

The background is a vibrant red. It features several white and black abstract shapes, including large, stylized female symbols (♀) and smaller circles. There are also some black, angular, geometric shapes that resemble folded paper or origami. The overall composition is dynamic and modern.

Fearless Heroines of Peace

Publication of women's individual stories
about building peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina
through personal and real struggles

Title: Fearless Heroines of Peace
Publication of women's individual stories about building peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina through personal and real struggles

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We would like to thank the women who told their personal stories for the purposes of this publication and thus contributed to its content.

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Reviews



Personal narrative is a woman's most powerful weapon

“It doesn’t matter what you’ve been through, where you’re from, who your parents are - neither is your social or material position important. None of that matters. It is important that you chose to love and that you express love through your work, your family, through what you have to give to the world... Be a queen...”, is the message of one of the participants in the publication “Fearless Heroines of Peace”, a woman who survived wartime rape as a form of intimidation, humiliation and degradation of personality, which was experienced by between 20 thousand and 50 thousand women, mostly young women and girls, during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Through the experiences of women who survived rape recorded in this publication, but also through some other experiences, we see women’s history as an archive of trauma and pain, as a permanent process of learning about the lack of personal responsibility for every form of violence that she has survived.

“I begged him to kill me,” says one of the women who survived rape during the war. We heard that plea many times thanks to those who had the strength to share their stories. And these were always long, slow and painful processes. By keeping silent about their own trauma, the women wanted to protect their loved ones. The few who didn’t do that often encountered condemnation and misunderstanding in a patriarchal culture that implies women’s responsibility even when it comes to the most monstrous form of humiliation and destruction of personal integrity. They would speak slowly and with difficulty, usually thanking people who did their job honorably, be it doctors or non-governmental organizations focused on women’s empowerment and women’s rights in general.

In addition to being a collection of precious personal narratives, “Fearless Heroines of Peace” is also testimony to the incompetence or lack of interest of institutions. Civil society organizations were the ones that were key in the implementation of numerous forms of support, from the processing of personal trauma to the empowerment of women in various segments.

This publication also brings us the experience of a child born of war. Today, that child is an empowered young woman whose activism is an inspiration to many. Her experience tells us not only about transgenerational trauma, but also about the specific dynamics of all relationships built by persons marked by wartime sexual violence experienced by their mothers.

The most traumatic confessions, as well as others that are “only” a consequence of patriarchy, apart from being important testimonies about the complex processes of peace building and the enormous contribution of women in these processes,

are a kind of guide through some correct decisions made by women, whether they intended to help to themselves or someone else. That help would always result in good for the wider community.

The female body and corporeality, the pleasures or pains associated with it, are one of a series of taboo subjects in our conservative patriarchal societies. Thanks, among other things, to the talented writers of the new generation, these topics are finally becoming the ones that are written about and talked about publicly.

However, with decades of silence, enormous damage has already been done. Not knowing that they have the right to take care of themselves and take care of the health of their own body, neglecting personal needs and putting the needs of others (mainly family) in the foreground, many women have fallen ill. Seeking help too late or not at all, they lost their lives prematurely.

The publication “Fearless Heroine of Peace” also brings us a story about the living with cancer, about the empowerment and association of women who have gone through that kind of experience. It teaches us about taking care of our own health as our duty and reminds us that there are still areas in Bosnia and Herzegovina where women do not have basic knowledge about disease prevention or treatment, nor do they know that they have the right to do so.

The history of women is the history of multiple discriminations. In addition to each specific discrimination or more, a woman also suffers discrimination because she is a woman. When she is a Roma woman, then she will be discriminated against because she is a Roma woman and a woman, if she is also a lesbian, the reason for discrimination will be tripled. The specificity of the minority experience in Bosnia and Herzegovina implies the paradox that the minority will not necessarily be accepted even in its own community. This is evidenced by the experience of a Roma woman recorded in the publication. She did not meet the expectations of the community. She was “too” old to be single. She has “too” light complexion to be a Romani woman. This experience should not serve us as an illusion about the specificity of the Roma community and as an excuse from our own discriminatory actions if we belong to the privileged majority. This experience is a record of the perpetuation of harmful discriminatory patterns that will inevitably, sooner or later, be adopted by those who are discriminated against.

Let’s just look at how women often behave in political or other positions of power and we will know what the patriarchy, with its eternal reference to “sacred tradition”, has done to us.

This important publication also contains the story of life with a disability, although in recent years this narrative has been a slightly more present in the

public eye than it may have been previously. All stories about women's disability tell of disappointments and loss of faith in the system, people, and sometimes life itself. At the same time, empowered women are an incredible source of inspiration and confirmation that every potential will develop when there is a grain of social support for it, or often when there is only a woman's will to overcome all the obstacles that society, because she is disabled, successfully imposes on her. This publication presents us with the queer experience and the activist position of women, as well as the experiences of women who had such a bad time in their own countries that Bosnia and Herzegovina is a better choice for them, at least at the moment. We are certainly talking about migrant women whose experience further confirms to us how important it is to deal with peace processes and the role of women in them, which can be of inestimable importance, and often is, whether it is about women in the civil sector or in the armed forces, which is also one of the recorded experiences - the experience of a woman who advanced highly in the military hierarchy and who, based on her own participation in military missions, realized how extremely important the sensibility and approach of women in these processes are.

This publication, as was its intention, truly succeeds in illustrating the power of women despite the torture and discrimination they have endured. It is a testimony of their strength and will when creating real social changes. Their actions, the authors of the publication "Fearless heroines of peace" remind us, oblige us to support them. It's the least we can do.

The publication was created based on the personal stories of eleven women, while respecting all methodological principles that avoid retraumatization or revictimization.

Some stories were written, one was told and recorded.

The stories have been slightly edited and include authentic testimonies about what was experienced, which through different voices, approaches and angles gives us a better insight into the burden and subsequent success achieved by women.

The most important thing is the opportunity to record experiences, for women to talk about them, for their stories not to be interpreted or implied, but to be read and heard.

Mona Eltahawy once said in a conversation with Tamara Zablocki that when women tell their own stories, they encourage other women to do the same. She then emphasized that personal narrative is a woman's most powerful weapon.

Kristina Ljevak

Publication of women's individual stories about peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina through personal and real struggles

I was sent a copy of the manuscript of the publication “Fearless Heroines of Peace”, a publication of individual stories of women about building peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina through personal and real struggles, co-authored by Jasna Pekić and Dr. Tajma Kapić. The title itself aroused my curiosity to read it, and I have to say that it fully corresponds to the offered content.

In the introductory part, the goal, purpose and central motive of writing the publication are clearly defined.

The methodology clearly explains the concept of triangulation, which implies the use of more than one method to obtain information from multiple sources, and especially the justification of defining the goal of triangulation as a procedure used to better understand social phenomena by looking at them from multiple perspectives.

In a very interesting methodological way, the publication offers the personal stories and perspectives of 11 women, who experienced a series of systemic, political, social and other discriminations, and who told their stories in order to find meaning in life and place themselves within the framework of a complex socio-political reality.

The stories are divided into nine parts (chapters) that fit into a homogeneous whole: “*Scars of the Wartime Past*” (2 stories), “*War and Peace in One*” (1 story), “*Bosnia and Herzegovina as a Refuge*” (2 stories), “*Accepted*” (1 story), “*Escaping the Margins*” (1 story), “*Unequals Among Equals*” (1 story), “*Activism vs. Sexism*” (1 story), “*On Lost Battles*” (1 story), “*Woman in Uniform*” (1 story).

They reveal the truth with their stories and encourage others to talk. They became aware and understood what had happened to them and realized that they have a choice - to continue living despite the trauma, to break the cycle of learned helplessness or hopelessness and move beyond the guilt imposed on them by stigmatization. Experience has shown that talking about traumatic events heals. By talking, we connect with ourselves, hear ourselves, unpack our emotional baggage in a safe environment, connect with the environment.

At the beginning of each part, before each story, basic information, facts, excerpts from documents about the position of marginalized women are stated in accordance with the written story and/or the context of the local community, and they also form a homogeneous whole.

The conclusion has practical significance, and the recommendations point to the need for a systemic approach to the *fight against gender stereotypes, which are an important determinant of gender equality and which have a high degree of influence on women's access to rights, power and resources in order to adequately fight against these stereotypes and discrimination in a patriarchal society, as is the case in Bosnia and Herzegovina.*

This publication is important and useful material for continuing research and documenting narratives in order to develop awareness of the problems of marginalized groups and the fight against stigmatization and discrimination.

The publication contains reference and current literature.

M.Sc. Ranka Katalinski

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Sarajevo, 2023

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List of Abbreviations

BiH – Bosnia and Hercegovina

WPS – Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security

CEDAW – Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

ECHR – European Convention on Human Rights

UN – United Nations

HVO – Croatian Defense Council

NAP – National Action Plan

INTRODUCTION

Even after the third decade since the end of the war, certain issues from the social sphere that were not properly addressed in the post-conflict period in Bosnia and Herzegovina leave their mark on the feminist aspects of the development of society, especially in the sphere of transitional justice. On the other hand, with various geopolitical events throughout Europe and the world, Bosnia and Herzegovina found itself in a position where conflicts from other countries are reflected on our society - whether through the participation of security forces from BiH in peacekeeping missions or through the reception of refugees, migrants and asylum seekers from conflict countries and other countries of the world.

According to various open sources,¹ it can be concluded that Bosnia and Herzegovina has progressed in terms of reaction to these newer challenges, and that significant progress has been made in respect of the gender perspective in policies concerning newer security challenges. Such a shift is the result of the success of the gender institutional mechanism established at the strategic level, and the advocacy and humanitarian work of women's non-governmental organizations, international organizations and individuals at the operational level, as evidenced by the stories selected for this publication.

The publication "Fearless Heroines of Peace" focuses on the individual contribution of women in building peace, in the wider context of the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) concept in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Resolution 1325 of the UN Security Council on Women, Peace and Security which was adopted in October 2000, and from which this concept derives, as well as other subsequent

¹ www.msb.gov.ba, <https://stav.ba/vijest/eu-pohvalila-odgovor-bih-na-migrantsku-krizu/5985>

UN resolutions based on the WPS agenda, recognize the explicit impact of armed conflict on women and the role of women in conflict prevention and resolution. They also emphasize the importance of gender security with a special emphasis on sexual violence associated with war conflicts, political participation and greater participation of women in decision-making positions, as well as the fight against violent extremism.² The WPS agenda has a vital role in providing a framework to ensure the inclusion of women and gender perspectives in peacebuilding.

Since 1995 and the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) have been introduced into the legal system of Bosnia and Herzegovina. After the adoption of the Law on Gender Equality, Bosnia and Herzegovina developed a network of gender institutional mechanisms at all levels of government in accordance with the UN guidelines.³ The Gender Center of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Gender Center of the Republika Srpska were established in 2000 and 2001, respectively, before the adoption of the BiH Law on Gender Equality and the establishment of the Agency for Gender Equality of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2003.⁴ BiH was also the first country in Southeast Europe to adopt the National Action Plan for the implementation of Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security in 2010, and the first country in the region to ratify the Istanbul Convention in 2013.

Such an institutional and normative framework proves the current political and social determination of our country to seriously address the problems of gender equality. However, visible progress in the field and the daily lives of women are still exposed to many extreme challenges that are a characteristic and product of conflict and post-conflict society.

In the feminist literature that deals with post-conflict societies, the period immediately after the war is called the post-war momentum, and it is described as the moment when the war ended and the reconstruction of all aspects of society - political, economic and legal - began. This implies that this moment should be the time when gender relations change as part of the overall post-war state reconstruction process.⁵

According to the opinions of some authors, not including the gender perspective at that moment can harm the well-being of women in the newly built state in the long term. For example, violence against women will continue in the post-conflict period at relatively high levels, unless gender relations are taken into account and countervailing policies are introduced.⁶

2 Pierson, 2019 ; Cockburn 2007

3 Babić-Svetlin, 2009; Kacic 2022

4 Kacic, 2022

5 Cockburn i Zarkov, 2002; Moran, 2010; Sicard, 2015

6 Cockburn i Zarkov, 2002); Kacic 2022

In addition, many authors claim that the exclusion of women from peace negotiations and political institutions in post-conflict divided societies leaves a negative impact on the role of women in public life.⁷ This is visible in Bosnia and Herzegovina, moreover, the marginalization of women is also a consequence of “rooted traditions of ethno-national chauvinism” which were a key factor in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁸ The Dayton Peace Agreement did not engage with the possibility of introducing a positive gender dynamic of conflict transformation. Following this initial failure, the positive gender policy development became “caught up in slow-decision making, political deadlock and unaccountability contributed to by the complex institutional structure created by the Dayton Peace Agreement”.⁹

To guarantee the success of the implementation of the WPS agenda on the ground, cooperation with the non-governmental sector and civil society organizations is crucial, with a special focus on organizations that represent the interests of the people who are promoted through this agenda, as well as the most vulnerable beneficiaries or people at risk. Bosnia and Herzegovina has a strong civil society, but the fragmented political system has a negative effect on the struggle for the rights of certain marginalized groups, and the occurrence of unequal conditions within the same population within the same country is frequent.

Bearing in mind all the challenges faced by the society of Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also every female person, fighter for human rights, the publication also aims to illustrate the power of individuals who have survived various forms of social torture and discrimination, and who managed to find the strength to become leaders of social changes. Although the legacy of war often emphasizes the victimization of women, we should not lose focus from the great success that individual women have achieved and with which they have made a personal contribution to improving the status of these women (or groups of people) within our society, but also to the maturation of society in general. The central motive of many selected stories is the reaction of society, both institutional and in the broadest sense, and the interaction of these individuals in relation to society, through certain specific problems that these heroines faced. The experiences are different, but one thing is certain - their struggles have not come to an end. It is the duty of every individual in this country to support them in their efforts.

Therefore, the main purpose of writing this publication is to give open support to each of the women who honored us and shared their personal experience, and to raise collective awareness of the importance of the efforts these women talk about. We hope that by telling their stories to the general public, we contribute to spreading awareness about the given problems. Everyone can learn a lot from their experiences.

7 Byrne i McCulloch, 2018; Pierson i Thomson, 2018; Deiana, 2018; Murtagh, 2008

8 Byrne i McCulloch, 2018: 7

9 Deiana, 2016: 104); Kacic, 2022

Methodology

This publication contain the personal stories and perspectives of eleven women, who, through their activism and/or specific work in the field of reconciliation, contribute to improving the position of women in public life. It will present a short introduction to the issue, slightly refined personal stories, as well as a conclusion and general recommendations for further activist activity. Before each told story, basic summarized facts and statistical data (if any) about the position of marginalized women are stated in accordance with the written story and/or the context of the local community.

The publication is based on data collected from primary and secondary sources, using three methods of data collection: descriptive statistics, narrative analysis and semi-structured in-depth interviews told in the form of personal stories. Narrative analysis focuses on how personal stories interact with collective memories, images and values, and as such, narratives are central to understanding collective struggle and creating critical knowledge.¹⁰

Triangulation in the research and explanation of complex social phenomena presupposes the use of various data collection methods in order to offer readers a more balanced explanation of the investigated phenomena.¹¹ Secondary sources include the analysis of previous studies, reports and statistical data relevant to the topic covered in this publication.

