



On the Record: Civil Society in Kosovo - the Crisis Years

Issue 5: Women Under the NATO Bombs, September 14, 1999

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From the AP Editorial Desk by Iain Guest

When NATO bombs began to fall on Belgrade, many could barely contain their jubilation. The feeling was that finally the Serbs were "getting what they deserved." This emerged particularly in emails from the United States. It was also natural to assume that this sense of jubilation would be strongest in Serbia's former partners in Yugoslavia – particularly Bosnia and Croatia – which had themselves suffered from Serbian aggression in the 1990s.

This issue shows a very different picture. It takes the form of material that was published on the Internet by the Autonomous Women's Center Against Sexual Violence, based in Belgrade. The first extract disproves the widely held belief that Serbs had only sympathy for themselves. Indeed, it shows that many active Serbian women identified closely with their Albanian friends in Kosovo, and feared for their safety. The second extract describes in detail some of the services provided for women by the Center's Fear Counseling Team to help Serbian women who were traumatized and shocked by the NATO bombing.

Subsequent sections of this dispatch show examples of solidarity with the Albanians on the part of women's organizations in Croatia and Bosnia.

How Serbian Women Saw Kosovar Women During the War – An Open Letter

Dear friends,

Maybe some of you are asking where are the feminists from Kosovo at this moment. I have just come back from Macedonia where I went to see my friends from Prishtina [Pristina]. Most of them are in Skopje working in refugee camps: organizing, putting together workshops, role-

playing, dancing, traveling....

I saw my dear friend Igballa Rogova and embraced her many times, and this was first time we touched after she was expelled by machine guns from her home, like most of them.... She organized a girls' group in Cegrane, and they have a tent for women only in the biggest camp with 45,000 people.

Her sister Safete from Motrat Qiriazhi has organized with Nexhma, the women's group. Iliriana organizes theater events in different camps. Nazlie Bala from the "Elena" Women's Rights Group works with torture victims in two camps, also working closely with Hague War Crimes Tribunal. Vjosa Dobruna from the Center for the Protection of Health of Women and Children organized a new similar group in Tetovo, near two camps.

Xheri and Aferdita from the Media Project set up the new Radio 21 in Skopje. Vjollca Krasniqi, from the women's studies department in Prishtina, is now in the Gender Department of Open Society and is planning to introduce gender into Prishtina University.

All these feminists have started from zero, and are working under incredible conditions. They are renting flats; speaking Albanian in a low voice on the streets of Skopje; walking an unknown pavement; coping with broken families, sun in the camps, no shade, and dust in their eyes; living with the pain of being expelled by force; suffering the pain of humiliation, individual and collective – all with fantastic energy and hope for future. It was touching to see each other, so much emotion, with a tear around our eyes, watching each other faces.

As for Sevdie Ahmeti, she bravely remained in Prishtina and is alive and well. Her son is in Skopje and hears from her every day. Marta Perkapai, a feminist from Prizren (a town in Kosovo), is in Albania working with women, Nora Ahmeti as well.

Shuki Gashi is also in Tirana, and she phoned today and told us that she was trying last month every day to get a telephone connection with Belgrade. She finally succeeded today, and we were so happy and screaming to hear her, and she said, "Yes, I knew who are my friends. In war friendship becomes so precious and deep."

Serbian Women Fight Fear

After the first night of bombing, 24th of March, the law of war was ordered. Fear became a fact of life overnight and the activists of the Women's Center decided to start calling women over the phone to ask them how are they, to give them space for overcoming fear.

For six years, the work of the Autonomous Women's Center has been based on the ethical principle that service is given to women when they ask for it – whenever they call or come to the Center. Fear in wartime has moved the borders of private and public and therefore we transgressed this principle of work: every woman became a possible client, at least for a moment. Connecting with each other – calling on the phone, asking women how they feel – became legitimate activities of the Autonomous Women's Center. Once again, women's solidarity inspired many women. That is how we started the active telephone support for women to help

them overcome fear.

Telephone Counseling

The telephone counseling is based on the feminist principles of psychological counseling, as well as on the experiences in working with women in fear in the war in Bosnia – from the therapists in the Women's Therapy Center of Medica Zenica in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The Fear Counseling Team decided to actively call women for different reasons. First, because in a war situation women are less mobile and do not leave their homes often. Second, they feel their homes are the only safe place, most of the time, also, the telephone bill is paid by the Women's Center, which is a very important factor in time of war when poverty is increasing and women cannot relax to talk about themselves if they know they cannot pay the bill.

Documenting Fear

The Autonomous Women's Center Against Sexual Violence, from its founding in 1993, espouses anti-war and anti-militarist policies, multi-nationalism, and solidarity with women on the other side of the front line. In the present situation, the Women's Center is documenting the feelings of women who are in fear of NATO bombing and the entire war situation, as well as the feelings of women in Prishtina and other parts from Kosovo that are going through particular processes of fear, terror and pain.

In the first 25 working days, five counselors held 378 telephone-counseling sessions with women from 34 towns in Yugoslavia. Statistics of the Women's Center show that 232 counseling phone sessions were done with women in Belgrade, and others with women in other towns including Vojvodina, the Sandzak, Montenegro and Kosovo: 87% of the calls were initiated in the Center.

The Women's Center is documenting all forms in which fear is manifested – in the body, in dreams, in behavior, and in thoughts. From the statements received, it is easy to conclude that the life of every women has changed, that their emotional states are changing very often during the day, that the most dominant emotions are desperation and anxiety as well as the inclination to survive and adapt to the limited conditions of life.

Some examples of women's statements follow:

"I am in a horrible fear." "I fear the night." "I am afraid to go out further than the grocery shop." "I don't go out." "I sleep in the house of my friend." "I cannot concentrate." "I am sensitive to all the sounds." "I have fear of mobilization for my brother." "when sirens starts I feel nauseated."

