

My Voice Echoes...

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Masha Durkalić

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Sarajevo, 2015

Some sections of the book contain harsh language which may offend some readers. This language represents the authentic testimony of the authors for which the authors bear sole responsibility.

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Introduction: The margin exists to be erased

Taking into consideration that I am a journalist/writer, while thinking about life on the margin, my first association is always that margin in Microsoft Word, which I see even while writing this, that moves as needed so the whole text could fall into one place as I prefer. Although the association is very banal its comparability with reality is unquestionable. If we imagine society as a blank sheet of paper written on every day and if we identify the inability to move the margin with the lack of will of those who are writing on that page to do so, it is easy to understand why marginalized groups in our society are in the position they are in - a position of poverty, discrimination, rejection and social exclusion. It is obvious - the (privileged) part of society does not want them to be on the inside of the margin where they let them exist.

The leading "values" of our society and its political leadership have never been changed and are guided by heteronormative patriarchal rules which lightly put aside gender equality justifying this by the good old platitude "We were in a war" which political figures and other decision makers have used to legitimate the fact that everything needs to be addressed except gender equality. Everything else is more important from constitutional changes and the Sejdić-Finci verdict, to alarmingly high rates of poverty, etc. Everything is a bigger priority than the fact that women in BiH are discriminated against, unequal and in a position of need in relation to the male part of the population. Women in BiH constitute half of the society, but even so they are a marginalized group. Unfortunately, Bosnia and Herzegovina is not a pioneer regarding this trend - everywhere in

the world there has been a brisk fight for gender equality for decades and the victories are achieved only in countries of social well-being where gender equality has become imminent. Without doubt, BiH is a country in transition, poor, with a complicated political system, burdened by series of problems, but that still does not give it the right to treat women as if everything is more important than them. Women in BiH are marginalized simply because they are women. Even women whom we could “call privileged”, in comparison with other groups of marginalized women, i.e. women who are employed, healthy, and have finances and provided housing, face discrimination. Women are paid less, given fewer chances for employment; they are asked whether they are planning to start a family which directly affects the possibility of employment; employers prefer men even if they have the same qualifications; women are subject to dismissal after maternity leave and are owners of property on a much smaller scale. There are many types of discrimination deeply rooted in the system. But if we narrow down the focus of the story and if we focus only on women who belong to marginalized groups, within that marginalized group that exists only on the basis of sex/gender, we come to the horrible picture of our social reality that causes such tremendous harm to women in BiH. The aim of this publication is to reveal everyday marginalized women through their confessions and give them a voice to say freely what it is like to be in their shoes because if the leaders of institutions think they have any idea of how these women live, they are mistaken. These women do not lie about their lives. Their stories are supported by collected and fragmented data presented in the accompanying texts after each confession. In order to enhance those scanty numbers and statistics, I also interviewed activists who work with marginalized women, so they too can verify their truth and further clarify the difficulties that accompany these women. Marginalized women in BiH are all around us. They are Roma women with children begging on the streets condemned by society because their children are not clean or fed, while they and their immediate and extended families live in shacks without electricity or running water below the poverty threshold. They are women survivors of wartime rape who are still waiting for justice and judgment for perpetrators while receiving miserable social assistance from the state and spend their days under sedation. Marginalized women are also rural women who have spent their lifetimes working hard, for free, in the fields and on farms producing a large part of the food we eat while also doing unpaid household work. Women on the margins are also athletes, whether they are involved in sports that are seen

as “female” or those considered more “male” such as weight lifting, football, or boxing, because they do not have equal conditions for training. The Margins exist also for lesbian, bisexual and trans * women condemned to fear of violence, societal rejection, coming out to themselves first and then to their family and the wider community, fear of dismissal, loneliness and unhappiness just because they love people of the same sex or because their gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. Marginalized women are single mothers who have decided to bring their children into the world on their own or were divorced from their partners and therefore suffer the lack of payment of child support and must be magicians in order to feed their children, surviving very often on the edge of poverty. Women victims of domestic violence are also on the margins, and they suffer psychological, physical, sexual and economic violence, live in fear, suffer from various mental and physical traumas and are afraid to leave the perpetrators out of the fear what will society say or how they will live without money and a roof over their heads. Finally, the margin also includes women with disabilities who cannot pass on the sidewalk in wheelchairs because of parked cars, who are unable to work or already have a difficulty getting employment, who cannot access health centres or defend themselves from the pity of those who think that they should be pitied because of their disabilities. We do not see these marginalized women. Very often they are not even statistics for us, because statistics on them are almost non-existent. Also, the state does not see them and neither do its laws which are supposed to deal with these issues, despite the fact that many regulations exist. In theory the laws look great and the state has ratified a myriad of important international documents that should be mandatory to guarantee a dignified status to these marginalized groups. These women may belong to one of these marginalized groups or to many or even all of them. Their marginalization is never limited. Yet there is not a single marginalized group in this publication to which the state has systematically paid attention and resolved its problems. Therefore, these women have decided to speak out. They have decided to tell their stories and let their voices resonate as far as they can in order to be heard by everyone – both those who can do a little and those who can do a lot. Ten confessions of women who belong to marginalized groups will evoke true life on the margins. How does it feel when you are offered sweets just because you are in a wheelchair? How does it feel when someone wants to beat you because you are a woman, but you look like a man? How does it feel when your husband beats you and your five children, and the neighbours, the police and the prosecutors do nothing?

How does it feel when your partner wants you to get rid of the child you will have and leaves you? How does it feel when you have been working your whole life in the field and no one has ever paid you? But, you will also find out that it is possible to establish a successful women's basketball team for women with disabilities who play with the men's teams, and that a young Roma woman can pass the driving test, get a contract and plan to study at a university. You will learn that it is possible for a woman to win medals and repeat sporting successes in a "male" sport and that a woman can bear a child alone, raise it alone and be a successful mother. These are their lives, this is their reality and these are their stories: the ones that we will not hear when we see them on the street, because simply, we will not even ask. These women show that the margins on a page can be moved, as we do it with the mouse in Microsoft Word, so everyone can find their place on this paper. In order for everybody to get the place they deserve by virtue of being human beings, it is only necessary for all of us to have enough will and desire as well as basic human empathy and devotion to the idea of equality. Let's work together so that ours does not become a society which always looks the other way and sweeps problems under the carpet. Let's give opportunities to those who have not had them at birth or have lost them because of life circumstances. Let's delete the margin!

Masha Durkalić



"It is not the end of the world because I am in a wheelchair, with will and persistence there is something to live for."

Jefika Skorupan

Confession of a woman with disability

It is not the end of the world because I am in a wheelchair, with will and persistence there is something to live for.

My name is Skorupan Šefika, I live in Sarajevo and I am the president, manager and player of the women's basketball team in wheelchair "Bambi". I have been a person with disability since 1993, when I was wounded by a grenade coming back from work. At the time of my accident, 21 years ago, I had great difficulty leaving the hospital and arriving home, because I had an inadequate accommodation for people in wheelchairs in my apartment and I had family issues and financial problems. During my recovery, I realized that I could not run away from myself. My son, Alen, was six years old at the time. My husband, Meho, was my right-hand man for everything and together they were my biggest supporters, as they are even today. We endured many problems, and sometimes we thought there was no way out. We managed to do and adapt to many things, but that took time.

Today I live in a society where some of its members do not want and do not understand us. After my recovery I was faced with the fact that nothing will ever be the same and that my life is no longer what it was before. After a short time I began to go out into the city. Our society is unfamiliar with persons in wheelchairs and I had the

feeling that everybody felt sorry because I was in this condition. Many approached me and offered chocolate, apples, bananas- all out of pity. I saw myself as a degraded person in this society. I really had a problem with such reactions. But I persisted. I decided to go into the city several more times and some persons understood the message so they did not feel sorry for me so much anymore. I found strength and I told myself: "You can do it, go ahead!"

While watching sports which included persons with disabilities, I wanted to get involved too because previously, when I was healthy, I was a track and field athlete. I joined the athletics team, where I have achieved remarkable results, and five years in a row I was declared the best athlete of the Sarajevo Canton in the category of athletes with disabilities. I moved on from athletics to start a basketball team in wheelchairs in 1999, where girls in wheelchair join the sport. In this sport we had to play against male teams because there are no other women's teams on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, and even today only our team exists in this category.

I am, as a woman with disability, part of a large group of marginalized women and I am exposed to multiple forms of discrimination just because I am a woman and I am of the sex which is facing major problems. It has always been said:

- Women cannot play basketball in wheelchairs
- Women in wheelchairs cannot drive a car
- Women in wheelchairs do not have the financial support for a stroller
- Women do not have the necessary bus transportation to get to practice (while the male team did)
- Women in wheelchairs do not have the necessary conditions at the gynaecologist
- Women in wheelchairs do not have a job, etc.
- Women do not have the necessary bus transportation to get to training (while the male team did)

The injustice in our society is still present. Equality of opportunities should be standard in every society, including ours.

Being the person that I am, I have achieved many things I never imagined I could.

- I passed my driving test and I drive a car alone.
- I founded a basketball team in wheelchairs (which plays against men) and I have been running it for 14 years now.
- I have been declared the best sports official in Sarajevo Canton in

2013 and 2014, in the category of disabled athletes, and this was the first time a woman had been elected as the best sports worker.

My message is that women should not be neglected. They need to fight! The fact that I am in a wheelchair is not the end of the world. With will and persistence there is something to live for.

We should not give up even when we fall; we should get up to make our voices heard and not let the injustice beat us!

My basketball players and I were manipulated, but we won against society because we were more exposed to the public and we moved a lot more than other people with disabilities. Mine and my basketball players' successes were enormous compared to the situation we were in at the beginning.

- We managed to be included in the BiH Basketball championship in wheelchairs and we play against male teams.

- We managed to pass our driving tests.

- We now have orthopedic aids (although it is still necessary to adopt a new law).

- Some of us are currently employed and work side by side with men.

- We fought for the removal of architectural barriers (although some still exist).

What else can I say, my dear friends? Stand up for your rights and let the public know about it. If the public does not know about your problems then no one can help you. Bring everything you have to the table. It will be easier. If I have helped you by exposing my story, let me know and I will help you improve your life too.

Sincerely,

Skorupan Šefika

Women with disabilities: Wrongful victims of pity and social isolation

Since the war, BiH society has faced an increase in the number of people with disabilities who require comprehensive assistance. To this day our country has failed to adequately help people with disabilities, and discrimination directed toward them is still an integral part of our society. It is expressed in numerous ways ranging from the lack of ramps for access to buildings to a comprehensive (false) compassion shown by the society towards people with disabilities but without any visible will to consider them equal members of the society.

Women with disabilities are doubly marginalized, first because of their sex/gender and then because of their disability. For them the society has reserved a special kind of deceptive empathy that largely considers them unfit to exercise independent (family) life and to build a career. It is believed that these persons are forever bound with other people who have to care for them and that they are just another social category weighing down the already burdened state budget. Through the confession of Šefika Skorupan, a great sports worker, it is evident that the society is aware of disabilities to a great extent, but treats it incorrectly. Because of this, Šefika states that people have, out of pity, offered her fruits and sweets while at the same time no one took into account that she, although in a wheelchair, is the founder of a successful women's basketball team

that played games with men, and that she has been named the best sports worker in Sarajevo Canton in the category of disabled athletes. The successes Šefika made are overshadowed by her disability. This is also the experience of many other women with disabilities where double discrimination has been an obstacle to achieving important goals in life or they did not even have a chance to become successful individuals.

The list of cases of everyday discrimination against women with disabilities is long and upsetting. To a large extent they are socially excluded, do not have adequate health care and access to services or equal opportunities for education and a career. Bosnia and Herzegovina has adopted the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (although with minimal effect so far) as well as the document “Disability Policies in BiH”¹ in which there is data that almost 10% of BiH citizens have a physical, sensory, developmental, mental or emotional disability, while 30% of the population is directly or indirectly affected by the consequences of the phenomenon of disability.² Furthermore, nearly two-thirds of the total number of adults with disabilities live near or below the threshold of poverty.³ If we apply the simplest estimate that half of the people in these statistics are female and that women are, due to social circumstances, often the victims of poverty, it is easy to conclude how serious the situation is. Official and/or usable statistics on women with disabilities do not exist but as a kind of a reference we can use the 2010 figure from the Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which states that, according to data from the Centers for social work, that there are 60,950 registered people with disabilities, out of which 52% are men.⁴

1 “Disability Policies in BiH”, available at: <http://fmrsp.gov.ba/s/images/stories/Politika%20u%20oblasti%20invalidnosti%20u%20Bosni%20i%20Hercegovini.pdf>

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 BiH Initial Report on the Implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. May 2012. Available at: http://www.mhrr.gov.ba/Javni_poziv/INICIJALNI%20%20IZVJESTAJ%20BIH.pdf

Tanja Mandić Đokić, MSc, sociologist and the president of the Humanitarian organization “Partner”⁵ from Banja Luka, on the basis of her experience in working with women with disabilities, concludes that their position in BiH is very difficult, that they are a vulnerable group exposed to discrimination on multiple grounds and in a very difficult social situation. “The isolation and the lack of recognition, based on culture and traditional attitudes and prejudices, often have more influence on women with disabilities and lead to the lack of self-esteem and to negative feelings.”

A serious problem is the fact that discrimination exists also based on the causes of disability. Disabled war veterans and civilian victims of war are significantly more likely to have rights than disabled workers and people with disabilities of a non-war origin.⁶ Women, according to some estimates, are more likely to fall in the latter category since they were not equally present on the battlefield (although certainly there were female civilian victims of war). For example, financial compensation for the same level and type of disability can range from 41 to 1700 BAM.⁷ Due to the lack of institutional support, family becomes the main source of protection for women with disabilities, but poverty, social exclusion, discrimination, lack of information about rights and numerous other problems mean that women with disabilities are still on the margins of the society.

A superficial and very common opinion is that women with disabilities cannot live independently, cannot perform daily activities or start a family. Most persons with disabilities live in a state of dependence on their parents or other members of their family, which is especially true for women with disabilities.⁸ “Society does not recognize or it underestimates the role of women with disabilities in the social, parental and economic life, which significantly affects the image that women with disabilities have about themselves. They grow up and are brought up in an atmosphere focused on their inability and diversity which puts them in a passive position in relation to

5 Humanitarian organization “Partner”: <http://www.ho-partner.rs.rs/>

6 Alternative Report on Progress 2014: Political criteria. The initiative for the monitoring of the European integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Sarajevo, July 2014. Available at: http://soc.ba/site/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Alternativni-izvjestaj-2014_BHS_za-web.pdf

7 Disability Policies in BiH”, available at: <http://fmrsp.gov.ba/s/images/stories/Politika%20u%20oblasti%20invalidnosti%20u%20Bosni%20i%20Hercegovini.pdf>

8 Ibid.

engagement for their own sake. This leads women with disabilities to leave to others to make decisions about their lives. In this way their isolation is also supported by themselves,” says Tanja Mandić Đokić.

Women with disabilities are absolutely not competitive in the labor market. The state has no special programs for the re-education and rehabilitation or employment of women with disabilities, nor does it have relevant statistics, data or special measures for their protection in the areas of labor and employment.⁹ The report of NGO’s ICVA and Rights for All called “The implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in BiH “ notes that there is a disproportionately higher number of men compared to women with disabilities who are directly employed by the Fund for Vocational Rehabilitation and the Employment of Disabled Persons, which may indicate that amongst the (un)employed persons with disabilities there is a large number of men who are disabled war veterans, but also a small number of women with disabilities who are familiar with the programs implemented by the aforementioned Fund, and who sought employment or funds to start their own businesses.¹⁰

Tanja Mandić Đokić explains the reasons why women with disabilities are a highly impoverished category in the society:

1. The inability to realize the right to education due to the maladjustment of the educational system;
2. Very low levels of employment because of a low level of educational attainment, lack of adequate mechanisms for stimulated employment and general high level of unemployment;
3. Additional costs due to inadequate social support systems.

The already mentioned report by NGOs states that educational and health institutions which employ large numbers of people, employ

9 Esther Garcia Fransioli: Annual report on the state of women’s rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina during 2013, according to the Combined fourth and fifth periodic report of Bosnia and Herzegovina for the implementation of the CEDAW Convention. Available at: <http://www.ffuis.edu.ba/media/attachments/2014/12/01/Godisnji-izvjestaj-o-stanju-ljudskih-prava-zena-u-BiH-u-2013.pdf>

10 Report by NGO’s ICVA and Rights for All, “The implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Bosnia and Herzegovina”. July 2013. Available at: <http://www.rightsforall.ba/publikacije-bs/docs-bs/izvjestaj-nevladinih-organizacija.pdf>

only a very small number of people with disabilities and the report also provides some information that can give an insight into the real situation when it comes to the employment of women with disabilities:

- 70 schools in the Sarajevo Canton employ a total of eight men and six women with disabilities;
- Sarajevo Pharmacies employ 40 people with disabilities, of which 39 are women;
- In Tuzla, of 142 persons with disabilities, 18 are women and 124 are men;
- In Trebinje, in 27 institutions surveyed, a total of 196 persons with disabilities (150 men and 46 women) are employed; the highest numbers are disabled war veterans;
- In the seven municipalities of the Sarajevo Canton, 81 persons with disabilities are employed, of which 51 are men and 30 women; the men are mostly war veterans. These people work as administrative employees, consultants, clerks and senior clerks.¹¹

Andrea Bilandžić, project assistant at the alliance of organizations supporting people with intellectual disabilities in FBiH “Sumero,” says that both BiH entities have laws that regulate issues of rehabilitation, training and employment for persons with disabilities. Conditions for the employment of persons with disabilities are specified both in institutions and companies which are not specialized for the employment of persons with disabilities, as well as in those established just for this purpose. “According to the law, in any legal entity every sixteenth person who is employed should be a person with disabilities. Of course, this is the law and, like many others, is not implemented in every company as it should be; therefore discrimination exists. The salary of women in BiH is on average up to 300 BAM lower than that of men and when it comes to women with disabilities the discrimination is doubled. Of the total population in BiH, 60% of women with disabilities have lower education, which means they have completed four or eight years of elementary school or have not completed primary education at all, which demonstrates the seriousness of this problem.”

Regarding employment of people with disabilities, those most engaged are individuals and individual companies, as well as, of course, associations of persons with disabilities. There are plenty

¹¹ Report by NGO’s ICVA and Rights for All, “The implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Bosnia and Herzegovina”. July 2013. Available at: <http://www.rightsforall.ba/publikacije-bs/docs-bs/izvjestaj-nevladinih-organizacija.pdf>

of successful examples, but due to lack of space we cannot mention them all. However, one of them is “Uspon”¹² (The Rise), a social enterprise established in 2009 by the Association of organizations supporting people with intellectual disabilities in FBiH “Sumero”. “Uspon” currently employs ten women with disabilities.

Women with disabilities, who are first of all in need of adequate health care, have limited physical access to health care institutions, as well as a lack of adequate equipment and trained medical personnel.¹³ In addition to the lack of appropriate tables for examining of women who move with difficulties or with the help of wheelchairs, most health staff has not been trained for the examination or delivery of women with disabilities. The report made by ICVA and Rights for All states that women with disabilities encounter unprofessional attitudes and prejudices about their sexuality by medical personnel. A large number of focus group participants pointed out that doctors during gynecological examinations require the presence of a personal assistant which jeopardizes a woman’s right to privacy.¹⁴ Despite their disability, disabled women are often victims of mental and/or physical domestic violence. They are also faced with difficulties in obtaining custody of children after a divorce because of the social belief that a child should be with the “healthy” parent, ignoring the child’s best interest, even in cases where the father is violent. Also, society takes for granted that women with disabilities are incapable of educating their children.¹⁵ Also, women with

12 <http://www.uspon.ba/>. Uspon currently has 20 employees, out of which 17 are persons with disabilities- 10 women and 7 men.

13 Edita Miftari: Economic and social rights of women in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 2012 and 2013. Available at: <http://cps.ba/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Ekonomska-i-socijalna-prava-ena-u-Bosni-i-Hercegovini-u-2012.pdf>

14 Report by NGO’s ICVA and Rights for All, “The implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Bosnia and Herzegovina”. July 2013. Available at: <http://www.rightsforall.ba/publikacije-bs/docs-bs/izvjestaj-nevladinih-organizacija.pdf>

15 Esther Garcia Fransioli: Annual report on the state of women’s rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina during 2013, according to the Combined fourth and fifth periodic report of Bosnia and Herzegovina for the implementation of the CEDAW Convention. Available at: <http://www.ffuis.edu.ba/media/attachments/2014/12/01/Godisnji-izvjestaj-o-stanju-ljudskih-prava-zena-u-BiH-u-2013.pdf>; According to: Report by NGO’s ICVA and Rights for All, “The implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Bosnia and Herzegovina”. July 2013. Available at: <http://www.rightsforall.ba/publikacije-bs/docs-bs/izvjestaj-nevladinih-organizacija.pdf>

disabilities consider that they are not equal within the movement of persons with disabilities and they are not satisfied by a small number of female representatives in the advisory body of the Government of BiH.¹⁶

In the previous year the state has not initiated special programs relating to women with disabilities, and there are still no relevant statistics or special measures to protect women with disabilities in the areas of labor and employment, education, social inclusion, health care and elimination of discrimination.¹⁷

Efforts to improve the quality of life of women with disabilities are mostly individual or are connected to the work of non-governmental organizations and associations of people with disabilities. In addition to their families, it is safe to say that only civil society organizations provide support to these women and carry out advocacy pressure to secure fair treatment and adequate protection, but also change the attitudes of society towards this group.

Finally, it is important to draw attention to the fact that women with disabilities are not recognized as relevant actors in the struggle for women's human rights, as correctly noted by Tanja Mandić Đokić, because they are often discriminated among women on grounds of their disability. In addition, within the movement of people with disabilities, women are much less common in leadership positions of organizations. This sad truth is another indication of the position on the margin occupied by women with disabilities and this is occurring even in the sphere of feminist activism which should operate on the principle of universal inclusion.

However, research done by Tanja Mandić Đokić "Social determinants of quality of life of women with disabilities" conducted at the Faculty of Political Science at the University of Banja Luka, in June 2012, and which the author ceded for the purposes of this publication, shows that women with disabilities are much more capable than

16 Report by NGO's ICVA and Rights for All, "The implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Bosnia and Herzegovina". July 2013. Available at: <http://www.rightsforall.ba/publikacije-bs/docs-bs/izvjestaj-nevladinih-organizacija.pdf>. The data has been collected through a survey on monitoring the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The study included conducting focus groups with at least 100 participants, field research through individual semi-structured interviews and questionnaires for the institutions in four regions (Sarajevo, Mostar, Tuzla and Banja Luka).

17 In preparation: The annual report on the state of women's rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2014. Inela Hadžić, Dalila Mirović, Edita Miftari. CURE Foundation and Sarajevo Open Centre.

the society suspects. The research focused on obstacles and opportunities that arise in the social functioning of women with disabilities, and it was carried out based on a sample of 100 adult women with various physical and/or sensory disabilities who live in Republika Srpska and who have experienced life with a disability. Of the total number, 75% of women have difficulty moving or are unable to move, 7% have hearing and speech impairments, 5% have hearing impairments and 13% have damaged sight. In most cases these women need help in daily routines from their parents and spouses but research has also shown that women with disabilities largely perform everyday tasks independently. For example, 55% of surveyed women independently perform activities such as going out of the house, bathing and personal hygiene, nutrition, getting out of bed, cooking and going to the toilet. A total of 69% do not use the services of personal assistance, versus 31% who do.

A significant component of the research is economics, which clearly shows the difficult financial situation that women with disabilities face: 45% of women have a monthly income from 160 to 400 BAM, 23% from 400 to 700 BAM, 25% up to 160 BAM and only 4% have an income from 700 to 1000 BAM while 3% have over 1000 BAM. When asked how many of their basic needs their income 'covers', only 6% of respondents answered that the income can cover all their needs, 18% of them answered that it can mostly cover their needs, 49% say that it covers their needs partially, 14% answered slightly and 13% of women reported that they cannot cover their needs with the income they have. Problems that occur because of their disability in the personal and emotional life of these women are also reflected in the survey: 48% of women are not married or were never married, 14% have no plans or in the past did not plan a marriage because they believe that marriage is not for them because of their disability, 15% have no plans or in the past did not plan to have children for the same reasons.