To select a sample of participants in the interviewing process, the method of “pur-

¹⁰ Deiana, 2018

¹¹ Joppe, 2000

positive or judgmental sampling” was used. During the deliberate selection of the sample, the researchers purposefully select participants who are familiar with the specific social phenomenon being studied. This is a strategy in which particular settings persons or events are selected deliberately in order to provide important information that cannot be obtained from other choices.¹²

By using this sampling method, researchers select specific cases or sample participants because they believe they justify the selection. For the purposes of this publication, 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted with women from the following preliminary categories: migrant women, refugees and asylum seekers in BiH (2 interviews), women who survived sexual violence in the conflict (2 interviews), women with disabilities (1 interview), children born of war (1 interview), Roma women (1 interview) and women who participated in peace missions around the world (1 interview), women who survived cancer (1 interview), and human rights activists (2 interviews). When choosing interviewees, care was taken to represent the largest number of marginalized and minority groups and groups that survive discrimination, as well as to represent women of different ages from different locations.

The choice of data collection methods was also determined by the need to collect narratives from the perspective of women involved in activism and the fight for women’s rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The narratives provide an important insight into the life experiences of women in a post-conflict and divided society such as Bosnia and Herzegovina. This process also helps them reflect on how their position allows them to practice positive changes for women generally.¹³

According to the literature, narrative structures are not only result of individual perceptions. They also reflect the outlooks and values of the broader society. Consequently, they provide a rich foundation of information of how women make sense of their position in the society and how their agency interconnects with the broader outlook of their community.¹⁴

Semi-structured in-depth interviews also contribute to the attainment of deeper knowledge about the research subject of this study. The literature argues that: “In-depth interviewing commonly seeks ‘deep’ information and knowledge – usually deeper information and knowledge than is sought in surveys, informal interviewing, or focus groups.”¹⁵

The questions used in the interviews were open-ended and were used for the pur-

12 Maxwell, 1996; Taherdoost, 2016

13 Cortazzi, 1994; Deiana, 2018

14 Cortazzi, 1994; Childs, 2004; Deiana, 2018

15 Johnson, 2001:104

pose of “conducting” the interview or writing a personal story. The same questions were sent to all interviewees:

- Please introduce yourself to us to the extent you want and in the way you want.
- Tell us more about your experience or life situation(s) that led to the position you are currently in? How did these experiences directly or indirectly determine the course of your life?
- Did you have help or support through these life situations? Did you ask for it and did you get it to a sufficient extent? Did the institutions help, and which ones? Or did individuals help, and which ones?
- How did you feel about the whole process? Have you had the opportunity to share your experiences in a safe environment where you felt safe and supported? Have you also experienced discrimination or unpleasant reactions?
- What moment in your life was crucial for you to speak/share your experience?
- Do you feel support from certain segments of BiH society and if so, from which? Do you feel that women have equal rights to face what they survived?
- How did your involvement in this field of activity begin? What were the motives for you to get involved?
- What recommendations would you make for improving the position of women in building peace in BiH and beyond, especially when it comes to different marginalized groups? If you represent that group, then from your perspective?

Interviewees were given the opportunity to write or tell (or supplement) their own stories through the interview. Nine of them chose to write a story, while two preferred to tell their story.

In an effort to avoid any ethical issues or problems, the research was conducted according to the ethical norms of the EU and in accordance with the EU data protection policy. The interviewing process was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of humanistic and social research funded by the EU, which state that respect for persons should be at the highest level and that the interviewees should not be harmed during the research process or after publication.

After the interview process was completed, the collected data was securely deposited, and the interviewees had the opportunity to choose pseudonyms to protect their privacy, in accordance with EU data protection laws and regulations. The publication will be available to all participants through the dissemination processes selected for this publication.

An additional ethical dilemma was the potential possibility of retraumatization or secondary victimization through telling stories. Therefore, the authors of the stories, in addition to consenting or refusing to participate, were offered the choice of storytelling modality, and the amount and manner of information presented.

Scars of the Wartime Past

I was speechless and then I wished that he would kill me and that I would disappear from this hell. He stopped, put down his weapon and said to me: 'I can't kill you balinkuro,¹⁶ but that's why I'm taking you to a bloody feast.'

Adila Suljević

Out of fear for their lives, I managed to hide what happened to me, while everything inside me was bursting with pain.

Mirsada Tursunović

The number of women raped in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992-1995 has been disputed since the end of the war, however, it is estimated that between 20,000 and 50,000 people, mostly girls, were raped in this period. These systematic rapes resulted in a negative long-term impact both on the women themselves and on their communities, and this also had a negative impact on the distribution of gender roles in public life in post-Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹⁷ The lack of reliable statistical data complicates the situation, as it allows ethno-national political oligarchies to manipulate the lives and traumas of the victims, but also to hinder the implementation of strategies adopted for the purpose of systemic assistance to this

¹⁶ Translator's note: Derogatory term for a Bosniac woman

¹⁷ Kapic, 2022

group of people.¹⁸

When it comes to supporting survivors of sexual violence and other forms of torture during the war, Bosnia and Herzegovina is working to improve the legal framework and mechanisms for the rights of survivors and the availability of compensation and benefits. Survivors face numerous obstacles in receiving reparations for the torture they suffered, and as a result of these obstacles, wider social stigma and the additional financial burden imposed on them, survivors most often give up their right to compensation.

According to the UN Women report (2021), the UN Committee against Torture recently ruled that Bosnia and Herzegovina must pay compensation to a survivor of sexual violence in the conflict and provide her with appropriate and free medical and psychological assistance. The aforementioned survivor was represented by TRIAL International when she submitted a petition against BiH to UNCAT in 2017,¹⁹ claiming that the state did not fulfill its obligations under the UN Convention against Torture and ensured her right to adequate and fair compensation and full rehabilitation.

The Committee also decided that an official apology should be made publicly to the aforementioned survivor, and that BiH must establish an efficient system of reparations at the state level in order to “provide all forms of redress” to the victims of war crimes, including sexual violence. The decision was made in August 2019, and TRIAL International published it. As for criminal proceedings, there was a significant increase in the number of final cases for criminal acts with elements of sexual violence committed during the war; in 2011, 13 people were prosecuted and that number rose to 22 in 2016 and 46 in 2017.²⁰

STORY 1

I am Suljević Adila, born on July 28, 1965 in Tuzla. I am a former camp inmate and a woman victim of war. At birth, none of us chose which nations we would be born into, including me. I was born as a Muslim child in the most beautiful country of Yugoslavia under the leadership of Josip Broz Tito. As a young married couple, my parents left Tuzla for Vienna to earn more money, buy a house and return to Yugoslavia with two children. I was seven years old, and my brother was four years old. Having settled in Vienna, I had to go to school. There was only a Christian school with working hours from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. There were nuns and the whole school

18 <https://fondacijacure.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/my-voice2-final-print-poslano.pdf>

19 The Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

20 <https://eca.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20ECA/Attachments/Publications/2021/7/UNW%20Country%20Gender%20Equality%20Profile%20BiH.pdf>

was full of girls in the same uniforms, there wasn't a single boy. I remember when my teacher called my father for a meeting, it was a problem because all those girls were going to prayer, and I was a Muslim child and what to do with that. My father asked if those little girls were praying to one God, and if they were all praying, let his child pray with them.

That's how my schooling in Vienna began. I finished three classes and was the biggest favorite in the whole school. Having earned money, my parents buy a house in Brčko in the Srpska varoš settlement. All Serbian children, myself and my brother among them, we studied, played, went to Christmas Eve Mass and we all liked each other, both the children and our parents, no one ever looked at what religion or nationality one is.

I graduated from high school as a textile technician. I got married at the age of 21, worked in a textile factory, had a house and all my family together. I thought that when I was 35 years old, I would have everything and that all I had to do was give birth and travel the world. Those were my unfulfilled wishes.

On May 1, 1992, shots were heard from somewhere, the people were agitated, cars were set on fire, people were leaving their houses, and it was all unclear and confusing to me. What is happening and who will shoot whom???? In the settlement of Meraje where I lived, about 60 of us, some old people, some women and children, went to a nearby shelter. We spent the night there, shots were heard all night, children were crying, we were all disturbed. In the morning, my neighbor wanted to go to the house to bring food. On the way out of the shelter he fell and I saw it all because I wanted to go with him. There was a scream: "THEY KILLED HIMZO". That's when I realized that this is a real war, and not some military exercises as people said. We hear that Ljubiša Mauzer's army is in Meraje, that's when hell began.

We were captured by that army, they were all young people, unknown to me. We were taken to the playground, they beat us, cursed us, mistreated us, put us up for shooting, and some were killed, some not. I survived three shootings and all possible tortures. Goran Jelisić, aka Adolf, took only me to the third shooting, and wanted to kill me. I was speechless and then I wished that he would kill me and that I would disappear from this hell. He stopped, put down his weapon and said to me: 'I can't kill you balinkuro,²¹ but that's why I'm taking you to a bloody feast.' He handcuffed me and threw me into the truck. My husband, my sister-in-law's son and four neighbors were in the truck. They took us to the Luka camp, and not far from Luka is my parents' house. What I saw in Luka is not even in horror movies, it can't even be told, so much massacre, pain and suffering.

My father's friend Pero rescued me from Luka. He told me to wait for him to come get me because if his people find out what he did, they will kill him. That's how Pero takes us out of Luka on May 9 at around three o'clock in the night. With my

21 Derogatory term for a Bosniac woman

request, he released my husband and my neighbors. I went to my parents' house with all of them. It is the center of the city, Srpska varoš. Serbian armies changed, Dragan's army, Black Eagles, White Skulls, etc. While I was at my parent's house, I was recorded for work, cleaning bloody walls, freezers and a lot more. I signed up for the exchange on September 28, 1992, all through acquaintance. I also registered my husband, but he didn't want to because I told him that as soon as we get to the free territory, I want to separate. In that period, in addition to all my pain, I also experienced a lot from him, a lot of insulting words.

I went alone to the prisoner exchange in Maoča, a nearby village of Brčko. It rained heavily that day, I arrived in Maoča and find out that my family is not there and that they are in Tuzla. Only my brother was in Rahić, on the battlefield. When I settled in Maoča, police patrols came non-stop to pick me up for interrogation because I was under suspicion, my husband had stayed there, and I crossed over and they considered me a spy. Their first question was whether I had been raped. When they asked me that, I fainted, already tired of life... My brother took me to my mother in Tuzla. I couldn't speak for three months, I had nightmares and when I wanted to say something, I stuttered a lot. Seeing that I was not well, my mother took me to the neuro-psychiatrist Alija Sutović. My treatment lasted a long time and for the first time I told my doctor Alija everything about all the events in Brčko.

When I recovered a bit in 2005, we got word that my brother had died. I felt very bad again and went to the organization "Vive žene", where I became their client to this day. "Vive žene" brought me back to life again, they helped me in various ways, with psychotherapy, realization of my rights, and they encouraged me on all possible life paths.

For having decided to work on myself in order to be strengthened through further life, I am most grateful to my mother. She is my great heroine. I decided to speak for the sake of my mother and all the good people like my doctor Alija, "Vive žene", and for the sake of all the women who survived those Golgothas and for the sake of the women who have not yet spoken, who are still silent... I want to tell them that they are not alone and that it is never too late to ask for help.

I am married today, I have a wonderful marriage. I am the president of the Association of Women War Victims "Tears" in Brčko and I can say that I am proud of my success. I am proud because I have helped many women and men to speak up and demand their rights. I led them along the path I was also taking and we succeeded. I am still working and fighting.

Yes, I also want to emphasize this: our association has a multi-ethical character, for us all women are victims regardless of religion and nation. We are daughters of God - we are here to teach the world how to love.....It doesn't matter what you've been through, where you're from, who your parents are, nor does it matter your social and material position. None of that matters. It is important that you chose to love

and that you express love through your work, your family, through what you have to give to the world.... Be a queen....

STORY 2

I was born in a village not far from Zvornik. I grew up in a family of seven. There were five children, I am the third female child in the family, then another sister and brother. Although there were many of us and we lived modestly, I still had a happy childhood. Everything was done in agreement, we shared tasks with my mother while my father worked in the company. In addition to all my obligations, I went to school and completed eight grades. There was no end to my happiness and imagination, I was thinking of completing a part-time typist's course in order to be able to get a job.

Then, in 1992, the army entered my town Zvornik, and mass killings and persecution of the population began. Somehow, at this time of spring, my dreams and happiness disappeared. My life continued by hiding in the woods and it lasted almost two months, without sleep, bathing and food, it was getting harder and harder. On that 21st of June, I remember well that date that remained deeply engraved in me, I put all my dreams and happiness that I had been building for 18 years in one plastic bag and together with a group of about 60 women, girls and children left my hearth forever. We set off in a column on foot not even knowing where to go. The army captured us there, forced us into a bus and took us to a warehouse in Caparde.²² Soldiers immediately started entering the warehouse, cursing and insulting. They started taking women and girls out under the pretext of cooking and cleaning. A soldier came in and started yelling at me because I was crying and ordered me to go with him to change one woman's clothes. I had to go, I only managed to look at my mother and brother, their pale faces said it all, and they couldn't help me.

I only saw that woman, then he took me upstairs and ordered me to take off my clothes with a gun pointed at me. I started to shake. I lost ground. When I refused, he hit me, threw me on the bed and raped me. Crying my heart out, I begged him to kill me. At the age of 18, I was marked by a shame because of the most brutal act that exists for a girl, a woman. I lost my honor, the dignity of a woman, who according to our religion and tradition should have entered into marriage as a virgin. My life had no meaning anymore. Various thoughts broke my heart and soul, I blamed myself, I was disgusted with myself, feeling his smell and the stench of his breath on me. How to get back to the warehouse, how to look my mother and brother in the eye, without them noticing what happened to me. Because of the fear

²² Populated area in today's municipality of Osmaci, Republika Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina

for their lives, I managed to hide what happened to me, while everything inside me was bursting with pain.

I think that night was the longest night of my life. When it dawned, they took us to the exchange again by bus, they unloaded us halfway to walk to Kladanj. We walked all day, it was hard and exhausting, and only before dark we arrived at the free territory of Kladanj. After two days we left Kladanj and came to the refugee center in Živinice.

The life of a refugee was not easy at all, my sadness and pain did not stop.

After a few months, I meet my current husband and make the decision to get married, to forget my past. He knew what I had been through and supported me. I gave birth to two girls who gave me strength and the will to live.

However, I had to ask for medical help. Even though I thought my wounds from the past had healed, they weren't. Every spring, they opened again and started to hurt, and I unconsciously passed the nervousness and trauma on to the children. Not knowing that there were many other women who had the same fate as me, I wasn't allowed to tell the doctor the cause of my nightmares, I didn't even know that it was allowed to be talked about, until SIPA²³ knocked on my door because someone called me as a witness. In 2009, I gave a statement, after which I was sent to Sarajevo to the "Women Victims of War" Association. There I achieved the status of a civilian victim of war and learned more about my rights. I had the greatest support from my family and Dr. Amra Delić, who, through her volunteer work with survivors, strengthened me as well, encouraged me to step out of the shadow of the war and not be trapped in my past.

