2011 | feminist research and activism on violence against women: linking the local and the global

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introduction

Since the very beginning, in the 1980s, my research and advocacy were inspired by Western feminist theory and the battered women's movement. During the 1990s, the dictatorship of Milosevic and war in the former Yugoslavia isolated Serbia, but feminist links did not cease to exist. New realities brought survival problems to all of us living in Serbia, but there was also a new challenge for feminist activism and research. Difficult times brought me to another phase in my research development, when I introduced feminist methodology into my own research. War rape, refugees, the impact of war on domestic violence, abused women who kill, and the suffering of imprisoned women during economic sanctions, were topics on which I found it important to do both research and activist work, and where feminist method seemed the only suitable way of doing it.

In this paper, I will present my experiences of doing research on violence against women, which at the same time produced changes – within myself, as well as within other women and at times across an entire society – and discuss how helpful global feminist dialogue and networks were in producing changes locally.

doing research on violence against women: continuity and transformations

I conducted my first research on violence against women for my PhD in the mid-1980s. Interestingly enough, feminist debate about various women's issues had already been started in Serbia (Vušković and Trivunac, 1998: 47). Serbia used to be an open country and many Western feminists used to come during the 1970s and 1980s to participate in panels organized by local feminists.

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I used to work as a researcher in the Institute for Criminological and Sociological Research where I had decent access to worldwide books and journals. Although most of them were from mainstream criminology, I had quite enough resources to draft my own research and develop a vision for the changes of legislation and support structures for abused women, such as shelters and SOS hotlines. My own research was welcomed by a local feminist network[1], which supported public promotion of my book *Women as crime victims* (1989), resulting from my PhD research, and subsequent advocacy for legal changes. As early as 1990, the first hotlines for battered women and children had been opened. This was the beginning of a long battle for change for Serbian feminists, and I am proud of having had a central place in it.

1 This included both Serbian and Croatian feminists.

In the 1990s, my broader interest in women as victims of crime became much more focused on domestic violence and women's crime. In 1991 and at the beginning of 1992, when ethnic conflicts in the former Yugoslavia were about to start, I completed the first Serbian (pilot) prevalence survey on spousal abuse, as well as a survey on women's crime. For the first time in Serbia, the focus of research on women's crime was on the impact of patriarchy and violence against women. It is worth mentioning at this stage that most of my research at that time was quantitative, based on structured questionnaires and secondary data such as court files.

The beginning of the 1990s was marked by feelings of despair and helplessness. These feelings came with the collapse of the country, which I felt was my own, and with unsuccessful attempts to prevent the Serbian authorities' involvement in ethnic conflicts and crimes against civilians in Croatia and Bosnia. In 1992, both social and personal misery came together. This year saw ethnic conflicts, a large number of refugees coming into Serbia, solders in uniforms and with weapons parading the Serbian streets, not only Muslim, but also Croatian and Serbian women raped in war and abused at home, and the UN introducing economic sanctions on Serbia, because of its role in ethnic conflicts. Economic sanctions meant isolation, lack of essential goods and rising trade in 'black markets', etc.. In my personal life, it also meant that my salary became worthless and that my colleagues and I were sent home, while our offices were rented to a smuggling business. Our research institute and some of my colleagues never recovered from that time. I stopped doing research for some time: the overall social drama was accompanied by a personal one, the tragic end of my pregnancy. My second child was born and died after a week. In the fall of 1992, I found myself in deep depression, for first time in my life.

Interestingly enough, and significantly for the topic of my paper, my recovery and return to research and activism occurred largely thanks to the local, and later, international, feminist network. An invitation, which came from a Belgrade feminist network, to join the group that was dedicated to developing support for women raped in war, and my subsequent combination of research, activism and

alternative women's studies teaching, were decisive not only for my recovery, but, I am sure, for the overall later direction of my professional and personal life.[2]

Thus, together with (post)conflict-related activities and humanitarian work, I started to learn about violence against women from another perspective. Obviously, in direct contact with women prisoners, raped women and refugees, and with the support of both local and global feminist networks, I experienced both continuity and transformation of my research interest/experience.

Continuity was obvious in my interest in violence against women, but also in the main patterns of violence against women itself, in war and in the so-called peace.[3] Moreover, one of the very important aspects of continuity was to continue with research work in spite of social turmoil, isolation and lack of funding and other resources.