When it comes to education, the highest percentage of women surveyed - 63% have completed secondary school, 4% of them are not educated at all, 2% have not completed elementary school, 17% have completed elementary school, 13% completed college, while 1% has completed post-graduate studies. Out of all these women, 75% wanted to get more education than they had and 79% are unemployed. Social isolation is also reflected in the answer to the simple question of how often they visit cultural events: 38% of them do so less than once a year, 16% once a year, 10% once every six months, 16% on a quarterly basis, 13% once a month and only

7% several times a month. Their interactions are often carried out solely within the group to which they belong and 83% of them are members of an organization, association of citizens and formal or informal groups.

At the end of the research, Tanja Mandić Đokić's concluded that the conditions society creates are key to the quality of life for women with disabilities. "Quality of life of women with disabilities depends more on whether she lives in a socially favorable atmosphere than on the degree of impairment causing the disability." This shows the obvious truth: women with disabilities would integrate better into the society if the society chose to provide them with better living conditions. Unfortunately, the lack of statistics, as well as dull reports, shows the real picture of women with disabilities in BiH. Many of them live hard lives and are unfairly burdened by the irresponsibility of institutions that do not adequately protect them. Further, the environment refuses to treat them as equal members of the society. Yet women like Šefika Skorupan, who decided to tell her story, and others like her who have taken their disability and made the best out of it to build a life equal to that of everyone else, show us that women with disabilities must and can be equal with all other women; they must be given equal opportunities and chances they deserve.



"Love yourself, love your body, love that fat you cannot get rid of, love your crooked legs, love yourself whatever you look like, make peace with yourself, be your own friend."

Lovana B.

Confessions of a rural woman

Women, do not stand in the shadows of men!

“... Shut up! What do you know, you stupid woman...?!” –a sentence uttered by a man. It very often bothers many, as does the thought in that moment: “He is her husband, he has the right.” or “What are you going to do, that is her fate written in the stars.” (Well, not quite, you cannot write fates like that!) Despite the fact that we live in the 21st century in a country governed by rule of law and democracy, somehow all that is only on paper, and it is obvious from the conditions in which women live. It seems that in a country where we have Gender equality law, the law of tradition, patriarchy or, as some call it, the law of nature still leads in many ways!

In our society, especially in the rural areas, the status of women is very low. Women in rural areas, or, let’s say, women who grow up learning the lessons of patriarchy (unfortunately, such exist in the urban areas also) live in fear and have forced themselves into thinking that they have everything they need. Somehow, at birth they get the label of a martyr- one who is supposed to suffer. It is just something they have to do. (My dear woman, first of all, you do not have to do anything, absolutely anything!). These women grow up with the traditional recipes of their mothers and grandmothers according to which a man is sacred and before him we should kneel, kneel primarily morally, we should crawl. He is a deity who must be welcomed with open arms. Someone who must be served day and night and only when HE ends his meal can SHE then sit down and pick the crumbs up off the plate (if any crumbs remain).

The ideology of this tradition separates a woman from her own self, from her own life. It prevents her from getting to know herself, her body, her needs, hopes, and character, the things she likes and

those she does not like. It takes away her right to decide whether she wants to accept or refuse something. It imposes the feeling that she has to worship everything around her, everything she is offered on a silver platter, and she is expected to accept everything and let it reside on her shoulders. How to do all that - she does not know! She is taught from an early age to never say NO. To live for others, to serve, to welcome and see off... To act in accordance with other people's moods (for example: when you are happy - I am happy, and when you are sad - please do not do anything, I will take care of everything myself). SHE is the one who changes and exchanges, who performs tasks, but only those tasks which are in accordance with the rules, which fit, which are implied. She takes over his business too, especially when he is not present (and he is not there often). She never gets the well-deserved piece of the pie.

The fact that she is born as a slave in the family is also confirmed by the birth of a male child when joy is inevitable: "First child and a male!" (he will be someone who will ride on horses through markets and streets, people will be proud of him, praise him as he is the SON of the household. Mostly every woman creates that homey house, but the importance is always shifted to the man of the house, not to the women who make miracles and leave their lives there.) Female children will always be followed by the aforementioned label. They will be often attacked by vicious tongues, potential suitors chosen by their parents, and ridiculed. The woman is the one who carries the label of the person on duty for everything and everyone. And it is always justified:

- Beaten up - because they were asking for the devil.
- Hungry - they did not deserve food because of their behavior.
- Unmarried surely because they swirled their tail and no man wants them now.
- Unhappily married - because they run their mouth and do not remain silent when they are told.

Remember, my dear women - there is no justification!

Women's work is the most underrated and the least paid job, and the worst of all is that it is unnoticed by everyone including the husband who comes into the house and says: "It is easy for you, you are in the house all day." That job in and around the house is the hardest job, it is least noticed (which to me, as a woman, is the most troublesome - no one sees it), it is unpaid and the worst is that tomorrow you have to start all over again. Every new day brings new chores, room cleaning, cooking, ironing, washing, vacuuming, brushing, polishing, etc. And I will not even mention the work around livestock. Living in the country requires having cattle and working on the land, and in

the end the beautiful and rich native crops are mostly commented on as the work of the host – and nobody even mentions the woman of the house.

The hardest part is that women by the reconciliation with their fates and by bowing their heads before such injustice and the violation of their rights are not even aware of what they can do and what is rightfully theirs. By neglecting themselves and reconciling with various forms of violence, which is, as we see, justified, they are actually destroying themselves and their health, carrying a big burden on their shoulders, but still denying these facts. Very few women would visit a doctor or a gynecologist because it is a disgrace and the only person who should see her in that state is her husband. And then we are shocked by the calculations and the diseases which kill mostly women. The death of the woman actually means that the host of the house also gradually disappears, drowns, because all the wealth the woman of the house acquired for years crashes, and the man is accustomed to the notion that there is always someone to do everything for him. Often, the women of the house become mentally weak, because they also struggle with an alcoholic who comes from work drunk and takes everything out on his wife.

A woman's life in the countryside is not easy, her social life is reduced to a half hour coffee with a neighbor who shares the same situation. Their conversations are reduced to discussions about how long their situation will remain unchanged. Waiting for each new day, waiting for the children to finish their education, to get employment, to get married, waiting for the husband to retire so maybe he will drink less, because in those situations women often get beaten. Women are brought into various forms of violence, but they consider it fair because the men are their HUSBANDS, and they cannot be rapists because they are their spouses. They live without being able to realize their rights. That if SHE does not want something then HE must respect that. It all turns into waiting to make themselves a priority, while being available for others 24/7 - socially, physically, sexually, financially, intellectually and so on. They do not even notice that they are vulnerable. Even when they feel bad, they are silent and they endure it for the sake of the children, for the sake of peace in the house. They find that they have nowhere to go and the situation remains like that. They grow up with such primitive rules that they do not think about their own development but rather they wait to get married and have their own house. And in her husband's house she will be called out during their first argument because she is the newcomer. Her husband will, of course, have the support of his mother and the other relatives. Today there are many such cases

- when a woman gets married she does not only get a husband, she also gets his mother, sisters, aunts, neighbors...

Their social life is mostly reduced to attending weddings, celebrations of patron saints, funerals and small town debaucheries. These are their opportunities to meet with dear friends and relatives. On the street no one will call her by the name, everyone will say: "There she is - the daughter of this man or the woman of that man." Nobody will remember her for her intellect, work, talent, color of hair or her walk, but for being the daughter or wife of a host, a drunkard, the wife of the President, the wife of an athlete, of a bar owner and so on. What is disappointing is that because of the fact that she is someone's daughter, sister or wife SHE cannot shine as a WOMAN, she cannot show her character and talent, she cannot be given a place and time to learn and implement her own ideas. If she is "someone's" ... then you know who she is. It goes on the lines of "like mother, like daughter" or "they are born at this place, and their grandfather is so and so" or "she comes from a local house" ... Wrong, my dear women, a totally wrong perception!

Somehow it is always imposed on them that they have to do something, that they *need* to do something... They cannot get a job because their mother was such and such or they can get a job because their father was such and such and so on. It is obvious that they do not have the opportunity to realize themselves, build their own personality and character. It is well known that each of them should and must get married, must become mothers, and it is quite normal and implied that they love children, and are married before the age of 25. After 25 she becomes known as the girl who never married. On the other hand, the man is actually a teenager until he is 30, and the older he is the better, tastier and more attention worthy. If she leaves her husband for any reason she will be judged and she will become the subject of bad-mouthing. If he leaves his wife - well, there has to be for a reason, she is to blame because he left her... Women in these situations do not have the right to vote at elections, because it is well known that which house supports which political party. The way the husband decided is the way everyone votes. She is to blame for everything and she is dismissed if she is not married by the age of 30. If she is married and she does not give birth in the next year, there is something wrong with her, she must be replaced. Replaced - as if women were garments for changing and bartering. As if women were cigarettes so one can leave them at certain point and passionately retrieve them when they please.

Today, women are jeopardized in every sense. They are never defended and respected enough. Women do not have the same

rights. We are not equal to men, and we will never be because we are x times better, more valuable, more intelligent. Because women carry out all activities - both male and female, because women wear the skirt and the pants, women dig, count, give birth, do miracles. Because of women wars started, people demolished and abandoned places. Each of us can do everything that a man can, and a man cannot possibly do all that a woman can. This is only a matter of strength, will and support!

Yes, my dear women, this is recommended to you by a woman who is no longer a silent observer. This comes from a woman who was born in the above described environment, a woman who grew up in incomplete family, who was exposed to various forms of violence by her environment, family and partner. A woman who did not know what violence means. And this is everything that you do not want. A woman who previously thought differently and had high hopes for her beloved men. Do not have high hopes for your father, or your brother, or a lover, or for anyone. You are the most important person in your life. I love my dear men, I love them three times more than I did before, but I love myself ten times more than them.

Stand against patriarchy, put your foot down. Wake up, do not let a kind word, a gift or a stupid gesture, which will soon be transformed into violence, overshadow you. Get to know yourselves, what you like, what you want in life. Find love and beauty within yourselves. Remember: you are not alone. Respect other people and do everything you can, but most of all, observe yourselves. Do not allow yourself to depend on others, perfect yourselves. It is never too late. Age is not a limit if you preserve your youth and agility. You will succeed in doing so if you stop ignoring your needs! Love yourself, love your body, love that fat you cannot get rid of, love your crooked legs, love yourself whatever you look like, make peace with yourself, be your own friend. Love your body, have the power, get up and move on. No one can have what you are given. So take pride in what you have survived and endured and know this - those who succumb to injuries are not the only victims, but victims are all those who were touched by the repugnant hand and lived! You are alive and there is nothing you cannot do! You are not alone!

Jovana B.

Rural women: The invisible moving force of production

According to the report “Rural Development in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Myth and Reality”, BiH is one of the most rural countries in Europe. Its population is unevenly distributed and 61% of the population lives in rural municipalities which places BiH in fourth place, behind Montenegro, Ireland and Finland, while 52% of people live outside of urban settlements, making Moldova the only country on the list before BiH.¹⁸ Life in the country is very different from urban areas, and this puts rural women in a specific position because their lives are determined by the traditional rules. Rural areas have limited economic opportunities, high unemployment and low wages, and the population in rural areas is at greater risk of social exclusion, not having access to services and being outside the focus of political and social life.¹⁹

The above mentioned report notes that conservative attitudes and values are more present in rural areas and this especially affects women who live in these areas. Many rural households maintain traditional gender roles, where the man goes to work and the woman stays at home and takes care of the house and the children. This pattern can be found anywhere in BiH, but it is more emphasized in

18 Human Development Report for Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2013.: “Rural Development in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Myth and Reality”: UNDP, 2013. Available at: http://www.ba.undp.org/content/dam/bosnia_and_herzegovina/docs/Research&Publications/NHDR/2013/NHDR2013/BiH_NHDR_Brochure.pdf

19 Ibid.

rural areas, especially among the older generation.²⁰ The part of the report which deals with the shortcomings of rural areas points out that in these areas, children, especially girls, often drop out of school very early thus limiting their options for the future.

Women are about 15% less educated than men, in both rural and urban areas. However, most of these differences are present among older generations and reflect the social and educational circumstances of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. In the 21st century, girls in rural areas receive only 4% less education than boys.²¹

The workforce of rural women is unnoticed and unpaid. Heavy physical work is implied in the countryside, together with the maintenance of the household, and in this way women from the countryside are disabled in regards to the realization of their labor rights. About 70% of women are unpaid family members and workers, such as women who work on farms.²² These women are rarely owners of land and property and their living conditions are drastically different from those in cities. Their access to public services such as health care and education is limited, while they often do not participate in cultural and sports activities. Rural development programs are taking place without them, and access to modern solutions of production is limited. Their heavy physical work is not compensated financially nor in any other way. It is not unusual to find an older woman living alone, without a pension or any other regular financial aid.²³ Their situation can often be even more difficult because of the fact that some of them are war returnees to their home towns and are additionally confronted with social isolation and the status of an ethnic minority. We should not

20 Ibid.

21 Human Development Report for Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2013.: “Rural Development in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Myth and Reality”: UNDP, 2013. Available at: http://www.ba.undp.org/content/dam/bosnia_and_herzegovina/docs/Research&Publications/NHDR/2013/NHDR2013/BiH_NHDR_Brochure.pdf

22 Edita Miftari: Economic and social rights of women in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2012-2013. Sarajevo Open Centre. Available at: <http://cps.ba/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Ekonomska-i-socijalna-prava-ena-u-Bosni-i-Hercegovini-u-2012.pdf>; According to: Idžaković, F. (2013) “Economic Status of Women”. In: Miftari, E. ed. Annex 3 to the Alternative Report on the Implementation of CEDAW and Women’s Human Rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Sarajevo Open Centre. p. 9-14

23 Poverty in BiH: www.dep.gov.ba/dokumenti.../srednjorocna_razvojna_strategija/?id=36. According to: Bosnia and Herzegovina: Poverty Assessment. The World Bank. Report no. 25343-H. P. 102-103.

forget the fact that their position makes them vulnerable in the context of economic violence, as the male “head of the household” has control over the financial resources which he can arbitrarily deny to a woman.

In addition to traditional patriarchal attitudes there is often both physical and psychological violence present in the family, which further complicates the position of women in rural areas. Even when they want to seek help, it is harder for them to obtain information on how and where to do so. Asking for help is also seen as disgraceful and leads to condemnation by the other members of the rural community. After a study conducted in 2010 among 1,000 inhabitants (500 men and 500 women) in 54 villages in five municipalities of Semberija, Majeвица and Drina, the women’s organization “Lara” from Bijeljina concluded that one in five rural women is the victim of domestic violence. Among the 500 participants, 95 respondents or 19% stated that during her life they were victims of domestic violence, while 8% did not want to answer this question. Of the 19% of rural women who explicitly stated that they had been victims of domestic violence, 52% indicated that it was a question of physical violence, 57% stated psychological torture was also included, 37% were exposed to economic violence, 20% to verbal threats, and 8% to isolation.²⁴

Association Medica Zenica shares their experience in working with women and girls in rural areas: “Violence in the marriage union is seen as a “normal” phenomenon which women do not tolerate very well but is still justified as a kind of violence transmitted from generation to generation: “My mother always used to say: What is happening to you is nothing compared to what I went through.” Often women in rural areas do not recognize some forms of violence such as marital rape, psychological violence, etc. (...) During our work with women in rural areas we noted that girls marry young and their parents prepare them for marriage by warning them to “obey” their husbands and his family, not to contradict anyone and to please everyone. Sometimes others witness, encourage and justify violent behavior towards women (e.i. in-laws, mother in law) and encourage their sons to teach the woman who she has to listen to.”²⁵ Official statistics about rural women do not exist so this text relies on pieces of information scattered in different reports and publications,

24 One in five rural women is a victim of domestic violence: <http://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/svaka-peta-seoska-zena-je-zrtva-porodicnog-nasilja/100407076>

25 Rural women are a particularly vulnerable group: <http://www.16dana.ba/2011/12/zene-na-selu/>

as well as newspaper articles. The overall conclusion is quite clear: the position of women at the countryside is extremely difficult due to their economic vulnerability and patriarchal norms that bind them to difficult and unpaid work which usually takes place on farms owned by male family members, regardless of whether they are their husbands, fathers or brothers. Also, they are responsible for the maintenance of the household and for raising children, with the pressure of possible condemnation by their immediate environment if the woman does not fulfill her duties as required and expected. Opinions of the family are considered extremely important and comments regarding the woman's suitability to be a wife, mother, daughter or sister can be frequent and cruel and damage a woman's self-esteem and self-image.

Jovana B., who shared her experiences in this confession, writes very openly and in detail about the problems of rural women. Humility towards their partners, putting partners before themselves, taking numerous tasks on their shoulders, unhappy marriages, poverty and limited social life are just some of the problems of rural women. It is important to note the tendency of older generations of women, mothers and grandmothers, to install in their daughters and granddaughters the principle of obedience to husbands, fathers and brothers which does not contribute to their independence and self-confidence.

Slađana Ujić, the president of the Association of women SNOP²⁶ from the village Gučevo near Rogatica and the Minister for Rural Development in the Alternative women's government, states that the main problem of women in the rural communities is poverty that tends to transition into extreme poverty. She points out that the global statistics which best reflect the economic status and position of rural areas can be fully applied to BiH. "I am talking about the fact that women deserve credit for the production of 80% of our food and get only 10% of subsidies allocated for agriculture." In 2013 Slađana was the first woman from Bosnia and Herzegovina to win the Award for women's creativity in rural life, which the World Women Summit Foundation has awarded to women and women's organizations around the world for creativity and commitment to improving the quality of life in rural areas since 1994. She says that the community ignores the plight of rural women. "This is not

26 Association SNOP gathers women from the country and has the mission of improving the status and quality of life of women in rural areas through economic support, raises awareness of the rights and opportunities, and participation in public policy and strategies relevant to the local community through various projects and initiatives.

that big of a problem for rural women, because suffering is a way of life for them and they do not know of anything better, but this is a problem for the development of the community as a whole. If we know that the cause of poverty in general in the world is rural poverty and the social community ignores the needs of more than 50% of the total population, i.e. women, and ignores the importance of the development of rural communities which account for over 80% of the total territory, it can be assumed when the women at the countryside will be in a better position and when this society will become a society of equal opportunities.”

In Appendix 3 of the Alternative Report on the Implementation of the CEDAW Convention and Women’s Human Rights in BiH²⁷ Selma Hadžihalilović, activist from CURE Foundation, writes about the invisible rural women, noting multiple forms of discrimination. Citing research from April 2013 by Kolektiv.BA - Initiative for experiential learning of the Association Lotus, on a sample of 500 women from local communities Arnauti, Čajdraš, Podbrežje, Perin Han, Pehare, Donji Bradići, Ciglana, Opšenik, Begov Han Kovanići, Lokvine and Donja Gračanica, Hadžihalilović notes that the data is devastating. The main problems of rural women are unemployment, poverty and a lack of drinking water. Women in the countryside face poor sanitation and waste water, wild dump sites, and the lack of or very poor transport links from administrative centers to their place of residence. A large number of local communities have some form of women’s organizations - whether formal or informal - but the percentage of women’s participation in decision-making processes about the quality of life in their communities is almost non-existent. Women almost never participate in the work of the committees of local communities and local communities are not qualified in any way to provide even basic administrative services to their fellow female citizens. Their attempts to contribute to the household budget through production in agriculture, farming and livestock breeding are also thwarted because of the difficulty in placing local products on the BiH market. The level of health care, especially prevention, is embarrassingly low. Already existing health care centers rarely correspond to the true needs of the community, so preventative care, such as regular visits to the gynecologist or the dentist, for women of all ages is almost nonexistent. Rural women agree that the lack of female leadership, public spaces for women,

27 Annex 3 to the Alternative Report on the Implementation of CEDAW and Women’s Human Rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina. July 2013. Available at: [http://rightsforall.ba/publikacije-bs/docs-bs/AnnextotheAlternativeReport\(BHSandENG\).pdf](http://rightsforall.ba/publikacije-bs/docs-bs/AnnextotheAlternativeReport(BHSandENG).pdf)

public cultural, educational and recreational contents are the main causes of the lack of socio-political participation of rural women. Rural women are usually visible only when promoting national traditions, handicrafts and local specialties, while their political opinion is not asked for or listened to.²⁸

The Gender Action Plan of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2013 - 2017²⁹ does not address the position and improvement of the quality of life of rural women in any of its 15 chapters, while campaigns for the prevention of and raising awareness about violence against women are rarely implemented in the rural communities.³⁰ Among the public activities that put rural women in focus we can highlight the campaign of the Gender Center of Republika Srpska entitled "Equality! - For women in rural areas" launched in 2009 and celebrated every year on the 15th of October, the International day of rural women. The Gender Centre of Republika Srpska, in cooperation with the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management of Republika Srpska prepared a Document on the status of women in the rural areas in Republika Srpska, which contains a detailed gender analysis of various aspects of the situation of rural women in the RS, as well as an Action Plan for the advancement of the position of women in the rural areas in Republika Srpska until 2015. The report on the situation of women in the rural areas in RS noted that women make up more than a half of the population in the rural areas of RS and that life at the countryside is considered extremely difficult for women, presupposes hard work, isolation and life in frustrating, traditional hierarchical relations.³¹ The Federation of BiH does not have a similar plan, but we should highlight several projects dedicated to rural women: the project "Improvement of the position of rural women on the local level in FBiH" which was implemented in municipalities Gračanica and Tešanj, where, in 2013, the municipality of Gračanica developed the Analysis of the position of women in rural areas on the territory of that municipality and

28 Ibid.

29 Gender Action Plan 2013-2017. Available at: http://arsbih.gov.ba/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/GAP_BIH.pdf

30 Annex 3 to the Alternative Report on the Implementation of CEDAW and Women's Human Rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina. July 2013. Available at: [http://rightsforall.ba/publikacije-bs/docs-bs/AnnextotheAlternativeReport\(BHSandENG\).pdf](http://rightsforall.ba/publikacije-bs/docs-bs/AnnextotheAlternativeReport(BHSandENG).pdf)

31 Information on the status of women in rural areas in RS, September, 2009.

an Action Plan for the period 2014-2016³² which was implemented by Vesta Association with the purpose of creating preconditions for the strategic advancement of the position of women from the countryside.

The info graphic made by the Gender Centre of RS, published on the occasion of the last celebration of the International day of rural women, pointed out that global rural women make up one quarter of the total world population (1.6 billion), 43% of the labor force in agricultural production, own only 1% of land and receive only 1% of all agricultural income.³³ The info graphic also showed the needs of women in rural areas of the RS with regards to traffic and transportation infrastructure: only 17% are owners of cars, 58% do not have access to internet, and 54% cannot use postal services.³⁴ These statistics are practical indicators of the isolation of rural women and it is very easy to apply these to the rest of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Agency for Gender Equality stresses that particular attention should be paid to overcoming the traditional views that men are heirs, successors and owners of private property because such stereotypes prevent women from accessing property loans which require a guarantee in real estate.³⁵

But Slađana Ujić considers that the strategies and action plans are still there just to satisfy the form. "In my life and in the lives of thousands of women in poor rural communities nothing substantial has changed. Why? The key problem is that women themselves are not aware of the seriousness of the situation and the inevitability to "take matters into their own hands" as we, a few women from the village Gučevo, did in 2005 when we formed an association with the intent to make the problems of rural women visible and to remind all the these decision makers who created these great strategies on the improvement of the position of rural women that we are here and that the documents governing the position and rights of rural women, no matter what the institutional level, cannot and must not stay in their office drawers."

