



Mothering Children or Soldiers: Advancing Paradigms of the Women's Movement in Former Yugoslavia

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The transition of political power in former Yugoslavia and the wars that followed have led to the country's reassessment of the proper role of women in society, culture, nation, and family. Advocates of a new vision of nationalist womanhood assert that the continued existence of the entire country depends solely on women carrying out their reproductive and nurturing roles. This new envisioning clearly serves a political purpose, solely at the expense of the women's movement that has made significant strides in this nation. It is the purpose of this article to provide a brief historical overview of the development of the new idealized "mother of the nation" from a strengths-based social work perspective.

1 Background

The rise of state-sponsored nationalism in the former Yugoslavia and the wars that followed have been brought about a reassessment and re-envisioning of the suitable role of women in the family, culture, and the nation. Emerging from this ideal working woman, she has become the equally the ideal 'mother of the nation'. Advocates of this new enlightened vision of nationalist womanhood assert that the nation's continued existence depends on the women carrying out their reproductive, procreative, and nurturing roles; yet it is clear that this new emphasis on motherhood also serves particular political interests in other ways, particularly as a means of declaration and of consolidating power (Walsh 2002).

There are a number of reasons for this public rhetoric. The hearth, the woman, and the mother are enduring symbols of the nation. Serbs and Croats, in particular, have each depicted their own nation as mother, nurturing her children, threatened with rape by predatory aggressors, calling on her sons to defend and avenge her (Bracewell 1995). This sort of language has a political purpose, it legitimates and domesticates the rather abstract idea of national community by presenting it as part of the 'natural order' of gender and kinship relations, even though these relations, like those of nationhood, are not in fact biologically determined, being neither uniform or static (Allcock 1992). Linking the sentiments associated with the family to the nation taps into our most intimate emotions (love, duty, honor, and respect) to condition our response to the demands of nationalism. Pleas to fight and die for "Mother Serbia" rely on such passion for their power. This type of language rests on long-lived preconceptions about women and the family - even if actual social conditions may be somewhat different; but in turn, such imagery can also reinforce assumptions about suitable and proper gender roles. Consequently, the image of the nation as virtuous mother not only prompts us to love the nation, it also reinforces the view that motherhood is both women's primary role and her patriotic duty (Duki 1993).

Such a re-characterization of women as mothers of the nation has been given added impetus by specific circumstances, especially the post-communist political process in the former Yugoslavia (Bracewell 1995). Throughout Eastern Europe, the disintegration of communist rule has been accompanied by an aversion to government policies associated with socialist

ideology, including the ideals of gender equality and feminism in general. Conventional and traditionalist ideologues have further contended that socialist policies towards women (especially the rights to work, to abortion, and to divorce) actively damaged the family, thereby endangering the nation. From this perspective, women are depicted as the guardians of moral and national values (seen as based in family life), and the neglect of their proper role is diagnosed as one of the causes of national decline under socialism.

Calls for the national rebirth have taken on a very literal meaning throughout the former Yugoslavia. Concerns over low fertility rates, and fears of losing a demographic race with rival nations, have been used to fan nationalist sentiment, and slogans to the effect that 'there are more graves than cradles' have become commonplace in discussions of demographic trends, as has the emotive term 'the white plague', referring to low birth rates (Wegnerzi 2003). The tendency to blame women for the state of affairs, and to make them responsible for ensuring the nation's biological survival, has further enforced the nationalist emphasis on women's reproductive functions at the expense of their other roles. The irony of making such arguments while at the same time promoting warfare in the name of the nation is obvious. Proposed solutions to low birth-rates usually focus on restricting women's reproductive choice, arguing that national interest takes precedence over individual rights. In 1991, the platform of the Democratic Opposition of Slovenia (DEMOS) coalition in Slovenia explicitly stated that "women should not have the right to abort future defenders of the nation" (Select, 1993). The underlying sentiment here is that abortion is wrong, solely because it deprives the nation of future soldiers, who in later years, will go into way and possibly lose their life at that time. Pro-life measures have been pursued most vigorously in the regions of Croatia and Slovenia where the Catholic tradition is strongest. Orthodox nationalists have also taken a similar approach. Even clerics, by discussing abortion in the framework of national birth-rates and survival, seem to treat the individual moral issue as secondary to the importance of national interests.