Transformation is in the first place connected to the shift in my research focus to war-related violence and victimization, and, even more so, to a methodological shift from more or less traditional methods to feminist methods. This shift was also indirectly influenced by links with both local and, in spite of the isolation, Western feminists and academics. At the beginning of 1993, I, like other feminists in Serbia, felt entrapped by both Serbian authorities and the international community. We found ourselves stuck between a strong desire to continue our lives and activism for change, and feelings of helplessness, isolation and guilt. Looking from today's perspective, I think that I never had such a strong wish to network and communicate with people outside of Serbia than at that time. I never felt such a strong dependence of my mental health on my professional and activist work, and particularly on this dimension of it, which included supporting and empowering others.[4] This was not unusual since at that time feminist activism in Serbia also had an additional psycho-therapeutic dimension since many women tried to heal themselves from the feeling of powerlessness, that is, to escape from their own desperate reality, by helping other women (Nikolić-Ristanović, 2002: 141). Thus, it is not surprising that my professional and activist work, as well as my local and global networking, all came together in this difficult time.[5]

transformation number 1: women in prison

The small survey that I did in a Serbian women's prison in 1993 was a milestone not only in my research work, but also in Serbian criminological research on women in general. This is actually the first study in which the main elements of feminist methodology were applied in Serbian criminology research. This is also an example of the *ad hoc* transformation of conventional research approaches to feminist methods. The survey was intended to collect data on prison conditions through interviews with prison staff, questionnaires completed by the inmates themselves and direct observation. I prepared the structured questionnaire

2 My example is not unique. As Blagojević noted, it was quite common that women who went through difficulties in their private life joined women's groups, and that their activism had a therapeutic effect (Blagojević, 1998: 22).

3 As one battered woman said: 'The war is nothing new for me, I have been living in war for years' (Nikolić-Ristanović, 1996: 204).

4 Of course at that time, I was not aware of this impact on myself. On the contrary, I felt powerless and wished to do something for so many of those suffering around me.

5 This is in accordance with research on women's motivation for joining women's groups in Serbia during the war, which shows that during the 1990s three main motives for joining women's groups were: the need to understand and change social reality, their own victimization/ negative experience and the wish to

intending to ask inmates to complete it on their own. Thanks to the prison staff, I was allowed to stay alone with 52 inmates. Most of them were either illiterate (19.6 per cent) or had partly completed or completed primary school education (52.9 per cent). In addition, most of them were housewives and workers (77 per cent), that is, from the lower class. The majority were between 25 and 45 years of age (64.7 per cent), with those between 32 and 40 years making up the largest group. All inmates, except for one Roma woman, were Serbs (Nikolić-Ristanović, 1995).

oppose the war and alleviate its consequences, that is, to help others (Blagojević, 1998: 21).

Staying alone with the inmates proved favourable, as they felt they could communicate freely with me; and to be honest, this is quite unusual in Serbian prisons and as such was quite surprising. After I distributed the questionnaires, some women started to complain asking why they need to complete it, while some of them were illiterate and needed my help. This is actually how I got involved in explaining my research to them in greater detail. I explained how I felt they, as well as other women in similar situations, could benefit from it. Once we had established communication, some said that they would like to add something on the back of the questionnaire, which was an indication for me that the answers offered were too narrow for them to express their experiences, as well as that they needed someone to hear something else they had to say and to be supportive to them. They also started to ask me for information, such as how to re-establish communications with their children, how to get medication and supplies of basic toiletries, etc.. Suddenly, I became aware of the fact that the women in prison were affected by the economic sanctions and overall economic crises much more severely than the rest of the society. Their canteen, the only place they could buy things, was empty; they did not have chance to go to the black market to buy scarce goods; and the toiletries, food and medications they were offered by the prison staff were far from satisfying their needs. Moreover, their relatives stopped visiting and sending them packages since they could no longer afford it.