32 Analysis of the position of women in a rural areas in the municipality of Gračanica and Action plan for the period 2014-2016. October, 2013. Available at: http://vesta.ba/files/ANALITI%C4%8CKA%20PODLOGA%20I%20AKCIONI%20PLAN_%20%C5%BDENE%20I%20RURALNI%20RAZVOJ%20_%20OP%C4%86INA%20GRA%C4%8CANICA.pdf

33 Fair "Women in the countryside of RS" in Nevesinje: http://www.lokoportal.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=14856:saj-ame-ze-na-selu-rs-u-nevesinju&catid=39&Itemid=53

34 Ibid.

35 International day of rural women: http://arsbih.gov.ba/?page_id=611

Vesta Association conducted a survey on the situation, needs and possibilities for improving the situation of rural women within the project “The socio-economic empowerment of the position of rural women through active participation in local development plans”, which is based on surveys and workshops with a total of 450 women from 17 municipalities in 37 local rural communities in the Federation of BiH. Results show a high level of dissatisfaction with the validation of the role of rural women, stated by 80% of the participants.³⁶ However, the research points to the encouraging fact that 85% of respondents confirmed that running small business initiatives (through the production of healthy food, medicinal plants, rural tourism, greenhouse production, growing flowers, handicrafts, etc.) can largely or at least sufficiently contribute to a better economic position for rural women.³⁷ A report written by Vesta points out that educational support and financial incentives for the development of agricultural and small businesses can be one of the key generators of economic improvement for the position of rural women and the rehabilitation and development of rural areas.³⁸ The myriad ways that support programs change the reality of rural women can be seen in the research conducted by Care International “Investing for a better life!”³⁹ as a part of the project “Economic empowerment of women in BiH”. The research, which took place from April to June 2013, sought to determine the practical benefits of this project 22 (out of 63) women and their families as the beneficiaries of technical and financial support in starting their independent businesses. The study was conducted in Tuzla, Kakanj, Živinice, Bijeljina, Bratunac, Kravica, Tomislavgrad and Livno, in communities where women were empowered and where there was visible improvement in economic empowerment because today these women are successful in greenhouse production, milk production, eggs and honey production, cattle breeding, working at markets, growing raspberries, etc. With their businesses they financially contributed to their home budgets, because family members were often unemployed. To illustrate, prior to the project 66.6% of the beneficiaries did not have any income, the income received by

36 Vesta Association: “Gender and Rural Development: Good practices and institutional framework”. Tuzla, September 2012. Available at: <http://vesta.ba/files/publikacija.pdf>

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Care International in the Balkans: Research Paper: Investment for a better life!, 2013. Available at: <http://care-balkan.org/dok/1389101458.pdf>

28.63% of them was not sufficient to ensure the economic stability of their families and in only 4.76% of the families were one or two family members employed.⁴⁰ After the whole process, 91% of women beneficiaries said that the business they began, thanks to the project, will one day be officially registered extended with additional capacities or they will begin another successful business.⁴¹

How to help women in the countryside? Slađana Ujić considers that it is necessary to act on three levels. "At the institutional level, greater importance has to be given to the development of rural communities, to include all other ministries and pay more attention to small family farms. The civil sector should be more sensitive to issues of development of rural communities and the development of women as the main actors in the community development. It also requires action from the base, by the women themselves, because only the initiatives from the base level which are based on real needs can provide sustainable results."

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.



"We shouldn't lie, we shouldn't be ashamed, we should say everything loud and clear with pride about who we actually are - women with great strength.."

Strong woman

Confession of a daughter of a wartime rape survivor

Does my mother hate me?

Who am I really? What's there for me?

Even since I was a young girl I remember the parks, playrooms, kindergartens, all those places children go to with their moms and dads. I remember one spring when I was playing in the park with my mother, I was very happy and excited, I ran through the park, played with the other children. It was then that it happened, a man approached me and the girl I was playing with, and I asked her: "Who is this?" and the answer was: "My dad." The man took her in his arms and they left. My mother was sitting on a bench, looking at me. I approached her and, confused as I was, I asked her: "What does "dad" mean?"

Right, what is the meaning of "dad"? It is the question which remains unanswered today, tomorrow, always. In theory, all of us know the meaning of the word, but many of us don't know the meaning the word takes in life, and we are silent about it. To be honest, I came to this world the wrong way, I came to this world not through an act of love, but through an act of hate. It's not easy, it's tough, it's tough to realize that you are perhaps an exception among your friends, it's tough to realize that perhaps you were not meant to have a dad, that you were not meant to grasp the true meaning of the word "dad" in life. All of this is tough to understand and to accept, but perhaps you need to stop for a moment, look behind you and see: I don't have a

dad, I have a mom, am I at a loss? Am I at a loss, or not?

I came to this world as a result of sexual abuse during the war. It is very hard for me to even write these sentences, it is very hard to think of that, to think of the moment I had to persuade myself that I have to move on, that I have to accept it. There were thousands of questions in my mind the first time I uttered that sentence, many insecurities, there was the lack of acceptance of me as a child, of me as a whole person. Does my mother hate me, can she care for me with love or because it is expected of her? Do I remind her of everything bad that happened to her? Many dilemmas, many questions, but I remain silent. I am silent because I am afraid of the answers, I am afraid of asking my mother whether she loves me, I am afraid of hurting her because I think my existence hurts her enough already.

Throughout my life, growing up, meeting new people, I sometimes found myself lying when asked what the real story of my parents was, where my dad was, or why the documents didn't state his name. There were many uncomfortable feelings, unanswered questions, escapes. I remember when a teacher at my school asked me what was the reason that only the name of my mother was entered in the class registry, why there was no father's name as well. I told him I didn't know the reason, and then he asked me: "Well, do you have a dad?" and I said I didn't. He asked: "What happened to your dad?", to which I answered: "He died in combat". He looked at me and said: "Ah, but even if he died in combat his name should be in the class registry... So, what is the name of your dad?" I just left the classroom, I didn't answer the single simplest question and it left a mark, I became "labeled" in my class. I didn't know the name of my dad, how would I know it, I can't, I don't want to know. Years after being laughed at, numerous questions emerged because of a person whose name I didn't know.

As time passed by, I worked on myself and finally found the strength to sit and talk with my mother, but only with her, as she was the only one who could understand me. She is the only one who understands me and she is the only one I would talk to, but not too often because it's hard; only with her because she won't reject me, judge me. Our conversation lasted for ages because there was no end in sight to all the emotions, questions, and tears. I listened to my mother speak, fear gushing out of her. It was the incredible speech of someone afraid of being judged. Why are you afraid, mother? She was afraid of the same thing that frightens many women today - they are afraid

of being judged.

My mother and I were labeled, and we still are, we carry an enormous burden on our shoulders. Fingers were pointed at us by all those who knew who we were, what we carried on our shoulders. But the important part is that we carry an enormous burden on our shoulders. This burden is not carried only by me or only by my mother - we carry it together. All the fears we had actually came down to one - fear of not being accepted.

Why can't people comprehend that, why can't they accept that there are those who didn't come to this world in a "normal" way? What hurts the most is that many people blame my mother for being dishonorable, for being a woman who gave birth out of the wedlock. The problem of our present is that people don't think about what they say before they say it, and in the end it is another insult, another pain for us. Plenty of lies have to be uttered in order to be accepted, and finally it seems you are accepted, but it is never the real you.

People I am surrounded with know me as a smiling girl with a fulfilled life, a girl whose dad died during the war, but is that really my story, is that really me? No, it's not! I know lies are not the best solution, but sometimes they are to only one. I have once tried to tell my story and it was fine, they "accepted" it but not genuinely. They couldn't keep quiet, they couldn't understand it, it was a false acceptance of me. And when someone accepts you falsely, when they try to convince you that they are there for you, that it's not a problem, then the feeling of worthlessness emerges.

I have often asked myself how to move on, whether I will succeed in creating something with someone, without any lies?

I have stopped saying that conversation is a medicine for sorrow, because I felt even worse every time I talked openly. I decided to keep quiet, not to answer the questions that hurt me, I have tried not thinking about it all. But, again, that wasn't a solution.

One wonderful day a lady invited me to a workshop. The theme of the workshop was sexual abuse during the war and its consequences. I was afraid to go to the workshop, I didn't know what it would look like, how I would feel, if I would be able to sustain the pressure.

The workshop began and we went through a range of exercises

that prepared us for the most important part of the workshop: conversation. I sat there for hours, listening to other women, women who have been through a lot during the war, women who were left to themselves, I listened about their struggles in life, how the workshops are helping them, how they are being healed, healed through conversation... I was there at the workshop, still afraid. I looked around me, I saw that soon it will be my turn to speak, I was afraid... I was thinking about leaving, giving up, but I couldn't give up, I couldn't leave the group, a group of women who understand each other, women who are compassionate to each other, women who don't judge each other.

It was my turn, I was supposed to speak, I shut down completely, not knowing what to say. My eyes were full of tears, I was hiding my face with my hands, I couldn't, I didn't know how, I was afraid. I was just sitting in a chair, my head low, hands on my face like I have done my entire life, the room was silent. I don't remember what I was thinking at that moment, but I suddenly felt someone hugging me, and telling me: "You can do it, don't be afraid, we are all here for you." I cried, I couldn't raise my head for a few minutes, but there were the hands which hugged me, hugged me tightly, as if they were trying to give me strength, will power, safety.

I raised my head, I saw a circle of women, my friends who were hugging around me, I saw the tears in their eyes, I simply felt the support, I felt safe and the fear was slowly vanishing. I got up, washed my face and returned to my safe place, to my chair. I started speaking slowly, but steadily. Everything I said was the truth, I didn't have to lie because all around me I could see the supportive looks. When I was done with my story, the ladies who were sitting around me held my hand and laughed, not with ill intentions but happy that I succeeded. They were proud of me. That was it, I did it, I finally succeeded, I felt great, accepted, I felt safe. I have released so many unspoken words that day, I was able to express all the pain. That conversation helped me.

I was silent for years, I was afraid, I didn't believe that talking was the cure, but after the workshop, after a lot of effort, tears, working on myself, I understand that talking is the best solution for our troubles. We shouldn't lie, we shouldn't be ashamed, we should say everything loud and clear with pride about who we actually are - women with great strength.

We have to understand that no one has the right to judge us, that we all have equal rights, the right to laughter, safety, strength, that all of us have the right to live what we are, proudly and loudly, that we simply have the right to life without judgment. From the moment I realized all this, I slowly but steadily started becoming the one people should see in me: *always smiling, a strong young women.*

A Strong Woman

Women survivors of wartime rape: Women that Bosnia and Herzegovina (still) refuses to talk about

Although the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) ended 20 years ago, the BiH society still finds it hard to speak out about one of the worst war atrocities - wartime rapes. The women who have survived wartime rape are still suffering, in addition to the horrible traumas, the stigmatization of the society that avoids speaking publicly about them and their status. Rape as a systematic weapon of the 1992-1995 war caused great damage to BiH women who were its victims and it pushed them to the margins of society which still, despite many years which have passed, forces them to live in silence, and which deals with their problems and needs in a very limited way, void of compassion.

Avoiding the topic of wartime sexual violence is perhaps one of the greatest shames of the post-war BiH society especially since wartime rape has been recognized as a war crime and crime against humanity, at the trials which took place in international criminal tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, which was achieved thanks to the pressure and the intensive lobbying of feminists, activists and lawyers from BiH. It was the first time that the crime of wartime rape was declared a crime against humanity, and it qualifies as such in court proceedings since. The first case on sexual violence at the Hague Tribunal was against Duško Tadić and many cases followed. Court of BiH and its Special Department for War Crimes, as well as the lower instance courts have been applying this qualification since 2005.

There are no reliable data about the number of persons who have survived sexual violence, and the figure most commonly used is between 20 and 50 thousands. The lack of reliable statistical data makes the situation more difficult, as it allows the national political elites to manipulate with the lives and traumas of victims and link them to their nationalities, but also to obstruct the implementation of strategies that should resolve the problems of this group, sending thus the message that wartime rape is at the very bottom on the priority list. It is difficult to imagine that there will ever be accurate data, since many women survivors of wartime rape never spoke out or reported the crime, some of them were murdered during the war, others died after the war, and some of them left BiH. Women activists point out in some cases the judiciary misinformed women the possibility and importance of reporting wartime rape. Those who do report the crime have to undergo a painful procedure of testifying, that might be retraumatizing, but that is the only way to bring the criminals to justice.

The BiH judicial system has not solved all the cases of wartime rape even 20 years after the war and some of them have not even been opened. Due to the fact that in some cases the perpetrator(s) are free and they live near the victim(s), some are granted early release or are released pending trial, as well as due to different ways that the perpetrators are using to avoid court proceedings, we get the impression that the BiH judicial system can allow a lot of impunity and that justice is painstakingly slow. Additionally, the perpetrators are often welcomed as war heroes in their communities, while the women, victims of their crimes, are rejected, judged and stigmatized by the society.

According to the OSCE data⁴², over the last decade the judicial system in BiH prosecuted 111 cases which included the charges of sexual violence committed during the armed conflict. BiH Court prosecuted 36 cases of this type, sentencing 33 perpetrators and releasing 12 persons, achieving a 73% rate of convictions for the accusations of sexual violence.

42 Combating impunity for conflict-related sexual violence in BiH: Progress and Challenges, An analysis of criminal proceedings before the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina between 2005 and 2013. OSCE mission in BiH, February 2014.

Available on: <http://www.osce.org/bs/bih/117054?download=true>

By the end of 2013, indictments have been confirmed in another 18 cases, in three of which the accused are on the run. The report points out that there are many cases still in the investigation phase.⁴³ Additionally, the Court of BiH has surpassed the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia when it comes to the number of prosecuted persons on sexual violence - 71 to 68.⁴⁴ It is estimated that a significant progress has been made, although the total number of indictments issued by the Prosecutor's Office of BiH for sexual violence crimes is very low in comparison to the number of crimes committed during the war.⁴⁵ Despite positive results, the general public is not familiar with the number of remaining unsolved cases which include allegations of sexual violence committed during the armed conflict, or with the degree of their complexity, which in turn means that the victims are not familiar with the phase of investigation that the cases of crimes committed against them are in.⁴⁶

The ACIPS report titled "Prosecution of Wartime Sexualized Violence at the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina: What Happened to the Interest of Justice?"⁴⁷ presented the results of a yearlong gender sensitive monitoring of the trials for sexualized violence at the Court of BiH and identified multitude of problems in the prosecution of these cases. During the 12 months of the trial monitoring, out of the 18 women who testified about rape they survived, 15 of them talked about it in hearings closed to the public (which the monitoring team could not attend), and only 3 of the women testified in public hearings. These figures point out that testifying about rape is a

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 Processing War Sexualized Violence at the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina: What Happened to the Interest of Justice? And Analysis and Recommendations on Gender Sensitive Trial Monitoring for Wartime Sexualized Violence Cases in Bosnia and Herzegovina for the period from May, 23 2011 to May 25, 2012. Gorana Mlinarević, Jakov Čaušević, Jasmina Čaušević. Association of the Alumni of Center for the Interdisciplinary Postgraduate Studies – ACIPS. Sarajevo, 2012. Available at: <http://www.acips.ba/bos/uploads/publikacije/ACIPS%20Procesuiranje%20ratnog%20seksualiziranog%20nasilja.pdf>

complex taboo in BiH. “By making a taboo out of rape crimes and testimonies on them, the Court only solidifies public prejudices on the subject and adds to the stigmatization of survivors. Such a practice does not help the wartime rape survivors in the long run, and include major problems that the survivors of rape face continue to exist: silence, lack of family support, coping with stigma and guilt and tabooing sexualized violence, all of which leads to a lack of an effective and necessary psycho-social rehabilitation.”⁴⁸

The research team that worked on this report emphasized the problem of nonexistent gender-disaggregated data at the Court of BiH, which makes it extremely difficult to obtain a gender perspective about the prosecution and adjudication of war crimes in BiH.⁴⁹ “The creation of a gender-disaggregated database would offer a first reliable gender-sensitive assessment of BiH war crimes trial processes and thus allow for first evidence-based analyses on this topic. This hard data will offer a politically and ideologically unbiased proof and thus represent an irrefutable basis upon which advocacy in favor of a more gender-sensitive treatment of women witnesses and survivors in war crimes trials could be built.”⁵⁰, the report says.

Since 2010, TRIAL Organization (Track Impunity Always) has been running a support program for the survivors of sexual violence. Adrijana Hanušić, a legal adviser at TRIAL, believes that the women who have survived sexual violence are still marginalized. “There is some progress when it comes to their stigmatization, if we take into consideration that there has been more discussion on the topic than this was previously the case, when their struggles were completely unmentioned. This happened because the women themselves established associations, got empowered and started asking for their rights, loudly and clearly. However, many women are still marginalized, for example, due to the sheer fact of their vulnerable socioeconomic position or due to the harm caused to them and which lead to their gradual social isolation. Finally, many of them have still not spoken about what they went through and are quietly suffering, without any support to help them deal with their traumas.”

Women who survived wartime rape find no understanding within

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

their communities or the wider society, which fails to comprehend that the women are not guilty for what happened to them. They are unable to pursue intimate or emotional relationships because of their numerous traumas. They often leave their partners or the partners leave them, and the deep traumas difficult to overcome makes them vulnerable and they easily become victims of domestic violence. Additionally, it is often the case that the psychological help is not sufficient to help them overcome traumas they were exposed to, and many women suffer from severe mental health difficulties, they are addicted to tranquilizers and often suffer from numerous chronic health problems. Having in mind the state inefficiency to provide adequate support systems, it is the various nongovernmental organizations that make efforts to help the victims exercise their rights. Another problem is the inability to obtain compensations for non-pecuniary damage after the announcement of the verdicts in civil proceedings.

Women wartime rape victims are not put in an equal position by the laws of entities in BiH. There was no improvement of their status whatsoever until 2006. It was in this year, when the film *Grbavica* directed by Jasmila Žbanić was released and the campaign *For Dignity of the Survivors* organized - which raised 50,000 signatures of BiH citizens for the amendments of the draft Law on Principles of Social Protection, Protection of Civil Victims of War, and Protection of Families with Children - that the victims of wartime sexual violence were recognized as civilian victims of war in the Federation BiH and were granted a special category that entitles them to maximum 70% of the benefits given to the war veterans. According to the data published on website veteran.ba in February 2014, only 789 victims of wartime rape were receiving this benefit.⁵¹ In District Brčko, a law was passed in August of 2012 which regulates the status of women civilian victims of war without any time limitations and taking into consideration the psychological pain and suffering.⁵² But the situation is diametrically opposite in Republika Srpske (RS), where the Law on Civilian Victims of War does not recognize women victims of

51 Only 789 victims of wartime rape are receiving benefits from the state: http://www.veteran.ba/clanak/513/samo_789_zrtava_ratnog_silovanja_prima_naknadu_od_drzave.html

52 Annex to the 3rd Alternative Report on the Implementation of the CEDAW and Women's Human Rights in BiH. July 2013. Available at: [http://rightsforall.ba/publikacije-bs/docs-bs/AnnextotheAlternativeReport\(BHSandENG\).pdf](http://rightsforall.ba/publikacije-bs/docs-bs/AnnextotheAlternativeReport(BHSandENG).pdf)

sexual violence as a separate category and according to which they had to prove 60% of disability and apply for financial support by January 2007 (time limit which passed a long time ago). According to the 2012 Amnesty International report, the government of RS also avoided public discussion on this topic and failed to work on de-stigmatization in relation to crimes committed against women during the war: “The resulting silence has become one of the biggest obstacles to wartime rape survivors”⁵³, the report states. In this way the discrimination of wartime sexual violence continues and even differs from one part of Bosnia and Herzegovina to another. The harmonisation of the status of women wartime sexual violence victims in FBiH and RS has to become a priority.

Adrijana Hanušić identified key problems of women wartime sexual violence survivors: “The biggest problems of these women concern the financial support they need to be able to secure a subsistence for themselves and their families. Although an initiative was launched to harmonize the position of women in the Federation BiH and in RS, there is still no progress when it comes to the monthly social benefits for victims of wartime rape. The Law on Torture Victims, proposed for adoption at state level still has not received the required support of all members of the Parliamentary Assembly of BiH, while at the same time the RS Government ignored the initiative to regulate a separate category of war victims in the Law on the Protection of Civilian Victims of War of RS, in analogy to the solution adopted in the Federation BiH. Additionally, limited access to health care and psychological support for all women across BiH, in order to allow their full rehabilitation, has been identified as a problem. Finally, many women are still yearning for justice through the prosecution of perpetrators of crimes committed against them, as well as through remuneration for the harm done to them, which is not be mixed with disability benefits that women in Federation BiH receive as a social protection measure.”

It is the movie *Grbavica* which thematizes a story similar to the one shared by the girl under the pseudonym Strong Woman in this publication, who, like Sara in *Grbavica*, was born as a result of

53 Bosnia and Herzegovina: When Everyone is Silent: Reparation for Survivors of Wartime Rape in Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Amnesty International. 2012. Available at: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/EUR63/012/2012/en/5185778e-ebd2-4f66-9008-5e7812f4bffc/eur630122012en.pdf>

wartime rape. Her decision to hide her identity is fully logical, if we consider the stigma reserved for women wartime rape victims and especially for children born as a result of these horrible crimes. Women who gave birth after wartime rapes testify about the society's judgment, about the bullying their children go through, and about the difficulties they and their children face when trying to make peace with that fact when (and if) they find out about it. There is only limited data about the number of children born after the wartime rapes, and it is hard to even imagine the fate of the children given up for adoption or those who ended up in orphanages. For example, Bakira Hasečić, the president of the Association "Women Victims of War" says that 13 girls and young women, members of the Association, gave birth as a result of rape - "(...) some gave them up for adoption, some left them with the rapists, while others kept their children."⁵⁴

The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW Committee) issued the conclusions for BiH in July 2013 expressing their deep concern for the "great tardiness in passing the measures for accommodating the needs of numerous women victims of conflict", and because women do not have "a suitable and equal access to the benefits, support and the possibility of rehabilitation, or the financial and social assistance, which are differently regulated in the entities." In line with that, the CEDAW Committee recommends that BiH speeds the passing of the law which would insure the efficient access to justice to all the women victims of wartime sexual violence. BiH will have to report to the CEDAW Committee by July 26, 2015 about the measures the state has undertaken to resolve these issues.⁵⁵

Adrijana Hanušić feels that there has been a noticeable progress in the attitudes of the society towards the women who survived wartime sexual violence in terms of greater visibility of the topic in the public discourse, yet the situation is far from ideal. "There is still a vast, unacceptable silence, especially in the patriarchal context, when it comes to the horrible things BiH women experienced, while their problems are growing and not disappearing as the time

54 Activities and goals of the Association "Women Victims of War": http://www.zzi.at/files/hasecic_molila_sam.pdf

55 In preparation: The Annual report on the state of women's rights during 2014. IneĽa HadŹić, Dalila Mirović, Edita Miftari. Sarajevo Open Center and Foundation CURE.

passes, if we consider the continuous lack of respect of their basic human rights and the depriving them of the basic services they certainly need". She also listed what the future steps towards the solving of their problems should be: "A unique legal and institutional framework is to be set up to enable equal access to all women in BiH to the social and health services, as well as to psychological support. Furthermore, we need to ensure that all offenders who committed wartime rapes are brought to justice and, essentially, that they receive a suitable sentence, as well as to ensure that women are entitled to an effective access to suitable remuneration for the harm they were subjected to, without going through expensive, lengthy and uncertain court proceedings."

If we consider the shameful sluggishness of the competent structures when it comes to the issue of solving the position of women who were forced to bear the state indifference, we raise the questions of how long will these women be forced to undergo such indifference and when will the state start working more efficiently to solve the problems which make a dignified life difficult for them to achieve. Nongovernmental organizations are covering a great part of what needs to be done by helping these women, offering them psychological support and education on their rights and mechanisms of realizing them. The road to justice these women deserve is long and exhausting, but it should definitely not last forever.



*"Sometimes I like my body, sometimes I hate it and I want to escape.
Sometimes I feel that it is there and that I am in it, genderless, without a label,
without anything."*

N.L.

Confession of a gender-fluid woman Sometimes I feel like a woman, sometimes like a man, and sometimes like something in between

I am gender-fluid. As soon as I say this, I also start saying the well-learned definition of the term, because few people are aware of its meaning or even that it exists. For this reason, the point of my writing about the experience of being a gender-fluid person will be in explaining what it really means. But this time I will not provide a definition, I will instead write about what it means to me. For me, it means that I sometimes feel like a woman, sometimes like a man, and sometimes like neither, but as a something in between, something androgynous. It's not that I feel masculine, I feel like a man, and I really am one. Most of the time I use female pronouns because it has become a habit. Sometimes that bothers me, but usually I am not in a secure enough surrounding or I am with people who don't understand me, so I'm not able to express my gender.

I can always "pass" for a woman. When I feel like a woman it's all good, because everyone speaks to me in the female gender and they perceive me as a woman. On the other hand, when I feel like a man or when I feel androgynous, problems arise. Some people do understand and notice me and they do sense my changes. They keep up with me and they speak to me in the way I would like them to speak to me. It's hard with other people. How can I explain to some people that I feel like a man and that I would like them to speak to

me using the male gender? I can't explain it. Usually, I suppress it and I allow myself to be content with the small things, such as when a friend of mine tells me I look like a boy. At that moment I feel the greatest happiness. In her own way, she notices it and accepts it. Still, this usually doesn't happen and I suppress my identity. Perhaps the problem is that I rarely even try to explain it. Perhaps the reason for this is that I am usually not taken seriously or I am simply ignored. That is why I like to stay within the community which accepts it, where there is a place for being transgender, where the majority of people are actually trans.

