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Women in Black, Belgrade: Feminist creativity as an antidote to war

Women in Black (*Žene u crnom*) in Serbia and Montenegro is the first WiB group I've met in my travels that has its own office premises. They rent an apartment, 18 Jug Bogdanova, just down the road from the market and bus station in old Belgrade. The flat's a busy place. There's always someone on the phone, someone at the computer, someone in the kitchen making coffee. Others are sitting smoking in the living room, talking to a visitor or to each other, planning a workshop, discussing a publication, reviewing an action. The walls are covered with posters and photographs, reminders of friends, events, conferences, journeys.

In the course of a day, week or year, a lot of different kinds of people can be found in this office: all age groups, women and men, and not only residents of Belgrade. The flat is the hub of activities that extend to other Serbian towns, to Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and other parts of the former Yugoslavia, and to many other countries of the world.

Feminist response to nationalist war

In the office most days is Staša Zajović, one of the founders of Women in Black Belgrade, and its co-ordinator from 1991 until today. But responsibility and work in *Žene u crnom* is widely shared. I was aware of at least fifteen people during my five days in the office.¹ All of them, and others, come here, some regularly, some occasionally, taking care of current projects and activities. At any one time they may be planning a workshop, preparing for a demonstration, answering e-mails, writing a news mailing to the international WiB network, editing a publication, dealing with a print order, receiving a visitor, getting ready for a journey, writing a funding proposal, keeping the accounts. WiB publishes prolifically, bringing out a beautiful diary each year, and an annual volume titled *Women for Peace* in Serbian, English and sometimes other languages.

There are certain others you may meet from time to time in the Jug Bogdanova office, each of whom signifies some distinctive link in the Women in Black network in the region. For instance, there's Jadranka Milicević who lives in Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Ivana Percl, who lives in Zagreb, Croatia, cities where they don't have separate Women in Black groups.² They are part of Women in Black Belgrade. There are several others, local to Belgrade - women who were involved in WiB from the outset and have played

¹ In alphabetical order they were Boban, Borka, two Cica's (Nevzeta and Zinaida), Dana, Fika, Gaga, Ksenija, Lilja, Melita, Miloš, Nena, Senka, Svetlana and Tamara. They will acquire second names as I mention them below.

² Ivana Percl belongs to NEO AFŽ, a recently formed anti-fascist women's front in Croatia.

important roles in it, but have only one foot in WiB while the other is in one of its sister initiatives (of which more below). I'm thinking of Lepa Mladjenović, who gives a lot of energy to the Autonomous Women's Centre, Daša Duhaček whose main responsibility is the Women's Studies Centre; Jasmina Tešanović, originator of the publishing house *Feministička '94*; and Slavica Stojanović who has been involved with both the AWC and *Feministička '94*.

One significant woman of course I couldn't meet: Žarana Papić died two years ago, leaving a large hole at the heart of this small community. I knew her from before the wars, and I can still feel her influence in the projects she gave so much to. I would really have enjoyed the interview I might have had with her at this stage in their development.

Yugoslav feminism in the 1980s

In a talk Žarana wrote for a conference back in 1994, she recounts the origins of Yugoslav feminism. She says 'although we didn't have a feminist movement in ex-Yugoslavia, we had *feminists*' (Papić 1994:19). In 1978 an international feminist conference was held at the Student Cultural Centre in Belgrade. This event prompted confrontation with the official communist women's organization and kick-started autonomous feminism in Yugoslavia. It flowered mainly in the big cities, particularly in Zagreb, in Belgrade and in Ljubljana, where the first lesbian feminist group, Lilit, was formed. The issue of gay and lesbian rights became part of a struggle for democracy inside and outside the League of Communists in these years (*WFP* 1998:59).

Lepa Mladjenović was very much involved in this 1980s feminism, and she had a special importance for a lot of women in being visible and active as a lesbian feminist. Jasmina Tešanović, who had grown up in Italy and was gradually developing the skills of the essayist and novelist she would become, was one of the organizers of the '78 conference. Slavica Stojanović was first and foremost a student activist in the 1980s. With Žarana she was involved in student publishing activities. She was the first woman to be chief editor of the student review that was boldly opposing the authorities. Daša Duhaček was teaching philosophy in high school, and like Slavica, was only tangentially involved with women's activism then. But she was reading widely, and beginning to be aware of the misogyny of the mainstream academic disciplines.