Thus, my questionnaire was transformed into a mere starting point for a spontaneous and unstructured discussion (and some writing) about the problems women were faced with and the needs they had. I realized that it was essential for me to give them the opportunity to say what they considered important, in addition to answering my questions, as well as for me to answer their questions and try to find the information they needed. In this way, women's experiences came to occupy a central place in my research material, which enabled me to get much more reliable and detailed insights into the impact of war and economic sanctions on women in prison compared with the accounts I got from the prison staff. As Harding argued, 'the adoption of this standpoint is fundamentally a moral and political act of commitment to understanding the world from the perspective of the socially subjugated', and thus this expression of subjugation is to replace the dominant account (Harding, quoted by Smart, 1990: 81). In

addition, although I managed to keep control of the collection of data from the questionnaire, which was important as the basis for my contribution to a comparative survey on women's prisons, I also got women more actively involved in the survey and managed to answer some of their questions as well. Moreover, I wrote papers and lectured within the Women Studies Centre[6] about what I learnt in this research, and thus as a follow-up, at the initiative of a group of my students, I organized – together with other activists from the SOS hotline for battered women – a collection of toiletries, food and other necessities for women in prison. In this way, the survey gained the character of action research and contributed towards empowering women and solving some of their problems. It was also a crucial moment in shaping my interest in women in prison in general, including particularly battered women who are imprisoned for killing their abusers. This was thus the basis for my future action research and advocacy for improvement of conditions in women's prisons in Serbia, as well as for the support and release of battered women who killed their abusers.

6 At that time, the Women's Studies Centre was an NGO, and, although working under extremely difficult conditions, offered a unique alternative to mainstream and ideological studies.

transformation number 2: violence against women in war

At the end of 1992, I was invited to join the group of women who, after learning about women raped in ethnic conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, wanted to set up a support group for those finding themselves in Serbia. From the very beginning, we had women refugees, Serbs, Croats and Moslems, from Sarajevo and other war-affected territories coming to our meetings and speaking about their own experiences, as well as those of other women. Thus, the suffering of women in war was real to us, although we were not so close to the conflict zones. We started to develop the concept of our activities, at the same time as sending letters and humanitarian help to Bosnia, and to refugee camps in Serbia, listening to and supporting women who had escaped from war-torn territories, empowering each other, etc.. Since at that time we did not know much about supporting raped women, we were very glad when a group of women from Switzerland came to visit us, and invited us to visit them in Zurich and Berne. In March 1993, a group of 22 women activists from Belgrade travelled to Switzerland, stayed at the homes of Swiss activists and visited various women's groups. I also used that opportunity to visit the Criminology Institute in Zurich, and got to know about some useful literature.

After coming back to Serbia, my time became divided between volunteering for the SOS Hotline for battered women and children (Mladjenovic and Litricin, 1993) and women's studies, on the one hand, and developing a proposal for the action survey on women, violence and war, on the other. In 1994, with a group of colleagues/researchers, I created the Group for Women's Rights – an advocacy and research group.[7] During the period 1994–1995, we visited women refugees to record their stories about what they themselves defined as violence suffered in war, and to support them in various ways. The results are two books: *Women,*

7 The Group for women's rights (Grupa za zenska prava) is the

violence and war (1995 Serbian, 2000 English edition) and *Women from Krajina: War, exodus and exile* (1995).

predecessor of the Victimology Society of Serbia (www . vds.org.rs).

The study *Women, violence and war* (Nikolić-Ristanović, 2000a) was conducted throughout 1994, through interviews with sixty-nine women refugees in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and in Serbian-held territories in Bosnia-Herzegovina. As stated in the introduction of the book, 'trying to make the female experience of war visible, we found it important to highlight similarities and differences in the experiences of women who differ among themselves by nationality, age, profession and other consideration' (Nikolić-Ristanović, 2000a: 5). We did that directly, by asking women about their own experiences, and indirectly, asking them about other women's experiences. Most of our respondents, fifty-three out of sixty-nine, were Serbs from Croatia and Bosnia – because they were the most accessible to us – as the majority of refugees in Serbia were of Serbian nationality. However, we also interviewed seven Muslims, two Croats and one Slovene, two Montenegrans and five women who declared themselves as Yugoslavs. Most of the women we spoke to lived in refugee camps. Most women were between 25 and 40 years of age (30), eighteen were between 40 and 55 years of age, and ten were between 17 and 25 years of age (Nikolić-Ristanović, 2000a: 37).

Apart from interviews, we analysed the letters women made available to us, as well as data collected through informal conversations with women before and after interviews, and supplements to interviews that some of the women later sent us. Interviewees approved all the material we used, including their personal correspondence. We used a draft questionnaire consisting mostly of open-ended questions so that women could provide their own definitions, and express their attitudes and personal experiences of violence in war and against refugees. In fact, the draft questionnaire served as a reminder to the interviewers. Women were encouraged to talk about their experiences and give their own definitions of violence in general, and of war-related violence in particular. They were also encouraged to join our activities and to interview others, which some of them did. Others helped us to contact other women.