It was like this at "Traspozij"⁵⁶ last year. I can't remember the last time I felt so free and happy. I spoke in whichever gender I preferred and, finally, I felt safe enough to do so. People spoke to me in whatever way I wanted them to or in the way they felt was right, which was an amazing experience. I started experimenting with genders, at least in my speech, and I enjoyed it a lot, it was so liberating. Since I can't do this in the place where I live, I try to express my gender in another way, and that is through my looks. I express myself through the way I look. People close to me, who know about all of this, recognize the way I am feeling by my looks. It might sound funny, but sometimes all it takes is me not wearing any make-up for them to realize I don't feel like a woman on that particular day. It's just the way it is with people who are close to me and who get me. It's hard with other people. Especially if I don't dress like I should. It's not a problem if I wear a short skirt, or show cleavage, but it is a problem if I dress the way they say only men should dress.

The majority of people around me find it funny. Often I am told I look like a proper dyke, lesbo or something similar. They don't realize how hurtful these comments are. I remember the first time it happened. I guess it was also the first time I became aware of another identity but was unsure how to define it. I was 12. I had long hair back then and I always wore it down because my mom wanted me to. But, despite all her attempts to make a good girl out of me, I always played with boys. I would come home dirty and bruised, always with a ball in my hands. She didn't like it, but she didn't forbid it either. Still, sometimes I was forced to hang out with my cousins. When this was the case, we would usually play with dishes, pretending that we were grown-ups.

56 Translator's note: Transposium- symposium on promoting and protecting the rights of trans*, inter* and gender variant persons

My cousins would play, but I always insisted on being “the father”. Once, I came dressed in a huge shirt, a pairs of pants and sneakers, all of which belonged to my father. I tied my hair and put a baseball hat over it. I even drew a beard, using my mom’s eyeliner. My cousins looked at me, with an amused expression, and asked me what I was trying to do. Proudly, I said I was finally a proper man. They started laughing and said it was stupid and that they don’t want to play like that. A few years had to pass before I could again acknowledge this part of me and embrace it. Luckily, by that time I knew how to name it and I had people around me who showed me a great deal of support and understanding.

Since everyone perceives me as a woman, the way I look is supposed to conform to the way they think a woman should look like. They seem to be unable to understand that not only as a woman, but as a person, one should look like whatever way they want to look like and the fact that I sometimes choose not to wear make-up, to wear baggy pants and a baggy shirt, doesn’t mean they have the right to tell me this isn’t the proper way a girl should look like. A close friend asked me a question any trans person would be reluctant to answer. She asked me if I would like to undergo a surgery. I tried to calmly explain to her that this was a very personal matter, but since she was already asking, I wanted her to know that I couldn’t give her an answer. Sometimes I like my body, sometimes I hate it and I want to escape. Sometimes I feel it is there and that I am in it, genderless, without a label, without anything. She couldn’t understand it. Lately, an important part of me has been hidden, I don’t show it like I used to, I simply can’t deal with the questions and opinions of my surroundings every day. It is enough that there are many people who know that I like girls and who ask harmless questions, and on top of that, I am forced to explain the way I look. It is an important part of my identity. I am tired.

N.I.



"When I find some free time, I visit my friends in Sarajevo. Ah, that is freedom! This feeling that there are people like you, you only realize it once you are in a surrounding where you are respected and understood."

Sanja

Confession of a lesbian woman

Let everyone kiss whomever they want

My name is Sanja, I live in Prijedor and I am 23 years old. I lost my father soon after the war. My mother and I were left alone, without any help or income. I am gay and I am finding it hard to deal with it. I realized I was gay when I fell for a married woman. I simply started watching her and imagining her and me together and that is how it all began. I've never had the chance to fall in love with a girl who is gay, for the simple reason that there is only a few of us in Prijedor, and my job makes it hard for me to travel and meet people. I see it as an emotional handicap. There is the Internet, that's true, but I don't think it's a great medium for meeting someone. I want to have a girlfriend by my side and not some virtual person. I can't admit it to my mother because she is old and she wouldn't get it, she would never forgive me. A few of my friends know about it, but that is not enough for a person to be happy and free. The small town is suffocating me, it has a bad influence on me and my feelings

When I find some free time, I visit my friends in Sarajevo. Ah, that is freedom! This feeling that there are people like you, you only realize it once you are in a surrounding where you are respected and understood. You can speak out openly about every problem and not hide it. The same goes for good things. People I stay with in Sarajevo offer me everything, they try to make me forget about every bad feeling I have about myself. I am accepted there and, though they

don't know me well, everyone is always there for me, to offer some advice and give me strength.

When I was 19, I began working, cleaning toilets and offices for a minimum wage. I faced bullying and belittling everywhere. I came home crying a thousand times, I was doing it all for my mother who means the world to me. To be able to feed her and to feed myself. It was a very tough and painful period of my life but it is over now, thank God. Now, I work as a bartender in a coffee shop, and unlike my previous job, this one is a lot easier, if for no other reason than a higher pay. But, now there are new problems and new ways of belittling and insults. I often find myself in awkward situations due to my physical appearance, my short hair and the way I dress. My colleagues don't respect me either - I am the one to carry the beer crates, I'm the one to unload the drinks, and so on, but still when something needs to be washed or cleaned, they tease me and tell me: "You are a girl, you should do it." I avoid arguments for the sake of peace and tolerance at the workplace. This is what it is like to live in the province, where nothing is accepted, including the fact that you are a homosexual girl. The only people who are accepted are those who drive expensive cars, have the best mobile phones, and those who are with the most girls - those are the hotshots in our town. I just want to disappear from here, go somewhere where it is a bit more normal, where hard work and honesty are appreciated, where people are accepted for who they are, regardless of their sexual orientation, ethnic group or race.

A few days ago, two guys, visibly drunk, around the age of 25, came to the coffee shop and sat at the bar, where they started to provoke me, calling me a tomboy, a dyke, and so on. I tried to ignore them, but with no success. They got in my face and they insulted me. There were also problems with charging the bill. A colleague who worked with me warned them, but they wouldn't stop. I called security and they escorted them out. The two guys left, yelling: "Šerifović¹, see you again!" It is awful how prejudiced young people are and how rude they can be just for the sake of appearing cool and what not. How can I continue living in such a town with such people, waiting

1 Translator's note: Marija Šerifović is a Serbian singer who came out publicly in 2013.

for someone to beat me or even kill me? You can't even go out on the street without someone giving you mean looks or shouting something at you just because you are not wearing high heels or

a short dress. Or because you don't have a boyfriend who will tell the rest of the town all about the sex you had last night., How about some respect, for crying out loud I'm not bothering you, so you don't bother me. Let everyone kiss whomever they want.

Sanja

Lesbian and trans* women: women whose existence no one wants to admit

Although all the marginalized groups of women, featured in this publication, are in a difficult situation, lesbian and transgender women find themselves in the most precarious position. BiH legislation forbids discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, but this has no concrete bearing for lesbians and trans*² women who suffer multiple marginalization and discrimination. The general ignorant attitude of the society towards the LGBT population is manifested in the horrific treatment of any person who falls under any of the letters of the acronym LGBT, which stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans* persons. Two women who belong to the LGBT spectrum shared their confessions with us in this publication: a lesbian and a gender-fluid woman who identifies both as a man and as a woman. Their confessions have a lot in common and the most striking feature of both is the lack of understanding which these two women have to endure on a daily basis and which prevents them from showing their true selves, since they are afraid of suffering rejection from those closest to them as well as from the rest of the society. When reading their stories, it is easy to get a sense of what life is like for someone who is “in the closet”, what type of pressure they are facing, as well as the risk of

2 The word “trans” is used with an asterisk to denote the spectrum of trans* identities (transgender, transvestite, transsexual, etc.) which are not only limited to trans women and trans men. Within the trans* community, transsexuality is not a diagnosis, as it is the case in medical discourse, but an identity.

violence and discrimination present whenever someone looks at them on the street, every hurtful word/threat/remark spoken at them, and the painful stereotyping.

Lesbian and trans* woman are victims of double discrimination: on the basis of their sexual orientation and on the basis of their gender/sex. They are unable to freely express their identities and are therefore also unable to fight for their rights and this is what sets them apart from other marginalized groups of women featured in this book. The life of marginalized women is hard either way, but lesbian and transgender women face an additional risk in the form of direct threats to their security. Lesbian and transgender women are completely invisible - their needs do not exist as far as the institutions are concerned, although their rights are guaranteed by various laws and international documents on human rights. Trans* women, on top of all this invisibility, face an additional lack of visibility even within the LGBT community. "At the moment, the greatest problem for lesbian and trans* women is that they do not have the access to everyday services in the same manner all the other citizens do and, on top of that, when they do try to gain access, they often face discrimination and different forms of violence", explains Emina Bošnjak, Project Coordinator at Sarajevo Open Center (SOC).

Rainbow Map³ created by ILGA Europe (International Lesbian & Gay Association), the organization that reviews the state of human rights of LGBT persons in European countries, presents BiH as a country with 20% of gained rights, on a scale from 0%, which represents serious discrimination, to 100%, which represents full equality.

The available statistical data about LGBT persons in BiH have been gathered solely by the non-governmental sector, since the state institutionally refuses to accept the existence of the LGBT population on many levels. Due to this situation and the need for statistical data which would show that LGBT persons do in fact live in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sarajevo Open Center⁴ has presented data on the state of human rights of LGBT persons in BiH, in various

3 Rainbow Europe Package - Annual Review and Rainbow Europe Map: http://www.ilga-europe.org/home/publications/reports_and_other_materials/rainbow_europe

4 Sarajevo Open Center: www.soc.ba

reports published in the last few years. In 2013, SOC published the “Numbers of Life”⁵ report, so far the only research to include members of the LGBT community of BiH as direct participants and focus exclusively on their needs. 545 participants between 15 and 54 years of age took part in the research. Excluding the persons of the male gender, for the purpose of focusing on lesbian and trans* women in this text, there were 275 participants of the female gender and nine transgender persons. 252 persons used the female gender to identify themselves, and nine persons identified themselves as transgender.⁶ The answers to one of the key questions of the research – Who from the people surrounding you knows you are an LGBT person – were the following: 90.4% answered their friends know of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, and that the vast majority of them supports them (89.2%) Also, work/school colleagues know that a person is LGBT more often than this is the case with family members.⁷ When asked if they faced any form of discrimination on the basis of being an LGBT person, 35.8% replied affirmatively, and 63.1% provided a negative answer. The research concludes that every third LGBT person faces discrimination, and that instances of discrimination are not reported in 93.8% of cases.⁸ According to this research, 74% of lesbians between 20 and 30 years of age faced some form of discrimination. 62.5% of lesbians who are out experienced violence (32), as well as one lesbian who is not out. 75 of lesbians who are out suffered physical difficulties, as well as one lesbian who is not out.⁹

The Annual Report on the State of Women’s Rights in BiH in 2014, which is currently being prepared by Sarajevo Open Center and CURE Foundation¹⁰, points out in the chapter on lesbian, bisexual and trans* women that BiH continues the systematic neglect of the

5 Numbers of Life: An analysis of the results of survey of the needs of LGBT persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Sarajevo Open Center. Sarajevo, 2013. Available at: http://soc.ba/site/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Analiza-istrazivanja-bhs_web-verzija.pdf

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Numbers of Life: An analysis of the results of survey of the needs of LGBT persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Sarajevo Open Center. Sarajevo, 2013. Available at: http://soc.ba/site/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Analiza-istrazivanja-bhs_web-verzija.pdf

10 Foundation CURE: www.fondacijacure.org

existence of LBT* women, since there is no strategy or program for dealing with the problems of this group of citizens.¹¹ According to data on hate crime collected by SOC throughout 2014, and soon to be published in the Pink Report for 2014, a total of 19 cases of hate crime occurred in 2014, 9 out of which were committed against LBT* women. LBT* women still face harassment, hate speech and discrimination in everyday life and while exercising their basic human rights.¹²

“Numbers of Life” research data paint quite an accurate picture of the social climate in which lesbian and trans* women live, as part of the LGBT community in BiH. To this gloomy situation we need to add the data from Zlatiborka Popov Momčinović’s study “Who are we to judge?”¹³ which researched the public opinion on homosexuality and transgender identities using a representative sample of 1010 participants, and according to which 42.2% said it was unacceptable to have a homosexual person as their neighbor, boss or work colleague, or their close friend. Also, more than half of the citizens (59.5%) found sex change unacceptable, while 58.4% of citizens found it unacceptable for people to dress and act like members of the opposite gender. 56.5% of citizens believe homosexuality should be cured.¹⁴

In addition to open social rejection, lesbian and trans* women face a lack of institutionalized support and protection, are prone to suffering from internalized homophobia and are easy targets for physical and psychological violence, and are discriminated against when looking for a job or at their workplace. The police, judicial system and certain parts of the health care system fail to abide by the required professional standards when it comes to dealing with these marginalized groups, , partially due to the lack of knowledge about LGBT issues, and partially due to rampant homophobia and transphobia. These women hide their sexual orientation and gender

11 In preparation: The Annual report on the state of women’s rights during 2014. Inela Hadžić, Dalila Mirović, Edita Miftari. Sarajevo Open Center and Foundation CURE.

12 Ibid.

13 Zlatiborka Popov Momčinović: “Who are we to judge? A survey of the public opinion on homosexuality and transgender identity in Bosnia and Herzegovina”. Foundation Heinrich Boell, Office for BiH, Sarajevo Open Center, Foundation CURE. Sarajevo, 2013. Available at: http://europa.ba/documents/delegacijaEU_2013103011152364eng.pdf

14 Ibid.

identity from the medical professionals from fear of discrimination and unprofessional responses.¹⁵

An additional form of discrimination can be found in the fact that lesbian and trans* women do not have equal rights when it comes to registered partnerships. The laws in BiH make it impossible for persons of the same sex to join in marriage or to register a partnership, and they make it impossible for LGBT persons to adopt children, have access to their partner's social and health insurance, enjoy inheritance rights, as well as other rights which hinge on state recognition of the partnership (marital or domestic) and which are available to heterosexual couples.¹⁶

In 2013, Sarajevo Open Center published a collection of personal stories "More than a label: On women who love women"¹⁷, to promote lesbian literature and art. Unfortunately, similar artistic and activist efforts which provide visibility for lesbians are rarely seen, and the same goes for trans* women; they usually remain invisible within the wider context of LGBT rights, without a more specific focus on their needs and problems.

Marija Vuletić, an activist from CURE Foundation says that lesbians in BiH are "invisible, trivialized and are not taken seriously". She emphasizes the importance of communal struggle, empowerment and being sure in one's own identity. "I get a special type of satisfaction from coming into a room full of women who are scared, sad and lonely, and being able to tell them that they can create a lot of space for working on themselves and that no system can forbid them to be who they are and to fight for what belongs to them. By making a step towards recognizing and accepting her own identity, a woman can leave a large space for others to judge and belittle, but she also frees herself and learns how to be herself to the fullest. No one will give us anything, we have to take for ourselves everything

15 Numbers of Life: An analysis of the results of survey of the needs of LGBT persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Sarajevo Open Center. Sarajevo, 2013. Available at: http://soc.ba/site/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Analiza-istrazivanja-bhs_web-verzija.pdf

16 In preparation: The Annual report on the state of women's rights during 2014. Inela Hadžić, Dalila Mirović, Edita Miftari. Sarajevo Open Center and Foundation CURE.

17 "More than a label: On women who love women". Sarajevo Open Center. Sarajevo, 2013. Available at: http://soc.ba/site/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/KTK_za-WEB.pdf

we need - from the people, from the society, from the state, from the world”, says Marija.

Trans* women are exposed to a particular form of exclusion, since their biological sex does not match the gender they feel. Trans* women are a special eyesore in the eyes of the patriarchal society because they fully undermine the heteronormative order in which the patriarchy clearly determines the position of men, and the position of women. Trans* women can be victims of physical and psychological violence just because their appearance does not correspond to their assigned biological sex. They are unable to fully use health services from fear of sharing their gender identity with medical staff that is insufficiently educated on how to deal with trans* persons. There is no legal basis in the area of medical protection which would sort out the issue of sex reassignment and this leaves trans* persons with nothing but the possibility of having a privately funded medical procedure in one of the other countries in the region. Since the price of the relevant medical procedures is extremely high, the number of persons who can come close to sex reassignment in this way is minimal. The report “The rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans* persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina: New approaches?”¹⁸ states that trans* women, as well as trans men*, can change their name, social security number and personal documents, and it is only the Law on Registration Books in Brčko District which does not accept “sex change” as a basis for the amendment of personal documents.¹⁹

Trans* women are often in an unequal position in feminist/lesbian movements, and they are left out of campaigns against violence against women and similar activities which aim at raising awareness about the position of women. This exclusion can happen intentionally, due to the belief that trans* women are not “real” women in the way cis-gender women are or simply because of ignorance and the lack of interest for their existence and their difficult position in the society. “The state ended its efforts to improve the position of trans* persons’ rights by enabling them to enter sex change in the registration books and to change their documents, and has completely neglected all other needs of trans* persons, including

18 “The rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans* persons in BiH: The legal system. Foundation Heinrich Boell, Office for BiH, Sarajevo Open Center, Foundation CURE. Sarajevo, 2013. Available at: http://ba.boell.org/sites/default/files/pravosudje_knjizni_blok_1.pdf

19 Saša Gavrić: The rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans* persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina: New approaches? Foundation Heinrich Boell, Office for BiH, Sarajevo Open Center, Foundation CURE. Sarajevo, 2014. Available at: http://soc.ba/site/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/LGBT-OSOBE_bos_01.pdf

medical support during the transition period, i.e. reassignment/sex change”, explains Vladana Vasić, program coordinator in Sarajevo Open Center.

The report “Numbers of Life” has a separate chapter on transsexual and intersexual persons whose participation in the research cannot be overlooked - nine trans* persons and 11 intersexual persons (persons born with genitalia and reproductive organs which cannot be explicitly classified as either male or female) took part. Eight out of nine trans* persons said they were feeling physical difficulties, depression, fear, anxiety, sadness and other as a result of transphobia they face daily.²⁰

In October 2014, Sarajevo Open Center started a group Trans* BiH²¹ aimed at empowering trans* persons in BiH, promoting their human right through the improvement of legislation, the health care system and education, and offering support to trans* persons and people who are close to them. Ryan Zu, a member of this group, says trans* persons face prejudice and violence on a daily basis, both in their families and in local communities, as well as through the legal system, the job application process, the health care system and education. “That is why we are often hidden and why we don’t have any contact with those who don’t understand our difficulties and the discrimination we face in all segments of life. Trans* BiH came to be because of the need of trans* persons in BiH to connect with each other and to support each other in a safe environment.”

Trans*BiH group is based on the principles of equality of all gender identities, inclusiveness and the respect for individuality of gender and gender expression. “We believe there is no single “proper” way for someone to be trans*, and that trans* and cis- gender identities belong to the same spectrum and not two different categories. The group has six members and they belong to different parts of the transgender spectrum and it welcomes everyone who identifies as transgender, to their families, partners and friends”, says Ryan Zu.

20 Numbers of Life: An analysis of the results of survey of the needs of LGBT persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Sarajevo Open Center. Sarajevo, 2013. Available at: http://soc.ba/site/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Analiza-istrazivanja-bhs_web-verzija.pdf

21 Trans Bosna i Hercegovina: <https://www.facebook.com/transbih>

The group collaborates with LGBT, queer and feminist organizations and initiatives in BiH and in the region, and is one of the founders of Trans* Balkan Network²², a regional network of trans* activists who work on empowering trans* communities in the Balkans and on raising public awareness on trans* issues.

Vladana Vasić and Emina Bošnjak say that it is possible to reach a small number of lesbians and trans* women who can be, and who often are, empowered through the activist engagement. “It is necessary that the activist engagement, aimed at empowering lesbians and trans* women, comes not only from certain LGBT and feminist organizations, but also from other mainstream women organizations”, they say. But, the task of the state is to support tolerance to diversity and to raise an inclusive society through its systems. “In order to lower the level of marginalization of these women, the state has to take a proactive role in enhancing protection and the respect of human rights and dignity. The state institutions must not act only when it comes to the consequences of human rights violations - their care must have a preventive character as well and it must act towards the causes of marginalization of these women”, warn the activists.

The issue of the LGBT population is particularly troublesome for the state of BiH, since accepting the existence of LGBT persons and finding systematic solutions for their problems, which are mostly connected to discrimination and compromised safety, presupposes the destruction of the dominant patriarchal norms which reject, or at least ignore, the existence of persons of a different sexual orientation and/or gender identity. That is why Sanja from Prijedor must fear for her safety at work because the way she looks like does not coincide with the way society thinks women should look like. That is why N.I. cannot feel free and explain without fear that she sometimes feels like a woman, sometimes like a man, and sometimes like neither, but like something in between. That is why both of these women, like many others who share their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, are forced to live in fear, uncertainty, anxiety and are forced to weigh every step they make and/or word they utter. Through all of this they are pushed to the margins of a society which, unfortunately, tries its best to keep them there.

22 Trans Network Balkan: <https://www.facebook.com/transbalkan>



"I have helped myself through helping others. I plan on doing this for a long time, because this feeling contributes to my pleasure and joy."

Beqzada Beqanović

Confession of a Roma woman

A way to a better future

It began with dirty words which clearly stated the death of my mother, those words which leave a mark which cannot be erased, the words which tear down, change or build things. For a child of nine years, every loss represents the failure of life - one cannot see further from that moment and there is no future. Death of my brother, six months later, awakens doubt and fears. The near and predetermined future, specific for my people, without education, without dreams and wishes. One latches on to the spark of oblivion, built through tiny years and the hardest turmoil. A new black curtain appears over the dining table of life. The death of my other brother in a car crash sealed the previous small pleasures and small moments of happiness through my elementary and high school years, the same high school I dropped out soon after this unfortunate event. One could say that life stopped for me.

Dragan Joković from the Organization “Otaharin” visited us in mid-2006 and motivated me for volunteering. I entered this house, which would soon become my home, with great wanting and hope. Working in “Otaharin” provided me with a great number of experiences, with education in all fields, with new friends and many journeys. But, it wasn't all so perfect. Through my volunteering, I have encountered discrimination as well, and I faced prejudice of both non-Roma, as well as Roma within my community. For a long time I carried this burden, and I continued fighting and showing those people that I am

a citizen/girl too, and that I want a better future. I made some of them change their opinions, both some of the Roma in my community, as well as non-Roma.

Year after year, actions, seminars and projects made me a happier and better person, and a hard-working, constantly praised volunteer. In 2011, I signed the employment contract with the NGO "Otaharin", thus becoming the only working Roma woman in Bijeljina. During the same year, I passed my driving test and got my driver's license. The informal education through various seminars has brought me understanding and knowledge about working with target groups, especially children. I was pleased to work in the kindergarten "Čika Jova Zmaj" which was attended by Roma children as well, for the first time. This kindergarten is where I found support and help in my further work. In 2014, I have enrolled into high school and I have already successfully completed the second grade.

Since I am recognizable in my surroundings thanks to the job I do, I constantly meet new people from different organizations, which enables me to have great collaboration with non-governmental organizations. My plans won't end once I finish high school. I plan on enrolling in the Faculty of Pedagogy, department for preschool teachers. I have helped myself through helping others. I plan on doing this for a long time, because this feeling contributes to my pleasure and joy. The greatest pride is in children who go to school, who have plans and who know a way to a better future.

Begzada Beganović - Begzi

Roma women: The women who are not there

The image of Roma women in our society is reduced to girls and women begging in the streets, marrying young, living in huge families and below the poverty rate, who constantly give birth to new children who also beg, thus enforcing the social exclusion they are doomed to. The reality is completely different - the position of Roma women is difficult because they are, like other marginalized groups, exposed to double discrimination, primarily because of their sex/gender, then their national identity, and because they face discrimination every time they attempt to have a decent life, with roof over one's head, education and health protection.

Roma are the largest national minority in BiH and for many years, in general, they have been forced to live on the margins of the society. Around 90% of Roma women have no access to health services, social services or employment.²³ According to the results of research “Stop the Violence: Report on Domestic Violence against Roma Women in

23 “Stop the violence: Report on domestic violence over Roma women in Bosnia and Herzegovina”. Rights for All and ICVA. Sarajevo, November 2010. Available at: http://www.rightsforall.ba/publikacije-bs/docs-bs/Romkinje_za_zivot_bez_nasilja-BH.pdf, according to the Fourth and fifth periodic CEDAW report on Bosnia and Herzegovina, May 2011, pg. 65, the data used from the Report of the Ministry of finance and treasury and of the team of United Nations in BiH “Progress in the realization of Millennium Development Goals in BiH”, 2010.