Unfortunately, I didn't have the support of institutions, as I still don't have it today, and in the whole process I felt humiliated, left alone. I was usually helped by individuals, my neuropsychiatrist and women's non-governmental organizations: "Vive žene" Tuzla, Medica Zenica, TRIAL International in BiH, "Forgotten Children of the War", "Wings of Hope" Sarajevo, Dr. Denis Mukwege Foundation, SEMA Global Survivor Network and others.

Fortunately, I had the opportunity to share my experiences in a safe environment and I really felt safe and supported then, but I must emphasize that I also experienced ugly reactions from individuals as well as discrimination. I remained silent for 17 long years about the crime that was committed against me, and the moment I decided to speak about it was the knowledge that a large number of women, of all nationalities, had the same fate as me during the war.

²³ State Investigation and Protection Agency

The female body was a battlefield in the war, these crimes must be talked about, because by silence we support crimes and criminals go unpunished.

Unfortunately, even today I feel that women do not have equal rights to face their past. This is why my engagement began in 2012 when, with the help and idea of co-founder Dr. Delić, we founded the association to help victims and survivors of sexual violence in the war “*Naš glas*” (Our Voice) Tuzla. The motive was to end the “CONSPIRACY OF SILENCE” through adequate confrontation with the past, social inclusion of victims and survivors of sexual violence in the war and continuous promotion of the values of democratic civil society, such as humanity, non-violence and tolerance.

War and Peace in One

Our mothers survived torture from different ethnic groups, different religions, so we are both war and peace in one. We show the consequences of both.

Ajna Jusić

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, rape during the war was used as part of the policy of ethnic cleansing, and also to terrorize and intimidate people. The policy of ethnic cleansing was planned and systematically implemented, as were mass rapes. For this purpose, “rape camps” were formed in which women were faced with daily humiliation, torture and intentional insemination. The organized campaign of rape was aimed at humiliating or terrorizing the entire community and thereby assisting the process of ethnic cleansing by forcing entire communities to flee. It also aimed to “colonize an enemy nation” by impregnating women, as women were kept in camps until they reached an advanced stage of pregnancy and then released to return to their communities.²⁴

The US human rights organisation Helsinki Watch believed that rape was being used as a “weapon of war” in Bosnia: “Whether a woman is raped by soldiers in her home or is held in a house with other women and raped over and over again, she is raped with a political purpose – to intimidate, humiliate, and degrade her and others affected by her suffering. The effect of rape is often to ensure that women and their

²⁴ Kapic, 2022; Allen, 1996; Sofos, 1996; Stiglmeier, 1992;

families will flee and never return.”²⁵

In her book “My Voice Echoes”, Durkalić (2015: 46) states: “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.”

However, even today, 27 years after the end of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, very little is said about the children who were born as a result of wartime torture and rape. However, the most significant change occurred in July of this year (2022), when the Brčko District Assembly adopted the Law on the Protection of Civilian Victims of War, in which, for the first time, children born as a result of wartime rape were legally recognized as a special category of civilian victims of war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This achievement is the result of the tireless work of the “Forgotten Children of War” Association. Immediately after this event, the FBiH Parliament also adopted a draft of the Law on the Protection of Civilian Victims of War in the Federation of BiH, which introduces new categories of civilian victims of war - survivors of sexual violence and children born of wartime rape. Currently, this draft is in the stage of further public discussion.

STORY 3

The whole story begins, like many others, in the war that took place in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In 1992, my mother survived a war rape and I was born as a result. I was born in 1993 in a safe house and spent my first fifteen years in ignorance of my biological origin, of how I came into the world. At the age of fifteen, motivated by social discrimination and somehow systemic discrimination, I was forced, motivated to find the truth about my parentage.

Here I follow up on the story of the *One Parent's Name* initiative, because this is exactly what started me thinking when, at the age of fifteen, in high school, I was asked a question about my father's name, which was not written in my school register. At that moment, I replied very honestly that I do not know that name. The fact that I was 15 at the time, right around puberty, was enough motivation for me to

²⁵ Stiglemayer, available at: <https://srebrenica.org.uk/what-happened/the-rapes-in-bosnia-herzegovina-alexandra-stiglmayer>

start looking for my truth, especially after the kids at school laughed at me. It was impossible for everyone that a human being did not know her father's name.

In general, when I talk about the influence of my peers in primary and secondary school, I was not discriminated against, the children did not discriminate against me as a child born of wartime rape, because they, like me, did not know who I was at all, but I was discriminated because I didn't have a father. In essence, it is once again a social segment, a whole social problem that exists in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

As a child, I was guided by the idea that my dad was gone, that my dad was killed, because somehow that was the most common answer in Bosnia and Herzegovina, that my dad was killed in the war. Discovering one's identity, that you are a child born of wartime rape, is unimaginable, and that's where the turning point came for me. An even bigger turning point happened when I tried to find more information about it on the Internet, in newspapers, anywhere, and there was no information. The greatest success of our Association "Forgotten Children of War" is definitely reflected in the full research spirit, thanks to which we obtain a large amount of information about everyone who finds himself/herself in the situation in which I found myself at the time. At that time it was completely invisible, completely unknown, I thought I was my mother's reminder of such things, of what happened to her. There were many different processes between me and my mother until all of this was accepted and until this burden was shared with psychological and professional support. Nevertheless, this series of events motivated me to start activism.

Even before finding my identity, the greatest motivation lay in my will, desire and effort to show everyone in the world that it is very stupid and very inhumane to claim that women are to blame for what happened to them. I mean, I have repeated that on several occasions, that this is my first and most important goal. To connect people with the illogicality of their thinking, that is, to connect it to people that the patriarchy makes ordinary sheep who blindly follow some things. Now, as a child born in that way, I clearly ask the question of how it is possible for four people to decide, on someone's order, to commit the war rape of a 22-year-old girl, and that after that the whole society considers that she and the child born as a result are to blame, and let us all forget that someone ordered it and that someone commit it. And I don't think that here anyone should be gentle or considerate towards society, because that is proof of human stupidity, and that if people perceive things in that way, then they allow themselves and their children every day a 50% chance of the same or similar happening to them. This is where my greatest source of motivation lies. To show and prove, because I know that my mother is a heroine, but again to show and prove to everyone that this is so and that we can all stand in front of her and learn a lot from her. No matter what happened to her until today, she never spread hate speech and never spread any kind of ethno-nationalist messages that

could lead to new conflicts. She always simply claimed that what happened to her could not, should not, happen again.

At the time, I lived in Zenica, attended medical school, and the greatest support that my mother and I received at that time was the support of the Secondary Medical School, in fact our pedagogue and my class teacher. For example, all the professors at my school and my class teacher and the director, they all knew that I was born as a result of war rape, only I didn't know. When I enrolled in the Medical School, my mother submitted my documents so that I wouldn't be faced with that question as soon as I got there. Mom had preventive meetings with the school staff, and separately with my class teacher in order to warn her that I don't know this and that it will take some time to find out. The moment I found out, I had a lot of resistance towards school. I had a lot of resistance towards my class, towards that whole discriminatory circle, and due to certain problems and difficulties I ran into (e.g. I failed biology, I failed mathematics, etc.), my class teacher reacted and called my mother. Until that conversation with my mother, I had meetings with a pedagogue who took me to the Center for Social Work, where I had professional psychological support. The student dormitory where I lived during that period was also involved in all of this, so I can say that in my case and my mother's, educational institutions showed a positive side in the sense that they reacted instantly, that they followed the line of the child's well-being. Where I am today is precisely the child's well-being, since the professors and the principal and the class teacher made every effort to ensure that I received all possible support in order to return to education, to continue my path. Subsequently, Medica Zenica and their staff were always involved in that process, because we, mom and I, are simply connected to Medica. I was born there, in a safe house. My mother used the support and services of "Vive žene" from Tuzla, and I independently sought adequate forms of support upon my arrival in Sarajevo. I received such an adequate form of support from the CURE Foundation, upon my arrival in Sarajevo in 2012. Someone had to teach me how to turn all this into action, some work, and I have always had a need for some food for thought rather than some psychological sessions, so that circle of support was always there.

If we talk about the support of an individual, my class teacher, she really played a key role. She is the one who enabled my healthy return to class. She is the one who made extracurricular activities possible, for the whole class to drink coffee with me and my mom, because it was obviously a trauma for all of them at that moment. Mom came to the gym one day and we all just talked about it. She tried to make me feel the power of adequate inclusion of the child, with such a specific story, and I think that made our class special and strengthened at that moment because it was a moment in which we could share some additional personal experiences. There were quite a few difficult personal experiences in our class that were not known until then, so the teacher is really a guide for me on how to work even to this day. She is the one who initiated the dialogue. There isn't much dialogue in schools, and that's

clear to everyone, but she used dialogue as her strongest asset, and that was crucial for me and my mom.

As for friends, I always had friends and comrades who rotated through school, but I never had a loyal friend. I started building constancy in friendship since I came to Sarajevo. Ever since elementary school and through high school, I've only had one friend. His name is Jasmin Mujezinović. He is also the only person who, even before school, learned about my story before everyone else, with whom I first shared my experience. After I found out and found those mother's documents, he was the one with whom I shared all of this. As far as family is concerned, I continuously enjoy some kind of support from my family, but in my lifetime, no one has ever directly asked me about this. Today, everyone gets information through the Internet and the media. But then again, I understand them. I believe it's a shock and it takes a long time to process these things.

On January 18, 2017, dr. Amra Delić appeared in my life. She is the first researcher of this topic in Bosnia and Herzegovina. She came up with this idea, contacted centers and women survivors, various institutions and organizations. I know that it was very difficult, almost impossible and unthinkable to find an institutional or social thread to follow. She was looking for socially invisible, legally non-existent people. She coped as best she knew how, she reached out to the children and tried to put it all on paper with arguments and to have proof that we exist. We as members (thirty-three of us participants) decided to actively participate in this research and what deeply touched and motivated me the most was our first membership meeting in April 2017 in Sarajevo. Of the thirty-three people who participated in the research, fifteen of us came face to face with our identities for the first time. That was a priceless moment for me because we were sitting in the hall, the doctor was moderating, and there was also psychological support. We were all in that one and the same circle and each of us told his/her own story, war is common to all, but all stories are individual and different. However, when you tell a story in a circle of people who understand you, it is priceless. I think I will never forget when I told my story and talked about some of my pain, suffering and thoughts about what was happening to me, how Alen said that he understood me and that was really the only understanding in the world that I knew was 100% correct.

Essentially, if we make a parallel with the moment when I found out everything at the age of 15, when I thought I was left alone in the world, with this moment when I met the other members, I think that knowing that you are not alone in the world with such an identity, with such a background that is horrible and that is brutal and criminal, is really priceless. When I sometimes feel bad, I remember that I am not alone in this and that there are people with whom it can be shared, and even people within our Association who belong to the Peace Keepers Babies group or the children of humanitarian workers. Maybe there is no case of rape in some situations, but the

point is that we all went through brutal social discrimination, a lot of physical violence, psychological violence, a lot of peer violence. Somehow that peer, physical violence is something that all of us in the Association have survived, and sharing such experiences with someone is crucial for me. From that day, April 2017, until the middle of 2018, we continued to meet in secret. We did not go out in public. We had a series of workshops, both in Sarajevo and Tuzla, and all these workshops were moderated by our Amra, our Belma and our late Džejna Bajramović. Amra guided us through the process. Around 2018, we included Jadranka Miličević, who taught us activism. How to convey all this from the heart and soul to the outside world.

What is specific about that period is that it took us almost two years to work on ourselves, to work on the exchange of experiences during group meetings, private phone conversations, through social networks, to prepare ourselves mentally in order to have enough courage and strength in the first place to go public. So, after two years of preparation, the decision was made. The decision was made that Alen Muhić and I will go public, together, with our families. First, my and Alen's parents, and then slowly, slowly, we will start including the other children. And it was like that. We went public in July 2018 and that's it. One three-minute interview received about two million views, and everything started at that point with no return.

Since then, it has been difficult to control the Association, actually, it is not difficult to control the Association, but the confrontation with the past that we brought with our appearance. We really are. I think we are a pretty good slap to the face, a healthy slap to people, because it should be taken into account that our Association has members belonging to different ethnic groups, different traditions, religions, faiths. And also, on the other hand, our mothers survived the hardest things done to them by different ethnic groups, different religions, so we are both war and peace in one. We show the consequences of both.

The association is developing according to its normal course, strategically and organizationally, but many thematic fields have opened up. The most important thing is that we opened an argumentative dialogue in the field of stigma and discrimination. This is crucial. The example of women survivors has shown that even if there is a law since 2006, that law cannot save you from the language of shame, and this is our key goal - this type of dialogue, because we believe that if we do not have a clear dialogue in the field of discrimination, stigma and prejudice, we cannot even have a clear dialogue in the field of peace.

As the Association "Forgotten Children of the War", at the moment, apart from the advocacy and logistics campaigns in Bosnia and Herzegovina aimed at raising social awareness of the existence of this category and the legal recognition of this category, we place the greatest focus on the international, advocacy network of

children born as a result of war . We started this topic on a global level and through this network, first of all, we want to gather mothers because it is the only way we can reach children.

We shall include mother survivors and women survivors from different post-conflict countries, as well as countries currently in conflict, for example Ukraine.

We want to share our experiences from Bosnia and Herzegovina because we think they are good and we think they can help a lot. We want to transfer our artistic expressions to other countries because we believe that art heals and can really heal a part of trauma. Through this network, we also want to advocate on a global level because this is not an issue only in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is an issue that has been swept under the rug for centuries. On the other hand, through the international network, we will try to fight one important battle, which is the Peace Keepers babies battle. It is very important for the international network and for the work of the Association. What we do most now is education. We educate whoever we can, from government representatives, donors, international, regional, national and entity institutions. We are aware that we have broached a subject that no other person has ever thought about, and we believe that people need to hear about our experiences, as hard as it is for us to talk about it over and over again, so that they can gain perspective on what we claim hurts us.

We base a lot of things on education and after the education we enter the process of advocacy, and that also will be done by the international network. For example, a similar problem exists in Uganda, and a lot of education is also needed there. Culturally we are quite different, legally we are quite different, but the form of social visibility is simply the same everywhere. Every child, wherever he/she is from, from Kosovo for example, must go public once, must share a story. These are stories that require social empathy above all else. Without social empathy, they cannot get some quality, because one should beware of the general impression of these children as the children of the enemy, especially in these kinds of policies in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Now the question is whose children are we, who is the enemy here? We know the answer, does society know?

Bosnia and Herzegovina as a Refuge

They took my child, they took my rights to live in society, my family left me, I was living on the streets, I was forced to leave my country because they tried to kill me several times...

Ranjeet Kaur

I am a woman who has survived all kinds of things on the way here, and only one of them is domestic violence.