More than half of them expressed the desire to stay in touch with interviewers, to read and comment on the final text of our research. We discussed together the topic of our research and the method of data collection. We took into consideration their evaluation of both our analyses and our interpretation of their statements. At the same time, the research team worked as a support group: we tried to facilitate women's contact with institutions, to supply them with medicine, food and toiletries. We encouraged them to cope with their problems in an active way or were just friendly and spent much time talking with them. We suggested that they cooperate with and actively join feminist groups and feminist media activities. Women interviewed for this, as well as for *Women from Krajina: War, exodus and exile*, liked very much the

idea of obtaining the book based on their own experiences. We took care that all those who were contactable by the time the book was published got their own copy.

We collected 150 stories about inter-ethnic war violence committed against women of different nationalities (39 about physical violence, 49 about sexual violence, 113 about psychological violence and fear). The findings suggested that, although in war, as well as in peace time, rape is one of most serious forms of violence against women, women in war are also subject to other kinds of sexual violence, including giving birth to children conceived through rape, sexual slavery, forced concubinage, forced prostitution in brothels; they are also victims of physical injuries, murder, torture, malnutrition, psychological violence, fear, domestic violence by husband and/or son (who is of another nationality, back from the front, or refugee). Women suffer because they have lost or been separated from a child, husband or other family members, because of different forms of discrimination and violence experienced in exile, as well as because their houses were destroyed and their entire lives were violently interrupted and ruined. (Nikolić-Ristanović, 2000a).

Women are victimized directly and indirectly, most often by different forms of violence, with their consequences being interlaced. Their individual suffering occurs in the context of the interruption of normal everyday routines and in the absence of normal living. Women were left alone to cope, in the impossible conditions imposed by war, not only with violence, but also with the full responsibility of home and family care. Raped women are re-victimized by inappropriate media representations, and journalists' and fact finders' approaches, as well as witnesses before international and national courts. Women also faced a lack of appropriate counselling and therapeutic services. Refugee women suffered again when they were put in inadequate accommodation, without social support, and experienced political manipulation and misuse by humanitarian aid workers, by media and individual journalists and fact finders.

Apart from the differences related to the positioning of women of different ethnic groups, research showed many similarities in terms of the concrete ways in which women were abused and suffered in war, as well as how they coped with that. It particularly uncovered the suffering of women from mixed marriages as a result of the intersections of gender, power and two opposed ethnicities, and deconstructed patriarchal/nationalistic constructions of rape as a method of ethnic cleansing as opposed to ethnic mixing as an alternative existing before the war.

In doing this research, I found Western feminist epistemology and methodology very helpful in general, in particular standpoint and postmodern feminism, as when doing the earlier research in prison. Feminist theory about war rape,

particularly Brownmiller's analyses (1975, 1994), was also very helpful for interpreting results. On the other hand, Western feminist analyses of violence against women in war in the former Yugoslavia sometimes proved to be too narrow and needed to be adapted. This was especially related to what Zarkov calls Rape Victim Identity, which makes all other victims (who are not raped) look trivial (Zarkov, 1998), and which is seen as valid for Muslim women, and sometimes for Croatian women, but not for Serbian women (Zarkov, 1998).

Thus, Western feminist theory and the stereotypes it might have uncritically imported from media representations could not adequately explain women's accounts about rape being acceptable when compared to the killing of their child, nor those experiences of various forms of abuse aside from rape, nor the suffering of those women whose rapes were not committed as part of a strategy of ethnic cleansing. Nor was it very useful for understanding the similarities in experiences between Moslem women and women from other ethnic groups who used to live together in the former Yugoslavia, the differences in experiences of Serbian women from different parts of the former Yugoslavia, and particularly not violence against women from mixed marriages.