War has heightened fears of national extinction, and has strengthened impressions that women must carry out their maternal duties if the nation is to survive. There have been redoubled calls for increased birth-rates as a way of resisting the nation's enemies, from the first news of armed clashes on the Slovenian borders in 1991, which prompted the widely-quoted demand that "for every Serbian soldier dead in battle in Slovenia, Serbian mothers must bear 100 more fighters" (Salzman 1994). The war had changed the character of a woman's patriotic duty, from bearing babies to bearing soldiers. Spokespersons of all the nations at war have urged women to do their part for the war effort by giving birth. Nevertheless, war has made nationalist motherhood into more than that. Women are not only expected to sacrifice their own interests to the national good, but they must also sacrifice their children. Among the Serbs, the image that has been evoked is that of the Mother of the Jugovici, the epic heroine whose nine sons died fighting the Turks at Kosovo, who did not weep over her dead, but whose heart burst when the hand of her youngest son was dropped in her lap by ravens. This comparison has been used to glorify Serbian hero-mothers, depicted as willingly sacrificing their sons for a just struggle. The very act of bearing a child can be imagined as an act of war, comparable to taking up arms - an idea summed up by a Sarajevo woman quoted as saying, "I plan to fire off one baby every year to spite the aggressors" (Salzman 1998). Some women have gone farther, joining the troops to fight themselves, but the way that isolated examples are treated by the nationalist media - as exceptional heroines who have been forced into a man's role - only proves the rule that women's main importance in the current versions of post Yugoslav nationalism lies in the reproductive potential (Salzman 1998)..

Nationalist rhetoric views women primarily as mothers or potential mothers and not as individual, productive members of society (Bracewell 1995). This limits women's rights to self-determination and full citizenship. It also puts women under an immense burden, for by bearing children and soldiers; they have it in their power to save the nation. If they reject this role, they are at best failures, unnatural, and selfish; at worst traitors, hangovers from socialism or worse. In fact, the assumptions that underlie this redefinition of women's roles are not so different for those of socialism, in that both systems subordinate individual interests to those of the collective. Fulfillment, in both systems (and for both men and women) is supposed to come not from following one's own desires, but through selfless service to a higher ideal, whether that is the advancement of socialism or the nation. The difference for women is that national interest now appears to demand a return to the "natural order" of patriarchal gender roles and motherhood (Bracewell 1995).

It is fair to ask, however, whether regenerating the family, increasing the birth-rate, or saving the nation, the ostensible goal of the redefinition of women's roles, is indeed the main purpose behind such arguments. It is not obvious, for example, that restricting abortion would raise birth rates (it certainly won't provide more soldiers). A practical concentration on raising birth rates alone, while ignoring the actual social and economic circumstances that shape family life, raises the question of whether such policies are primarily aimed at ensuring the nation's "biological survival". Nationalist policies directed at women also serve other political purposes. By reasserting the rights of the nation over "their" women, nationalist politicians throughout former Yugoslavia can demonstrate their anti-Communist, nationalist credentials at little expense to themselves (particularly useful for those with communist pasts). At the same time, they can make political currency out of number of emotional issues: the sense of belonging associated with the family; the survival of the nation, the security of motherhood; perhaps even a fear of emancipated women. Sending women back to the home answers economic needs as well, by getting rid of surplus labor and shifting the costs of welfare provision back to the family. Though women are vitally affected by such arguments, it often seems that their primary significance lies elsewhere; that nationalist debate about the role of women and mothers is a ritual carried out in the political sphere largely by men (Bracewell 1995).

2 Regression through Progression

One of the more persistent challenges to nationalist chauvinism in the former Yugoslavia has come from the women's movement there. While by themselves incapable of preventing some of the worst excesses of the war, organized women in the region have nonetheless mounted a relentless attack on the logic of militant nationalism. Consequently, they have often found themselves the targets of official and unofficial abuse.