Bosnia and Herzegovina”²⁴, a staggering 81.18% of surveyed Roma women are unemployed. 9.08% work in the black market, and only 8.40% is employed, while 7% stated that they ensure the necessary means for life by begging.²⁵ Roma women live in poor conditions, often without running water, electricity or sewage system. They are financially dependent on male members of their families, their health is at risk, and they can rarely gain access to health services because they often do not have personal documents. Due to the lack of suitable health care, they often fall ill and/or develop severe diseases, and even die. In 2013, film *An Episode in the Life of an Iron Picker* directed by Danis Tanović turned the public eye to this problem by portraying a true story of Roma woman Senada Alimanović, whose baby dies during pregnancy, but she is unable to have the surgery she needs because she has no health insurance. In Tuzla, she is told to pay 980 BAM in order to get the procedure. Since her family does not have the money, Senada uses her sister-in-law’s health insurance card in order to finally have the life-saving procedure in Doboj.

In Roma communities, dominantly patriarchal and closed, there is often an attitude that family is sacred and that it should be preserved at any cost, says Jadranka Miličević from CURE Foundation, who has worked as an activist for years in the area of improving the position of Roma women. The community expects women to be patient, obedient, restful and submissive. As a rule, Roma women marry young, give birth soon after, they either do not attend school at all or drop out after only a few grades. They are financially dependent on their partners, and their families rarely offer them help. Their sexual and reproductive health is at stake, because of the lack of access to contraception (due to which they become mothers in their early twenties), and to regular gynaecological services as well. The preliminary data from the aforementioned survey about the marrying age of Roma women, show that out of 527 participants, 44.21% were married by the age of 18, usually between 14 and 16 years of age.²⁶ They will mostly stay at home, bear children, take care of them and the other children in their families, and be condemned to unpaid housework.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Alternative report on the implementation of CEDAW convention and on the women’s human rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina. October 2010. Available at: <http://www.fondacijacure.org/cms/books/img4d05ee548f99c.pdf>.

Roma girls often do not attend school at all and are mostly illiterate. Greater numbers of Roma girls, in comparison to boys, leave schools at a certain period and it is clear that the educational status of Roma women is worse than that of Roma men.²⁷ Number of Roma girls who attend elementary school is very small in comparison to that of the boys (the ratio is 3:7 for the boys).²⁸ This report includes data from the survey conducted in 20 largest Roma communities in BiH by 12 Roma female leaders, representatives of Roma non-governmental organizations during 2010.²⁹ Out of 607 surveyed Roma women, as many as 45.13% are without any school education, and 31.13% have completed only primary school. Such a high percentage of Roma women who have not completed elementary school, which is legally required for all children, is unacceptably tolerated by the state institutions that do not implement the law in practice. When parents of Roma girls come to school to sign them out for any reason, the authorities do not ask any questions and they do not take legal action against them.³⁰ UNDP study states that almost 80% of Roma women do not even graduate from primary school, and only 4.5% graduate from high school, compared to 9.2% of Roma men. Only 47% of Roma girls were enrolled in primary school.³¹ Roma children are exposed to additional pressure in school, in the form of harassment and teasing, and from the very start, they are labeled as dirty, lazy, stupid, etc. Roma women without formal education have no chance for employment and, therefore, they have no chances of surviving outside their communities and they are completely financially

27 Ibid, according to: “Socially excluded in BiH today, what about tomorrow?”. Bureau for human rights Tuzla, 2009. Available at: <http://www.hrotuzla.org.ba/publikacije/Socijalna%20isključenost.pdf>

28 “Stop the violence: Report on domestic violence over Roma women in Bosnia and Herzegovina”. Rights for All and ICVA. Sarajevo, November 2010. Available at: http://www.rightsforall.ba/publikacije-bs/docs-bs/Romkinje_za_zivot_bez_nasilja-BH.pdf

29 Alternative report on the implementation of CEDAW convention and on the women’s human rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina. October 2010. Available at: <http://www.fondacijacure.org/cms/books/img4d05ee548f99c.pdf>,

30 Ibid.

31 Improving the equality of sexes and support to women: Institutional, legal and public policies framework for the integration of equality of sexes, Chapter: Social exclusion: http://www.ba.undp.org/content/bosnia_and_herzegovina/bs/home/mdgoverview/overview/mdg3/

dependent on members of their families, which often exposes them to various forms of violence.³²

The needs of Roma women are not even recognized in public policies on the improvement of gender equality and the protection of women's human rights.

There are no reliable data about women victims of domestic violence in BiH, and thus there are no reliable data on the number of Roma women who undergo domestic violence. Previous research shows that Roma women are more exposed to violence than non/Roma women. Survey conducted by Medica Zenica and Infoteka "We haven't learned it, that is how we used to live", conducted in January 2001 in Zenica municipality shows that 33% of Roma women were exposed to long-term and multiple abuse in comparison to 24% of non-Roma women.³³ According to the data of NGO "Better future" from Tuzla, Roma women are particularly vulnerable because of deeply rooted prejudice about violence against women as being a part of Roma tradition, causing the institutions responsible for the implementation of the laws prohibiting violence not to engage enough in that regard.³⁴ Roma women are "used" to violence since early age, so it becomes acceptable to them and they readily tolerate it for a long period of time. "Often, their husband is chosen by their families, from the families which are, as seen by the male family member, similar to their own by socialization and social status. Obedience is a characteristic of a "good" wife. Messages such as "Put up with it, I did, too", "You have to eat a bag of salt to save your marriage and your children", and so on are often heard in patriarchal communities," states Jadranka Miličević. Organization "Rights for All" from Sarajevo states that, according to some preliminary data from a conducted survey with 609 Roma women participants, 43.19% answered affirmatively to the question if they previously

32 Alternative report on the implementation of CEDAW convention and on the women's human rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina. October 2010. Available at: <http://www.fondacijacure.org/cms/books/img4d05ee548f99c.pdf>.

33 "Stop the violence: Report on domestic violence over Roma women in Bosnia and Herzegovina". Rights for All and ICVA. Sarajevo, November 2010. Available at: http://www.rightsforall.ba/publikacije-bs/docs-bs/Romkinje_za_zivot_bez_nasilja-BH.pdf

34 Alternative report on the implementation of CEDAW convention and on the women's human rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina. October 2010. Available at: <http://www.fondacijacure.org/cms/books/img4d05ee548f99c.pdf>.

suffered or are still suffering some form of physical violence. When asked if they know a woman who suffered or is still suffering physical violence, 606 said yes, out of whom 76% know a woman who is suffering violence, and most commonly that woman is their mother, sister, cousin or a friend. Also, an alarmingly high number of women, 46.52% said that they either know a woman or they themselves have suffered some form of sexual violence. Most commonly, it was marital rape or forced sexual encounter in a manner a woman does not want or she does not approve.³⁵

Although women from different groups face difficulties when looking for help and protection from violence, this help is unavailable to Roma women for multitude of reasons: they live in closed communities, have no access to information, are often illiterate and thus unsure about the possibility of reporting violence, and also there is the fear from prejudice and unprofessional treatment by people employed in the institutions which should offer protection from domestic violence. Organization “Rights for All” reported on the response of domestic institutions to the domestic violence against Roma women in 2011, and stated that the discussion on policies towards the population and “reaching and sustaining the optimal level of birth-rate” as a precondition of a happy childhood of Roma children was deeply concerning. As they state, it seems that the greatest obstacle for Roma women gaining rights is the size of their families and that the women with less or no children would have greater range of rights or better access to them. Insisting on programs aiming at “promotion of better parenting” constitutes direct violation of human (reproductive) rights of Roma women.³⁶

Roma women are also victims of human trafficking - they are sold to other countries for the purpose of marriage, under the facade of the prejudice on Roma custom that girls marry young, but they also become victims to human traffickers in their pursuit for a better life and escape from catastrophic life in BiH. The Alternative report on the implementation of CEDAW convention in BiH states that people

35 Ibid.

36 Esther Garcia Fransioli: Annual report on the state of women’s human rights in BiH during 2013. Sarajevo Open Center. Available at: <http://www.ffuis.edu.ba/media/attachments/2014/12/01/Godisnji-izvjestaj-o-stanju-ljudskih-prava-zena-u-BiH-u-2013.pdf>, According to: “Roma women for life without violence. Response of the institutions to domestic violence”. Rights for All and ICVA. November 2011. Available at: http://pravazasve.ba/publikacije-bs/docs-bs/Romkinje_za_zivot_bez_nasilja-BH.pdf

working in institutions for the prevention of human trafficking are also prejudiced against Roma population, and therefore hesitant to engage in cases involving Roma children.³⁷ The data from the Report on domestic violence against Roma women in BiH³⁸, quoted in the Appendix 3 of the Alternative report of CEDAW for BiH, witness that some of the participants in the survey stated that their reason for marrying was getting paid by their husband's family and that those are the so called arranged marriages. Out of 561 participants who answered this question, 30.34% answered that they know a woman who was paid to get married.³⁹ The results published in MISC4 survey in 2013, dealing with early and forced marriages, show that more than a third of Roma women aged 15-19 are currently married, that 15% of Roma women aged 20-49 were married before the age of 15, and 48% before the age of 18⁴⁰. These women are forced to stay in paid marriages no matter the violence they are exposed to from their partners or members of his family, because their families cannot accept them back, and often they do not want to since they are unable to give back the money they received. Practically, this means that the woman was "bought" and that she becomes the property of the family she married into. Unfortunately, this type of "marriage", and actually of selling girls, is not accepted or treated by the state as human trafficking, justifying it as tradition in the Roma

37 Alternative report on the implementation of CEDAW convention and on the women's human rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina. October 2010. Available at: <http://www.fondacijacure.org/cms/books/img4d05ee548f99c.pdf>,

38 "Roma women for life without violence. Response of the institutions to domestic violence". Rights for All and ICVA. November 2011. Available at: http://pravazasve.ba/publikacije-bs/docs-bs/Romkinje_za_zivot_bez_nasilja-BH_93 Annex of the 3rd Alternative report on the implementation of the CEDAW convention and on the women's human rights in BiH. July 2013. Available at: [http://rightsforall.ba/publikacije-bs/docs-bs/AnnextotheAlternativeReport\(BHSandENG\).pdf](http://rightsforall.ba/publikacije-bs/docs-bs/AnnextotheAlternativeReport(BHSandENG).pdf)

39 Annex of the 3rd Alternative report on the implementation of the CEDAW convention and on the women's human rights in BiH. July 2013. Available at: [http://rightsforall.ba/publikacije-bs/docs-bs/AnnextotheAlternativeReport\(BHSandENG\).pdf](http://rightsforall.ba/publikacije-bs/docs-bs/AnnextotheAlternativeReport(BHSandENG).pdf). According to: "Stop the violence: Report on domestic violence over Roma women in Bosnia and Herzegovina". Rights for All and ICVA Sarajevo, November 2010. Available at: http://www.rightsforall.ba/publikacije-bs/docs-bs/Romkinje_za_zivot_bez_nasilja-BH.pdf

40 Esther Garcia Fransioli: Annual report on the state of women's human rights in BiH during 2013. Sarajevo Open Center. Available at: <http://www.ffuis.edu.ba/media/attachments/2014/12/01/Godisnji-izvjestaj-o-stanju-ljudskih-prava-zena-u-BiH-u-2013.pdf>,

communities.⁴¹

The Annex 3 of the Alternative report on the implementation of the CEDAW convention and on women's human rights in BiH emphasizes certain positive steps made for the Roma women.⁴² The first women's Roma network "Success"⁴³ was formed in 2010, comprised of ten organizations from Tuzla, Visoko, Kakanj, Vitez, Zenica, Srebrenica, Prnjavor, Donji Vakuf and Bijeljina. For the first time, a group of Roma women spoke about their position before the Committee for gender equality of the Parliamentary Assembly of BiH in 2012, and, as proposed by the first deputy chair of the Commission, a large number of women were chosen for the Roma Board, including the appointment of Indira Bajramović from the organization "Better Future" from Tuzla, as the chair of the Board.⁴⁴

Indira Bajramović states that there is certain progress, mostly thanks to the projects implemented by the associations of Roma women, which are based on improving the position of Roma women, both in their community, and in the society. "As we started joining the public and political life, the issue of Roma women became more visible as well as their position in BiH itself." Thanks to the joint lobbying, 5 Roma women, as well as five women from the relevant ministries joined the Roma Board, chaired by Indira Bajramović. "The visibility of Roma women and their participation in the public life is at a better level than it was ten years ago. We have many female Roma activists, we formed Women's Roma Network, and we were also independent political candidates. Of course, the situation is not satisfying because we still need to work on the additional ways of improving the position of Roma women in their own communities", Indira says. Jadranka Miličević adds that we need to be active listeners as well and that there should be better communication between all the subjects of the society when it comes to the issue of Roma women's social position:

41 Annex of the 3rd Alternative report on the implementation of the CEDAW convention and on the women's human rights in BiH. July 2013. Available at: [http://rightsforall.ba/publikacije-bs/docs-bs/AnnextotheAlternativeReport\(BHSandENG\).pdf](http://rightsforall.ba/publikacije-bs/docs-bs/AnnextotheAlternativeReport(BHSandENG).pdf)

42 Ibid.

43 Roma Women's network "Success": <http://zrmuspjeh.com.ba/>

44 Annex of the 3rd Alternative report on the implementation of the CEDAW convention and on the women's human rights in BiH. July 2013. Available at: [http://rightsforall.ba/publikacije-bs/docs-bs/AnnextotheAlternativeReport\(BHSandENG\).pdf](http://rightsforall.ba/publikacije-bs/docs-bs/AnnextotheAlternativeReport(BHSandENG).pdf)

„All of us should work on breaking our own prejudice and on strengthening our own powers relating to the Roma women, and on the better understanding of the marginalized Roma community’s problems.”

Roma women are often the unjust victims of media sensationalism. When there is an article on educated Roma women, phrases such as “the only highly educated Roma woman” are often used, which points to the perception of Roma women who attend school as social exceptions, which only produces counter effect, since the real message that Roma women, like other women, should have the possibility of educating themselves is not being sent. Often, the writing about Roma women is not sensitive and they are written about in contexts of sexual scandals or sexual abuse, and in connection to the populist events such as beauty contests in Roma communities or Roma weddings.

Begzada, who shared her life story in this publication, is an example that young Roma women can achieve their life goals. She works, she earned her driver’s license and she is planning on enrolling at the Faculty of Pedagogy. In these achievements and goals, she is not much different from any other girl in BiH. But, Begzada will be an exception in comparison to all the other girls just because she is a Roma woman. The society is to ensure equal life chances to Roma women because girls and women like Begzada are all around us. The society refuses to see that, or they only see that those girls and women beg in order to survive. That is not their fault. To say the least, the aforementioned society is responsible for turning their heads from them and it is up to that society to find a solution for this unjust situation.



"You can do anything you set your mind to, and obstacles do not mean it is impossible - only that you have many new ways to overcome them!"

Selma

Confession of a Single Mother

Not all families are the same

A victim or a person who made a tough choice – that is the question.

This was the question I often read from the looks my friends were giving me after realizing I had decided to give birth to my child out of wedlock.

It takes two to have a child - that is how it was with me at the very beginning. After a long-standing relationship, I got pregnant. Quite shocked, still not aware of what that really meant, I informed my partner about it. This is when maybe the most devastating thing in my life happened – my partner simply said: “Get rid of it.”

Even more shocked and faced with an enormous fear – I made a decision – my child was loved and wanted and I was going to give birth to it.

I will get back to fear later on because it was fear that was one of the greatest problems I had to face in my entire story. Fear of the unknown; fear because I did not have role models to look up to and adjust to myself some of the experiential stories of other women. There were simply no such stories - because you do not tell such stories. They are kept far away from the public eye, at least from the reality we live in.

My pregnancy was not easy at all. Vomiting literally destroyed me. The job I had back then did not allow me to rest at all, and I did field

work the whole time, and after I announced I was pregnant, it caused new problems for me. Not all of us are ready to accept the fact that a woman in our surroundings has decided to have a child outside of conventional patriarchal social norms. I became painfully aware of this fact when I started getting very strange messages from my work colleagues such as: "I do not really approve of this." and similar. The disregard, the lack of empathy, hidden messages of disapproval and frequent mean-spirited comments only made things worse.

No, life is not a fairytale with a happy ending. It's something we have to learn from early childhood. "They lived happily ever after." is one big lie.

Two events from that time fully shaped my further thinking. Two very burdensome experiences. The first one was when I had to tell my father I was pregnant. The fear was horrible. The fear of hurting him, of letting him down. Everything went well. My family accepted my condition with enthusiasm and full understanding and support. But still, every time I remember that family lunch, I start to shake and tears just start coming down. The second incident occurred on one winter afternoon when I slipped and fell on the street by the Latin bridge. I was alone. Alone in a high stage of pregnancy, I was lying on the street and trying to chase away the tears that kept coming and coming... If you think that any of the passersby came to help me – you are wrong. I gathered my strength by myself and got up. The strength was there and it always came on its own and lifted me to face all other problems that just kept coming one after another...

On one hand understanding - accusations on the other. One is to balance in between. What will happen to my job, will I be strong enough to continue? What awaits me tomorrow – if tomorrow ever comes?

I started to look around different internet forums, looking for answers. A handful of information on the one hand, and on the other hand – the taboo about women who survive their pregnancy by themselves and prepare themselves for future life. I prepared myself for a self-supporting motherhood – without knowing anything about how it looks like and what actually awaits me. Yes, there are some things common to us all, but there are also certain things which differentiate us completely.

I will try to mention some – loans, yearly vacations, buying a car, paying the bills, planning a future... It is one thing when you plan with two heads and another when you don't know what to plan by yourself. It is true – everything just comes when it is time for it to come...

Childbirth was very traumatic for me, as well as what happened later on. Due to the intense stress, I gave birth to a premature baby girl and faced the enormous fear that she might not have been fine due to my decision to do everything by myself. I don't know if I was ever so scared in my life as while watching that little being in the incubator and counting her little fingers... Somebody who has not gone through that cannot know what this dull pain and fear of reality is.

But we survived, and we still live courageously. Very courageously.

With time, I stopped caring about some things.

It became a bit funny when they started asking me at new job interviews: "How do you plan to work in your situation?", alluding to the fact that I was a single mother.

How? Well, nice - I am going to get my paycheck and pay a babysitter or a kindergarten like any other "normal" person.

How and where will you go to your annual vacation? How? Well, nice - as any other "normal" person – look what they offer and where, pay for it and leave. And I will not have to comply with anybody's wishes – only with my child's and my own.

It's time for winter tires – you should change the old ones. How? Well, nice – put the baby in the carrier and straight to the tire service. Done before you know it!

You can do anything you set your mind to, and obstacles do not mean it is impossible - only that you have many new ways to overcome them!

Not everything is always great and easy. You need to fight and ask questions and place demands before yourself on a daily basis.

My family is incredible – they have been here this whole time, with me, with us, supporting us and helping us. They give love and understanding unconditionally.

My friends are amazing - they are here, they listen and give their support. My friends – amazing!

The society? There are funny situations sometimes because the society simply ignores the fact that there are units who are an integral part of that very society which are “a bit different”. They ask about your marital status on all administrative questionnaires, and when you state “unmarried” and you mention the number of your children...”No, I am not divorced, and I am not a widow.” I am not a charity case. No, I never experienced marriage. Do I need to?

I admit it – sometimes I feel lonely. This loneliness mostly emerges in those moments when I want us to do something, and there is somebody *third* missing because everything is somehow adjusted to this ideal image of a family smiling from promotional posters for various insurance companies and laundry detergents. Wherever I look, I see those false images of an idyllic life imposed on us as a norm, and which have nothing to do with the reality we live in.

Not all families are the same. There are single-parent families and families without children, there are individuals who are a family for themselves. There are the ones with difficulties, the ones who have serious problems, the ones ruled by violence and alcoholism, gambling, insults, lack of honour, insincerity and lies. There are families governed by love, harmony, respect and consideration. Each of those families is around us. We need to recognize and acknowledge each other, to support and enable a humane and dignified life for each other.

Each of us is different, each of us has different needs and wants to live her own life, has her own needs, her identities. We need to recognize and acknowledge each other, to support and enable a humane and dignified life for each other. The society also needs to recognize and acknowledge that, to support and enable that all of us have a humane and dignified life, free from violence and discrimination.

And in the end – let me go back to the fear. There is always fear and there always will be. It is always present whenever we freeze in our own skin and don't look around ourselves. Indeed, we are different. Indeed, we are wonderful. Each of us has a beautiful story to share with each other. It does not matter whether the story is difficult or easy. It is important that it is there, that it is not invisible. If we are invisible, it means that we do not exist.

And we do exist, and we are superb, wonderful, courageous women.

Selma, a feminist, a mom

Single mothers: Women who have to do everything alone

The nuclear family, as the most traditional form of family was joined by various and different forms of family in the modern times. Regardless of this, the nuclear family is still the dominant structure in which the existence of a father, a mother and children is considered as the only socially accepted form of family life. Many families which exist in different forms suffer due to this traditional perception, and among them are women who are single mothers faced with great challenges of earning a living and raising children after their divorce, death of their partner or simply the absence of a partner. The confession of Selma, a mom and a feminist, who decided to give birth to a child after her partner suggested that she should terminate her pregnancy, talks about the difficult acceptance of the surroundings. Her colleagues did not agree with her choice, she had to deal with the numerous pregnancy stresses by herself, and then with raising the child, and apart from it all, she was accompanied by fear she would not be capable of ensuring a good life for her child because she was – alone. Other single mothers who, in an already tough general economic situation, must manage in various ways in order to feed their children, share her fears.