Then, in 1989, nationalist parties won the elections and you could feel the republics pulling apart. Yugoslavia was on the point of violent disintegration. Slovenia seceded in June 1991. War in Croatia started a month later. The women in Belgrade were abruptly cut off from those other centres where their feminist sisters lived and worked. By the end of the decade internationally-recognized borders would have been thrown up to divide these Yugoslavs into separate nationalities, with different passports. Soon after fighting broke out in Croatia, Lepa had gone to meet a train from Zagreb at the Belgrade railway station.

We heard that the train was strangely delayed. The report was first that it was an hour late, then several hours. Then two days. I still didn't understand then that there was a war going on. An important moment for me. Such a sad thing - the lost train. I didn't know, nobody could know, that that train would be five years late! In 1997, I went one day again to the railway station. The train was back! But now you had to buy a ticket to Zagreb from the international ticket window, not the local one. I was crying. (From an interview with Lepa in London in 2000.)

Creative moment

As war approached, Staša was active in the Centre for Anti-War Action, an organization of both men and women, working against forced mobilization. She noticed that women were doing most of the work. The peace movement was reproducing a patriarchal model (Zajović 1994). She began to feel the need for a specifically feminist initiative by women against the terrifying upsurge of nationalism and militarism, which she saw as clearly gendered.

Around this time a group of Italian feminists came to offer support to the Belgrade women in the struggle to keep internal and international bridges open. They had for some years been supporting Women in Black in Israel, and now called themselves *Donne in Nero*. Staša and other Belgrade women followed suit, and the first street demonstration by Women in Black against War (*Žene u crnom protiv rata*) was held on October 9, 1991.

A second initiative, with which Daša and Žarana were particularly involved, along with Marina Blagojević, Rada Iveković, Svetlana Slapšak and others, was the Women's Studies Centre (*Centar za ženske studije*). This was a project planned before the war but only established in 1992. At first it was completely independent of the formal higher education system. Daša conceptualized its input to their activism as 'theory, not as an approach opposed to praxis, but as a way of praxis, a powerful tool...it works steadily, patiently, persistently and reveals its effects only in the long run...' (Duhaček 1994:75). Hundreds of women of all ages found the women's culture and feminist theory they were hungry for in the courses run by the WSC. It still thrives today, as the Centre of Women's Studies and Gender Research, now also offering accredited courses inside the University, where Daša has an academic position in the Faculty of Political Science. Her aim, as director, has been to gain academic legitimacy and support for feminist studies while keeping access open and maintaining autonomy over content. Her hope is it will subvert the nationalism and the patriarchalism of the various disciplines (such as Philosophy, much criticized by Tamara and Ksenija, below) They have a sizeable feminist library and publish a journal, *Genero*.

A third related initiative, in which Lepa and Slavica were mainly involved, was the Autonomous Women's Centre against Sexual Violence (*Autonomi ženski centar protiv seksualnog nasilja*), now known simply as the Autonomous Women's Centre (AZC). It was founded in 1993 by feminists who had already (in 1990) started an SOS Hotline for Women and Children Victims of Violence and would later go on to create a Women's Safe House and a Girls' Centre.

Lepa wrote, 'The rapes in war have affected us deeply and we founded the Women's Centre first of all for women who survived war rapes' (Mladjenović 1994: 70), but central to the analysis of the AWC was that domestic violence and war rapes are connected. Lepa wrote

Serb perpetrators got up from the beaches and their coffee bars: the voice of the nation asked [them] to raise their heads and show what they have learned so far. They were to roll up their sleeves and show that the skills of torturing, raping, threatening women can be used against the enemy (Mladjenović 1993).

AWC has been the place of feminist consciousness-raising and skilled individual counselling and care, especially for the many refugees that flooded into Belgrade during the war. Like attending a course at the WSC, taking the SOS telephone line training was often a first step for women into Women in Black, where you would take the harder step onto the street, 'outing' yourself as a feminist and antimilitarist.