Haleh Valizadeh

According to the 2021 Crisis Response Plan in Bosnia and Herzegovina, published by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), as of 2019, 44,249 migrant arrivals were registered in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). These numbers look modest compared to the world's migration movements, which, in 2020, as reported by the IOM, amounted to 281 million and comprised about 3.6% of the world's population.²⁶ In Bosnia and Herzegovina, people on the move are mostly concentrated in the immediate vicinity of the border with Croatia, which is a member of the European Union, in the Una-Sana Canton or in the Sarajevo Canton, with a smaller number of migrants distributed in the Tuzla and Herzegovina-Neretva cantons.

These migration flows represent a serious security challenge for Bosnia and

²⁶ <https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/wmr-2020-interactive/#:~:text=The%20current%20global%20estimate%20is,over%20the%20past%20five%20decades.>

Herzegovina, but more importantly, they also represent a threat to human security because of the entire population of people on the move, women and children are the most frequent targets of physical and psychological violence, forced prostitution, human trafficking, and constitute the largest percentage of those who have gone missing during their movement.²⁷ The Coordination Board for monitoring of the implementation of the Action Plan UNSCR 1325 recognized the migrant crisis as a new security challenge, especially for women and children, emphasizing that this issue should be given particular attention in the policy-making and measures for implementation of UNSCR 1325. Systemic protection of children and women is needed, especially in their access to education and health care.²⁸

The fact that Bosnia and Herzegovina has managed to ensure a safer and more prosperous life for some individuals is especially pleasing, as evidenced by the following two personal stories.

STORY 4

As for me, I proudly like to say, I am a woman from Sarajevo and Bosnia, because this is the city and country that accept me as I am, the people around me never judge me or discriminate against me because of my past. Beyond this proud moment, I also have one name given by my parents and that is Ranjeet Kaur. We believe that our name and the meaning of our name play a role in our whole life and believe me it's really true. When I was a child, I always asked my parents why they gave me this old class name which I don't like. But in the hardest period of my life, my name taught me a lot and gave me the strength to fight for my life and to get peace and justice in my life. My name means **Undefeatable Warrior**. Whenever I thought to give up in my life, my name held me and give me the strength to fight. Thanks to my parents, they give me a great gift with this name.

I don't know where I have to start. My childhood was not nice. I got married at the age of 19, got a child at 20, in the age of 21 I started to live separately because I was the victim of domestic violence. At the age of 26 one police officer raped me and I became a rape victim. Unfortunately, I was born in a country where 80% population worship goddess and where the police register a rape case every 15 minutes. I don't want to say that my country is bad, but the situations and conditions of women are very bad and unsafe.

In my life, I wanted to do something, to become someone, and to fulfil my dreams.

²⁷ <https://eca.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20ECA/Attachments/Publications/2021/7/UNW%20Country%20Gender%20Equality%20Profile%20BiH.pdf>

²⁸ Ibid.

I started to study again, I always wanted to be a lawyer, so I choose law. I got admission to one law university and left my son with my mother. One police officer who was living in the same city where I started my studies was my uncle, a close acquaintance of my mother, and she introduced us. He said to me that his son also studied the law so if I need any help to let him know. We exchanged numbers, that was the darkest day of my life. He started to message me, call me, with bad intentions. I started to feel unsafe. He was forcing me to have sexual relations with him. When I denied, he started to threaten me, he sent my locations to me, where I was and with whom, telling that now some of his guys will come and shoot me there. I was 24 hours in fear of death and depression - I talked with my mother and she said to quit everything and come home, I did the same. My mother called him and told that I mean everything to her, so if he calls me again, she will complain. "It is not true. I never did this, why I will do this, she is like my daughter", he said. For a few days everything was calm, no phone calls, no threats, nothing. I was living with my mother; my son was going to school. Suddenly one day I got a call on my new number. It was said that my son will not come back home that day. "You did not listen to me, now you will see what I will do with your child." He said some really horrible things about my child - I can not even repeat those lines. He said if I want my child alive then there is one car in front of my door and I have to leave my phone at home and sit in the car. I was so helplessly afraid to lose my beautiful little child, and I did what he told me. There were two cars around, 7 to 8 males in both cars. I sit in one of those cars.

They took me around 250 km far from my city in one government building. Those boys said to me to go straight in some room and to not try to be clever otherwise I will see what can happen. I did so, they knocked on the door, and that police officer opened the door. I was shaking with fear and had no clue what will happen to me, two guys they came inside the room with me and the third was that police officer. When we entered in the room that officer said: " Why you did not listen - look at my power, what I can do!". I beg him to let me go, my child was waiting for me. I was crying and full of fear like a poor animal being hunted. They started to beat me a lot, injured my legs and said if I try to run, they will shoot me here and they will shoot my child there. It seems my life is ended up there.

I was screaming inside but my lips were shut. He touched me wherever he wanted, he raped me the whole night there, ate my body, he did not let me wear my clothes. I was just breathing, everything was dead inside me like a dead body with the breath.

The next morning those boys came back. I even don't remember who put clothes on me and that monster said if I open my mouth, I will see what he can do. They put me in the car and left me near my home. I was dead in my mind, completely unconscious. My mother found me, took me to the hospital, and it took months to come out of everything. I decided to fight for justice.

But the Police didn't want to listen to me because he was a senior police officer. I tried to fight, I didn't give up not only because of me, but because of every woman who was raped. I have tries to save other women in the future. I wanted to tell those monsters that we are not a toy, nobody can come and rape us. But that fight was not so easy and at some point, I understood why women tolerate everything and stay silent. If they choose to fight for justice, then they have to face society and their questions and blame. I was raped once but society, court, media, beliefs, raped me every day with their words. Somebody said that probably I provoked him, some said why I wanted to study after got a child, some said I am not pure anymore because I am raped, I have no right to live in society. They asked me where he touched me, how he touched me, how he raped me, tell us everything... My husband didn't want to accept me, he said that now everybody knows that I was raped. "Give our child to me because nobody will accept you, and you will ruin the future of this child", he said. My family left me because, as they said, I choose to fight. "You have to be silent, you destroy our reputation in society, how you can destroy our reputation, how you can be so impure, why you couldn't be silent?" Thousands of questions teach me why women choose to be silent. In this fight for justice and peace, I lost everything.

They took my child, they took my rights to live in society, my family left me, I was living on the streets, I was forced to leave my country because they tried to kill me several times. I believe that court will release them. I lost everything in this war, just my name was with me to hold me and to give me the strength not to give up. In this whole journey, I learn one thing which is patience. When you have patience, you can change everything in your life the way you want. Lessons which you learn from patience, those lessons will make you successful in your life. The life that I am living now, it's a gift of my patience.

The moment I decided to speak out for myself and for other women was when I decided to fight for justice, my family pressured me not to tell a word. "Society will discriminate you", they said. Somehow, their fear was right because I faced discrimination in every way. But to be silent was not the solution, someone has to come out to fight, to speak, to ask for justice to protect others. Then why I cannot do that, why do I have to wait to let this happen to someone else, and then she will speak, why? And I decided that I will not shut my mouth, I have nothing to lose anymore in my life, I will speak, I will scream and ask for freedom of every woman to let them live their life. Don't judge them, don't put labels of your stupid customs and the society rules on them. Society cannot decide about someone's life.

I survived almost three years of my life as a migrant I lived in camps, in safe houses and in other places. I know the pain of migrant woman, I know the needs of them, I know what they had to go through. After faced all of that, I decided to do something for others, because I was also taught the value of help in this journey.

It made me be able to become a light for others life.

I think nobody can survive without the help of others. We are and should be there for each other always. As we have bad people, we have good people too. I am not judging anyone, but this is how we divided society - in good and bad.

In every hard step of my life, the universe sent someone to be next to me, to help me, to understand me. In my country it was very hard to find support but still some of my friends supported me a lot. But when I left my country, I traveled to several countries to save my life but through my passport details they found me everywhere, I was running here and there to save my life and last time when I was in Serbia, they found me there and attacked me. I escaped from them and illegally entered in one country because wherever I was going with my passport, they found me. That country was Bosnia and Herzegovina. I never ever heard about this country and my destiny brought me here. I was tired from 'cat and mouse' game I was tired from what I went through; I was just seeking peace. I have found peace here in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

I got and still getting support from some organizations, and I would really like to say thank you to all those organizations and I would really love to share their name with all of you. They are Danish Refugee Council, UNHCR, BHWI Foundation, the CURE Foundation, *Vaša prava*. They all played a huge role in this *Sarajka's*²⁹ life. In addition, there were many people who helped me individually too. I love Bosnia and Herzegovina not only because I got help here and I started my new life but also because Bosnian people love me a lot. They helped me, cared about me and accepted me as I am. I am more than thankful to my motherland Bosnia and Herzegovina. We say the mother who feeds you is your real mother, not the one who has just given birth to you. In my life, the mother who healed me and feed me is Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In these last 4 years, I went through a lot of pain, struggle, emotional pain, and mental threats but after finding myself in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the life slowly started to change. I got some opportunities to speak openly, I got safe environment, I felt supported and protected too. Well, we have all kinds of people everywhere, I experienced sometimes discrimination and inappropriate reactions, but I think not everybody can understand us and that's ok. Be with those who really understand you and support you, I am doing the same.

I had started my career as a volunteer in the CURE Foundation, then I worked in BHWI as a volunteer too. To be very honest, both organizations gave me lot of respect and I have learnt so many things. They thought me how women can play a role in the life of other women, to push them up, to support them. I am more than thankful to them for giving me the great opportunities to learn and grow in life.

²⁹ Translator's note: Woman from Sarajevo

As we all know, women are suffering in every corner of the world. They have many different problems in their personal and professional life, they always have to go more miles to prove that they are equal to men and they face the customs, society rules and various issues. In the modern age, women still have to face many problems in their daily life and struggle a lot to establish their careers. The root of the problem is that women are seen only as a medium to keep the family happy and healthy.

Women need safety, the right to study, freedom, and respect no matter of what she is working or what is her family background. And I would like to say to every single or lonely woman around the whole world to not give up - patience is the greatest key to change everything, so be patient and work or fight for women's rights. Don't think that you are doing something or fighting only for you, your struggle will change the future of other women. Stay strong and build peace with patience.

STORY 5

After all the difficulties and problems and disappointments, I am here to tell you that if you will and want, everything is possible! I do not chant slogans; I know it is a very difficult path, but it is worth it.

Sometimes we do not have support, but it is not going to stay that way, you create your own opportunity for your future! We will only live once and no one has the right to inflict the slightest harm on us, either physically or mentally.

I am a single mother from Iran, and a foreigner, a migrant in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I am a woman who has survived many things on the journey to here, only one of which is domestic violence. I am a woman who survived a pregnancy that is against the laws of my country, and my daughter is not accepted. As a single mother, I cannot return to my country.

I am a woman who has experienced life on the street corner, how happy you are from the bottom of your heart when someone gives you a piece of bread. I am a woman who did not know the language, it was not my country, and all this happened to me...

I left my country as a single young woman in search of a better future, work and prosperity. I was dreaming of Sweden and Germany. I was thinking it will be a quick and easy journey. But it was the opposite.

I had a boyfriend in my country at the time, and because my father is so religious, In Iran, the most common thing for such situations is honour killing!! I had no money for running away from the country, so my boyfriend bought me a ticket to Turkey. I didn't see him after that.

My nightmares started during traveling. I met a smuggler who promised the world to me and who pretended to protect me from other violent men, and there were many. I thought I felt safe around him and that I thought I was in love.

My journey with him was hell. He kept beating me even when I got pregnant. Always thought I was going to have a defective child because of the beatings I had during my pregnancy, and it also included hospitalization. I say baby because I did not know the gender until I was eight months old into pregnancy - it was not possible for me to go to the doctor!

We were in Bosnia and Herzegovina at the time and my sweet baby daughter was born here. He was operating his smuggling business and I had to follow him around. He kept me and the baby locked in different houses, he even stole my baby away from me twice so he can use her to help families cross the border easier. I was out of my mind, I asked for help from all institutions, and I was finally reunited with my baby after 2 months!

But God loves us, just trust him and try. He puts people in our lives to help us. Thanks to some individual good people, people who believed me when I told my story, I managed to hide from him for a while and escape him forever. I also managed to report him to the police and prosecute him and he was convicted of violence and deported to Iraq. I felt safe for a while, even though he always found ways to reach me and threaten me. I was in hiding with my daughter for over 2 years...

After all the problems, God has given me a very beautiful girl, and my daughter and I were able to find a way to escape from a mentally ill, alcoholic, and drug addict.

Even after 4 years, I have no good relationship with my father, I miss him so much... My mom sends his photos to me. He doesn't know that I got pregnant without getting married, if he would know that he would definitely not let my family (mom and sister) to contact me. But at this point, I am tired and fed up with running from men!

What I want to say the most is that it is really hard without help and support. I have tried many times, but without support it is useless. There must be an organization and an institution, or even an individual, that can help so that we can find ourselves again.

I was very frustrated and tired physically and mentally during that time, I had lost my self-confidence. At this point you need someone to push you forward!!

I want to thank everyone who helped me for their help so that we can be saved, all my angels of salvation, including CURE, they have been helping me for over a year while I was in BiH.

In the end, my suggestion is to not give up trying, I am still trying! Organizations and institutions and individuals can help to some extent and after this everything depends on you and your will and efforts.

I am alive!

Accepted??

... 'Aldijana, I know you are a Gypsy, but don't worry, I will still be your friend'. At that moment, I felt the earth slip from under my feet.

Aldijana Musli

According to some sources,³⁰ it is difficult to establish the exact number of Roma living in Bosnia and Herzegovina, although there are certain data from the 1991 and 2013 censuses. The majority of Roma live in temporary settlements, they do not have permanent residence addresses or residence certificates, which is why they were not fully included in the population censuses. According to the 1991 census, 8,864 Roma lived in BiH, and according to the 2013 census, 12,583. The Special Report on the Status of Roma in BiH, prepared by the Institution of Ombudsman for Human Rights of BiH in 2013,³¹ showed that about 50,000 Roma live on the territory of BiH, which also means that Roma represent the most numerous national minority in this country. According to other available information, the number of Roma in Bosnia and Herzegovina is about 65,000 to 70,000.³²

Bosnia and Herzegovina is a signatory to various international standards for the protection of human rights, thereby assuming a number of obligations to ensure that all persons on its territory, under equal conditions and without discrimination on any basis, enjoy the minimum standards of human rights. In the case of Roma

30 <https://yihhr.ba/diskriminacija-roma-u-bosni-i-hercegovini-istravacka-prica/>

31 <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/e/110497.pdf>

32 <https://yihhr.ba/diskriminacija-roma-u-bosni-i-hercegovini-istravacka-prica/>

rights, international human rights standards require Bosnia and Herzegovina to ensure the equal enjoyment of human rights to Roma, as to all other persons on its territory, without discrimination. According to international standards everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status, and States Parties undertake the obligation to respect and to ensure to all individuals within its territory and subject to its jurisdiction the recognized rights, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.³³

As stated in the Special Report on the Status of Roma in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Committee for the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) adopted “a set of recommendations relevant for the situation of Roma in BiH pertaining to the general situation and the elimination of all forms of discrimination, ensuring the rule of law. These recommendations principally require the implementation of those laws which ensure the right to personal identification documents, education, health, social protection and housing.”³⁴

STORY 6

I am Aldijana, mother, wife, activist and child from a mixed marriage, a Roma father and a Bosniak mother, child of parents with disabilities. I grew up in a family that faced many adversities, which made me the person who I am today.