There are no reliable statistics on how many single mothers there are in BiH. Various relevant associations collect their data which they use to help their members and exert pressure on the legislation in order to secure the legally required alimony. Despite this, paying alimony after divorce is a rare occurrence, as pointed out by all

associations for single parents. A survey on household consumption from 2001⁴⁵ states that the differences between sexes are apparent when it comes to single parents and that over 84.4% of parents are single mothers, as well as that households with single parents present .5% of all households in BiH.⁴⁶ Furthermore, analyzing the types of households, the survey indicates that when it comes to the highest poverty rate, single parents with other relatives come third with 20.4%.⁴⁷ When comparing the data in the region (BiH, Serbia, Montenegro), it is estimated that the share of one-parent households is from 10-15% (with or without an extended family) and that the share of single mothers is from 70-85%, and single fathers from 15-30%.⁴⁸

For example, 96% of mothers in the Association of Single Parents *Ponos* from Banja Luka are the primary caregivers of one-parent families and in almost 90% of cases are faced with the problem of not receiving alimony for their children that would facilitate their difficult lives.⁴⁹ The data which the Association obtained together with the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Banja Luka show that there is a total of 36,925 children in RS whose parents do not have the income to support them.⁵⁰ Dijana Miljatović from the Association points out

45 Survey on Household Consumption for 2011. Agency for Statistics BiH, Federal Institute for Statistics, Republic of Srpska Institute for Statistics. Sarajevo, 2013. Available at: http://www.fzs.ba/Anketa/BHAS_HBS_BH_dv5-2.pdf

46 Ibid.

47 Survey on Household Consumption for 2011. Agency for Statistics BiH, Federal Institute for Statistics, Republic of Srpska Institute for Statistics. Sarajevo, 2013. Available at: http://www.fzs.ba/Anketa/BHAS_HBS_BH_dv5-2.pdf

48 "Single Parents in Republika Srpska: Little Support, Big Problems", published in M. Blagojević Hjuson, J. Milinović, Single Parents in RS. Proceedings "Rights of Children and Equality of Sexes – between Norm and Reality". p. 578–599. Available at: <http://pravnilis.rs/Download/Zbornik-Prava-djeteta/PDRPV10.pdf>

49 Banja Luka: The Daily Struggle of Single Parents for Surviving and Feeding Their Children: <http://www.24sata.info/vijesti/bosna-i-hercegovina/banja-luka/177716-banja-luka-svakodnevnaborba-samohranih-roditelja-za-opstanak-i-prehranu-svoje-djece.html#sthash.CPDDOhFW.dpuf>

50 Even 90% of Parents Do Not Pay Alimony!: <http://www.nezavisne.com/novosti/drustvo/Cak-90-roditelja-ne-placa-alimentaciju-210508.html>

that only 10% of members receive their alimony regularly. Also, she said that around 150 families in the Association are socially handicapped and that 50 of them are below the poverty line.⁵¹

Taking into consideration the difficult economic situation and the poor implementation of laws or their complete absence, the existing statistics, although scarce, can be very easily applied to the rest of the country and it can give an insight into the real position of single mothers. This was confirmed by the statement of the Network of Associations of Single Parents that “the needs of one-parent families are the same in the whole country”.⁵² The Network was created after long-standing efforts of associations of single and separated parents to create a better social and legal surrounding for this population. It was founded by the already mentioned association *Ponos* from Banja Luka, the Association of Single Parents *Velika porodica*, the Association of One-Parent Families *Iskra* from Pale and the Association of Single and Divorced Parents *Norne* from Tuzla.⁵³

Poverty and social exclusion are often present in single-parent families. The research *The Socially Excluded in BiH Today, and Tomorrow?*⁵⁴, conducted in Banja Luka, Brčko, Doboj, Gračanica and Tuzla covered the focus group of 105 single mothers, with 46% of them being widows, 15% of unmarried women and 38% of divorced women. 46% of them had one child, 37% had two children and 10.5% had three children. The biological father of the children was alive in 59% of cases.⁵⁵

51 Even 90% of Parents Do Not Pay Alimony!: <http://www.nezavisne.com/novosti/drustvo/Cak-90-roditelja-ne-placa-alimentaciju-210508.html>

52 The Network of Associations of Single Parents: “Our Problems Are the Same All over BiH”: <http://www.6yka.com/novost/51952/mreza-udruzenja-samohranih-roditelja-nasi-problemi-su-isti-u-cijeloj-bih>

53 Ibid.

54 *The Socially Excluded in BiH Today, and Tomorrow?* Human Rights Office Tuzla, Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly Banja Luka. 2009. Available at: <http://www.hrotuzla.org.ba/publikacije/Socijalna%20iskljucenost.pdf>

55 *The Socially Excluded in BiH Today, and Tomorrow?* Human Rights Office Tuzla, Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly Banja Luka. 2009. Available at: <http://www.hrotuzla.org.ba/publikacije/Socijalna%20iskljucenost.pdf>

We also single out the data about the employment status: 30% of the respondents are contracted employees, 11.5% work without a contract, 11.5% of respondents is self-employed (in the Brčko District), and 47% of the respondents is unemployed. When asked "What is the main reason you do not have a job?" as many as 34% of them did not answer. Other answers were: there is no work - for 24% of the respondents, 12.5% has to take care of their children, 10.5% of examinees are looking for a special job while 8% of respondents are prevented to work by disease or disability.⁵⁶ Only 1% of children of employed single mothers attend kindergarten, an additional 3% have babysitters. A high 7.5% of children stay home alone.⁵⁷ Finally, the data that could not have been overlooked and which surely refers to a great percentage of single mothers in other parts of BiH: 27% of the examinees occasionally have to miss a meal in order to leave food for their children.⁵⁸

Without the support of a nuclear family, without both parents who work and an extended family to provide financial or other kind of support, single mothers are faced with the great challenges of survival. The additional problem lies in the law which does not recognize the phrase single parent after divorce, but only if the partner passes away, is unable to perform their parental role (for example, serving a prison sentence), is declared incapacitated in terms of work or being a parent, or is simply not present. The spokeswoman of the Association Ponos, Slobodanka Plavljanin, adds that the biggest problem is the absence of the term single parenting that would encompass the entire population. Even though proceedings have been initiated at courts for not paying alimony, this problem is not being systematically solved because the data on poverty and the difficult financial situation of single mothers clearly shows that paying alimony in most cases is not done which brings many children into the state of social need. Judging by the newspaper reports, over 80% of fathers in BiH under all cost avoid to support their own child after divorcing their former wives⁵⁹, and the methods of avoiding to pay the otherwise very low sum of

56 Ibid

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 More than 80% of fathers avoid paying alimony: <http://manjine.ba/?p=4593>

alimony are numerous: from simply refusing to pay up the money to hiding their real income or being illegally employed..

The results of the research of the Association Ponos in cooperation with the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Banja Luka, conducted at the end of 2009 and beginning of 2010, on a sample of 558 people from the area of Banja Luka, Prijedor and Ljubija, and which was kindly ceded for the needs of this publication, show that alimony is paid only by 6.45% and occasionally by 8.60% of partners after divorce. The research also states that 42.29% of people do not pay alimony, but Ponos states that this number reaches around 70%, given that a lot of parents did not choose that option during the research "because they were neither looking for it nor did they know that they had the right to ask for alimony", as Dijana Miljatović from the Association explains. Working on site, they obtained information that about 20% of parent pay alimony occasionally with recoverability still being below 10% even though many parents have fully legal and enforceable court rulings, but there is no mechanism of collection. Categorizing parents is essential because current laws do not cover all parents and their situations. "The position of single mothers, as well as single parents in general who are not single parents according to the law, is undefined and followed by numerous problems which institutions are not able to solve because there is no systematic apparatus to follow the rights of the child from the moment the parents decide to separate or divorce. Since children stay with their mothers in most cases, this problem becomes more complicated because around 70% of mothers are unemployed", rates Dijana Miljatović.

Therefore, associations from both BiH entities call for an urgent establishment of a state alimony fund which would cover the financial needs of single mothers and fathers. The suggested system of collecting alimony from the alimony fund would mean that the money would be paid by the state which would then collect money through court proceedings from parents who avoid paying alimony. The decision on establishing an alimony fond was passed last year in FBiH.⁶⁰ Last year, The Department for Following the Rights of a Child of the Institution of the Human Rights Ombudsman of

60 Federation of BiH is Introducing an Alimony Fund, Children Are Going to Get Their Money: <http://www.vecernji.ba/federacija-bih-uvodi-alimentacijski-fond-djeca-dobivaju-novac-923000>

Bosnia and Herzegovina warned that the procedures for collecting alimony are slow even though this is a criminal act punishable by a month to three years in prison. However, in the last 25 years nobody was sent to prison.⁶¹ “Establishing an alimony fund would solve various problems, but the society generally stigmatizes one-parent families and education on a global level is necessary in order to change the attitude of relevant institutions”, says Dijana Miljatović.

The social pressure is manifold for single mothers. The patriarchal norms of the society that blame the woman after divorce and which place her in an even worse position than the one she is already in as a single mother are not helpful in this situation at all. Divorce is still thought of as another phenomenon of “the new times” and “a Western trend” despite the fact that people get divorced everywhere, and not just in BiH. Another estimation of the Association Ponos is that, for example, there are 300 divorces per year in Banja Luka which amounts to a number of around 3000 divorced people. Muamera Činjarević, the president of Canton Sarajevo Association of Single Parents of -One Less,⁶² shared for the needs of this publication the information that there were 869 divorces in just the first half of 2014 in Canton Sarajevo. Divorce happens due to different reasons, and a common one is domestic violence due to which women often run away from their partners and become single mothers while having to overcome the trauma of violence together with their children. Činjarević states that the members of the Association One Less are mothers in 99% while 1% of them are fathers. One of the objectives of this Association’ is to introduce prosecution of persons who do not pay alimony.

Single mothers fall into the social category which is more vulnerable to social exclusion. It is more difficult for them to get a job given that they must balance their work duties with the duty of taking care of their children without a partner to help them. They rely on free-lance and unreliable engagements which often do not provide regular incomes. The employers often hesitate to employ single mothers out of fear they will not achieve their best due to stress, as well as due to other obligations motherhood entails. Statements of single mothers who say that they do not have enough money to pay the

61 Ibid.

62 The Association off Single Parents of the Sarajevo Canton *One Less*: <http://www.usr.ba/>

bills and occasionally live on the brink of starvation are alarming.⁶³ They are often without a housing solution and subtenants are forced to an unsuitable life. “The newly-created one-parent families often become social welfare cases due to such issues, and because they are not single parents according to the law, they do not even exercise minimal rights”, says Miljatović. “The mental stress which single mothers go through should absolutely not be disregarded – juggling several parental obligations while trying to ensure a decent life can lead to depression, lower self-confidence and serious health issues and add to the difficult position of one-parent families. Single mothers are often forced to receive humanitarian aid in food, clothes, medicine... It is the associations such as this that are often the only ones to open their door, providing advisory or humanitarian aid,” clarifies Dijana Miljatović.

In her confession, Selma writes about fear: “Fear of the unknown; fear because I did not have role models to look up to and adjust myself to some of the experiential stories of other women. There were simply no such stories - because you do not tell such stories. They are kept far away from the public eye, at least from the reality we live in.” Her experience tells the dire story about a society which, due to utter lack of care, leads on women who are mothers to feel the elementary fear that their children will not survive, that they will not be taken care of and that they will have a traumatic childhood. That is a cruel reality, that the social system which always calls upon tradition and family values and every now and then warns about the birth dearth, is not capable of providing the elementary existential security to the ones who, due to circumstances, personal choice, running away from violators or any other reason decided to raise their children by themselves. Maybe the society thinks that this is the price these women have to pay because they decided to live their life without a partner. Even if it is, it is awful and no woman should pay it up. A righteous state system, if there is such one here, should make sure that they, as well as their children, never feel hungry or poor, nor socially rejected.

63 Alternative Report on the Implementation of the CEDAW Convention and Women’s Rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina. October 2010. Available at: <http://www.fondacijacure.org/cms/books/img4d05ee548f99c.pdf>



Football is a beautiful game and I see no reason why a woman shouldn't enjoy it"

Ivana Vlašić

Confession of a woman in sports

I enjoy football as a woman

My name is Ivana Vlaić and I live football.

I played football actively for 19 years. I won the championship title of BiH 12 times with my club. In 2000, as the team captain, I played in the UEFA Women's Champions League for 10 times with the Women's Football Club SFK, two times in the finale, among the 32 best teams in Europe. I played for the national junior and the senior team.

I have been working as a coach for ten years with youngsters in the Women's Football Club SFK 2000, and also with the seniors' team since 2010. I was a coach of the U-19 BiH national team as well as the A women's BiH national team.

I have been working as a referee since I was 19. I was a referee for the children's leagues in Canton Sarajevo, for the Cantonal League, the Second Center League (men's league). I am currently a referee for the BiH Women's Premiere League, the BiH Youth League (boys) and for international matches of women's teams.

I do not remember the moment I encountered the ball for the first time, but I have a feeling that I have been playing football forever because ever since I became self-aware, football has been a part of my life. I played it in all places, in school, at home, on fieldtrips,

tournaments... At that time I was the only girl in my town who played football. This went on until I was 14 when I went to Italy to attend school and where I started to train seriously for the first time in a women's football club "Vigor Grandate".

I passed the referee exam in 1999 and, as a student of the Faculty of Sport and Physical Education and an active player, this was very interesting and challenging for me. At that time, I was one of the two women referees in BiH. Several years later, other women referees began to appear, but only in the last two years have women refereeing slightly expanded. Since 2007, I have been a referee in international matches and my greatest accomplishment so far has been refereeing the match for the third place at the European Championship for girls up to 17 years in Switzerland. I am very proud of the fact that I am on FIFA's list of women referees which is also a burden because when I am refereeing for matches abroad, I am not just Ivana Vlaić, I do not only represent myself, but also my country and I contribute to the quality of presenting BiH in the world of football.

Women's football is much more popular and represented than men's in certain countries of the world (America, Scandinavia etc.) while in most other countries this is not the case. FIFA and UEFA scale down the differences between women's and men's football on a daily basis which increases the number of girls who want to engage in this sport and its popularity is constantly growing. Every year, the quality of women's football, working conditions, and media campaigns are getting closer to men's football.

Different people view women's football differently in BiH. Some appreciate the fact that a woman is engaged in a sport, some find it interesting, some think that it is completely normal, and there are extremes where it is thought of as a male privilege.

This was not a problem for me until the moment I won several championships as a female player in Women's Football Club SFK from Sarajevo, achieved top results, and this was not recognized and it was understated, as it is today. The media pays very little attention to these things, and as many countries in the world struggle with a similar issue, so do we.

I grew up playing football and after "playing it", it became a way of

living my life, and my parents and my sister were a constant support in every moment. When I overdid it with my trainings, when I had severe injuries, when I was happy because I won or unhappy because I was defeated, they were always there for me. Through all of these situations, both the good and the bad ones I have my sister's daughters with me who think of football as an integral part of my own and their life.

We have regular trainings in our referee organization in Sarajevo, all referees train together according to the same curriculum, and considering that our referee organization cherishes the tradition of women referees, we are well received by our male colleagues.

It was not like this at the very beginning, the opinions and attitudes were divided, where some had a bad attitude towards women referees. However, it was the other ones who prevailed so we managed to withstand all of it to fight for our place in the organization. Although some were against it, there were referees who were ready to help and it was a pleasure for them to referee together with women.

I heard different comments in the matches in which refereed ranging from negative to very positive ones. Once, while I was still actively playing football, I came to referee a match and when the players saw that they will have a woman for a referee, one of them commented: "She is not going to be our referee, is she?", while his teammate responded: "Shut up, she plays in the Champions League, you can only play there on PlayStation."

I, as a woman, enjoy football, whether I am playing it, refereeing it, working as a coach, or watching it on TV.

Football is a beautiful game and I do not see a single good reason why women should not enjoy in it.

Ivana Vlaić

Women in sports: Women who have to be twice as good at sports

If you type in the term “sportswomen” into Google search, the data about the most successful women doing sports in BiH, and maybe even about how many of them actually decide to pursue a career in sports, you will mostly get titles which offer an insight into which ones have “the most sex appeal”, are “the sexiest” and “the most beautiful”. Mass media mostly glorifies sportswomen because of their physical beauty and not without a reason – they are beautiful, fit women with amazing success and abilities in sports. Unfortunately, their physical looks regularly overshadow their achievements in sports. This is nothing unusual – many other capable women are victims of the trivialization of their abilities due to their sex and physical beauty. However, sportswomen must face yet another obstacle – with the very common belief that, if they are engaged in a traditionally “male” sport, they do not belong there. The presence of women is approved in certain sports which are considered to be “for women” such as figure skating, gymnastics, tennis and other sports where the participation of women is equal to that of men. On the other hand, women playing football, boxing, martial arts in general, weightlifting, rugby and similar sports which are traditionally regarded as men’s sports receive negative comment from their surroundings, and face practical problems in their careers.

There are numerous benefits of sports for girls and women. Besides improving physical condition and health in general and the positively affects the elimination of stress, sport is also an

instrument of empowerment, a tool for building self-confidence and teaching leadership skills, as well as cooperation and team work. Sport also affects overcoming gender stereotypes and increases the possibilities of gender equality.

However, no matter which sports they are involved in, it is not easy for women to have a career equal to that of their male colleagues. They will be less paid than men seeing that sport has become a spectacle that brings as much profit as can be generated via sponsorship agreements mostly oriented towards men, who are considered to be untouchable and excellent sportsmen. Male sport is a spectacle that is obsessively being watched, paid and glorified. Sportsmen are heroes, sex symbols, wealthy men who are given a lot of media space. Sportswomen are less paid, they have more difficulties in ensuring sponsorship contracts, and the media often sexualizes them and trivializes their achievements. Even if they take part in high-profile competitions, they are not equally covered by sponsors or the media, as well as other sport professionals.

Sportswomen are often proclaimed to be “mannish” because of their muscularity or other body modifications the sport demands, thus directly being subjected to other kinds of prejudice regarding their sexual and gender identity. The degrading practice of sex verification before a competition which is performed only on women in order to establish if the person can compete in the women’s category which is especially traumatizing for intersexual persons should be noted as well. Sex verification was carried out by the International Olympic Committee until June 1999, which reserves the right to test the sex in certain cases even today.⁶⁴ Trans* women are especially exposed to prejudice and discrimination in sports, but trans* sportswomen are becoming even more visible in the world, and recent rules allow for transsexual athletes to compete at the Olympics after their sex reassignment surgery and a legal recognition of the sex they want to compete in, as well as after two years of hormonal therapy.⁶⁵ The International Association of Athletics ended sex verification in 1992 but also retained the possibility of checking in case of doubt. The most recent case happened in August of 2009 when the South African athlete Caster Semenya was tested. The Olympic Council

64 Gender verification in sports: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender_verification_in_sports#cite_note-12

65 Ibid.

of Asia continues to perform this kind of testing. ⁶⁶ Finally, the marginalized group within sport – women with disabilities who are actually given very little possibility to do sport and who, ironically, achieve great results should be mentioned as well. As a matter of fact, according to the research of the Women’s Sports & Fitness Facts and Statistics⁶⁷ young girls with disabilities participate in sports and other physical activities more than their male peers. Also, the number of competitors at the Paralympics increased from 400 in Rome in 1960 to 3, 951 in Beijing in 2008 with 1, 380 of them being women, or 35%, which is the highest percentage so far.⁶⁸

As in other careers, a sport career suffers from the so-called wage gap due to which women receive significantly less money than their male colleagues. A recent BBC study in sport showed that the awards in 30% of sports in Great Britain - including cricket, golf and squash - are higher for men than for women. The research covered 56 sports. Out of it, 35 sports have cash awards, of which 25 have equal awards and 10 sports have unequal cash awards.⁶⁹ The biggest difference is in football where the Arsenal Football Club won both the men’s and the women’s FA Cup with men receiving 1, 8 million pounds and women 5, 000 pounds for winning, while tennis is one of the rare sports where the awards for men and women are the same.⁷⁰ In the USA, sportsmen get 179 million more than women when it comes to athletic scholarships, and college scholarships spend only 24% of their operating budget for athletics on women, while 16% is being spent on recruitment and 33% on scholarships for female athletes.⁷¹

66 Ibid.

67 Women’s Sports & Fitness Facts & Statistics. Women’s Sports Foundation. 2009. Available at: http://www.womenssportsfoundation.org/home/research/articles-and-reports/athletes/~media/PDFs/WSF_Research_Reports/WSF_FACTS_March_2009.ashx, according to Sabo, D. & Veliz, P., (2008.) Go Out and Play: Youth Sports in America. Women’s Sports Foundation.

68 Ibid, according to: International Paralympic Committee, 2008

69 Men get more prize money than women in 30% of sports: <http://www.bbc.com/sport/0/football/29744400>

70 Women in sport still facing inequality over prize money: <http://www.bbc.com/sport/0/29786682>

71 Gender Discrimination in Sports: <http://www.livestrong.com/article/247625-gender-discrimination-in-sports/>

According to Women's Sport Foundation, even though women make 40% of people who engage in sports and physical activities, only 6% to 8% of media coverage of sport is dedicated to their activities. And in the research that covered four great American newspapers – *USA Today*, *Boston Globe*, *Orange County Register* and *Dallas Morning News* – it was discovered that stories about women in sport made only 3,5% of all sports reports.⁷² There is also data about the trivialization of success and the maximum forcing of only physical attributes of sportswomen from the already mentioned research that Women's Sports & Fitness Facts & Statistics which states that women were only on 38 covers from a total of 676 issues of the famous American magazine *Sports Illustrated* in the period of their research. Out of these 38 magazine covers, 6 (15,8%) portrayed women as a part of a larger story about some of the aspects of sport (ticket prices, fans, sports colleges) while 12 covers (31,6%) were dedicated to models as a part of the well-known *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit edition.⁷³

There is no relevant statistics regarding these issues in BiH and that is why we rely on world reports. But, the publication "Women 2000 and Beyond: Women, Gender Equality and Sports" states information about using sport to reduce stressful conditions through physical activity among women in BiH.⁷⁴ Dr. Fadila Ibrahimbegović-Gafić from the University of Sarajevo estimated the physical and psychological state of 70 women and implemented a program of physical activity with the goal of reducing stress in women from 40 to 55 in areas affected by war in BiH.

The program was successful not just in reducing stress, but also in changing the attitude towards workout and its effects on physical

72 Ibid.

73 Women's Sports & Fitness Facts & Statistics; Women's Sports Foundation; 2009: Available at: http://www.womenssportsfoundation.org/home/research/articles-and-reports/athletes/~media/PDFs/WSF_Research_Reports/WSF_FACTS_March_2009.ashx, according to the research of the Women's Sports Foundation, from January 1997 to December 2008

74 Women 2000 and Beyond: Women, Gender Equality and Sport; UN; 2007; Available at: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/public/Women%20and%20Sport.pdf>

recovery.⁷⁵

Surely, there is little money and support in BiH for the most talented sportspersons, with women having an even greater challenge of achieving success. Ivana Vlaić who grew up with football, who was in the national team and a player for the Women's Football Club SFK, as well as a referee in football matches told her story in this publication. Ivana described how women's football is underestimated in BiH, speaking of referees and players who thought of her being a referee as a problem due to her sex/gender. She shares this experience with a lot of BiH sportswomen, of which some talk openly about the problems stopping them to achieve their full potential in sports. Four BiH sportswomen who are engaged in the so called "male" sports spoke for the needs of this publication, and they shared their experiences and explained what it is like to be a sportswoman in BiH.

We will begin with football, currently the largest sport spectacle of the world, which is, speaking frankly, played by men for men. There are women's leagues as well as numerous great female football players, but this is still considered to be a "male" sport, as evidenced both by Ivana and Samira Hurem, the coach of the Women's Football Club SFK 2000.⁷⁶ This club confirmed its status as the best women's football club in BiH last year. Even though Samira says that there is a positive shift when it comes to the interest of woman for football, she is not fully satisfied. "Women's football is in a period of great expansion and it has room for popularization and progress. If we compare the present-day image and the number of women interested in football with the image five years ago and more, we will see that the numbers are constantly rising. I see no reason why we should not have three times the number of female players and clubs in the next five years. Football is the most popular sport in our country so why should girls be denied the opportunity to play the most interesting

75 Ibid, according to: Oglesby, Carole A., in collaboration with the International Working Group on Women and Sport, Women Sport International, the International Association of Physical Education for Women and Girls, and the International Council of Sport Science and Physical Education (2006). Positive Embodiment: Contributions of Sport, Exercise and Physical Recreation to the Life-long Development of Girls and Women. (Brief prepared for the Division for the Advancement of Women.)

76 SFK 2000 Sarajevo: <https://www.facebook.com/sfk2000>

sport?!” Young girls whom Samira works with love football, they play and follow it with passion. “FIFA and UEFA did some research and analysis which showed that little girls enjoy football much more while they are actually playing it. Football has become a business. Boys are already consciously and subconsciously directed towards individual success and assertion. Girls are much more focused on team play, cooperation and having fun, and this is directly reflected on the beauty of the game and the mood.”

The club that Samira trains has won the most trophies in BiH (including the competition of men’s football clubs) which defended 12 times the title of the state champions, and its members promote women’s football at all times. “The results show that we play football really well and, according to these facts, there is no real reason why we should not be equally famous and recognized. However, in this region, we can still feel the bold inequality in the treatment of women in almost all segments of the society including sports, and especially football. Prejudice is the wall that we will still have to bring down. These prejudices include simply thinking that women are not capable of playing fine and interesting football. Through our promotional activities we try to directly get in touch with our audience and show them that our players do play fine, and not in the least boring football. The game is dynamic, filled with fine moves, technical finesse. It is only necessary to see and realize this before forming an opinion,” says Samira Hurem.

She thinks that the marginalization of women in sports is obvious. “If you compare the budgets of men’s and women’s clubs and the sources of their finance, you will get a clear picture of it. The situation is changing. The greatest step was made by the Football Federation of BiH when it finally raised the women’s selection and competition to a higher level and paid attention to the development of women’s teams 3-4 years ago. We are making a step forward, but very slowly. I wish the time would finally come when we will not talk about differences and when, as the BiH football club with the most trophies, we will not have to present and explain ourselves, and justify who we are and what we do. I wish for the time to come when our society will be proud of a successful team which represents us in the best way, on international competitions and when we will talk about our success, projects and upcoming goals.”

Irma Balijagić Abdihodžić is another sportswoman who chose a traditionally “male” sport – boxing. In 2006 she became the first European champion in kick boxing and then moved on to professional boxing where she was the world champion three times (in 2008, 2009 and 2013). Irma also thinks that it is much more difficult for women to have a career in “men’s” sports, but says that women’s awareness is beginning to change and that girls who started to do professional boxing have appeared in recent years even though boxing in our environment is traditionally thought of as “beating somebody up” and as being inappropriate for “the fairer sex”. Irma points out that the conditions for training in BiH are generally poor and in combination with that, women have much less chances. “You can come to a club and train, but the problem arises when it comes to how the coach and other members treat the girls. When a girl shows up to train a so called “male” sport, there is immediately prejudice. It depends greatly on the person who wishes to train – if they are strong enough and if they want it very much. I went through it. When I started to train kick box, I came into a hall with 20 men and they all looked at me as if I had no idea what I was doing.” says Irma, who usually performs under the alias “Adler” (meaning “eagle” in German).