It was especially difficult to include rapes of Serbian women and women from mixed families in existing theoretical frameworks. The data obtained in my study indicated that women married to men of different nationalities were raped or threatened with rape by men of their own nationality, the nationality of their husbands or by men of nationalities neither of them belonged to. Cases of suffering of women from mixed marriages, whom I met during my research on violence against women in war, indicate the complexity of the situation of mixed marriages and the exposure of women from such marriages to rape, which have been totally neglected in all past analyses. However, rapes of women from mixed marriages undoubtedly confirm Brownmiller's thesis on rapes in war as a means of men's mutual clashes: rape is directed against all women who belong to other men (Brownmiller, 1994). Thus, I was able to introduce a third, decisive element into the rape issue: a woman who belongs to a man of an 'other' nationality. In fact, women were raped in war because they were 'women' and because they were 'ethnically other'. However, when married to men of another nationality, their ethnic difference was determined by belonging to men of another nationality, while their own nationality was considered of secondary importance.

linking local and global

The two surveys described above were significant for my own personal and professional development, but they were also important for a much broader development of Serbian women's studies, and feminist criminology/victimology.

They were the basis for further feminist research on both women's crime and violence against women, with experiences from these two surveys being used for teaching subsequent generations of students and researchers in Serbia.

However, both the continuity of my research work and its important transformations occurred largely owing to the support of both local and global feminists. This may be why I have twofold memories from the 1990s: on the one hand, hopelessness and desperation; while on the other great enthusiasm for change and energy coming from feminist networking. The latter was experienced as the light at the end of the tunnel and due to it many women got support or simply managed to survive during the most difficult times.

I had taken part in activities of the local feminist network in the 1980s, that is, before the war in the former Yugoslavia. However, the beginning of the war, together with the dictatorship of Milosevic, somehow made our links closer and our cooperation and mutual support stronger. We found ourselves with one common task: supporting, assisting and empowering each other, and then other women directly affected by (both war and 'peace') violence.

Looking back at that time, I think that it was an unexpectedly positive time for the women's movement in Serbia: many women's groups were created then and most of them, with the exception of nationalistic women' organizations, were united in both their anti-war/anti-Milosević activities, and their advocacy for women's rights. This is not unusual, and similar examples of women united around the struggle for threatened women's rights can be found throughout the world, as well as more recently in Serbia itself.[8] Moreover, one of the fascinating features of women's groups in Serbia was that they continued to be in touch, and even further developed and expanded their links, with women from other countries – in spite of strict international sanctions and the isolation of Serbia. As Belgrade feminist sociologist Marina Blagojević (1998: 20) wrote, two key factors that contributed to the creation of the women's movement in Serbia were war and international women's networking, together with a strong theoretical base (also created through interactions between global and local experiences).

Local feminist networks thus were like an oasis in the desert, and through their contacts in Western countries, created during communist times, first funding and then other kinds of assistance for women's groups entered Serbia. At first, these links were precious for our own survival and our capacity to help the numerous refugee and indigenous women affected by war to survive.[9] Moreover, thanks to these links, we managed to survive mentally as well, since we were not completely isolated and had the opportunity to travel and to accept visitors from abroad. These feminist links were crucial for the continuity and further development of my own activities, as well as those of other feminists, and it also helped lessen 'burn-out', which affected many feminists, especially during that time. Moreover, all the material, spiritual and human resources that flowed from

8 The most effective common actions of women's groups were those related to issues such as abortion, laws on rape, pornography and prostitution, which most easily united Western feminists as well (Bouchier, 1983: 106; Rowbotham, 1992: 74–76). Obviously, these actions were most effective in terms of preventing negative change or advocating for positive legal changes, since these are issues around which women's groups found a high level of agreement and interest for advocacy. This is not unusual since, as Fireman and Gamson (1979: 28) stressed,

the West to Serbia and vice versa, were essential for us to acquire significant knowledge and skills, which appeared to have long-term benefits for women in general, and for women victims of violence in particular. Opening towards the West was very important for East European women's access to Western feminist ideas and experiences of self-organizing (*Feminist Review*, 2004: 76). Even in Serbia, which in the 1990s was more isolated than before, foreign financial support for women's NGOs was more or less present all the time. Moreover, in the most difficult years, this support came almost exclusively from international women's organizations. It is especially worth mentioning the cooperation and mutual support between Serbian and Croatian women, as well as the fact that the first money that Serbian feminists got from abroad, actually came from Zagreb, Croatia. Croatian feminists obtained a donation from Germany and shared it with their friends from Belgrade (Ćetković, 1998: 144).

the role of global feminist dialogue/networks in producing changes locally

The stronger impact of Western feminism in Serbia during communist times, compared with other post-communist countries, is not surprising, since during communism Serbia was much more open towards the West than other countries. This allowed feminism to start developing in Serbia in mid-1970.[10] Feminist ideas, developed during communism through intensive contacts and exchange of information with Western feminists, resulted in the creation of the first Belgrade feminist group as early as 1979 (Blagojević, 1998: 47–59). This was decisive for developments in the 1990s, when political pluralism and increased possibilities for self-organizing created favourable conditions for the creation of non-governmental organizations in general, and women's NGOs in particular.