I was born in Sarajevo in 1987, despite certain family members who told my parents that they, as disabled people, would not be able to take care of the child. However, everyone was wrong because I had a very nice childhood in a family full of love and understanding. I was a happy child. In the spring of 1995, near the end of the war, my parents decided that we should try our luck in Germany. I started the second grade of elementary school there and even though I didn't know the language, everyone at the school made an effort to make sure I was accepted. After three years, we return to Bosnia and Herzegovina, to our Visoko, and of course I continue with school, because it was very important to my parents. Then, already in the fifth grade, I felt for the first time a different treatment at school, not only towards me, but also towards other children who were from the countryside or less privileged families. The teachers openly asked some students about their moms, dads, aunts, these children had the opportunity to go to supplementary classes, and I got the impression that even when they didn't learn so well, they always got A's. I, on the

33 <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/e/110497.pdf>

34 <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/e/110497.pdf>, p. 8

other hand, no matter how well had been prepared or studied, I could not get a grade higher than B or C. It was not easy for me to accept this kind of treatment. Three years later, due to a very difficult financial situation, as well as the poor state of health of my parents, we again decide as a family to leave Bosnia and Herzegovina and go to Germany with the hope that we will be better there. This time we applied for asylum in Germany. At that time, I spoke German quite well, so the employees of the reception center often hired me to translate. After a short period, we were transferred from the reception center to another city where I continued my education. At that time I was already in the 8th grade and for the fourth time I experienced that I was a new student in the class. I soon became friends with two girls who were also new in the class, and it was easier for us to deal with the fact that we did not belong to groups of children who had known each other since the first grade. It was an interesting period, a period of first crushes, but without real contact with other children because for many I was an *Ausländer* (foreigner) and not all children were willing to hang out with someone who arrived from a country they had never heard of.

I was a very good student, and the teachers often praised me for how well I mastered the language and other material. This lasted until 2004, when we were rejected for asylum and were forced to return to Visoko again. And again, at the age of 16, I was forced to change my school environment. I continued my education at the Mixed vocational secondary school “Hazim Šabanović”, majoring in economics. That’s when I meet non-governmental organizations for the first time. First, I had the opportunity to be invited to several meetings in the Roma association, and later I helped with writing reports, until the moment when I received the first invitation to participate in a seminar in Vogošća. I was overjoyed because for the first time I had the opportunity to meet other young people who were active in the work of the association. I remember that on one occasion I asked my class teacher if I could leave class one hour earlier to get to a meeting, and she asked me with amazement: “What do you do in the Roma association?” After finishing high school, I did not have the opportunity to immediately enroll in college, even though I had the desire to study economics. However, I got the opportunity to work in a biscuit factory in Visoko. I worked in three shifts six days a week for a salary of 310 KM. Then I was overjoyed because I could contribute to the household budget. I was really satisfied with my job until one evening when the shift leader, who was of Turkish origin, approached me and said: “Aldijana, I know you’re a Gypsy, but don’t worry, I’ll still be your friend.” At that moment, I felt the earth slip from under my feet. I felt helplessness, shame and anger. What’s the point of someone telling me who I am and what I am and that I should be happy that he will be my “friend” even though I didn’t even ask for that friendship.

Shortly after that event, I began to notice how the other workers were commenting behind my back, “... so her father is Roma”, because in Visoko everyone knows

who is who. The whole situation became too difficult for me and I decided to leave the company. I didn't need to justify myself to anyone, and on the other hand, I didn't need to listen to any condemnations either. At that moment I felt powerless and sad because I love my father and just because someone has a certain perception about the Roma, he/she thinks that has the right to categorize people. After that, I worked in two more companies, but I was still growing angry.

I wanted to show that there are Roma who have finished school and are doing their job honestly. In 2010, I decided to join the association of the Youth Roma initiative "Be my friend" from Visoko. Soon after that, the Roma Women's Network "Success" was formed and through the association I became a member of that network. I was really happy because there I got the opportunity for numerous educations, to work on many projects and researches. However, there I experienced that I am not fully accepted even in the Roma community, because at first glance I do not look like a Roma woman, although there is no exact description of how someone should look in order to belong to a certain group, nation, or maybe I missed it. While working on a research project, I filled out a questionnaire with an elderly Roma woman, and she boasted to me that she had two grandchildren. When I answered that I have no children and that I am not married even though I am 24 years old, she looked at me in such amazement that I also thought that maybe something was wrong with me.

I also heard several times from Roma from the neighborhood: "... but Aldijana is not ours, she lives in the building, she does not hang out with us, she is white." There were even stories circulating in the village that my brother and I are not my father's children, but that our mother brought us from a previous marriage, even though this is her first and only marriage. Regardless of everything, my desire to contribute to change, to help some little ones with their homework, to take them on a trip, to help the elderly by bringing donations to their door and to see gratitude in their eyes, that gave me motivation to continue working in the Association. I was especially glad that I was part of the campaign on the occasion of the 2013 population census, where we invited Roma men and women to declare themselves as such on the census.³⁵

Through activism, I cooperated with numerous organizations and I really had many opportunities to work on my personal improvement and I used every opportunity that was presented to me. On the other hand, I was surprised by the attempts of my male Roma colleagues to marry me off to their relatives. It seemed to me that the fact that I was not married at the age of 25, regardless of my education and everything I had achieved up until then, actually gave them a reason to worry about my future and that they should find someone to marry me. This encouraged me even more to work in the sphere of women's activism, the promotion of gender equality

35 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JU_odxJwJDQ

and the promotion of Roma women's rights.

Thanks to numerous seminars and activities, in 2013 I found out about an internship program for Roma activists. I applied and was selected as one of seven young Roma men and women for a six-month internship in the OSCE Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina and six months in another institution, which in my case was the office of the European Union Delegation in Sarajevo. During the program, I saw how people work in international organizations and realized how one can help others, but at the same time have a stable life with a good income. That's when I started researching the possibilities of getting a job myself in such an organization. However, in all the job postings, I saw that they were looking for a college education. Thanks to my savings, I had enough money to enroll as a part-time student at the Faculty of Political Sciences in Sarajevo, majoring in Social Work. When I enrolled, I applied to the public call of the "Education Builds BiH" Association for scholarships for Roma students. I kept the scholarships I received for enrollment for the following year. In 2017, I graduated with a degree in social work and enrolled in a master's degree. At the promotion of students, I remembered the words of my mother, who once told me to keep my head up and that I would be the first in my family to graduate from university, even at the age of 30. And it was like that.

Through all these years, the experience shaped me into the person I am today, broadened my horizons and personal perception. We can be anyone we want and we should not allow anyone to put us in a box because of belonging to a certain national, ethnic or gender group. I am a proud Roma, the daughter of Munib and Emira!

In the meantime, I got married, I have two children, I enrolled in master's studies and I work as a program assistant in the Human Rights Department of the OSCE Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

My message to all young people, especially girls, is to believe in yourselves, and that we women are capable of much more than we can imagine. Sometimes the path of life leads us through dead ends, curves, ups and downs, but it is important not to give up on the ultimate goal. On my way, I had the strongest support from my family, who cheered me on and believed in me even when I didn't.

Escaping the Margins

Already in my student days, I knew that we deserve a better world. That we may not be able to overcome the challenge of being born with a body that does not always cooperate, but that we can and must build a world tailored to all of us.

Tanja Mandić Đokić

The World Health Organization estimated in 2018 that around 15% of the world's population lives with some form of moderate or severe disability. According to the data of the BiH Statistics Agency, which were registered during the 2013 population census, there were approximately 300,000 people with disabilities in our country, of which more than 110,000 had multiple types of disabilities. Difficulties in this case refer to, among other things, problems with vision, hearing, movement, etc.³⁶ Although Bosnia and Herzegovina ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Optional Protocol without reservations in mid-March 2010, due to poor and uneven legislation, persons with disabilities are discriminated against based on the origin of the disability, as well as territorial affiliation.³⁷ According to some reports, women with disabilities are in a worse position than men, although the 2013 census shows that 161,083 women with disabilities live in our country. According to the estimates of the organization MyRight from Bosnia and Herzegovina, which deals with issues and protection of the rights of persons

³⁶ <https://istinomjer.ba/diskriminacija-osoba-s-invaliditetom/>

³⁷ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2017/03/committee-rights-persons-disabilities-considers-initial-report-bosnia-and>

with disabilities, “less than 2% [of women with disabilities] are visible and active in organizations or in local communities generally.”³⁸

STORY 7

My name is Tanja Mandić Đokić. I was born in Banja Luka in 1980, where I grew up and where I still live now. I like to see myself as a soul who was purposely born at a certain time, in certain circumstances with the task of playing the game of life as best as she can and, along the way, influencing others as best she can. That’s why I don’t think that my name, my education, my profession, my gender, or the fact that I’ve had a disability since early childhood are particularly important. I would say that these are backdrops and labels that have either been assigned to us or that we have built ourselves and that only serve as a framework for us to leave our mark on the world.

I often wonder what kind of person I would have become if my scenery and costumes for this life had not been so challenging. I really don’t know that, but I do know what it’s like to be a girl with a severe disability and try to get an education and live in a country that was at war at the time and where neither treatment nor education, especially for already marginalized groups, made it to any list of priorities

I like to say that it must have been very difficult, but no one told me that. I have the feeling that I broke the obstacles in front of me with insane strength and ease. However, what hurt me was when I noticed that not everyone has the same strength, nor the same family support, and that my energy was also wasted under the pressure of prejudices. Already in my student days, I knew that we deserve a better world. That we may not be able to overcome the challenge of being born with a body that does not always cooperate, but that we can and must build a world tailored to all of us.

First, I was engaged in organizations of people with disabilities, and there, together with colleagues from the movement, I changed the architectural image of Banja Luka, celebrating every lowered sidewalk, every ramp. It was especially important for us to change the policies of access to education. We knew it was crucial – education for people with disabilities is a way out of the margins. I also felt that being a woman with a disability is not the same as being a man with a disability and, as a student of philosophy and sociology, feminism immediately won my heart.

The history of the movement for women’s rights seemed to me to be the most adequate model for the realization of the rights of all those who are unfairly removed

³⁸ <https://istinomjer.ba/diskriminacija-osoba-s-invaliditetom/>

from the distribution of social power. Within the framework of numerous activities aimed at improving the position of people with disabilities, the story of women with disabilities stood out, which I felt on my own skin. We shyly knocked on the doors of the CURE Foundation and the Women's Network of BiH and, fortunately for us, encountered true acceptance and learned what it means to have a real desire to be involved, to be heard instead of being patronized.

I think that the first PitchWise festival was a turning point for me and that it awakened an even stronger need for my voice for peace to be heard even louder, I got, in a way, permission to make my voice stand out. Since then, the ways and dynamics of my activities have changed because I am also changing, but my efforts to contribute to peace and the right to be different, in any context, should, I hope, leave a mark that, combined with the marks that leave other women, will be visible on the social relief of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Peace is where everyone's voice is heard, where we accept each other with all our differences and where we are united for the sake of make it all of us.

Unequals Among Equals

During my struggle, my first motivation was just to survive, to watch my children grow and to help other people, no matter what malignancy they were suffering from.

Zekira Bajramović

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) reports, in 2020, there were 2.3 million women diagnosed with breast cancer and 685 000 deaths globally.³⁹ As of the end of 2020, there were 7.8 million women alive who were diagnosed with breast cancer in the past 5 years, making it the world's most prevalent cancer.

According to the WHO, there are more lost disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) by women to breast cancer globally than any other type of cancer. Breast cancer occurs in every country of the world in women at any age after puberty but with increasing rates in later life.⁴⁰

The reports of non-governmental organizations that deal with this issue note that there is no precise data on the number of breast cancer patients in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Unofficial statistics show that out of about 1,400 newly discovered cases, 500 women lose their battle for life because of this disease. Breast cancer is one of

39 <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/breast-cancer#:~:text=In%202020%2C%20there%20were%202.3,and%20685%20000%20deaths%20globally.>

40 <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/breast-cancer#:~:text=In%202020%2C%20there%20were%202.3,and%20685%20000%20deaths%20globally.>

the most common malignant diseases of women in Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, if detected at an early stage, the cure rate is high.⁴¹

The complex political system of our country best shows all its vulnerabilities and weaknesses precisely through the healthcare system, not providing equal or equally accessible healthcare services for all its citizens. The following story testifies to this.

STORY 8

I'm Zekira Bajramović. I'm from Cazin. I was born in 1972. I am happily married, and a mother of two sons. In 2012/2013, I took over the Association of Patients with Malignant Diseases in the city of Cazin unfortunately for personal reasons. I have been diagnosed with a breast cancer at the end of 2007. At that moment, at the age of thirty-five, I didn't know who to turn to, how, where? In a second, the world collapsed around me... I had metastatic cancer. And then there was a fight for smart drugs, Herceptin was in question. Unfortunately, many women couldn't get it because we had to buy it. And in all of this, I didn't even know that there was an association in Cazin, until an oncologist, the only one in the Una-Sana Canton, said to me: "Zekira, why don't you join that association?"

And that's how I heard about that association, which was already in shambles. However, I took it over and I'm proud of it because people respect and trust me. So I've been there for nine or ten years.

At first, I didn't know who to turn to, how to get the medicine. Unfortunately, the medicine could only be obtained through corruption. In our country, they also divided us into cantons, and the conditions are different everywhere, and I wondered if I was better or worse than a woman from Sarajevo Canton or another canton? This hurts me the most, for this reason I took on this obligation, I do everything as a volunteer, without any compensation, just to connect with many foundations in some way, to present our problems, to have equal conditions. The problem of cancer is the same, in Sarajevo, Jajce, Mostar, Banja Luka or in any city of Una-Sana Canton, we have the same problems, unfortunately.

Fortunately, I received the medicine in 2008 as the youngest priority patient, but I felt sorry for the other women who could not receive it. After some time, it came to the essential list. The association has been involved in the Think Pink project -

41 <https://www.aa.com.tr/ba/zdravlje/karcinom-dojke-jedno-od-naj%C4%8De%C5%A1%C4%87ih-malignnih-obiljenja-kod-%C5%BEena-u-bih/1892535>

Together we are one, where people meet, go to seminars, exchange experiences and problems that we all have together. The most important thing is cooperation. We start with our local institutions, the health center, and we also cooperate with associations from our canton, other cantons and even with associations outside Bosnia and Herzegovina.

On the other hand, it is still so difficult and sad when twenty-somethings of us from all over Bosnia and Herzegovina sit at the table and listen to a person who has a greater advantage over us in terms of orthopedic aids or some medicines on the essential lists. For example, two of my members buy the same therapies and it costs about 5,000.00 KM per month, and there is no talk of a refund.