Irma faced employment discrimination as well. As a graduate of the Faculty of Criminal Justice, Criminology and Security Studies she applied for several jobs, including for the special unit of the Ministry of Interior of Federation of BiH (where there are no women) and she was not accepted. While applying for another job which had something to do with ammunition, she was told from the start that they do not accept women. “The general rule is that there is no employment discrimination, but this is not true in specific situations. I am a woman engaged in a “man’s” sport and I have very low chances for everything, and while I do my trainings, I know that half of the men cannot do something I can.” Irma says that they should raise awareness among girls and women about the nonexistence of differences between men’s and women’s sports and professions. “It was always interesting for me to be better than men. I prefer to compete with men and I think that women are much more capable than men. But the unspoken rule that where that men play a leading role in all segments, still exists.”

Dajana Dangubić does Olympic weightlifting, and she opted for

this after years of training handball. Nowadays, she is a member of the BiH national team, a state champion in weightlifting who has set many state records, and won the most significant title so far at the world cup in weightlifting for women in Qatar where she came third place. Dajana's late father supported her in her efforts to train this sport from the beginning. "He knew that sports and especially weightlifting affect physical development, concentration, motor skills and the development of many traits in teenagers. He made sure that my brother and I enter sports and taught us that doing sports brings about mutual respect, tolerance and understanding by bringing people of different sex, race, religion and age together. Through the trainings and competitions I realized that sport activities, if led properly, can serve as a means of a struggle against discrimination, prejudice and stereotype.

Weightlifting is a sport which is especially subjected to negative comments on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity of women engaged in that sport and is considered to be one of the sports for "mannish" women. The comments of the surroundings, criticism, superficial thinking and ignorance used to hurt her. "I was considered to be the person who crosses the border of categories defined by sex. I was marked in many cases as strange and my sexual identity was questioned. They often described me as "mannish" even though I am very proud of my femininity in this beautiful, unusual sport. I did not fit into the concept of opinion of the majority, but I was still happy and fulfilled because my weights are the sport of my life, they push me and I am here to show the majority that women can shame many men in weightlifting!"

Emina Dževherović is also engaged in a sport often related to men. The sport of her choice is rugby sevens, a type of rugby played with seven players. Emina decided to take up this sport by accident. She used to trained athletics and spent a lot of time on the track, and one coach and former player who was looking for players suggested she play rugby. "I knew nothing about this sport, I thought it was rough, and like most people, I was prejudiced. At the very beginning, I felt resistance and fear towards this sport because it was unfamiliar and I did not know the rules of the game. But when I got to know it, I fell in love with it very quickly and I have been doing it for three years already. Even though not everything was promising when I started training, I gave the sport which I knew nothing about until

then a chance and I did not regret it.” Emina points out that the rugby she trains is not “that sport with a helmet and shoulder pads”, that is, American football. “People know little about the existence of this sport – especially women’s rugby even though rugby has been present since 1972. This sport is generally marginalized, unfortunately, it is still on an amateur level and I think it will take a long time for rugby to become equal to other sports. Nevertheless, I am glad when people are positively surprised that there are women who play rugby.”

Emina has won two European championships in the jersey of the BiH national team, and she played tournaments in Split as well as friendly matches with the club she plays for, the Women’s Rugby Team Ćelik from Zenica. They played home matches in BiH with the team of the First Women’s Rugby Club (PŽRK) from Sarajevo. A small number of players also train in Tomislavgrad. “Rugby is still a low-level sport and it should be promoted more. But, women’s rugby is present in other countries in the Balkans: Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro, Macedonia, and two years ago, they started playing it in Turkey. Slowly but surely, rugby is coming to our region with the intention of staying.”

Emina thinks that women in sports are marginalized, especially in the so called “male” sports. But when it comes to rugby, she thinks there is the problem of not knowing rugby, as well as prejudice. There are also financial problems, as well as the lack of female players to train this sport, which is, according to her, a great handicap. “In order for rugby to be in a better situation and for more women to take interest in this sport, it will take a lot of work, effort, time and of course, investments.”, says this player.

These successful sportswomen are joined by many other BiH girls and women who have been achieving success after success in sport. Late last year, the judoka Larisa Cerić was declared as the best sportswoman of BiH, chosen by the Olympic Committee of BiH for the third time in a row. She is a multi-champion of BiH, and she won the silver medal in the European championship in 2014. Another successful young judoka is Aleksandra Samardžić who won the gold medal at the last year’s European Junior Cup. Recently, Ilma Kazazić, a young competitor at the Paralympics and skier who participated in the Winter Olympic Games in Sochi where she carried the BiH flag

was declared the most successful sportswoman with disabilities in Canton Sarajevo for 2014. All of them chose sport as their life and decided to tackle prejudice, discrimination and the generally tough conditions for doing sports. They are and will remain a symbol of commitment, ambition, progress and the ones who will move the boundaries and use sport as a powerful tool of empowerment and achieving quality.



"I want to give myself everything I can and everything that makes me happy, I will embrace every kind of love, I will give it to anyone who deserves it, I will believe in anyone who knows how to share, I will fall in love with the one who shows me respect and I will believe in perfecting myself."

Ljubica

Confession of a woman survivor of domestic violence

Anyone who thinks that all fruits ripen at the same time as strawberries knows nothing about grapes

- You will never be ahead of me! Never! You just can't, you see!
- he tells me, his teeth clenched, roughly squeezing my arm muscles.
- What are you talking about? I thought we were together, walking side by side. I love you, I am the wind beneath your wings. What's that about me being ahead of you, I don't get it? What's wrong with you, love? - I am already crying and the strength I had when I entered this conversation is vanishing. Everything vanishes at the thought that I might lose him. - Why are you even telling me this? What have I done?

He is already gone.

He is hiding behind a door where he can comfortably place his disgraceful personality, eat food somebody else has provided for and cooked and switch channels - toneless, so that he could hear me scratching, babbling, begging him to come out and tell me what I had done to annoy him. He turns up the TV while I cry and say the most honest and most beautiful things this love for him has awakened

in me. He turns up the volume when it is most important that he should hear what I'm saying, when he should hear about all those things I am ready to do for us. Then the sports commentator starts talking and I choke up for the thousandth time and lose my strength from hours of crying and his toying with my emotions.

Once he realizes that I am broken and that I have retreated, he leaves me alone for several more hours so as to make sure that he has exhausted me enough. Then he comes out of the room and finds a way to hug me as I might not allow him to come near me right away.

- Fuck it, babe, I'm sorry. Oh, I'm such a... - I am already hugging him.

I will not let him talk bad about himself. We're embraced. I love him and I forgive him in advance.

He stays with me for a little while, gives me a teaspoon of love and usually says:

- How about we perk up a bit and clean this up, and then we'll go for a coffee?

Exulted, I do the dishes and iron some clothes, refusing to even think about how this is wrong because I am not the only one living here. Let's just leave the apartment, that's all I can think of.

We don't go anywhere.

He never has any money; he will take mine out of my wallet whenever he sees a chance.

We have been together for two years; I have stopped performing in the play that brought me money and enabled me to perform abroad. I don't even go to the Academy anymore.

I have stopped singing because all the things that I find liberating are an annoyance to him. I work as a waitress. He doesn't work. I get ready, put on some make-up after more than a month for that fucking coffee we won't go to once again because he's gone out by himself in the meantime and "bought us" something to eat, to

“pamper ourselves”, to stay in the apartment and watch “some great stuff” on TV.

If I suggest changing the channel because I lack interest in the making of a certain warplane or in how a club from the fucking middle of nowhere is playing and because this is all we watch during the day, I get the answer that the remote is a guy’s thing.

As the evening sets in, he gets hungry for the one hundredth time, and there is nothing to eat because he had eaten everything we had in the house, even the money I earned and the money my parents intended for me. Then, out of that hunger of his, out of his disgusting vanity, he starts biting down into my being. He prates about me cheating on him and tells me I am a whore, disregarding the fact that he himself knows that everything in me is subdued to him. When I say something back, he kicks me on the head and wipes off the floor with me, and then the same scenario is repeated. Like, he is sorry, like, he loves me, like oh, I’m such a...

All my childhood friends told me they couldn’t recognize me anymore and they didn’t understand what I was doing with him. Even his friends told me that. Acquaintances and random passers-by even tried to convince me, but I unconsciously turned away from many of them because of him. Those who know me often reminded me of the potential I was risking to lose forever, but I took offence and nipped such conversations in the bud. I believe in us. I believe in him.

You must believe in the one you love, otherwise you are a hypocrite, and when it comes to love, there is no room for hypocrisy.

I used to believe that I should not choose my partner based on whether or not he has money, an apartment or a car, and that two people can achieve so much from scratch if they are bound and guided by love. I believe in this to this day. On more than one occasion I have found him jobs and every time the money was good, the people he worked for were extraordinary and reliable; they were usually friends of my family or even family members. He always managed to get into a fight, to embarrass me, to knock down the material people were working with and to yell at them as he used to yell at me in the streets of Sarajevo, Bijeljina, Belgrade, Novi Sad and all other

places he came to with or after me, while hundreds of unfamiliar faces looked at my tears with pity.

I did not always allow him to break me down because the roots of my feminist personality still existed. I was born that way and I always believed that no one could ever beat me up, insult and humiliate me. I gained respect wherever I went because I myself respected others. I couldn't have known that on my path of love I would fall into an abyss and turn into a victim. Society labels women with similar experiences as "fools" and "liking to be beaten up", and I knew I was neither, I just wasn't able to explain to myself as to how I got there. It was only later, through work, that I understood the grave matter that came crushing down on me and that numerous books, studies and publications had been written about it. Psychology takes this problem very seriously. To fall into the role of a victim and not recognize it on time or not at all, is fatal for your personality and can happen to anyone. Hence, I knew how to break loose from him and restore my self-respect very quickly, but I would always let him come back because I felt that he was the only one whom I could give so much. Now I know that all that giving was mine to receive, but I had completely forgotten about myself.

We never used protection during sex because we wanted to have a child.

He thought that a child would solve all problems and that everybody who loved us would be more than willing to ensure our existence as soon as possible so he wouldn't have to do anything, whereas I desired a living proof of our bond. On one of the occasions, in a moment of the most beautiful kisses, words and hugs, he told me that he would not allow me to go near that child and that if I tried to take it, he would take everything away from me. Nature is no fool; it did not allow reproduction in this combination. He was appalled when I told him I wanted to keep my last name because it was a part of my identity and that there was no need to be called differently after half of my life. Luckily, no signatures ever occurred.

He tormented me for three years, taking advantage of my commitment; he was not my first partner, however, he shaped me into a sexual being who had difficulties with finding anybody else to be satisfied with after him.

That last year, while we were still together, I got a good job and a good salary.

Of course, he never believed in my vocation. He was additionally annoyed with the fact that I worked with people of different nationalities and that the topic of my assignment was related to women's rights.

My mother passed away in the meantime and several days later my partner told me over Skype, "Hey, why are you so fucked up? You're making everyone nervous; I'm off to the living room to do my thing, and then I'll come back to talk." That was the first time I told him he was a monster and that I did not want to have anything to do with such people. This was an eye-opener for me. I regret every day of my life spent with him, and not with her. I regret every hand grip that was his and not hers.

I regret all the kisses I bestowed on him on a daily basis, while I remained eager of hers. Since she passed away, everybody has been doing their share of work - my brother, father and me. No one has ever raised their voice at a woman, a child or a father at our place. No one has ever brutally hit anyone else.

I will not strive to form such a family nor will I renounce the selfless love of my parents and make them suffer because of me as that would mean that I do not love them. I did not want the money I knew I would earn to be wasted again. Now more than ever, I needed it for the home my parents had built from scratch with love to be sustained.

I cut the veins on my left hand because of him, I bled because of his rottenness and the problems he indirectly caused me after our relationship had ended. I look at it from a more positive angle today because I can sense that the weather is about to change.

All emotion disappeared overnight; I stopped loving him overnight; I saw the future days in my head. I could see myself just cooking, washing up, ironing, reeking of kitchen, keeping quiet, not singing, not reading, not seeing, not going anywhere, not having friends, not traveling, getting beaten up, worrying about how to pay the bills, the children watching him hitting me, not allowing my father and

brother to come because there is no room... Enough!

I told this story a thousand times, to people I know and do not know and I was never ashamed of it. I told it even when I knew I would get comments such as: "You are so stupid!" and "I don't know how you allowed that to happen!" I told it even when I risked going through trauma over and over again. I told it when it might have seemed I was burdened by it. It helped me start believing in myself again and prove myself once again that I was still ahead of an emotional manipulator and that there was no need for me to walk with such people anymore. It helped me to be happy once again for not wasting away my love, inspiration, emotions and teach myself to direct my energy at things and people of quality.

Love yourself! Improve yourself!

Those who themselves are not needed by others.

Nowadays, I have a totally different vision of marriage. Moreover, I do not want to get married, I do not want to have a child even though I love children. I want to give myself everything I can and everything that makes me happy, I will embrace every kind of love, I will give it to anyone who deserves it, I will believe in anyone who knows how to share, I will fall in love with the one who shows me respect and I will believe in perfecting myself because, as Paracelsus says:

He who knows nothing, loves nothing.

He who can do nothing understands nothing.

He who understands nothing is worthless.

But he who understands also loves, notices, sees.

The more knowledge is inherent in a thing, the greater the love.

Anyone who thinks that all fruits ripen at the same time as strawberries knows nothing about grapes.

Ljubica



"For a while, I thought I was the unhappiest person in the world. I can honestly tell you that this is the worst feeling in the world. All of it is now behind me."

Milena Čujetković-Ambulija

Confession of a woman survivor of domestic violence

The unhappiest person in the world

Dear all,

First of all, I would like to ask you not to judge me and blame me for everything that happened. Why do I ask this of you? Well, simply because I could have put an end to my agony before some things had happened. Of course, after all the things I had been through and upon reflection, I should have gathered my strength and put an end to it all. When it happens to somebody else, it is easy to say – “Oh, I would not have put up with him, I would have killed him” or “I would hit him with the first thing I could find”. Never judge anyone for what they did or did not do until you’ve heard why they did it or did not do it as all of us would react differently, if we found ourselves in the same situation,. Anyway, let me go back to how it all started. Before I begin, I would like to apologize for some of the words I will be using, but I need to do it because this is how my former husband said them. First, the violators will separate you from your family; they will prohibit you from having contact and interacting with your surroundings. They will gradually convince you that you are the one to blame for whatever is happening to you because that is how they manipulate you.

I was born in 1974 in Sarajevo. I lived with my parents in Breza until the war started. My childhood resembled that of all other children – it was normal, with no particular problems. My sister and I had everything we needed for our childhood and growing up. I graduated from the Secondary School of Economics. Honestly, I was not interested in going to college so I did not pursue further education. I was a good student. When the war started, we fled to Donja Vogošća where my mother and I lived. My sister went to Belgrade; my father was killed in 1996 when we moved to Trebinje. I met my former husband in Trebinje and after a couple of months of dating I got married. I got married in October 1997. At first, our marriage was not that bad. There was love and care. But I repeat - at first. After the first year of my marriage, I gave birth to my first daughter in 1998. Shortly afterwards, the problems started. The biggest and the only problem was alcohol. My ex-husband was an alcoholic and he is to this day, but I am no longer concerned about it. He would drink away the salary he earned in just two days, and he got fired from the tool industry he worked for. When he got drunk, and he was more drunk than sober, he became very aggressive and look for a fight.

A year and a bit later, I got pregnant and gave birth to my second daughter in 2000. I gave birth to her in April, and on May 4, exactly 27 days after the delivery, my ex-husband beat me senseless after a big fight. I tried to run away, but I did not make it – he reached me and knocked me down on the road in front of the house and kicked me. The neighbours saw it all and nobody wanted to come and help me because of the unspoken rule that it is always the woman's fault. After he got bored of kicking me, he ran into the house to get his shotgun so that he could kill me with it. I somehow managed to get up and run away. (I need to say that at that time, and never again, I had the courage to resist him and defend myself because at the beginning of the fight, when he threw the plates at me because it was lunch time, I took aim at him and shot him in the face with a glass. Everything I said happened after that. I fled into the house of one of the neighbours and from there, I went to my Mom. She lived in the same village as me, in Đivar, six kilometres from Trebinje. Later that day, I went to take my children and we stayed with my Mom for about three months, maybe even more. During this time, while we were at my Mom's, he came several times and caused problems. On one of the occasions he came over, he hit me again and I had seven stitches on my head. That was the first time I reported him to the

police and filed for divorce.

We were reconciled after going to the Social Care Center because of the divorce. That was when I made a mistake and gave in for the first time and fell for his promises. Both my children and I went back to live with him.

Again, there was a period of silence until I got pregnant again. In 2002 I gave birth to my third daughter, and in 2003 he was imprisoned for domestic violence for the first time. He remained in prison for a month and was released on probation. While the probation lasted, we had a kind of a normal life. I must say that my late former mother-in-law went through all of this and took part in our fights, and she herself was a victim of his violence.

In 2005 I gave birth to my fourth daughter and four months later, he went mad from alcohol. For me, that was when the horror set in, and I can say it freely – for my children. First of all, he accused me that the youngest daughter was not his. He attacked the neighbourhood and accused all men entering our house of being with me. According to him, I was a real whore.

What I am about to tell you is not intended as a justification but a description of the conditions we lived in. We lived in the country. I raised the children by myself. We fed cows, sheep and broiler chicken. I did everything. Furthermore, when the season of gathering herbs started, I would collect wormwood and immortelle. Even if I had wanted to have lovers, I couldn't, I didn't even have time, but that did not matter to him. He got it into his head and that was it.

According to him, my “fooling around” as he used to call it, was followed by my “taking drugs”. In September 2005 I ran away, but literally ran away, again to my Mom's. But since my Mom and I had no protection, a father or a brother to stand before us and protect us, he kept coming to our door and threaten us. He used to call at midnight and threaten us. Once, he called us in the afternoon and told us that we are going to burn as the hill above us (which somebody had set on fire that day). I called the police almost every half-hour, it was awful. One night he came at about 1:30 a.m., it was so cold outside, and he kicked down the door and before that, he threatened to come and slaughter us all. I called the police, but until they came,

he kicked down the door and barged in, looked around the rooms as if I were with a lover and left. That night, the door was fixed by the inspectors of the Ministry of the Interior. And do you know how the prosecutor in Trebinje classified the incident? As public peace and order disturbance.

We hadn't slept in nights, my mom and I. This fear of him has remained with us to this day. The oldest daughter had nightmares until recently; she would wake up in the middle of the night and scream.

We lived at my mom's on her paycheck and disability checks. In 2007, I somehow managed to get a job in the then Novoteks company. But the worst thing was that I had to ride the same bus as my husband. Imagine how it must have been for me when he started calling me a whore, a drug addict, that there were all of these men I was with... in front of the whole bus. Nobody wanted, (not that they really didn't want), or dare sit next to me or spend time with me, because if he saw a woman with me, he would claim that she was trying to get me to prostitute myself, and if by any case there was a man next to me, we were in a relationship. It was so horrible. Everyone avoided me, my mom and my children because nobody wanted to have problems with him. He would attack anyone who was on good terms with us.

My children and I stayed at my mom's for about two years and then we went back to live with him. I fell for his promises because he had spent some time in rehabilitation. Instead of this being a lesson and warning for me to run away from him, I came back with the children and what happened? It was chaos all over again. And why did I come back, you might ask? This is why: as he went through rehabilitation, all the doctors said, especially the doctor whose patient he was, that he needed the support of his family in order to make it. I said to myself then: "If you were able to come back and forgive so many times, you can do it once more. Maybe he will make it and change." But, a leopard cannot change its spots. And that is how it was. One night, when I had to go to the night turnus (I was still working back then), he told me he would throw our two-year-old daughter in the dumpster if I go. He got it into his head that I was not going to work, but that I was whoring around, as he used to say. That night I did not go to work because I did not dare to. I stayed at home. The next day when I went to work, my boss lectured me in such a way that I have not forgotten it to this very day and I never will. The woman had no

idea what I was going through. I did not want to tell her even then, neither did the other women around me, and they all knew. But later on she found out and treated me differently. Sometimes he would not allow me to go to the second shift, and sometimes he did not permit me to leave for work even though we lived only off my salary back then.

What else did happen to us? He used to go out somewhere, we had no idea where he was, and then he would come back and start provoking us all of a sudden in order to cause a fight or he would hit me. Worst of all, he did not pay attention to the children. He began to insult and provoke them too. He called them bastards. He used to say: "Your father is that one or that one." This is how my third daughter had millions of fathers. I am embarrassed to talk about this, but we all experienced it and survived it, thank God. The worst of it all was when he accused me that I was in a relationship with his brother and that our second daughter was his brother's. He talked about it outside our house and everywhere he went.. And he was so good at telling stories that most people believed him. I could never forget this period of my life even if I wanted to.

He used to come home at night and simply kick us out of the house regardless of the weather outside. Once, when he kicked us out of the house, my mother-in-law got pneumonia and ended up in hospital. Or he would come late into the room we slept in, lift the bed and throw me off the bed to the floor and kick me out.

They said, "He is sick, he doesn't know what he's doing," but it was not like that. He would always kick us out and chase us out of the house when he knew that my mom had left Trebinje. Why? Because then we would not have a shelter since no neighbour would let us into their house. It is not that they didn't want to, they didn't dare to. We would spend night after night in our mother-in-law's bed. The six of us would huddle together in one bed and tremble with fear. I have to say this too – he had planned it all because at the very beginning he would rip the phone cord out of the plug so that we could not call the police. The police were frequent guests in our house. Later on, after we got a mobile phone, he would take it away from us. One night, after his fit, because we had lately started gathering in grandma's room and kept quiet, we called the police. The police came, warned him and left. And he promised that it wouldn't happen again. He entered the room, took away the phone, went out, locked

us in and told us: “Now I will set all of you on fire, both you and the house.” He would have done it because he went to the garage to fetch the gasoline, if it weren’t for us who somehow managed to get the oldest daughter through the window and she ran to her aunt, my former sister-in-law and then she and her children called the police again. They came back immediately and took him away. The horrible things my children and I went through! The memory of it is killing me again. These are just few things out of a myriad of mishaps we had. I was not able to shelter my children from these fights.

Now, many people will judge me and ask why I got pregnant for the fifth time after everything that happened. First of all, I did not even know because I was having my period regularly for three months. And then I had the shock. Back then, it was a shock, but today I am really proud of it. I had nowhere to go, and I must admit that back then (God forgive me), if it hadn’t been too late, I would have ended the pregnancy. Thank goodness I didn’t. When I found out I was pregnant, I did everything I could so that the pregnancy would end, but I say it for the hundredth time, thank goodness it didn’t. I went to collect wormwood, climbed up impossible places in order to fall down from them. I carried sacks of wormwood twice as heavy as myself.

I was afraid to tell him because I knew he would immediately say it wasn’t his. It was a miracle he didn’t make a scene when I told him I was pregnant. I can say that this period was not that bad, but he made up for it after the birth of my son. And I have the right to say it – my son, nobody else’s.

Everything was fine until I gave birth. I will skip the humiliation he put me through when he would allegedly come to visit me at the maternity ward. Well, I won’t. Imagine your husband coming to see you and bringing a dog under the window, calling you names and so on. While I was in the maternity ward, he used to make scenes at home to his mother and children. One of the humiliations happened when we were about to leave the maternity ward, actually when he came to pick us up. Instead of rewarding the midwife, as every happy father and husband would have done, he brought her the cheapest chocolate, and what was even worse, he came dead drunk.

On arriving home from the maternity ward, the worst and the toughest period of the life of my new-born son and my daughters ensued. My son spent just one day and one night in the family house.

A day upon my arrival from hospital, I had to clean around the house as if I had not given birth. But, all of that does not matter because I worked after every delivery, because there was nobody to help. My mother-in-law couldn't do it, and she didn't want to do it anymore, and my mom wasn't allowed to come to my place because of him and his sister who had their share in all of it, as people would say.

The second morning, I was ironing diapers in the room with my son when my ex-husband barged into the room and immediately started kicking me while yelling at me demanding of me to tell him the name of the man who fathered my son so that he could kill him right away. What else could I say other than that the child was his, as it really was. Then all hell broke loose. He punched me and I fainted. He stormed outside after that and started smashing everything he could get his hands on. The three older daughters barged into the room where I was and started screaming. Their screaming helped me regain my consciousness. They gathered around me because they were afraid to go out as he went wild. My son was lying on the bed. He barged into the room again and started hitting me so that I would give in and admit who the father is. He was hitting me and pulling my hair without any consideration. Then he broke my teeth, his left fist was entirely bloody. That day, for the umpteenth time, he hit me so much that I fainted. My daughters were there the whole time and screaming. Can you imagine children of eight, ten and twelve years to stand up for their mother in front of their crazy father? We didn't manage to call the police on time because he first threw away my mobile phone and it broke to pieces on the floor, and I couldn't reach my landline phone. This agony of ours went on until he disappeared God knows where.