And there was publishing activity. AWC produced a series of 'Feminist Notebooks' with the participation of many activists. In 1994 Jasmina and Slavica would set up Feminist Publisher 94 (*Feministička 94*). In the next ten years they would publish 35 books. Some of them would be Jasmina's own, because she was not only 'scribe' to the women's initiatives but also a rare literary voice, and even rarer feminist author in Serbia, writing against the war in the midst of the war. In 1994 she wrote about the flowering in Belgrade at that time of small, informal and independent publishers, like *Feministička 94*, among whom 'the book is nearer to the author, the authors are nearer to the readers: the infra-structure is built from one enterprise to another...' (Tešanović 1994:88). And she told me in interview 'I think women should write more and all the time: it is a way of recording a parallel invisible history, as fragile as memory can be, as oppressed and hidden as their lives have been...'

This cluster of initiatives would continue to be a vehicle for the energies of this founding group, which included other women whom I have not named, and would be joined by other significant feminist activists over the coming years.

During the war: Women in Black

The principal strategies of Women in Black during and since the war could be summarized as the following five:

(1) Street protest

WiB began holding vigils in Republic Square in October 1991. They continued weekly for many years and even now demonstrate on the Square on significant dates. The early vigils were classic in form: silent and still, involving women dressed in black carrying simple messages on banners and placards, their case explained to passers-by in leaflets. Undeterred by verbal and sometimes physical violence from nationalists, they kept up an unbroken

weekly presence on the streets, sure that continuity and repetition would be important. At first, as several of them attested, it felt strange to be standing there in public. Jasmina said of the vigils, 'We did them first, thought about them afterwards. Standing on the street that first time we all thought, *what are we doing??* It was like having sex for the first time. It hurts. But you think, OK, next time I'll enjoy it.' Women's political action on the street was something for which, as Lepa wrote, there was simply no tradition in Yugoslavia. She said, we 'created our own tradition, sense and language' (WFP 2001:12). 'Don't speak for us – we'll speak for ourselves,' they were saying (WFP 1998:5).

(2) Analysis and counter-information

The analytical work out of which they derived their position and their slogans was meanwhile going on in continual meetings, in WiB, in the AWC, in the WSC, in public places. Daša said, 'I never believed Yugoslavia would fall apart. When it did, I fell apart. [This] became my space of resistance and sanity and solidarity.' Jasmina told me

It was a process to become political, to catch up with the events. We didn't know what we were doing at first. Life was shit... We had to do it to survive. We had to meet, talk, prepare food together. What I liked very very much was that we all said what was on our mind, not trying to be politically correct or emotionally correct. If someone was crying we'd respond. If a woman was talking like a nationalist we'd talk about it with her. I had so many prejudices at the start. We faced them all.

Together they developed a clear analysis of the system that had dragged them into war, of its sexism, nationalism and militarism (WFP 1998:20). They allowed themselves to be in no doubt that those mainly responsible were the politicians of the very city in which they lived. And, they believed, you must first challenge the murderers of the state in which you live. In the early days they were not unanimous about 'nationalism' and 'national identity' but soon a strong and clear anti-nationalism emerged as a key principle of the group.³ They took a stand of principled disloyalty and non-compliance with the nationalist state.

(3) Maintaining contact with the 'other'

From the start the women of these linked initiatives made no distinction on the basis of ascribed ethnicity between and among themselves, or in relation to the women living around them, whether residents of Belgrade or refugees. They simply refused national names, which they saw as products of war-mongering. They would not be told how to live such identities, or how to react to them in others. They also worked hard to maintain links with women in the other former Yugoslav republics, especially those now cast as 'the enemy'. They developed a philosophy of care. They would 'care for the other and care

³ While most groups in Women in Black internationally probably have a principled opposition to nationalism, some groups hesitate to condemn identification with nation and national movements in cases where people have been marginalized and oppressed for their 'name'. This sensitive issue is discussed further in my Research Profile No.9, from Spain.

for ourselves equally'. Keeping connected wasn't easy. The phone lines were continually inaccessible. Letters and parcels got lost in the post. It was a great improvement when the *Zamir* internet server was opened and e-mail became a possibility. They sometimes managed to meet each other in foreign countries, invited by third parties. And, despite the fact that several armies were killing people expressly to make such affinities unthinkable, meetings between women in the region did occur – in Banja Luka, in Istria, in Struga, Tuzla, Sarajevo. When the war shifted to Kosovo the same energy was put into maintaining contact with women living there. One Belgrade woman wrote at this time, 'My moral and emotional imperative (no matter how pathetic it sounds) is to spend hours and hours trying to get a phone line to Prishtina' (*WFP* 1999:183).