Feminism has a long tradition in Yugoslavia (Ramet 1998). Under socialism, Yugoslavia was at the forefront of feminist thought and practice in Europe. In part, this vanguard position derived from the critical role women played in defeating the Fascists in the Second World War. Women, especially in the countryside, were vital for logistical and material support, cared for the wounded, and even engaged in combat. The communists recognized that in order to mobilize women it was important to educate them about the possibility of new freedoms and rights. With the end of the war, the communists then set about destroying the traditional cultural and social models that disadvantaged women. They thus introduced liberal policies with respect to women's education, marriage and divorce, abortion, and occupational training. Yet in time, the authorities grew concerned about the challenge organized women might pose to the party leadership - a foreshadowing of the present period. By the 1950s, after all, women

were making decisions in a democratic fashion; they were displaying considerable initiative and proved to be frighteningly efficient in the conduct of their own affairs.

The communists therefore sought both to weaken and to co-opt the women's movement. They abolished the leading organization, the Anti-Fascist Women's Front (AFZ), while they extended additional rights to women, including the right to vote, equality, social security, generous maternity leave, and positive discrimination (Slapsak 2005).

At the same time patriarchal politics was gaining ground, and women came to be seen increasingly (particularly in the media) in sexual terms, much like in the West. In place of the uniformed and unadorned woman of the postwar period, the woman of the new generation was sexy. Not coincidentally, in the 1960s there was a boom in soft-porn magazines.

One special aspect of feminism in Yugoslavia has been its relationship with the dissident movement. Rebellious students in the 1960s were more interested in revising Marxism than they were in feminism, which they regarded as "unserious". It was the older generation of dissident professors who maintained an interest in feminism. But paradoxically, as dissidence in the 1980s became associated with nationalism, many feminists sought to distance themselves from this fraternal tendency.

By the late 1980s, nationalists were learning to manipulate women's issues to their advantage. On the eve of the war in 1987-89, for instance, they began to circulate stories about Albanian men raping Serbian women in Kosovo. The majority of these stories were never confirmed and the stories never made much sense anyway. Albanian men, for instance, were reputed to prefer old women, nuns, and children as their victims. Meanwhile the number of Serb-Serb rapes grew but, of course, this trend was ignored by the media.

In a single blow, the June 1991 war in Slovenia not only destroyed the alternative and anti-war culture there; it was also damaging to feminists and the women's movement. It became very difficult, if not impossible, to counter the right-wing and racist xenophobia that emerged in reaction to the Serb-led attack on Slovenia. Everything was directed towards patriotism and national unity.

In Croatia, where the media was more tightly controlled, feminist solidarity was seen as a threat to nationalist patriotism. A number of well-known non-conforming women writers were singled out as "witches" by the media (among them Dubravka Ugresic, Rada Ivekovic and Slavenka Drakulic). Details of their private lives were publicized (for instance, their spouses and parents' ethnic origins) and their phone numbers were made available so that anyone could attack them (Tax 1993). Meanwhile there has been a steady erosion of women's rights.

In Bosnia, pacifism and feminism, too, has been forced to yield to the exigencies of national-if not nationalist-service. The pressures of identity politics-internally and externally generated have revived support for traditional Muslim attitudes and practices towards women. Yet several women's organizations are active in Sarajevo which reject this model.

It was in Slovenia where women were the first to break the self-imposed silence of the peace movement and to take a stance against the war. "Women in Black," in many Slovenian towns, and "Silence Kills, Let's Speak for Peace," in Ljubljana, began to mount various anti-war activities, including the lighting of candles every evening in one of the main squares of Ljubljana to commemorate the dead.

The war has caused a real explosion of feminism in Serbia. Refusing to sever their ties with women from the other former republics-in defiance of the nationalists-Serbian feminists have been prominent members of the beleaguered anti-war campaign. They have encouraged resistance to the war by taking young men into hiding who reject the aims and motivations of the military planners. They have also entered into Parliament in a very visible fashion,

seeking to curb the domestic effects of increased militarism by proposing, for instance, the criminalization of domestic violence (Thompson 1992).