We didn't know where he was so we were afraid to flee the room. And where would we run off to? I couldn't run away and leave my kids alone because I was in no condition to run away with a baby in my arms.

He was gone for about half an hour, maybe even more. Terrified and scared, we remained in our room. As it was time to feed my son, I took him into my arms to feed him. It seemed as if he had just

been waiting for me to do that, he barged into the room and started punching me. He had no consideration for the fact that I had our baby in my arms. While punching me, he hit my son. He hit the left side of his head. My son fainted from it. It seemed to me as if he had been unconscious forever. The kids screamed he killed their brother. In the meantime, one of my daughters managed to get hold of the landline and call the police. They didn't want to come right away, to be precise, they weren't in a hurry, but when she called them again, they rushed over. Had they come but a minute earlier, my son wouldn't have been hit on the head. The police called the ambulance which rushed over right away and took my son and me to the hospital in Trebinje. From Trebinje, my son was urgently transferred to Podgorica to the Clinical Center where he spent 23 days. I should have gone with him, but I couldn't because I had lost the ability to speak and was paralysed. My son left, and I stayed. Oh my God, the horror! I refused to be hospitalized when I recovered, but it took me a long time to return to normal with the help of injections and pills they gave me then.

I demanded that they release me from hospital, but I couldn't remember where my mom lived or her name. Because of the misery I went through, I could only remember the phone number of a friend who came to get me, but I couldn't remember her name. The following day, I left for Podgorica after my son, but because I did not come on the same day as him, I couldn't stay. My son was in an incubator and connected to some machines monitoring his condition. The doctors who were monitoring him told me: "Only the dear Lord can save him now, it's all in his power. He has a hematoma, the bleeding has stopped for now, but if it starts again..." – this is where they stopped talking. I still have no clue how I remained standing, but I guess I was strong. Our agony lasted from Thursday to Monday. When they let me know on Monday that the danger was gone and that everything was behind us, there was no one happier than me. He had to stay in hospital until they were 100% sure that everything was going to be fine and now it is, thank goodness. My son is now a really big boy and he will turn five in April. A beautiful boy, a good brother and an even better son.

My daughters stayed in the house that night with their grandma who was not at home when it all happened. And in the morning, two of them came to my mom's, the oldest one and the youngest one, and my two middle daughters stayed with their grandma in the family

house.

My ex-husband was arrested. At first, he fled them, but they caught up with him and arrested him. He spent a month in prison and was in rehab for some time. In total, he was sentenced to a year in prison. Shameful and sad. But that's how it is.

After my son had left the hospital, we were with my mom for some time and then I found an apartment, took the kids with me and started a new life. At first, it was very difficult because I had neither a job nor an apartment. We only had child benefits in the amount of BAM 140.00. Nobody wanted to rent us out an apartment after I'd told them that I had five children, and that it was just me taking care of them, and on top of it all that I wasn't working. It was difficult, very difficult, but we still made it. There will always be good people everywhere. There were moments when I was thinking about doing the worst to myself, but thank God I didn't because then I would start thinking about my children. Where would they end up? For a while, I thought I was the unhappiest person in the world. I can honestly tell you that this is the worst feeling in the world. All of it is now behind me. It is all behind me thanks to the help of the single person who strictly forbid me to mention her name. I will always be grateful to her. She saved me. ... I just want to say that it's a woman. And she will recognize herself while reading this because I know she will be reading it. Thank you LJ. Č!

Now I'm the happiest mother and person in the world. I live my life with my children and we are having a great time.

I have to say that I got divorced four years ago and since then I have been a new woman. While I was married, my husband destroyed my self-confidence, self-respect and belief. I was terrified. I was scared of people and my surroundings. It took me a long time to go back to the state I was in before getting married.

My message goes out to all women - they should not put up with violence nor fall for promises given by violators who say they will change, because they won't. If they lay a hand on you once, they will do it again. There are few of them who changed and did not repeat it. Many people will ask why I put up with all of this. Well, exactly because I hoped and believed that he would change. And as long as I

had hope, I kept coming back. But I am the proof that this is not the way to do things.

Thank goodness, now everything is behind my children and me! And one more thing – never be ashamed for being a victim of violence and put up with it. Feel free to say it because you are not the only one.

Milena Cvjetković-Ambulija

Women as survivors of violence: A well-kept secret of the society

At the end of this publication, two women courageously shared their extremely upsetting confessions about the domestic violence they went through. The common thread of these stories is the cruelty and brutality manifested by their partners who abused them by physically and psychologically endangering their self-confidence and self-image. These women managed to leave their violators behind, but there are too many women in BiH who stay with their violators due to various problems that are not easy to solve. In such a situation, the worst thing we can do is judge them, given the circumstances. Leaving a violator is not easy at all and the women, who decide to do it, must face the tough challenge of surviving alongside the long process of recovering from physical and psychological violence. Finally, they have to organize their independent life, as well as the life of their children with whom they often flee from the violators. This is how these women become single mothers, twice or three times more vulnerable and threatened social categories.

As with the case of other marginalized groups, a systematic research and statistics that would help create the right perspective on the violence against women in BiH do not exist. The existing researches are fragmented and mostly made by the non-governmental sector. Still, when the numbers are gathered, they show the violence against women is alarmingly high and not even close to being eradicated. It is especially difficult to determine the implementation of laws and protective measures. Moreover, the ratio between reported violence cases and those where violence remains hidden for many years, is

very difficult to determine.

The violence against women within the family and in partner relations has numerous implications and, most often, classifications of specific forms include physical, sexual, psychological, and economic violence.⁷⁷ According to the results of the first research about gender-based violence from 2013⁷⁸, over a half of the women from the sample (47.2% in BiH, 47.2% in FBiH and 47.3% in RS) experienced at least some kind of violence after turning fifteen. In the course of one year prior to the research, 11.9% of women in BiH experienced some kind of violence (12.7% in FBiH and 10.6% in RS). Psychological violence is the most widespread form (41.9% during lifetime and 10.8% in 2013) followed by physical violence (24.3% during lifetime and 2.4% in 2013). Sexual violence was experienced by 6% of women during their adult life, while 1.3% of women experienced it during 2013. Current or former partners, being the perpetrators in 71.5% of cases⁷⁹, most frequently commit violence. According to this data, we can conclude that women are least safe at their own homes where they are threatened by the people who are their life partners.

What we know for sure about violence against women is that it is not talked about. Women are ashamed for being survivors of violence and it gives the violators an opportunity to systematically enforce power over years. This happens in a social environment where violence is treated as a private life issue. People avoid getting involved in the intimate things of their neighbours, close and extended family members, friends, colleagues and so on, who are at risk of violence or already suffer from it. Many women actually

77 Analysis of the Policies of Social Inclusion of Survivors of Domestic Violence. Fedra Idžaković, Arijana Catović, Radmila Zigić, Mirjana Vlaho, Mirjana Brajković, Aleksandra Petrić. BiH, July 2012. Available at: http://www.rightsforall.ba/publikacije-bs/docs-bs/Analiza_politika_socijalnog_ukljucivanja_zena_zrtava_nasilja_u_porodici.pdf, according to Ignjatović T. (2011): Violence against Women in Intimate Partnerships: Model of the Coordinated Response of the Community, Reconstruction Women's Fund, Belgrade. p. 42–44.

78 Prevalence and Characteristics of Violence against Women in BiH. Agency for Gender Equality with the support of UNFPA and UN WOMEN. 2013. Available at: http://arsbih.gov.ba/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/studija_prevalenca.pdf

79 Ibid.

do not recognize they are being put through violence (especially when it comes to psychological violence). They are used to this perception of violence as something “private” which does not require an intervention from society. A small number of women who have experienced violence do something in order to leave such a situation. It is assumed only 10% of domestic violence cases is being reported.⁸⁰ Around 17% of women exposed to violence tried to find the solution in separation, divorce, or leaving the household, and only around 4% tried counseling. Beside this, there is a significant discrepancy between what women think they should do in these situations and the actions taken. Mainly, women in most cases think that in the case of domestic violence, a woman should turn to some of the competent institutions for support, but only 5.5% of women exposed to violence actually look for support from some of the institutions. They mostly do not seek help from institutions or organizations because they think they do not need help, and then also because they do not know whom to turn to, out of fear, shame, low level of trust in institutions and similar.⁸¹

In 2013, the SOS lines in BiH received 4,986 calls, 95% of them made by women. The police departments in BiH registered 2,757 cases of violence; there were 1,669 reported cases and 916 submitted reports about committed felonies in FBiH, and 453 cases reported as felonies in RS, while 635 were reported as misdemeanours. There were 479 court rulings, where 94% of perpetrators were men and 6% were women. There were 417 people (half of them women, the other half children) who were placed in safe houses. There were 323 survivors of domestic violence in six safe houses in FBiH, while there were 94 survivors of domestic violence in three safe houses in RS.⁸² Throughout BiH, there is a free SOS telephone line available 24 hours, where people can get specific guidelines, information, or protection, depending on their needs. The telephone number is 1265 for FBiH and 1264 for Republika Srpska.

80 Infographic: What Can Survivors of Domestic Violence Do: <http://arsbih.gov.ba/?p=207>

81 Prevalence and Characteristics of Violence against Women in BiH. Agency for Gender Equality with the support of UNFPA and UN WOMEN. 2013. Available at: http://arsbih.gov.ba/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/studija_prevalenca.pdf

82 Infographic: What Can Survivors of Domestic Violence Do: <http://arsbih.gov.ba/?p=207>

The manager of the Safe House – Shelter for Women of the Foundation of Local Democracy⁸³ in Sarajevo, Mubera Hodžić-Lemeš, says there has been a certain improvement in the position of women survivors of domestic violence since 2000, when the Safe House, as a part of the Foundation of Local Democracy, was the first and the only one in Sarajevo Canton. Hodžić-Lemeš thinks that, even though public awareness of the problem has been raised and many things have been done in recent years, the whole problem still requires dealing with.

The social pressure to which women who are survivors of domestic violence are exposed to should not be forgotten – they are expected to put up with a lot of things in the marriage in order to sustain it and prevent the family from falling apart, which would leave the children without a father. Unfortunately, the society which imposes such strict patriarchal norms puts the right of women to a life without violence on the back burner. It condones violence against women by not taking all possible measures to take the violators away from the families and protect the women. Mubera Hodžić-Lemeš points out the relevant issue of the perpetrator of the violence: “Depending on the help the perpetrator received (professional therapy) it is possible to talk about stopping the violence and possibly returning to the family. The problem continues when there have not been any changes in the behaviour of the perpetrator. Past experiences have shown that it is necessary to offer professional help to those who have committed domestic violence. Our organization has a lot of experience with the projects involving self-help groups for perpetrators of violence, which we carry out in association with the Centre for Social Care of Sarajevo Canton. The results of self-help group work are very positive and we do not have relapses in the families whose members participated in the group.”

According to the research “Analysis of Social Inclusion Policies for Women Survivors of Domestic Violence”⁸⁴, violence against women in BiH is at the same time the cause and the consequence of the

83 Foundation of Local Democracy: <http://www.fld.ba/>

84 Analysis of the Policies of Social Inclusion of Survivors of Domestic Violence. Fedra Idžaković, Arijana Catović, Radmila Zigić, Mirjana Vlaho, Mirjana Brajković, Aleksandra Petrić. BiH, July 2012. Available at: http://www.rightsforall.ba/publikacije-bs/docs/bs/Analiza_politika_socijalnog_ukljucivanja_zena_zrtava_nasilja_u_porodici.pdf

poverty and social exclusion of women. The research included 99 women who suffered or had survived violence (most of them were marginalized on multiple grounds) and showed that economic reasons like financial dependence on their partner, unemployment, and poverty are common reasons why women hesitate to leave the violent relationship/marriage. “Even though they will say they did not actually work, it is the women from this research who have been forced to work around the house, in the field, to take care of the family, or more precisely to do work that is neither recognized nor valued, that is “invisible”. Having been absent from the labour market for a long time, they do not have equal opportunities at finding a job because they lack education, skill, and work experience. For all the women we talked to, employment is the most important need they have.”⁸⁵

The moment the women decide to leave their violator, they look for help in the safe houses⁸⁶. There are currently nine of them in BiH (six in FBiH and three in RS⁸⁷). All safe houses are led by non-governmental organizations and they have the capacity to accommodate 173 persons in total⁸⁸ and this is where women can receive medical, psychological, and legal help. The time these women can spend in a safe house is limited and is not enough for women to start anew and reorganize their lives. “The biggest problem of domestic violence survivors who have reported the violence and have been taken into a safe house is what to do after they leave it. Staying in a safe house is temporary and according to the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence it is supposed to last up to six months. If a woman decides to stop living together with the perpetrator for good, she

85 Analysis of the Policies of Social Inclusion of Survivors of Domestic Violence. Fedra Idžaković, Arijana Catović, Radmila Zigić, Mirjana Vlaho, Mirjana Brajković, Aleksandra Petrić. BiH, July 2012. Available at: http://www.rightsforall.ba/publikacije-bs/docs/bs/Analiza_politika_socijalnog_ukljucivanja_zena_zrtava_nasilja_u_porodici.pdf

86 Maida Zagorac: Safe Houses in BiH: <http://soc.ba/signure-kuce-u-bosni-i-hercegovini/>

87 Esther Garcia Fransioli: Annual Report on the State of Women’s Rights in BiH in 2013. Sarajevo Open Center. Available at: <http://www.ffuis.edu.ba/media/attachments/2014/12/01/Godisnji-izvjestaj-o-stanju-ljudskih-prava-zena-u-BiH-u-2013.pdf>

88 In preparation: Annual Report on the State of Women’s Rights in BiH in 2014. Inela Hadžić, Dalila Mirović, Edita Miftari. CURE Foundation and Sarajevo Open Center.

needs to resolve many issues in that period: employment, renting an apartment, taking care of children etc. We know how difficult it is to carry out all of this in our society.” Hodžić-Lemeš thinks that establishing a program of economic support and help for the category of survivors of domestic violence, resolving housing issues (by paying rent or providing social housing), greater sensitivity of the employer during hiring, and prioritizing this category would contribute to the solution of this problem. “The society as a whole, including governmental and non-governmental institutions, as well as the local community, should work more on preventing and fighting domestic violence. There should be a support for the survivors of domestic violence through targeted welfare programs, prevention plans, improvement of the violence survivors services, and an overall family support with an emphasis on the economic and educational role.”

The experience of Mubera Hodžić-Lemeš, after working with a great number of women who used the Safe House services (1550 violence survivors in total), shows that violence and remaining in a violent relationship comes from several factors. The first of them is patriarchal upbringing. The influence of tradition and a patriarchal cultural inheritance reflected in the domination of men in all spheres of life contributes to the belief that a woman is always to blame for domestic violence. It is a belief that she is the one who provoked her husband and that it is better to keep quiet about the violence because it is her own disgrace. Violence against women is a well-kept secret.” The next factor is economic dependence on the perpetrator of the crime – according to the statistics of the Foundation of Local Democracy, 85% of the women are unemployed and economically depend on their perpetrators. “Economic violence is the basis for all other kinds of violence: when a woman is unemployed, she faces the problem of housing. If, for example, she has two children, she sees no way out of the union, and this puts her in the position where she suffers physical, psychological, and other kinds of violence.” The third factor is that survivors are insufficiently informed about their basic rights and the protection options. “Given that survivors of violence mainly live isolated from their social surroundings, which is a consequence of psychological abuse (isolation, manipulation, and believing the violator holds the power), we are frequently being told during the admission interview that they did not know whom to turn to. They know they could have called the police, but they

thought it would be even worse for them afterwards because they did not know what would happen later on. They did not know there were protective measures, punishments for the perpetrators, safe houses, etc.”

Many women, especially the ones who live in rural areas, cannot get information about the support and are not familiar with their rights in terms of how to protect themselves from violence. The possibilities of social care centres are also limited, and social workers are often not sensitive enough to the problems of the women who suffer violence. The same goes for health professionals – several testimonies of women as survivors of violence tell about the lack of understanding by the people who should be first to help them out. Instead, women are treated as if they were the ones to blame for the violence, nobody helps them in the process of reporting the perpetrator, and the perpetrator is not detained in a timely manner, or at all... Also, there is this utter paradox where women, while running away from the violators, have to leave the house (instead of being the other way around) together with the children and are automatically faced with an unresolved housing issue, which affects their already bad financial situation.

An additional problem is that governmental institutions recognize physical violence with visible physical injuries as the main and only form of violence against women, while sexual, psychological, and economic abuse of women is neglected and almost unrecognized in practice.⁸⁹ The law in Republika Srpska recognizes domestic violence as a criminal offense and a misdemeanor, while the law in Federation of BiH only recognizes it as a criminal offense.⁹⁰ And even if women decide to report the violence and take the violator to court, there are many circumstances that will make the whole process more difficult for them. Violators, regardless of the criminal charges, continue to intimidate the survivors if given the opportunity to do so. The cases of child abduction are not that rare. Sadly, the statistics show lack of cases resolved in favour of women. Even if the attack is reported to the police, very often the police officers do not recognize it as

89 Edita Miftari: Economic and Social Right of Women in BiH in 2012.-2013. Available at: <http://cps.ba/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Ekonomska-i-socijalna-prava-ena-u-Bosni-i-Hercegovini-u-2012.pdf>

90 Infographic: What Can Survivors of Domestic Violence Do: <http://arsbih.gov.ba/?p=207>

a criminal offense but as a personal or private issue of the woman involved, while the persecutors reduce the criminal qualifications of the offense. This indicates that the level of awareness of the competent institutions and their employees is still low regarding this issue.⁹¹

At first sight, BiH has a well-set system of domestic laws, and also ratified international documents, which should ensure an adequate fight against violence against women as well as its prevention. The last of these significant documents was the Istanbul Convention, Convention of the Council of Europe on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence which was put into effect on August 1, 2014. The convention is the first international and legally binding instrument, open for all countries of the world, providing a comprehensive set of measures for preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, while also specifying the punishment for the perpetrator.⁹² The Agency for Gender Equality and UN Women conducted a research and started a baseline study and situation analyses in the field of violence against women in Bosnia and Herzegovina which will include the indicators for monitoring the implementation of the Istanbul Convention.⁹³ Regardless of the fact that both BiH entities adopted new legal provisions in the field of protection against domestic violence in 2012, the institutions did not manage to harmonize the provisions of these laws and ensure a legal security, equal treatment, and the implementation of protection of women and children rights. Women and children are recognized as the most common victims of domestic violence according to all available data about the users of protection from domestic violence.⁹⁴

Finally, the consequences violence leaves on women should not be

91 In preparation: Annual Report on the State of Women's Rights in BiH in 2014. Inela Hadžić, Dalila Mirović, Edita Miftari. CURE Foundation and Sarajevo Open Center.

92 Ibid.

93 Ibid.

94 Esther Garcia Fransioli: Annual Report on the State of Women's Rights in BiH in 2013. Sarajevo Open Center. Available at: <http://www.ffuis.edu.ba/media/attachments/2014/12/01/Godisnji-izvjestaj-o-stanju-ljudskih-prava-zena-u-BiH-u-2013.pdf> according to: Anex 3: Alternative Report on the Implementation of CEDAW and Women's Rights in BiH (2013)

forgotten. In addition to going through hell with their violators and being forced to rapidly change their life circumstances in order to protect themselves and their children, these women suffer from long-term consequences of violence. Beside the inflicted physical wounds, which can cause chronic health problems, there are also mental health problems. Women who survived violence in 2013, more often than not experienced bad moods, sorrow (50.9% of women who have experienced violence in contrast to 24.7% of women who have not), anxiety, fear (46.1% in contrast to the 22.4%), loss of appetite (24.4% in contrasts to 17.8%), difficulties with focus and concentration, clear thinking, studying (28.9% in contrast to 12.8%), and so on.⁹⁵ When it comes to physical injuries sustained through physical or sexual abuse, 11.4% of women from the whole sample experienced some kind of physical injuries, but the number rises to 96% when it comes to women who were exposed to physical violence during lifetime. These injuries were most frequently manifested through scratches, bruises, unspecified physical pain, but there was a significant number of women who experienced loss of consciousness, larger bruises, hematoma, and similar. Some women were exposed to more severe forms of violence so that their bones were broken, or were even injured by weapons. The injuries are usually inflicted by current or former partners, and then fathers.⁹⁶

Two heartrending confessions of women who were victims of domestic violence are just the tip of an iceberg. These women decided to speak up about their experiences and share the most brutal details so that their stories can reach a wider audience, as well as other victims in order to prompt them to speak up and ask for help. They did not deserve the violence they suffered. We must never judge them for being with violators or staying with them. The condemnation should be for those who execute the violence – for the perpetrators, abusers, for those whom the society implicitly allows to be violent. This permit stems from the lack of clear legal

95 Prevalence and Characteristics of Violence against Women in BiH. Agency for Gender Equality with the support of UNFPA and UN WOMEN. 2013. Available at: http://arsbih.gov.ba/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/studija_prevalenca.pdf

96 Prevalence and Characteristics of Violence against Women in BiH. Agency for Gender Equality with the support of UNFPA and UN WOMEN. 2013. Available at: http://arsbih.gov.ba/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/studija_prevalenca.pdf

measures that would show the perpetrators what they are doing is primarily illegal and then inhumane. The citizens must realize that by reporting violence that they witness, they help the victims. The victims of violence must understand that they can and must seek help and take on an active role in punishing the perpetrator. The society must take responsibility for the habit of covering-up and implicitly approving violence. Women survivors of violence should stop thinking about themselves as some dark statistical figures and anonymous unfortunate women who suffer because they are being battered. This is the only way we can all work together on eradicating gender-based violence.

Instead of conclusion and recommendations: Empathy and solidarity as an answer

There are many reports, publications, analyses and research papers produced by different non-governmental organizations, both international and local, and even state institutions which precisely and thoroughly determine what is required by law and by infrastructure in order to resolve women's issues within different marginalized groups. At the end of this publication, it is unnecessary to repeat platitudes about how and in what way a certain law/strategy/action plan should be implemented. Other people and other organizations have already produced statistics, analyses, and charts, recommending the laws should be fixed, new laws should be made, and in what way state institutions should behave. It is also significant that these are mostly non-governmental organizations, which are usually the only ones who actively work with these marginalized groups. All of their recommendations are fully in place. Unfortunately, what is not in place is political will to solve the problems of these groups or at least start a more intensive process of solving these problems. These women cannot wait forever. Time passes, they get older, some of them get sick, some die, some of them are still waiting for a roof over their heads, and some of them are still waiting for justice.

The solution to these problems does not lie in extra funding, or in a more favourable and less ethnically tense political situation, or in constitutional changes, not even in approaching the European Union. The solution is in empathy and solidarity that start with an

individual, then grows through (in)formal groups, transforms into movements for social justice and activism, and finally, in an ideal society, results in a social structure which takes responsibility for the vulnerable and helps them.

In an afflicted society like ours, it is difficult to focus on things that are not part of our everyday lives or our own problems, and find the strength to do something about them. We always ask ourselves, completely legitimately, why do we collect money for sick children, why do we give money to beggars, why do we do the work our state should be doing? However, empathy finds us sooner or later. We are faced with the suffering all around us and this is what disturbs us. None of us should silently watch the pain of others without doing anything about it. Therefore, we decide to give a hand, we decide to help, to understand.

If the authorities can give empty promises, they must be prepared to fulfill them. None of this is impossible and Bosnia and Herzegovina must not be pardoned from its responsibilities towards the most vulnerable groups. At the end of this publication, after you, hopefully, read all these stories and understood, even for a brief moment, the lives of the women who wrote them, the only recommendation is to empathize and to help improve our reality . Let's not forget that any one of us can be on the margin and that absolutely no one deserves to live on the margin. It should be enough just to start to push our own boundaries away, one by one.

About the author

**Masha Durkalić was born in 1986 in Sarajevo. She graduated in journalism at the Faculty of Political Science in Sarajevo. She has been working as a journalist since 2002, focusing on human rights and culture. She also worked for the Dani magazine and wrote a column dedicated to BiH women, titled Her Five Minutes, between 2011 and 2014. She has been collaborating with Sarajevo Open Center and Foundation CURE for a long time. She is currently employed as a public relations consultant at the Foundation SEE Change Net. She is the editor of the first BiH LGBT info portal LGBT.ba, and is also writing for different electronic and print media. As an activist, she is devoted to feminist issues, LGBT activism, and animal rights. In her spare time, she reads as much as she can, saves abandoned cats, and occasionally works as a DJ in Pussy Galore, a nightclub in Sarajevo. She lives and works in Sarajevo.
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