(4) Support for conscientious objectors

When the wars started, an estimated three hundred thousand Serb men of military age went into exile rather than fight in a civil war between Yugoslavs (*WFP* 1994, p.32). But many more were trapped, faced with compulsory enlistment to fight and kill people they couldn't consider an enemy. Some went into hiding on threat of conscription, others fled their units later. From the very start of WiB in 1991 the women acted on their anti-militarism in a practical way, by giving emotional, moral and political support to draft resisters and deserters, who were by definition male. They went on to build a Conscientious Objection Network that, rather than fading out once hostilities ended, would grow into a country-wide movement of antimilitarists.

A 'war resisters' movement gradually developed, at first underground and later more openly. When the wars ended, with the entry of UN peacekeepers into Kosovo and the conclusion of the bombardment of Serbia by NATO, different political positions in the resisters' movement became clear. The Centre for Anti-War Action took the legal route, petitioning change in the law to reduce the length of military service and strengthen the provision for the civilian alternative (*WFP* 2001, p.280). Women in Black on the other hand called for the complete demilitarization of Serbia and Montenegro.

Even after the fighting ended, refusal and non-compliance continued. With the Yugoslav Committee for Human Rights (YUCOM), Women in Black campaigned for a change in the law to shorten military service, and to provide for a civilian service alternative. In the year 2000, for instance, they organized a meeting of COs at Studenica, 200 kms from Belgrade. The slogan was 'Not one thought, not one woman, not one man, not one coin...for the war' (*WFP* 2001:241). That was in May. In September they organized an 'I Refuse War' campaign in various cities around the country. And in December they joined a campaign for amnesty for deserters. The campaign continued and continues today as an intrinsic part of the struggle to demilitarize the country.

(5) Feminist solidarity and internationalism

International contact was not a luxury for *Žene u crnom* but a key strategy. They said they were extending the feminist slogan 'the personal is political' to

'the personal is international' (WFP 1994:1). Groups in Germany, Austria and Switzerland brought them out of the country for conferences and workshops. Women in Black groups, especially those of Italy and Spain, raised money for them and invited women to come away for rest and recuperation, to give lectures and speak to the Western media. Just as important in reducing their isolation and lending them solidarity was the continual presence in the Belgrade office, even in the darkest days of the war, of antiwar activist 'volunteers' from other countries. Several persisted until expelled by the Serbian authorities. For many outsiders at this time (including for us in London) WiB Belgrade became crucially important as a unique instance of feminist methodology, courage in the face of suppression and sanity in a nationalist maelstrom. Hundreds of women from many countries of the world travelled to a series of nine annual encounters WiB Belgrade organized in Novi Sad and other places in Serbia and Montenegro between 1993 and 2001. They called this the 'Network of Women's Solidarity against War'. (Subsequently two such encounters have been held in Brussels, Belgium and Marina di Massa, Italy.)

Young activists

Women in Black groups in other countries have told me they find it difficult to attract and hold young members. I've found that often the age group 20-39 is greatly outnumbered by the over 40s, or even over 50s. *Žene u crnom* is different in that several of the core activists are in their 20s. Thinking that this could be of interest to Women in Black groups in other countries, I asked three of the young women to allow me to interview them, and shall report their experience in some detail.

All three of the young women I spoke with are, as it happens, aged 24. Ksenija Forca had a 'happy childhood' in a family that was neither poor nor rich. It was a characteristic family for Yugoslav times, her parents working in the 'mixed economy' in typically 'good jobs' – mother doing accountancy in a tourist agency, father in the national bank. Her father's family had lived in the Yugoslav republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina, her mother's in the Croatian republic. They identified as Yugoslavs, were communists and atheists. But now, after wars fought to reconstruct and deepen ethnic differences, they would be called 'Serbs'.

Tamara Belenzada was born in Belgrade. Her father, from Serbia, left the family while she was still a baby, so Tamara was brought up by her mother, who had also been born in Belgrade. Her maternal grandparents however were from Kosovo, and this fact, in an environment in which Serb nationalism was increasing, led to suppositions about the 'ethnic background' of Tamara and her mother. As a result the latter experienced discrimination in her job as a geological technician in the national oil industry, and Tamara also felt adverse effects as a schoolgirl.