Nevertheless, this cooperation with many associations means a lot to me because we learn from each other. For example, I have represented Bosnia and Herzegovina abroad several times. I have every right to talk about our problems, I mainly state what hurts us the most, I speak personally from my experience, citing my example of discrimination in the matter of disability assessment, for example in relation to an oncology patient or a civilian victim of war or an ordinary citizen ... It is unfortunate that individual doctors who are paid to assess disability do not do so in an equal and transparent way for everyone.

Discrimination is committed by employees from the first contact at the Center for Social Work, and then by everyone else. They say: "Whoever sent you, you have no right to that!" While many women do not know where, who to turn to and how, I am their ears, their eyes, I am available to them 24 hours a day. I'm here to help them because I had no one to turn to, and that's what motivates me the most.

During my struggle, my first motivation was just to survive, to watch my children grow and to help other people, no matter what malignancy they were suffering from. Is it a child, a man or a woman? There is no difference with me, cancer is cancer, one or the other, it is evil. Basically, any person who has been diagnosed with cancer can contact me. We meet each other, exchange opinions, our experiences in the fight with a malignant disease, and present our problems that we encounter.

It would be nice if the politicians would pay more attention to the people who are fighting for their lives, because it is sad that there is a waiting list and there is a solidarity fund, and as for that solidarity fund, as the old saying goes, the squeaky wheel gets the grease. A person who is in the Sarajevo Canton will always receive the medicine sooner than a person who comes from the Una-Sana or some other canton. We should show solidarity because anyone can get the disease, cancer is cancer, regardless of whether someone from Krajina or another city in Bosnia and Herzegovina has it, we all have a same problem, which means that everyone should receive a cure equally. Who can be entitled to choose the patient to whom medicine

should be given in order to prolong his/her life, while the other patients will have to wait? People who are in leading positions, starting with politicians, should think a little more about whether they are the next patients tomorrow, whether they might need that very medicine that is not on the essential list, and for some it means life. May God never give the same fate to anyone.

I draw my strength and energy from what I want, can, must. That is the motto of our Association. Life is beautiful even when it is the most painful. When I looked at my children, who were two and a half and six years old respectively, and my husband, who was a selfless supporter, that was enough for me to have the motivation to fight and live. And what I do, I do it with pleasure so that I can save someone's life, advise him/her, where he/she will go, how he/she will go, in what way. I'm delighted when I can help. This is not easy, but I am overjoyed when I meet the person I helped and when he/she says to me: "Zekira, God gave you, thank you, without you, I would have killed myself" or "I wouldn't know where I would be, what would I do?" There were cases when people were ready to end their lives when they found out they had cancer..

Many people who are not sick do not understand how much support and talking to someone means. Psychological help is the most important thing for every oncology-hematology patient, and there are very few educated specialists who could cooperate with this population.

Discrimination is everywhere. I live to help someone and to see that person smiling, alive and saying: "Thank you, Zekira!"

Activism vs. Sexism

Bosnia and Herzegovina needs a system that will be safe, resilient and accessible to everyone equally, regardless of sex, gender, race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, etc., and the implementation of which will not remain just a dead letter.

Delila

The Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination in Bosnia and Herzegovina defines responsibilities and obligations of legislative, judicial, executive authorities in BiH and legal persons and individuals with public authorities in BiH to ensure protection, promotion and creation of conditions for equal treatment. Discrimination, in terms of this Law, shall be every different treatment towards any person or group of persons on grounds of their race, skin colour, language, religion, ethnic affiliation, national or social origin, connection to a national minority, political or any other persuasion, property, education, social status and sex, sexual expression or sexual orientation, gender identity and sexual characteristics.⁴²

In the Annual Report on the State of Human Rights of LGBTI People in Bosnia and Herzegovina, entitled “Pink Report 2022”, it is stated that “the adoption of a systematic solution through clearly defined public policy measures and activities of competent institutions aimed at improving the position of LGBTI people in BiH has

⁴² <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/bih-lgbtqi-prava-institucije/31823809.html>

stood for many years as a priority measure to be undertaken.”⁴³

At the beginning of 2021, a draft entitled “Action plan for the promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms of LGBTI persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina for the period 2021 - 2023” was finalized, however, due to the sluggishness of the decision-making system and political blockages that are a daily occurrence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, this action plan has not yet been adopted.

Meanwhile, every third or fourth LGBTIQ person report encountering some form of discrimination.⁴⁴

STORY 9

My name is Delila and I am a Law graduate from Sarajevo. I am also a feminist, a queer woman and an activist for women’s rights and the rights of LGBTIQA+ people. The beginning of my activism was motivated primarily by my interest in the topic of human rights, which was awakened at university, and then by my very identity as a queer woman. I felt a deep need to use my voice for the LGBTIQA+ community, for women who do not have that voice and for all those who, for whatever reason, are unable to use it. Given that I do not engage in activism professionally, it is sometimes difficult to combine these two parts of my life, on the one hand, law as a profession, and on the other hand, justice and fairness as my principles and values. Activism has determined me to be a person who actively fights, but is subconsciously afraid. Aware of the social and political situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, I fear for my physical, social and material security every day.

We live in a country that has adequate legislation that prohibits discrimination, but implementation and mechanisms are weak, and this is supported by the scant case law.

I have personally experienced harassment in the workplace for being a woman. However, in addition to the fear I felt then, I also had the need to resist the discriminatory system. I thought: “If I am not able to fight for myself, then how will I fight for the people around me?”

The first people I shared my experience with and complained to were my friends and family. I surrounded myself with support that I didn’t have at my workplace. When I told my superiors about all the cases of harassment by a work colleague,

43 https://soc.ba/site/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Rozi-izvjestaj-2022_za-web.pdf, p. 17

44 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/bih-lgbtiq-prava-institucije/31823809.html>

they advised me not to pay attention to him because that's just how he is. Suddenly, I felt all the confessions of the women I had read about on my own skin. I did not accept that advice, I did not agree that my bounds and dignity were threatened, and despite the opposition of superiors, I turned to a representative of the authorities and certain non-governmental organizations that deal with issues of protection of women's rights.

I knew that there were help mechanisms, and that I had people who stood firmly by my side. Thanks to the reaction of the representatives of the authorities, the harassment decreased to a certain extent, and thanks to the instructions and advice of my legal colleagues, I also changed my behavior and attitude, so that the harassment stopped completely. I can say that I was lucky that I did not go through all this alone. However, a large number of women and persons exposed to this type of discrimination go through this alone and without support and protection mechanisms.

The process was terrifying because at every moment you are forced to choose carefully what to say, how to act, what step to take, how to avoid the person in question in the hallway, how to have witnesses if the harassment happens again? And with all that, you are trying to balance two parts of yourself. Your commitment to activism and the struggle to survive in the workplace because it is your only source of income.

I often think, if I, who really had full support, felt so scared and at times helpless, and somehow, constantly on the edge, how do people who go through such situations completely alone feel? I can say for myself that I was privileged because of the support I had. When we talk about support from certain segments of the BiH society, I think that not enough is said about the problems and prejudices that women face in the workplace, in the family, on the street or in public city transport. In addition, a big problem is that justice is not equally accessible to everyone. Yes, according to the law, every person has the same right to initiate a procedure, but the quality of that procedure is largely determined by the financial capabilities of that person and whether or not he/she has the money to pay for an attorney or a lawyer who would represent him/her in that case.

I think it is not enough to just talk about equality and claim that we are all in the same starting positions. We need to focus more on equity, that is, on providing equal opportunities to everyone. Bosnia and Herzegovina needs a system that will be safe, resilient and accessible to everyone equally, regardless of sex, gender, race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, etc., and the implementation of which will not remain just a dead letter.

On Lost Battles

Some kids called me an Ustasha when I didn't respond to their Salaam-Aleikum in Šantićeva in Mostar, some again on the street: "Is this that fool from Ljubuški? Shame on you for writing about your people... you can't write, you're ours... bitch, bitch..."

... Well, since I'm a bitch - I have to bark...

Štefica Galić

The first sentence of the preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,⁴⁵ reads: "Recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world", while in the second sentence of the preamble "the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear" has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of common people. The freedom of expression is an internationally protected right that is considered a fundamental human right. It includes notions representing equality, dignity and individual development or fulfilment. This right gives people the freedom to express or communicate what they think, that this expression is a reflection of who they are, and that they are therefore worthy of respect and protection⁴⁶

45 <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html>

46 <https://www.kas.de/documents/285576/11521648/MLHSA+2021++1+The+role+of+the+media.pdf/f54a092e-1f2d-543d-291a-9603556b3773?t=1612258525961>, p. 6.

If there is no freedom of expression—if people are not free to share information and express a range of ideas, opinions and political views; and, the corollary to that, if people are not free to receive information in the form of a range of ideas, opinions and political views—they will not be sufficiently well informed to make appropriate and meaningful political choices, whether at the ballot box or in their more general interactions with government.⁴⁷ In post-Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina, the political situation and the attitudes of some, especially ethno-national political currents, are often described as an obstacle to the development and nurturing of freedom of expression in the public space, especially in the media.⁴⁸

According to the Press Freedom Index defined by Reporters Without Borders, in 2020 and 2021, Bosnia and Herzegovina was ranked 58th out of 180 countries on the ranking list. The non-governmental organization Freedom House also assessed the state of media freedom in Bosnia and Herzegovina as “partially free”.⁴⁹ However, the Media Freedom Survey in BiH in 2021 conducted by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in BiH and the BH Journalists Association, showed that “the majority of citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina believe that media freedom in BiH is not present at all or is only partially present.”⁵⁰ In addition, the results of the survey on attacks on media workers and violence against journalists were presented, which showed that every fourth respondent believes that “attacks on journalists can be justified in some cases”,⁵¹ which inevitably indicates to the problem of hate speech, which is highly present in the public discourse in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This especially applies to the online public space, which, according to Jasmina Džumhur, human rights ombudsman in Bosnia and Herzegovina, is “contaminated by hate speech to the greatest extent.”⁵² This resulted in an increase in the number of attacks on media workers. During 2021, 26 cases of attacks and threats were registered in Bosnia and Herzegovina with the aim of exerting pressure on journalists and media in BiH, three of which took the form of physical violence.⁵³

STORY 10

I am a media worker, I have been editing the Tacno.net portal for 12 years, whose publisher is the Association “Center for Critical Thinking” from Mostar. Before the

47 Ibid.

48 <https://www.kas.de/en/web/balkanmedia/media-freedom1>

49 <https://www.kas.de/en/web/balkanmedia/media-freedom1>

50 <https://bhnovinari.ba/bs/2021/05/03/istrazivanje-o-medijskim-slobodama-u-bih-svaki-cetvrti-ispitanik-smatra-da-napad-na-novinare-moze-biti-opravan/>

51 Ibid.

52 <https://atlantskainicijativa.org/govor-mrznje-u-bosni-i-hercegovini-kad-mrznja-postane-svakodnevnica/>

53 <https://www.dw.com/bs/novinari-u-bih-najizlo%C5%BEeniji-politi%C4%8Dkim-pritiscima-i-prijetnja-ma/a-61754312>

war, I worked in photography and desktop publishing in Ljubuški. I was and remain an idealist, I believe in what I do, fighting for a better and fairer world.

We are left-oriented activists, we are among the rare media in the post-Yugoslav space that tries to maintain the dignity of the profession, that speaks critically about important topics of society. We are a media that is not a political tabloid nor is it influenced by financial and intelligence structures. On our portal, people of different professions, ages, nationalities, and religions publish their texts. They all have one thing in common: that they openly and harshly criticize the authorities and societies of the countries in which they live. Not because they like to criticize, but because they want it to be better.

All my activity is the result of what I consider my moral and human duty. I am fighting against a system for which nationalism and clerofascism are the measure of things, which celebrates “its criminals” as heroes, considering it a patriotic act, I am against a system which trades in human lives and their property, which raises future soldiers who will hate everything that is not theirs, a system in which the elections are permanently won by nationalist parties headed by criminals who think they are politicians...

I am often under the attack of such a system - the police, the judiciary, street fascism... Because of my involvement, I lost almost everything, many of those I considered friends, family gave up on me... On the other hand - and that is, despite everything, a great encouragement - there were many, many more people who stood by me, who supported me, helped me. Why? Because I spoke the truth, I testified about what I saw with my own eyes.

Despite all the war and post-war renunciations, I did not give up the “principle of humanity”, I did not agree to divisions, nationalist blackmail and intimidation, to the “official truth” and “alternative facts” of new counterfeiters and old avengers. I did not agree to it, nor do I agree to it, although they declare all of us national traitors who believe that there are no excuses or circumstances that could justify war crimes, camps, persecution just because someone has a different name, religion or nation. Despite the Hague verdicts, despite the trials before BiH courts, on all sides there is still a persistent refusal to admit the truth.

That is why I insist on the importance, on the inevitability of facing the truth about the past. The horrors of the past must be clarified and the victims asked for forgiveness. Without that there will be no catharsis, without that there is a real danger that what happened to us will happen again. Everything is being done to divide the country, annexing its parts to Croatia and Serbia; therefore, to the two countries that were the aggressors of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the nineties. This aggression, which was first military, then economic, and now diplomatic, never stopped, it only changed forms.

There is a thought by Martin Luther King that says: “Our generation will not be troubled so much by the misdeeds of evil men as by the terrifying silence of the good.” Have we been silent? Could we have done more? Both in the war and today. It is true, we rebelled against the fascism that was carried out by the Herzegovinian dogs of war in the nineties. I remember the trucks with which they took our Bosnian neighbors to the camps, I remember the screams when they tortured them, I watched people, mosques and the Orthodox church disappear, houses burn, people are taken away in refrigerators, our neighbors run away and disappear, how Qur’ans are burning in front of the dilapidated house of the murdered old woman, how people are being threatened and killed by local thugs who have not been punished even today, I watched a world collapse and disappear.

We did what we could, in those moments, helping with guarantee letters and photos, but the question persistently haunted me was whether we could have done more? However, we at least publicly rebelled - you will not do it in our name, we are against fascism. You can’t take innocent people away... Everyone else was silent. Yes, many did help secretly, but nobody publicly.

They called us the “Mujahideen embassy”, branded us as “traitors of the Croatian people”, collaborators of the secret police, the Yugoslav police... When everyone left the concentration camp, we and the children went to Prague. My husband, Neđo, then said: “I will hang my head in shame if I stayed here now among these fascists who want a pure nation.” When the Washington Agreement was signed, we returned to Ljubuški, but we were ostracized, isolated, I did all kinds of things to ensure our existence, at photography shops, picked strawberries, cleaned the stairs... The children were victims of our determination, and my husband fell ill and died in 2001 leaving us alone, with debts. Even today it is difficult for me to talk about those moments. I don’t remember anything more difficult in my life.