As in the 1950s, the Serbian leadership is sensitive to the subversive potential of an organized women's movement. President Slobodan Milosevic felt the need, to mobilize women in support of his policies. Thus, he has introduced his wife, Marjana Markovic vociferous anti-feminist-into the public discourse. The Western media, at least, was taken in by this ploy, sometimes portraying Markovic as "the Balkans' Hillary". Serbian feminists enjoy at least one relative advantage: Milosevic did not curb all opposition political and media activities, which would force him to abandon any pretence of democracy. The independent radio station B92 is now financing feminist magazines, including *ProFemina*, publishing books, and making films.

The main enemy of feminism-as well as a number of other civic values in post-Yugoslavia are the nationalist state ideologies. The situation in the former republics parallels one another to an astonishing degree. Meanwhile the churches are only exacerbating this condition by their efforts to return society to traditional values. Church and state alike have sought to restrict and even eliminate abortion rights, maintaining that the future of the nation requires women to play their part as procreators and to give birth, especially to sons - that is, warriors to be. The Islamic clergy has joined in, propagating these views among refugee women in particular, and often with considerable success.

The last 14 years have witnessed only one exception to the complete absence of women in negotiating positions. There are no women whatsoever in military command structures, nor is there a significant inclusion of them in the numerous international mediation and negotiation teams within the region. The decision-making process concerning war and peace, cease-fires, territories and borders is evidently "not" a woman's issue.

However, women can be found in great numbers within the humanitarian organizations and NGOs which provide care for the physical and psychosocial well-being of refugees, invalids, children and women. Women are not only in a huge majority in the peace movements, they are also tireless human rights activists. But the percentage of men involved in such organizations is approximately the same as the proportion of women in government. Women are, it seems, responsible for the piecing together the remnants of those lives stricken by war.

Women's fear is exile. According to the on-line web resource directory of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 51% of (about 6.1 million) refugees are women (UNHCR 2001). Women seem to be involved in desperate attempts to maintain an image of normalcy in the towns under the siege, during long-term or occasional shelling. They are often concentrated in the work sectors that cater to unemployed people in the parts of the region not directly stricken by war. Women are some of the biggest victims of this war; yet they are excluded from the day-to-day decision-making processes of war or peace.

Violence committed against women in war is no more than a continuance of the violence inflicted upon them in peacetime. The difference is in intensity and quantity. Violence can take many forms: physical and psychological, individual and structural, sporadic and systematic. Though the levels of intensity might vary, the consequences are not necessarily proportional to these levels; it can be in one blow or in many. Sometimes violence is inflicted against individuals, sometimes against a part or the whole of the community of women. Most frequently, the violence is systematic, with severe long-term repercussions. Both mind and body become the battlefield on which power and strength are exercised. Women who are on the side of the opposing nation are rarely recognized as individuals; instead, they are viewed primarily as Albanian, Croat, Muslim, or Serb. All other characteristics (such as individuality, life experience, and age) are superseded by the family name, which becomes the definer of ethnicity. Violence against women becomes a perverted "logic" and is "expected". The very

structure of war imposes violence on all levels of relationships and legitimizes aggression taken out on the weakest community members, mainly women and children.

Sensationalized stories of rape, murder, and interpersonal violence began to appear more frequently in the media around the world after 1990. At the end of 1992 and the beginning of 1993, Bosnia was the ideal producer of sensationalized stories for the blood-thirsty media. After sensationalizing the sufferings of men held in the concentration camps and mutilated children, women were next in line. Sexual abuses against women were used to manipulate Western populations according to the needs of daily politics, spread war propaganda, to justify ethnic hatred and to raise readership and viewing ratings. So women came to be abused again (Hughes, Mladjenovic and Mrsevic 1995).

3 The Global Response

The women's movement reacted globally. Women from all parts of the globe showed their solidarity, gathering aid, sending money, lobbying governments to set up of an international war crimes tribunal and change international conventions. They are calling for a sensitive witness protection program that includes attention to the physical and psychological well-being of these women. This very necessary response shows a little light in an otherwise dark situation.