The third young woman I met in the office was Dana Johnson, an American working there as an intern. She grew up in a Philadelphia suburb. While first Ksenija and then Tamara were studying undergraduate courses in the Faculty

of Philosophy in Belgrade, in the USA Dana was finding her way into 'international studies' courses. She chose to specialize on central Europe and had a semester in Poland and another in Hungary. 'The university environment, if you're lucky, can blast open your mind,' she says. 'I got interested in politics and the rest of the world.'

But the three young women experienced the nineties, the decade of the Yugoslav wars, rather differently. For Dana, the other side of the world, the situation in Yugoslavia just seemed confusing. 'I was picking it up from other people. You couldn't possibly understand it. Just the feeling there was something really weird going on there. This crazy guy Milošević!'

Ksenija, for her part, as nationalist feeling intensified, was sheltered from the realities by her parents. She remembers seeing the tanks leaving Belgrade for Slovenia in 1991. She saw her neighbours waving them off, cheering. But 'it was as if I grew up in a glass room. I didn't know who was fighting who, or for what.' Only later, looking back, she can pick up clues. She remembers her mother worrying that her father might have to go and fight. In the reserve forces, he was called to military exercises every weekend. 'It was right there in the family but I was blind to it.' Though most of her family and neighbours supported Milošević, it was not at this stage for his Serb nationalism but because he was seen as the only one acting responsibly to preserve Yugoslavia in the face of Slovenian and Croatian secession.

Tamara, as war spread from Slovenia to Croatia and then to Bosnia, was hearing more and more nationalistic language around her. It was increasingly hazardous to be ambiguous (or unenthusiastic) about national identity. Especially, as the war spread to Kosovo in the late nineties, it was uncomfortable to be assumed to have connections with that region. Tamara, like others who did not ascribe to a national identity, began to watch what she said, censor herself. 'I felt like a robot.'

It was Ksenija who discovered Women in Black first. At a certain moment in 1999 she 'woke up', and started really noticing both nationalism and male-dominance simultaneously. During the NATO bombing, when 'people were blaming the USA for everything, there was a feeling all around that "the whole world is against us"'. The bombing was seen as the final proof that the Serbs were being victimized. Ksenija felt uncomfortable with this line. 'Something clicked for me then.' Although active in the student organization, Ksenija was fed up with the Faculty of Philosophy, where the staff and students were mostly pro-Milošević. She was getting more conscious on the gender front too. At a personal level she wondered about the way some friends jibbed at the very 'equal' relationship she had with her boyfriend. And in the University she was beginning to be aware just how masculine the culture and male-centred the curriculum in the philosophy faculty.

Casting around for alternatives, it was not in fact WiB but the Women's Studies Centre Ksenija stumbled on first. She enrolled for a class there and found the feminist theory that was totally lacking in the University. She had never been *anti*-feminist, simply feminism hadn't until then been in her

environment. She'd lived in a house full of Marxist books. She'd read about women's emancipation, communist-style. 'Learning the theory of patriarchy at the Women's Studies Centre, suddenly the pieces fell together, like a jigsaw. It was like waking up.' She began to review the messages she'd received but somehow failed to understand over the past ten years. She started to get involved with WiB. What she likes most here is that it 'isn't just about women'. It's holistic, addressing nationalism, militarism and patriarchy as connected. Through its everyday practices WiB is living a different model for society in Serbia. Especially, Ksenija loves the Women in Black street actions.

When I first went out with them, I thought "finally!". It was so exciting. Each time it's a revolution for me. So inspiring. Especially when people see us, and stop, and even come and join us. Or come to us afterwards.

Tamara had found WiB only a few months before my visit there. She had enrolled as a student in the Faculty of Philosophy some years behind Ksenija. Like her she'd discovered the Women's Studies Centre, as an antidote to the sexism of mainstream higher education. One day at the Centre she heard Staša give a lecture about a proposed law to enable the state to give financial support to the Serb nationalists accused in the International Tribunal in The Hague, on which opinion in Serbia was deeply divided. In WiB, as in the Women's Studies Centre, Tamara found friendship and but political nourishment too.

I was disappointed with the philosophy course. It's such a male, white, bourgeois model. I felt in revolt against it. It wasn't easy to find the words to discuss this inner daily revolt... I felt the problem with patriarchy and nationalism through language. [In WiB] I felt I was beginning to be able to speak, finding a new language to express what hurts me, why people behave in a particular manner... It's like rethinking notions and concepts.