"I have lost 4 kilos, I broke down psychologically" "Every night I go to the shelter, I feel bad." "When I see soldiers on the street I shudder." "I feel I dropped out from the tracks, everything changed in my life." "I am worried for my future." "I am constantly on sleeping pills." "I sleep all dressed up." "Children in the shelter are very disturbed."

"At my work place men started to drink intensively." "I am nervous." "I am not afraid of death, but I am afraid of sudden sounds." "It is killing me that I cannot work at anything any more."
"My emotional state is changing every hour."

"I threw out the TV set, I cannot listen to that language anymore." "Neighbors are talking apocalyptic gossip all the time." "I am nervous, I go from the shelter to the flat three times in one night." "I feel like leaving this country forever, it is so nauseating." "New fears are coming."

Survival Mechanisms

An active role of the Fear Counseling Team is to support mechanisms of survival for women and their positive experiences. Supporting healthy behavior, feelings and thoughts is the main form of the active support of women.

"I am feeling good, I have gone through one war already, I know the rules" "I am concentrated and rational I have enough information" "I feel good, I am supporting other women" "I am cleaning the house all day" "I am walking up and down the town all day" "I spend hours on e-mail" "I have planted many plants" "I am taking my children to the hills" "We are hugging all day" "I am taking sleeping pills, and it works for me."

Keeping in Contact with Kosovo

The Fear Counseling Team called women and activists in Prishtina and around Kosovo actively for the first two weeks after the beginning of the NATO bombing. The women of Serbian nationality have stated their fears of bombing; the women of Albanian nationality (apart from fears of bombing) had much stronger fears of Serbian officials, army and police ("of green, blue, and masked men").

After the first two weeks, many women of Albanian nationality were forced to leave their homes by soldiers who had machine guns and spoke Serbian. After that, with their families they were forced to go to the buses or trains that took them close to the Macedonian border. From Macedonia some of them have called us to tell us that they are alive and healthy and from some of them we heard parts of the humiliation and terror they had to go through in the meantime.

"I am terrorized." "A strange silence is horrifying me." "We are sitting in the dark every night, I cannot sleep nor eat, but I have coffee and cigarettes." "we don't get out of homes at all, not even during the day." "I don't know what to tell you nor what to think, I am still alive."

Expressing Feelings

In the first month the Women's center organized four workshops with the title "How do we feel." The exchange of negative and positive experience have been of paramount importance for participants to feel they are not alone in their fears and to be supported for their positive feelings.

The Fear Counseling Team consisted of: Biljana Maletin, Bobana Macanovic, Bosiljka Janjusevic, Lepa Mladjenovic, and Sandra Tvtic. Autonomous Women's Center Against Sexual

Violence, Tirsova 5a Belgrade; tel/fax: 381-11-687-190

Croatia

From the editorial desk:

B.a.B.e. is a well-known Croatian women's group. Its full title is "Be active, Be emancipated." Its work includes forwarding emails from feminist activists throughout the Balkans, sharing information on the situation of women refugees, and providing links to resources such training material in several Balkan languages on dealing with war trauma. B.a.B.e. has also issued its own appeals for the end of violence in the region. Below is a copy of one sent out at the beginning of the NATO bombing.

B.a.B.e. – Be active, Be emancipated – Women's Human Rights Group accuses and condemns any military performance, like NATO's, although we hope that the destruction of Milosevic's war industry will prevent further war actions.

We point out that during last nine years, women's and peace groups expressed an impressive level of civil courage through opposing the ruling nationalistic and militarist ideology. We are proud that we have cooperated with numerous women's groups in Yugoslavia, such as Women in Black, who have been protesting, every Wednesday over the last 7 years, against war and hatred towards other nationalities: Albanians, Bosnians, Croatians.

We also remember our cooperation with the women's group Motrat Qiriazi from Prishtina, whose activists were educating rural Albanian women. They have spread ideas of peace and nonviolence.

We know that victories and successes of every nation are shown on warrior/diplomat male faces, since sufferings and defeats are visible on female bodies and souls. Therefore we are supporting those women's groups, knowing they will work out their mission of spreading tolerance and international understanding, despite extremely difficult conditions.

B.a.B.e. (Be active, Be emancipated) Women's Human Rights Group, Prilaz Gjуре Dezelica 26/II, 10 000 Zagreb, Croatia; Tel/Fax: +385-1-4846-176; Tel: +385-1-4846-180

Albania – New Women's Therapy Centers

From the editorial desk:

Medica Zenica, the respected Bosnian women's health organization, has partnered with Kosovar women to set up Medica Kosova. Cynthia Cockburn writes:

"The women of Medica, a women's therapy center in Bosnia-Herzegovina, are well known to me from five years of collaboration. I think everyone who knows them has great respect for them. They are themselves overwhelmed with new arrivals of Kosovar refugees in central Bosnia. In spite of that, they are employing their caring approach to war-traumatized women in support of

Kosovar refugees in Albania. I am attaching an emergency appeal for financial support for their excellent, practical, appropriate, gender-sensitive project

"Medica's principles: women who have been sexually abused need care in the first instance from women; they must be respected and their stories believed; medical treatment should always be accompanied by social care; and self-healing is possible with the help of skilled and appropriate therapy.

"Medica Kosova is a partnership between Medica Zenica and Albanian and Kosovar women's organizations. These women speak the language and share the culture of the women they wish to help."

Medica, Mokusnica 10, Zenica, Bosnia-Herzegovina; tel/fax: 387-72-30-311. Email forwarded from Cynthia Cockburn: Tel: +44 -71-482-5670