarship with in-the-room dialogues and frontline testimonies to bridge theory and practice. The collection traces a living feminist legacy while confronting the rise of anti-gender discourse and populism, and it spotlights the meeting points of feminism with interfaith activism. The book closes with a bold, practical ten-step roadmap for breaking our collective addictions to militarism, patriarchy, and violence, turning insight into action for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers alike.

- Dr. Randall Puljek-Shank, Director of Peace Academy, USA

¹ This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999.