Joining WiB isn't cost free. The organization is well known in Belgrade. A lot of people hate them and call them traitors and whores because they pronounce against nationalism and militarism, and promote friendship with 'enemy others'. But in WiB's environment Tamara now found herself for the first time fully included, her background unremarkable and unquestioned. Ksenija could say 'I think that nation, as well as gender, sex, sexual identity and all the other little boxes society has prepared for us are constructions, and I don't want them. If somebody asks me my nationality I say "anti-nationalist". If I have to write my nationality in some official papers I just put "xxx".' Both young women fell happily into this feminist space in a wider world that mostly treats feminism 'as a kind of joke'. I asked Tamara whether she felt the loss of more 'typical' young people she had known in the past? No, she said

I like it that I left all that behind... They aren't my friends. How could they be? I don't share their nationalist and homophobic, fascist, ideas... Here, I have support. Somewhere I can speak freely and

people I can share my feelings with... I can't say how much I want to help Women in Black.

And Ksenija said 'Sometimes I miss my old friends. Sometimes I call them. But I gained a lot more. From the start at WiB I felt on solid ground...My criteria for friendship have been raised.'

After University, Dana had decided to volunteer for a period of service overseas through a Christian organization in the United States. She was happy to identify WiB as a possible placement, both because she was attracted by its politics and because Belgrade is a big city. She met and made friends with Tamara and Ksenija here. She was working hard to adapt to the 'unique way of working they have here'. A lot of time in the WiB apartment is spent either hanging out, waiting for things to happen slowly, or working frenetically to achieve some project. The communication style is, Dana says, 'loud, fast, everyone talking at once, not much listening. It's a style that's difficult for me to get used to. I thought at first it was me not knowing the language. But now I do, and it's still the same'.

Men of Women in Black

Žene u crnom is unusual not only in having a presence of women below the age of 25, but also in including men among its activists. Although there are WiB groups elsewhere that accept the support, and the presence in demonstrations, of small numbers of men, the experience of Women in Black Belgrade is unusual and may be unique. Because I believe their partnership of women and men may be of particular interest to other Women in Black groups, I pay more attention to it in the paragraphs below than they would do themselves. To them, they made clear, it's less of an issue than it is for me.

The partnership of women and men was prompted by war itself, when a number of Serb COs found shelter in the Women in Black apartment (it was at another address then) and became part of the organization. Given *ZuC's* strong focus on antimilitarism and demilitarization it was logical that they would start a Conscientious Objection Network. Dejan Nebrigić, Bojan Aleksov, Darko Kovacev, Srdjan Knezević ('Sicko'), Stevan Curcija, Dragan Stepanović / Macak, and Igor Šeke are just a few of the many men who have been members of Women in Black Belgrade at one time or another.

Although a right to conscientious objection had been established in 1992 under a law of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, its clauses were extremely ambiguous and were variously interpreted. In practice draft-dodging and desertion were dealt with punitively and often resulted in imprisonment. The social costs of refusal were also high – on the one hand you were ostracized, on the other you had to live in clandestinity. Worse, as the war spread from Croatia to Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Ministries of the Interior of Serbia and Montenegro, desperate for more recruits, turned a blind eye to the international humanitarian conventions and permitted forced conscription of Serb refugees, who had struggled to reach Serbia from those war-stricken areas. 'Even sixteen-year-olds are abducted from refugee camps and sent to

the fronts in Bosnia and Krajina. They don't have a right to choice and objection' (WFP 1994, p.36).

When I visited Belgrade in October 2004, I met and talked with two men who are currently active participants in WiB. Although not all the male members of Women in Black have been gay, it so happens that, for these two men, their sexuality is an issue forced into salience for them by the punitive practices of the state and the military. Their stories demonstrate clearly the way patriarchy, nationalism and militarism are connected.

Miloš Urošević, 21, had fairly recently escaped military service by being designated unfit by the psychologists. He says, 'they concluded I was gay without my saying - from my gestures.' Now he was happy to be a WiB activist, 'a feminist' (he said), taking an active part in street protests against militarism and nationalism. Because of time, language and other circumstances I didn't have the chance I would have liked to know Milos better. With Boban Stojanović, 26, the second male WiB activist I met, I had a fuller conversation. He presently lives in a small room in the office. Boban was born in Zajecar, a small industrial town in Eastern Serbia, his father a truck driver and his mother an office worker. They would have completed the census form, he says, as 'Serbs' but they felt no ethnic identification. 'We were Yugoslavs.'