I told everything about those evil times in the documentary film “Neđo of Ljubuški”, which was made in 2012 by Dr. Svetlana Broz, granddaughter of Josip Broz Tito, and director of the organization Gariwo. The film was made on the occasion of the Award for Civic Courage that my husband received posthumously. Since the showing of that film, I and my family have gone through hell. After the right-wing media chase, threats, verbal and physical attacks on me and all those who spoke in the film, obstruction of the police and the corrupt judiciary, we closed up our house and left Ljubuški.

Today I live in Mostar, my children, Dejan, Bojan and Maša have their own families, I am the grandmother of Veronika, Vanja, Aljoša and Gea. In Mostar, I feel safe on the left bank of the Neretva. On the right, I was verbally attacked several times, in the Ministry of the Interior, in the shopping center, on the street... I won’t even talk about threatening messages via social networks. And there were many of them

after each of my appearances in public space. I don't report such things anymore, because I know that the police are the "watchdogs" of the local political powers that I have been fighting against for years. I sued some "ultra-right hate media" for defamation due to brutal lies and threatening comments and of course, lost everything in court with the explanation - it's not defamation but a "value judgement" that contributes to the social debate.

Despite all this, I have been editing our portal for 12 years, we have also founded the School of Critical Thinking, which has been operating for four years with the desire to encourage young people not to leave, to try to think critically about reality, and then to act contributing to peace and humane relations between people. We also have publishing activities; we have already printed 30 important books. In addition, we have organized hundreds and hundreds of forums on current topics, where prominent left-wing intellectuals spoke.

Because of the work I do and my social involvement, I am often under attack from various groups (right-wing), from physical attacks to threats and insults to defamation lawsuits that occur after published investigative stories about corruption and crime.

Until now, I was the victim of a physical attack in 2012, a verbal attack in Mepas in 2015, threats from a police officer in 2016 in the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Herzegovina-Neretva Canton, along with heinous threats and insults in the comments, on Facebook or in the inbox every time when I publicly say something critical or publish on our portal... Once we found two torn pages from the Qur'an in front of the door of our editorial office, and after they were translated it was clear that we were being threatened. Some kids called me an Ustasha when I didn't respond to their Salaam-Aleikum in Šantićeva in Mostar, some again on the street: "Is this that fool from Ljubuški? Shame on you for writing about your people... You can't write, you're ours... bitch, bitch..."

I was physically attacked in Ljubuški after the screening of the documentary "Nedo of Ljubuški" in which I spoke about the war and persecution of Bosniaks from Ljubuški in 1993. The only thing that was ruled in my favor was the verdict for that physical attack - the attacker was given 3 months probation and to pay 600 KM, which she never paid. And she defended herself with the words: "What does she want, if I hadn't beaten her - someone else would." She died a few years later.

I was threatened by many, from military associations, war veterans, right-wing Herzegovinian and Croatian media, to people on the street, on the phone, in the inbox, in comments under hateful texts on obscure portals that were shut down as soon as they were called to account, and all that to portray me and my

family as haters of everything Croatian, commies, ⁵⁴UDBA, staunch atheists, thieves... They threatened to kill me, rape me, cut me to pieces, cement me, I was for them a communist whore, a partisan bitch, an Udba scumbag. There were also wishes like “I hope you will be decomposed like your husband”, “I curse you and all your kin”... The IP addresses of the comments were, among others, from the police station. And I went to beg them to protect me!

I survived all that with difficulty, I was afraid for the children and their safety, but I was very angry because I was telling the truth - what do I have to fear. So, the fear and silence of the people who witnessed the events I spoke about and who did not publicly announce themselves (from Ljubuški and this part of Herzegovina) is not surprising. Predrag Lucić then wrote: “What greater insult can you do to a foaming crowd than to walk through it as your own man?! Like Neđo Galić in the past, like Štefica Galić today... A film about Neđo is undesirable among those who preserve the achievements of ethnic cleansing for the same reasons why it was undesirable to defend the persecuted in 1993.” Neither Neđo nor Štefica walk in Ljubuški anymore. But the others are walking.

It was such a chase that I haven't recovered from even today. I changed my phone number and moved to Mostar with my children. Don't ask me about diagnoses, but there are some. If we don't have a project related to the portal, then I live on my pension. I lived for four years and two months on 184 KM per month, because they confiscated half of my pension to pay Herzeg-Bosnian slanderers and court costs. I still have two thousand marks to pay, but I'm waiting for the confiscation because, even if I had that money, I wouldn't pay voluntarily. If necessary, I will go to prison. My children were also exposed to verbal attacks. My son Bojan moved from Ljubuški due to pressure from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and my daughter Maša never wanted to come to Ljubuški after that, she lives in Sarajevo. Dejan and later Bojan and their families moved from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In the beginning, we collected threats, reported them to the police and the Association of BiH Journalists, recorded them, wrote about them... Today, it's all funny to me, I don't talk to anyone, nor do I trust anyone... I had the support of many people, colleagues and mainly foreign organizations (Tamir Waser, Head of the Political Department of the U.S. Mission to NATO, then Deputy High Representative in BiH, went with the police minister to Ljubuški and after that they invited me for an interview... OSCE, Office of the Council of Europe, embassies, the Helsinki Committee...).

I lost five defamation lawsuits against “Herzeg-Bosnian quasi-media laborers” at all levels in Bosnia and Herzegovina. These trials, in addition to taking too long, were very stressful and expensive. Legal assistance was provided by the Helpline

54 Former Yugoslav Secret Services (UDBA)

for Journalists of the Association of Journalists of Bosnia and Herzegovina, all other costs were borne by myself. Value judgment - they ruled, not defamation, even though the defendants admitted everything in court. All appeals were rejected at the Constitutional Court, and "Poskok case" also in Strasbourg with the explanation that not all legal mechanisms in our country were used. What gives me satisfaction is that they rejected him⁵⁵ for all the diplomatic positions that Čović nominated him for - he did not get approval either in America or in the Czech Republic. He can only exist around the part of western Herzegovina within Čović's power, but not in the normal world.

Can you imagine they slander you, spit on you, beat you up, you have to leave your town and house, you are left with nothing and you still have to pay them for it in the end, because that's what was decided by what used to be honorably called - the Court, and only because I spoke the truth about the persecution of Bosniaks in Ljubuški by the Herzegovinian fascists, which I saw with my own eyes and will talk about until my death. (The Hague verdict has about thirty pages about torture in the Ljubuški camps, and judge Lena Raspudić, who dismissed all my charges, said to me: "You insult me when you say that there was ethnic cleansing in Ljubuški." The Hague verdict, the verdicts of BiH courts, several books by former prisoners and my testimony that I saw it with my own eyes mean nothing to her, she openly sided with the defendants. We complained about her to the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina, but nothing came of it. She also died recently.)

In the case of the verbal attack in Mepas, the trial lasted three years, and was interrupted, the judges/women were changed and then started again. None of the three attackers ever came to a single hearing, and the employee of the Ministry of Internal Affairs who was among the attackers was completely omitted from the indictment, while the third allegedly paid a fine for false representation, which I do not believe. In the end, the solution was for one of the attackers to pay a 100 KM fine and that was it. Everything is trivialized, the police authorities do everything deliberately and perfidiously so that in the end you have a feeling of disgust, humiliation and injustice. At the end of the day, I am convinced that justice does not exist.

I filed a report with the Prosecutor's Office of the Herzegovina-Neretva Canton against the unknown perpetrator who placed the prohibited Herzeg-Bosnian flags on the 25th anniversary of Herzeg-Bosnia, and later I was verbally attacked in the Ministry of the Interior - police officer Damir Vidović called me a bitch and almost pounced on me when I came to ask who put them up and, as usual when it comes to responsibility, they refused to give me information with the statement that these are not the flags of Herzeg-Bosnia, but the flags of the Croatian people and for the police it is not a criminal offense. We had submitted the criminal charge on Novem-

⁵⁵ Translator's note: Owner of the Poskok.info web portal

ber 18, 2016, and later I also reported the dozens of threats I received. Prosecutor Sinanović, who handled the case, almost threw me out of the office. The flags were already placed after midnight on Wednesday. The police were at every step and ensured the installation of flags. The news that they were installed by an informal group of citizens was announced on the first Mostar TV. The fake Croatian knights always hide behind irresponsible individuals or informal groups. After two and a half years, I received a decision from the Prosecutor's Office stating that there is no law in BiH that would prohibit the installation of any flag. Police officer Vidović was never punished because the Office for Citizen Complaints in the Ministry of Internal Affairs did not work *because there was no City Council because there were no elections in Mostar for 12 years*. Today, the case is time-barred. And thus amnestied from everything in advance, when he meets me in the city he says, laughing arrogantly: "Here is my friend who is teasing me on TV." "Well, since I'm a bitch, I have to bark," I tell him.

. And so - we have laws, but there is no justice to prevail. And it is not. I hope that one day they too will be judged and that with whatever measure they measure, it will be measured back to them.

I have never thought about leaving my engagement, although many have suggested it to me. Not even when Šiljeg, the general of the Croatian Defense Council, told me that if I wanted the best for myself and my children and wanted to stay in Ljubuški, I should write a statement renouncing the documentary film "Neđo from Ljubuški" and that Svetlana Broz persuaded me to do everything. He would have read it at one of the demonstrations against the film that were held in Ljubuški several times in 2012. I did not give up even when they threatened me that wherever I go, even to the end of the world, I am dead. I refused to write it, on the contrary, I wrote on my portal that I and my children stand behind every word we say in the film. And I'm still alive. My children carried a terrible burden and we all still carry it. But I didn't give up on the truth, if nothing else I can at least tell them at the end of the journey - I tried...

Let no one be discouraged by my story if they decide to rebel against this abnormality we have been stuck in for thirty years. Sacrifice is necessary. The biggest recognition that gives me strength is the dedication to "our sister Štefica" on the book "The Laughter of Freedom" by the Feral brothers⁵⁶ (Boris, Predrag, Viktor, Heni) and the knowledge that I am fighting on the same side with people who are my role models and who I can hug whenever I meet them. I don't need anything more.

I also received the 2018 Johann Philipp Palm Freedom of Speech and Media Award in Germany. I am very proud of her. A year later, I received the protection of the Bundestag. That's how the Germans rewarded and protected me, but none of us.

⁵⁶ Translator's note: Feral Tribune was a Croatian political weekly magazine

I will end with a quote from Hans Fallada's book "Alone in Berlin":

"Should we become just like the others then? They think that they can change our minds by hitting us. But we don't believe in the supremacy of violence. We believe in goodness, in love, in justice. At least we resisted evil. We didn't become evil together with the others... When they take our lives, what good was our resistance? To us - a lot, because we can feel like honest people until death... It doesn't matter if one man fights or ten thousand; if the one man sees he has no option but to fight, then he will fight, whether he has others on his side or not. I had to fight and I would always do it again."⁵⁷

I would too!

57 Unofficial translation

Woman in Uniform

There are significant differences in men's and women's approach to military operations, conflicts, problems and solutions. It is therefore crucial that we ensure that these differences, in a military sense, are complemented, especially during preparations, assessments and planning of military operations.

Jasmina Omerbegović

The third Action Plan for Implementation of the UNSCR 1325 in Bosnia and Herzegovina for the period 2018-2022 was adopted in 2018 with the aim of consistent, high-quality and efficient implementation of Resolution 1325 of the UNSCR in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and one of the strategic goals of this action plan is “Increased participation of women in the military, police and peacekeeping missions, including participation in decisionmaking positions”.⁵⁸

According to statistical data presented in “Women in the Service of Security in Bosnia and Herzegovina”⁵⁹ published in 2017, the Armed Forces of BiH (AF BiH) has a total of 9,619 employees, out of which 655 (6.8%) are women. The largest number of employees in the AF BiH falls into the category of professional military personnel, out of which 499 (5.56%) are women. With regard to managerial positions in the category of professional military personnel, available data shows that

⁵⁸ <https://eca.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20ECA/Attachments/Publications/2021/7/UNW%20Country%20Gender%20Equality%20Profile%20BiH.pdf>

⁵⁹ http://css.ba/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/publikacija_wise_ba.pdf

out of 2,254 persons in this position, only 57 (2.53%) are women.

The latest information from free sources confirms that there has been significant progress in increasing the number of women in the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and that the interest of the young generation of women in working in uniform is also increasing. In addition, the participation of women in peacekeeping missions in which our country participates is growing year by year, thanks to the positive measures that are the result of the implementation of the Action Plan 1325. For example, in the past ten years, the percentage of representation of women in peacekeeping missions was between 20 and 30%, and currently over 30% of female police officers from Bosnia and Herzegovina are in peacekeeping missions around the world.

STORY 11

I was born in Sarajevo on November 25, 1974. years. I still live and work there today. I earned a master's degree in sociology at the Faculty of Political Sciences in Sarajevo. When it comes to the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina, I have completed 28 years of active military service. My military journey began in besieged Sarajevo in 1994. Even today from this distance, I think I made a natural and correct decision and I simply cannot imagine myself anywhere else. I entered the military service as a member of the then Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Today, after the defense reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2005/06, I am a member of the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina, currently in the rank of major. I am the mother of a daughter Lamija (2002) and a son Harun (2004).

I was a recruiter, a soldier, a non-commissioned officer and today I am an officer with the rank of major. I went through all categories of military advancement and that requires a lot of education, training, training, execution of various tasks and operations, including peacekeeping missions. All this means a lot of sacrifices that, in addition to professional and military competences, also require maximum standards of physical and mental fitness.

As a member of the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina, I had the honor and great responsibility of participating in NATO and UN missions. I spent six months in Mazar-e Sharif, Afghanistan serving on NATO's Resolute Support Mission, and was frequently deployed to Kabul, Kunduz and Bagram where our infantry unit served the mission. Then follows the UN MINUSMA mission in Mali, in which I served for a year, and which I certainly single out for my experiences. I lived in Bamako for a year, but because of the very description of my duties,

I often traveled around Mali, getting to know all the beauty of African tribes, their cultures and traditions.

Regardless of the incredible wealth and beauty of different cultures, the world's historical heritage and wonderful people, Mali is a country where a war has been going on for ten years with no end in sight. Crisis, conflicts and problems that are not resolved leave long-term and serious political, security, socio-economic and humanitarian consequences, especially when it comes to human rights. Particularly determining factors of instability are corruption, nepotism, abuse of power, internal conflicts, deterioration of the capacity of the national army, while half of the population lives below any level of poverty.

History tells us that Mali used to be one of the richest countries. They produced more than half of the world's gold and salt reserves, and in addition, Mali was the main center where trade routes crossed over the Sahara, between West Africa and the North.

I was assigned to one of the staff officer positions in the military forces of the UN mission MINUSMA. Due to my obligations, I often met with local leaders, women from local communities of different ethnic groups, but also with women and children who lived in camps for displaced persons. I tried to get to know them, understand and help them, because I myself have a war behind me. I had that UN experience, but on the other hand - I used to be like them.

I had many opportunities to meet men who are local leaders, but I didn't have many opportunities to talk to them, my colleagues talked to them most often. That's why I dedicated most of my time to women and children. It was immediately clear that gender equality, as we know it and strive for, does not actually exist. There are few or no public occasions and examples of women and men sharing power or decision-making. Almost 90% of the women I talked to absolutely agree that men dominate decision-making even when it comes to the household, while women are there to take care of them, the household and the children. I needed opportunities, but also time to understand and appreciate them. Finally, it would be disingenuous to say that I understand them, just as they don't understand us, but I can say that I have infinite respect for them.