During my stay in the United Kingdom in 1995, I became familiar with activism of women ex-prisoners within the group Women in Prison, and campaigns for battered women who killed their abusers, led by Rights of Women, Justice for Women and Southall Black Sisters, including the changes of court practices resulting from them. The knowledge gained during direct contacts and talks with UK feminists, as well as through the study of available literature, inspired me upon my return to Serbia to initiate similar campaigns, research and support for battered women who killed their abusers. In addition, subsequent contacts with US feminists, either through correspondence or direct contacts during their stay in Belgrade, were important for my further work on drafting and advocating for legal change on domestic violence, sexual violence and people trafficking, and campaigns for clemency for battered women who killed their abusers (Nikolić-Ristanović, 2000b: 16).

mobilization is more likely when collective action is more urgent, and 'collective action is most urgent when there is no reason to believe that collective goods will be preserved without collective action'. This is exactly the kind of urgency that most easily united women in collective action when their rights were threatened by announced changes of laws in Serbia. The most recent example occurred in July 2009, when fifty-six organizations signalled their support for amendments to proposed legal changes relating to domestic violence.

9 For more details on how precious was support sent to Serbia at that time, see Nikolić-Ristanović (2003).

10 Feminist panels, meetings and other events that feminists from Western countries participated in have been organized in Belgrade on a regular basis since 1975 until 1992 when the war and international isolation of Serbia prevented them from continuing.

In 1997, I established the Victimology Society of Serbia (VDS),[11] as well as the journal on victimization, human rights and gender, *Temida*. VDS is currently recognized as a respected think tank on victimology, gender, conflict and reconciliation studies, while *Temida* is officially recognized as an academic journal by Serbian Ministry of Science, and is widely used by students and scholars. In 1998, I set up a working group of VDS that consisted of five feminist lawyers[12], who drafted the first version of the *New Model of Laws on Domestic Violence*, as well as draft changes to the Criminal Code regarding sexual violence and trafficking in people.

The *New Model of Laws on Domestic Violence*[13] followed two years' monitoring of the trials of battered women who killed their abusers. This activity was accompanied by a campaign to raise public awareness of the problem. The first draft of the *Model*, which was later modified to reflect existing legislative trends, was based on the research findings and reports on trial monitoring, as well as on research on international and domestic law. The Minnesota Domestic Abuse Act and the Duluth model were used as guidelines for drafting the Model. The *Model* was launched in December 1998. At the beginning of March 1999, VDS organized a panel discussion with a guest from the United States speaking about programmes for abusers. The Women's Group for Political Empowerment of Women – a Serbian feminist activist group also organized a workshop for representatives of all groups advocating support for the Draft. They organized the signing of support letters to be handed to the Government. Unfortunately, this was stopped by the NATO bombing.

The Society slowly recovered its activities after the bombing. My book *From Victim to Prisoner – Domestic Violence and Women's Crime* was published in 2000. The book is based on life history interviews with female prisoners who committed crimes, and who were also abused by their families. In 2000, during the pre-election campaign, women's NGOs and women politicians made a joint statement demanding an end to violence against women. After the political changes in that year, the new government was more open to NGOs' requests, although there was still substantial resistance to the specific proposals regarding reform of domestic violence law. However, the Draft got support from almost all women's groups and all political parties included in the ruling coalition. At the same time, the ruling party's youth wing organized a major campaign about domestic violence, collecting signatures in support of our Draft. In 2001, the Society submitted the Draft proposal to a female deputy in the Serbian Parliament, who made an amendment to the government's Draft of the Law on amendments of the Criminal Code of Serbia. In March 2002, those activities resulted in a new criminal offence called domestic violence, which is prosecuted *ex officio*, meaning without the need for the victim's request (article 118a of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Serbia), and marital rape became punishable as well (Nikolić-Ristanović and Ćopić, 2002).

11 VDS is a membership NGO that joins together female and male members, experts and activists to work for the benefit of victims of crime. It was established in 1997, and its main aim is to advocate for the rights of victims of crime, war and human rights violations in a gender sensitive way.