But when one speaks about war violence against women, non-sexual violence is usually forgotten. Loss of social connections, the difficulties of fulfilling the most basic needs of safety, shelter, and food whilst caring for children and the elderly can also be devastating. The woman whose husband does not permit her to use a kitchen knife because it reminds him of the torture he suffered is also a victim of violence. Guilty feelings because she left her village on the front line while others remain are after effects of victimization. Deceased and missing family members; members mobilized in different armies; loss of property, the impossibility of control over one's life; restrictions on movement due to numerous administrative obstacles as countries try to protect themselves from new refugee influxes subsequent loss of self esteem and self-confidence - these are also experiences of violence, Living in persistent uncertainty, without an imaginable future or vision, is not visible and sensational violence, but it is still all-embracing and devastating.

In tandem with the war, there has been a significant escalation of violence within families. Like rape, domestic violence is also underreported. The war puts a huge burden on state budgets. Those budget lines affecting women, such as health care and organized childcare, are the first to be cut. The lack of electricity, drinking water, and fuel hits women harder, because it aggravates and prolongs the time required for duties performed by women in the traditional, petrified patriarchal structure that prevails. Women are losing the time that once might have been there for themselves, and they are simply exhausted.

4 Sexual Assault

Not only has interpersonal violence increased sexual assaults on women and children have also increased. The number of women raped during the war is uncertain, with estimates or reported rates ranging from 25,000 to 50,000 (Stiglmayer 1994; Medica Zenica 1999). Data on specific numbers of raped women are incomplete, so the reports can only be based on estimates, rather than on exact numbers. Some testimonies however suggest that there are at least 10,000 additional undocumented cases of rapes. Most of the women who were raped or sexually assaulted during the war are understandably reluctant to speak out about their ordeals. Another problem in determining exact numbers is the irregular methodology of data collection: the number of rapes is never the same as the number of raped persons. Most of the

testimonies show that the victims were repeatedly raped by several persons over a period of time.

The war is empowering all those patriarchal structures that either can be suppressed or are less active in peacetime. Crowned with glory and bathed in blood, warriors influence the climate of our whole society, which has become increasingly militarized, increasingly aggressive, and increasingly violent in character. Media representations of women are falling back to the traditional images of woman as mother; woman as primary caretaker; woman as fulfiller of the needs of others at the expense of her own. Once again, we are being repressed by a strong tendency to reduce women's rights in areas such as reproductive health. Opportunities to choose one's own life-style are narrowing extensively due to the pressures of the community.

5 Conclusion

Although it is still too early to assess the long term impacts of the postconflict matriarchal ideal evolution, it is clear that women in former Yugoslavia are giving up the role of victim and becoming not just survivors but also restorers of life, both to themselves and to the nation. While the nationalist government may stress the importance of childbearing for the sake of the country, mothers know better. They understand the importance of mothering for the sake of mothering. They continue to normalize life as best they can. They are living *with* the war and in spite of it. They are restoring their homes and mediating conflicts inside families and communities. They are the first to restore severed connections between different ethnic communities. Now the only questions remaining are how long can women endure this post war devastation and where we can find a solution to this conflict. The solution, will be two fold: from within the government and from within themselves. Women though are understanding the importance of self-preservation, advancing the women's movement, and caring for hearth and home, *for the sake of hearth and home*. The women's movement will continue to strengthen, which in turn, will directly strengthen the nation.

The purpose of this report was not to provide any type of critical analysis of the postconflict environment in former Yugoslavia but to advance the knowledge of the reader regarding the advances that the women's movement has made. The pressure of maintaining and continuing the existence of a country has assisted the women's movement toward the realization that it is the mothers and future mothers who possess an immense amount of control within the country. For without them there are no sons to fight in the wars and to daughters to maintain the economic workforce of the country during both war and peace times. Yes, the means to the same end are viewed differently from the gender perspectives, but ultimately it is the perspective of the women and her actions as a result of those views that will strengthen the nation, therefore continuing it's existence.

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