My apartment was located next to the main paved road, in a building with physical security and video surveillance, and no one but the tenants were allowed to enter. Behind the building hundreds of small African houses were built (reminiscent of our small mudbrick houses) connected by dusty roads and passages. There were always children playing along the main road, all the mothers were in one place selling fruit, while the men stood separately, somewhere on the side. They were always grouped like that on two sides while children ran between them. For a long

time, I was not able to figure out who was the mother of which child, because they all behaved with equal care and attention towards all their children, and they shared everything.

Every day, I bought fruit there, in front of the building, and over time we became closer. My arrival from work, children's screams and hugs, their happiness to open the garage for me to park the car, dance, song and dance marked my every return home. On one occasion, after parking my car, I returned to the front of the building to greet my dear neighbors and children. At one point I heard a loud banging and shouting. I saw that men were dragging and beating someone in front of the garage. I started towards them and towards the entrance, but the women blocked my way. They didn't let me pass, they were explaining something to me. One of the women, Kumba, put her baby in my arms and pointedly motioned for me to sit down. I listened to her. I sat with my back to everything that was happening, and the women and children were around me, we continued talking as if nothing was happening. I was in uniform, and I didn't know what was happening or what to do, but I knew that I should listen to them. After a while, everything calmed down. An older man approached us and showed that everything was fine. Then the security guy and one of the English-speaking neighbors came over. They told me that a thief tried to break into the car and steal my backpack that was on the seat. They apologized for that. The thief tried to sneak into the garage while I went out to say goodbye to the children and women, and at that moment the men, the husbands of those women, with whom I had never exchanged a word until then, seeing what was happening, caught him, beat him and drove him away, and stopped him from stealing from me. I was speechless. I didn't know what to say or how to thank them.

The older man, probably seeing my confusion, tried to explain to me that they had been watching my relationship with their wives and children for months, and that this was their chance to thank me and say that they could always feel safe when I was there, regardless of everything that happens in Bamako, and that they will always find a way to protect me. He pointed to their houses and said that if I am ever in danger, they will protect me because I have become part of their community, and their homes will always be my home.

My dear neighbors did not speak English, and I did not speak the Bambara language, and even to this day I cannot explain to myself how we understood each other - and we talked every day and understood each other.

His words are still big and strong for me today, they were spoken by people whose families live in poverty that we have never seen before, that we don't even know exists. All they hold on to is faith, respect, kindness and honor, and that's how they raise their children as well.

That's why, in order to better convey all this to you, I have to share with you another event that happened maybe two months before this incident with the car, and which I feel most strongly determines all my life's paths.

Eid al-Adha (Kurban Bayram) was approaching. My family, my mother and my children were in Sarajevo. In order not to be alone on the day when we all get together as a family and solemnly, I decided to invite the children who followed me and greeted me in front of the building every day when I was leaving and coming back from work. These are the children who live in dilapidated houses that I see every day from my window, who still play happily in their dusty alleys, and for whom games with cardboard boxes or plastic bottles and old tires from someone's discarded bicycle are the latest and most expensive modern children toy.

I had brought all kinds of sweets that could be found in the UN base, and served it nicely arranged, just like for my Lamija and Harun. The children came, all together, about twenty of them. Girls in beautiful colorful dresses and with braids in their hair, and boys in traditional Eid suits made of African cotton, all with the most beautiful smiles and happy sparkling eyes. They came with the youngest brothers and sisters, so there were, among others, Ina, who was only eight months old at the time and Awa, who was 15 years old and was learning English. The children found comfortable seating and all kinds of sweets were already served. Awa and I went to the kitchen to prepare juices.

We heard a murmur, but not a noise - after all, there are so many children in one living room. They talk, laugh, everything seems great. The children speak in the Bambara language, so I don't understand them - Awa will translate when necessary. We return from the kitchen, and all the children were still sitting in their seats. I looked at the table and saw that everything is intact. I looked at Awa and ask her if everything is okay, and she started laughing. "Yes, yes, they are happy to be here", she said.

"Then why don't they take sweets", I asked. I will remember Awa's answer as long as I live: "Because you didn't tell them they could." At that moment, I thought of my and all my other children and imagined a similar situation. How many things are taken for granted? How much do we just serve to our children? How much do we not pay attention to? How educated are we ourselves? A million questions were buzzing in my head... I know that these wonderful children had never had the opportunity to see chocolates and sweets before, especially not in packages that attract their attention - but discipline and respect prevailed, and what particularly struck me was that they had no hard because of that. It was an Eid with full hearts and pure souls. It is superfluous to write about children's happiness and joy afterwards, but I definitely received a lesson that I will never, ever forget. I still learn from this to this day.

These are just some of my experiences that defined me, not only professionally, but perhaps more privately, intimately, because they gave me the opportunity to get to know life and its meaning through the ordinary people of Mali, to feel how they live and what values they are guided by, and to learn to be a better person when I return to my home.

What I learned is that every path has its own meaning because it provides us with opportunities to learn, to mature - it's up to us whether we will recognize them, whether we will accept them and allow them to shape us into better people.

Finally, I will reflect on the important role played by women in uniform. Integrating gender equality at the strategic, operational and tactical levels of the BiH Armed Forces has a positive effect on all the activities and operations we implement. The process itself begins with the preparation of the competition for admission to military service and continues in all stages of the admission process, then it refers to professional development, professional and specialist education and training, promotion and referral to peacekeeping missions. At the same time, sensibility is being built with the aim of suppressing prejudices, stereotypes and preventing any form of gender discrimination that would result in women being considered less capable and competent, or justifying lower expectations of them and limiting their roles in military activities.

The UN has a lot of "vacant" positions in military missions that are reserved exclusively for female military personnel. Connoisseurs of opportunities in UN missions know that thanks to the military participation of women in UN missions around the world and on their training and readiness, the wide range of opportunities that the UN provides to us, that is, to the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina, depends. As much as it sounds like a platitude, it has been shown on the ground that military forces without a large number of women in their ranks are insufficiently efficient for the implementation of the mission and mandate. There are significant differences in men's and women's approach to military operations, conflicts, problems and solutions. It is therefore crucial that we ensure that these differences, in a military sense, are complemented, especially during preparations, assessments and planning of military operations. The professionalism and training with which female military personnel approach the execution of military tasks, along with the sensitivity they show towards challenges, especially when it comes to analyzes or civil-military cooperation, has proven to be key to the success of the mission.

CONCLUSION

Bosnia-Herzegovina adopted its most recent National Action Plan (NAP) in 2018, for the period 2018-2022. It contextualizes the WPS agenda by providing a detailed overview of the country's domestic legal framework and critically examines the legislative and policy developments to advance women's full participation in public and political life. The NAP also offers a detailed gender equality analysis of women's participation in high-level decision-making positions such as in the security forces and peacekeeping missions. Additionally, the NAP has a section devoted to analyzing human security through the perspective of gender equality, which includes sections on human trafficking, victims of sexual violence and other wartime atrocities, and landmines as well as touching upon natural disasters, migration and violent extremism.⁶⁰

This publication, which is placed within the theoretical framework of the WPS agenda, is based on the narratives of lived experiences reflecting the personal stories of women who struggle with various challenges within our post-conflict society, where they try (and succeed!) to build peace within and around them. Their stories are extremely important - some represent groups that are marginalized, that are not talked about enough, whose struggle has been going on since the day of the conflict or from their very birth, while others, through their actions, have paved the way for new successful generations of young women and people who will enjoy a better life.

Although the focus of the publication is on issues that affect women more, their stories also teach us a lot about the society in which we find ourselves. The publication is therefore particularly focused on the reaction of society - both institutional and wider. Through individual experiences, the following common motives permeate:

- There are many positive examples of quality institutional reaction to certain problems, however, one gets the impression that these experiences are based on interaction with individual professionals, and not as a result of adequate systemic support.
- The fact that many women referred to the appropriate support they received from various civil society organizations and activists dealing with relevant topics is particularly pleasing. Acknowledging that their support was important in the lives of these heroines and that they are a part of their intimate stories is the biggest compliment they can receive for their work.
- Problems of stigma and patriarchal order are still deeply rooted in the BiH

⁶⁰ <http://1325naps.peacewomen.org/index.php/bosnia-and-herzegovina/>

society, and social discrimination against certain groups of women is still at a worrying level. The support of loved ones and family is crucial and present to the greatest extent, but adequate support from the wider social community is lacking.

- It is worrying how dangerous and undesirable it is still not to belong to standardized social patterns - whether in the context of the predominant ethno-nationalist narrative (Štefica, Ajna), but also in other spheres (Aldijana, Delila)...
- The importance of psychosocial support and the importance of peer support is highlighted through various individual examples. During the research itself, there was a dilemma regarding the exposure of these women to secondary victimization in order to recount their traumatic experiences. However, thanks to the fact that there was professional help from the non-governmental sector during their recovery, these women are empowered and have a sincere desire to tell their experiences to the general public, all in the context of helping other people who are in a similar or the same position.
- This is precisely the motive that gives strength to women's association and networking, in order to successfully solve many difficulties faced by women in post-conflict society.

The selected individual stories are also predominantly permeated with other problems that feminism continuously deals with. One of these is the male need for dominance over the female body, and the use of violence as a (still) widely accepted way of dealing with women. Whether as a method of wartime ethnic cleansing or through various forms of family and gender-based violence, violence against women is still deeply rooted in the BiH society, but also throughout the world, and exists in all its forms, including sexual, physical, psychological, verbal and economic violence.

As already mentioned, Bosnia and Herzegovina, in addition to having a solid legislative framework that combats discrimination on any basis, is also a signatory to most international standards that prohibit discrimination, promote gender equality and combat gender-based violence. Despite this, from the testimony of our interviewees, this publication, as well as many other studies that dealt with these topics, draw the conclusion that discrimination and gender-based violence, hate speech and violence against women are still present in all spheres of society.

Nevertheless, it is encouraging to see all the authors of the stories as ambassadors of key changes in BiH society, who with their personal efforts make a strong contribution to building peace and a better society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- In order to solve the problem of violence against women, it is necessary to continue with the pressures to finally have the political will to speed up the implementation process of both domestic laws and international standards on the prohibition of discrimination and the protection of vulnerable categories in society.
- Stigmatization of victims of sexual violence and gender-based violence committed in war is a problem that women face every day and often, instead of support and understanding, they encounter condemnation from society. It is necessary to guarantee affordable and accessible legal assistance to these persons, especially in relation to the filing of reports against perpetrators. It is also necessary to harmonize the legal framework for reparations and status issues on the entire territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- It is necessary to continue the fight against gender stereotypes, which are an important determinant of gender equality and which have a high degree of influence on women's access to rights, power and resources, and in order for these women to adequately fight against these stereotypes and discrimination in a patriarchal society, such as is the case in Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- It is necessary to introduce mandatory ex ante and ex post impact assessments based on gender and human rights in the process of drafting laws and by-laws and use their findings as corrective steps to eliminate direct or indirect discrimination on any basis.
- There is a need for further criminalization of hate speech and incitement to violence, a clearer definition of hate speech as a criminal offense in the legislative framework at all levels of government, and coordinated and stricter punishment of perpetrators throughout the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina
- It is necessary to continue working on raising the awareness of the wider society about the various problems of discrimination that women have encountered. It is necessary to continuously work on ensuring access to their rights, regardless of origin, place they come from or any other social determinant

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Jasna Pekić holds a double master's degree, one in Criminology and one in Human Rights and Democracy, with many years of experience working on issues of gender-based violence and issues of gender and security.

During her twelve-year career, through engagements in the UN, the Danish Refugee Council and other organizations, she had the privilege of working and meeting strong women in uniform, women who survived domestic violence, sexual violence in war, as well as women in movement who experienced gender-based violence in their country of origin, on the way or during their stay in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Their stories are part of this publication.

Significant earlier publications include an article on feminism and criminology in the publication "What Is the Gender of Security?", and published research on the protection of human rights of members of the Armed Forces (Case Study of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro).

Dr. Tajma Kapić

Tajma Kapić is a post doctoral researcher at the School of Law and Government, Dublin City University, Ireland. She is currently engaged in the ARINS project (Analysing & Researching Ireland, North and South) – an authoritative, independent and non-partisan reference point for research and analysis of future constitutional, institutional and political options on the territory of the island of Ireland. Her research investigates the impact of consociational peace agreements on women's descriptive representation in national and sub-national political institutions in divided societies. It focuses on the cases of Bosnia and Herzegovina to determine the gendered outcomes of peace processes and processes of post-conflict reconstruction, the effects of power-sharing agreements in resolving ethno-national conflicts, and their effect on women's rights. Tajma Kapić's research interest originates from her personal experience as a survivor of the Balkans war and her continued concern and efforts to improve the welfare of women in post-conflict areas.

She holds a Master's degree in Development Studies from the University College Dublin, Ireland. The topic of her master's dissertation was a comparative analysis of the integration of Bosnian refugee women in Ireland, Norway and Sweden.

Tajma has over 25 years of experience in development work in Ireland, Norway, the UK, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, and Thailand, including management of international development, emergency humanitarian aid and rehabilitation projects funded by the Irish government and the EU. Tajma has also led a number of international projects aimed at girls and women's empowerment in conflict and post-conflict societies.

She has published several scientific articles, and the latest one was published as part of the ARINS project entitled "The Dayton Peace Agreement in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Lessons for the Design of Political Institutions for a United Ireland". *Irish Studies for International Affairs, Volume 33, Number 2, 2022* (<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/846816>)

About the Project

The project “Women and Peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina” aims to raise awareness of citizens about the need to include women in all phases of peace negotiations and peacebuilding.

The project is based on the recommendations of the research “Dealing with Restlessness and Peacebuilding from the Perspective of a Post-Dayton Woman” and creates an opportunity for the inclusion of young women, middle-aged and elderly women, members of minority and marginalized groups, returnees, women survivors of violence and discrimination, asylum seekers, children born of wartime rape and all persons recognized as agents of positive change in the context of peace building in BiH.

Since the beginning of 2022, the CURE Foundation has been working on mapping, collecting and summarizing the personal stories and portraits of women in order to make them available to the general public through the publication/research “Fearless Heroines of Peace” and digital stories that will be promoted through online platforms.

About the CURE Foundation

The CURE Foundation is a feminist-activist organization that works for gender equality by advocating for positive social change through educational, artistic, cultural and research programs. By organizing affirmative actions, CURE celebrates the strength and power of women, and works to empower people to become initiators of social change in BiH and the world.

Feminist activism has provided a safe space where women are strong, fearless, capable and united in all their diversity.

CURE Foundation is an organization of professionals and volunteers who go out to the streets in sign of public protest against violence, discrimination, violations of laws and fundamental human rights, organize performances against violence, invite artists, scientists, educators, activists and the citizens to action and personal contribution to creating a better and healthier BiH society.