12 Vesna Nikolić-Ristanović, Slobodanka Konstantinović-Vilić, Nevena Petrušić, Ivana Stevanović and Brankica Grupković.

13 The *New Model of Laws on Domestic Violence* presents harmonized changes of five relevant laws: the Criminal Code, the Criminal Procedure Code, family law, civil procedure law and the law on weapons and munitions.

The advocacy regarding sexual violence was based on the draft of a completely new concept of the Criminal Code chapter on sexual violence, of which the main characteristics are: change of the title of the chapter on sexual violence from 'offences against dignity of the person and morality' to 'offences against sexual freedom, stricter punishments for all sexual offences and in particular for the sexual abuse of children and disabled persons'; a new concept of rape enabled the same criminal law protection to victims regardless of gender and sexual orientation, as well as for coercion to not only vaginal intercourse, but also other sexual acts, such as anal, oral intercourse, etc.. These changes were included in the Criminal Code of Serbia in 2005, while earlier only vaginal rape of women existed in law.

Until mid-April 2003, trafficking in people did not exist as a separate criminal offence in Serbia. Perpetrators could be punished only via a certain number of then existing criminal offences. This did not appear to be appropriate either for prosecution and sentencing of offenders, nor for the adequate protection of victims. Therefore, during recent years a lot of effort went into lobbying for appropriate legal reforms regarding this issue. Although the first proposal for the provision of a new criminal offence of trafficking in people had been drafted by VDS in 1998, the more systematic and comprehensive draft called 'new model of laws' about trafficking in people was made by a VDS expert team in 2002. As a result of VDS advocacy, supported by other women's groups and NGOs, the criminal offence of trafficking in people was included in the Serbian Criminal Code in April 2003.

lessons learnt: war, feminism and ourselves

The years that are behind me are a journey through which I, the women I met and the social context all changed greatly. I saw many women growing and getting empowered, and I also grew up with them, personally and professionally, and got new strength and passion for change. As I hope I have managed to show in this piece, women's solidarity, both locally and globally, has had a crucial impact on the continuity of, as well as on precious transformations of, my research topics and method. Moreover, this solidarity was important for the survival of many women affected by ethnic conflicts and economic sanctions in Serbia.

My own personal story confirmed what we know from studies of violence against women and the research on the impact of war on women: in the most difficult situations women act. These difficult situations may differ, but still women try to find their own strategies to survive and help other women to do the same. Available research on the impact of war on the everyday lives of women and men show that women respond more actively than men, and undertake responsibility, quite often, of both female and male roles in the family (Nikolić-Ristanović, 2002). This happens to both those directly and less directly (for instance, indigenous Serbian women) affected by war.

The concept of transversal politics is explained by Nira Yuval-Davis as 'an attempt to find a way of doing things which is neither the imposition of a single universal which refuses to recognise that there really are 'differences', nor the retreat into those differences as tightly-bound, exclusivist and essentialist identities (Yuval-Davis, 1999). Cockburn and Hunter (1999: 88) described it as democratic practice of a particular kind, which includes creatively crossing and redrawing the borders that 'make significant political differences'. Transversal politics includes several insights that bear similarities with the approach I chose in this paper for dealing with differences. These are: standpoint epistemology, which recognizes that from each positioning the world is seen differently; existence of many truths that can be reconciled only through dialogue; respect for each other's realities and perspectives; as well as an acknowledgement of the unequal power inherent in different positions (Cockburn, 2007: 205). Transversal politics, thus, may be understood as a feminist version of restorative justice and reconciliation, understood as a democratic way of conflict management and transformation (Bloomfield, 2003; White, 2003; Liebman, 2007; Waldgrave, 2008). I have used and advocated this stance in relation to dealing with the past in Serbia, (Nikolić-Ristanović, 2006, 2008).

I agree with Cockburn that 'women in Yugoslavia were inventing transversal politics throughout the war' (Cockburn, 2007: 101). I can also add that many Western feminists participated in that process as well, since they accepted us as equals, respecting different experiences of women from different countries, and particularly those from different parts of the former Yugoslavia. Moreover, they also understood similarities in the ways differently positioned women are oppressed. They did not develop prejudices against us just because of our national belonging, but trusted and supported us in the most difficult times. Consequently, in relation to the topic of this paper, it may be an argument for further development of the concept of transversal politics, so that various, not only local but also global, differences are encompassed, acknowledged and brought together, and involved in honest, non-exclusive and mutually respectful dialogue.

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