Boban's childhood wasn't a happy one. The household was a place of verbal and emotional violence. He had a very sensitive, intense relationship with his mother, and was on bad terms with his father, an alcoholic. He grew up to be afraid of older men, men his father's age. In primary school he didn't want to play football with the other boys. The play was too often aggressive, competitive; there was a lot of pushing and shoving. They called him a 'girl'. They would say, 'you're gay!'

I didn't want to be effeminate or feminized. But I didn't want to be like the boys. I made some kind of wall between me and other men. As I grew up I started to think about it. About my difference. I couldn't find a connection between me and other men.

In 1996 when he was of an age to be conscripted to the army, the first official notification came to his home address. His grandmother cheerfully signed and returned it without consulting him. She was so proud that he would be a soldier! But Boban was so angry he felt like breaking up the house.

What could I do? Thinking about the military I'd always supposed somehow I could live through it. But deep in my mind I thought of the other men who'd be there, how I wouldn't be able to be myself, how I'd have to hide myself. If I expressed myself I'd be harassed. I felt afraid. That's a big reason I refused to go. It wasn't just a political choice for me, about militarism being bad. *This just wasn't a possibility for me, there was no compromise.* I couldn't go - that was it.

His parents gave him no support in draft evasion. They felt his reluctance to serve was a shame on the family. At this time he didn't know of any organization that could have helped him. By various devices he got his call-up delayed until, finally, in 2000, he was cornered. He 'passed' a military medical test, which involved extremes of humiliation, both physical and psychological. Unfortunately, while homosexuality had in the past been forbidden in the military and had sometimes served as an opt-out for refusers, a recent statute had legalized it. Now when Boban said "But I'm gay" the recruiters simply said "So what?" He was ordered to report for service the coming June.

In the interval, however, he'd attended a seminar organized by Women in Black. This was the first time he'd ever heard of 'conscientious objection'. To refuse service, Boban believed, inevitably meant arrest and imprisonment. But Boyan, Darko and Sichko, whom he now met at WiB, advised him to enter service but to engage in principled 'non-compliance'. So he became a curious creature, a soldier who is a non-soldier. He refused everything that was asked of him, including putting his signature to his enlistment. He tells a harrowing story of the verbal and physical violence to which he was subjected until he was eventually dismissed as 'emotionally immature'.

That's how Boban became an activist with WiB. He started to read books. He learned that 'Women in Black' isn't just about women, but is concerned with civil values as a whole. Now, he says

Ever since the seminar I felt some kind of security in WiB. I was accepted here. People would hug me, kiss me, talk to me. It was like another world. I didn't say I was gay. But people knew that and didn't look at me strangely for it... I really want to help the group, give support, work in the office. The values here are very, very important for me. My life has totally changed. I learned, for my personal life, I just want to be here. WiB is my first activist group and my last. I don't want to be in any other.

Boban says, 'I feel more secure among women'. But the effect of WiB was also to show him that he could be secure among (some) men too, within this space women had created. One time, when the other men were staying over in the WiB apartment, five of them had to share bedspace in the living room. He was apprehensive. But afterwards he felt for the first time, 'Look, it's OK! They're happy to share the same bed. But they don't want to rape me. I couldn't believe it.'

Women in Black, though, is not just a space in which a victimized gay man can feel protected from other men. More importantly, this is a space in which women and men alike can live their sexuality in whatever way they choose, as a matter of their own concern, confident that everyone among and around them is *anti-homophobic*. Ivana Percl in Zagreb, a long-distance member of Women in Black Belgrade, read this Profile in draft and wrote to me,

It isn't important if you are woman or man, young or older, gay or heterosexual or bisexual. What is important is that all of us there are

learning how to be tolerant of each other, of our differences. It's not easy all the time, but we make the effort. I like the word 'deconstruction'. Deconstruction of all constructions. That's how I see and feel WiB Belgrade.

It is an exact parallel to the way in which WiB is a space in which people of all 'ethnic' names can freely live their own sense of self, confident that everyone among and around them is *anti-nationalistic*. Tamara and Ksenija only told me, out of kindness, because they were trustful of my analysis and my intention, what their 'ethnic background' was. It's not a question normally asked in this environment. Likewise, they gently avoided making use of opportunities to tell me whether they see themselves as lesbian or heterosexual, for that too is *not the point*. The point is that this is a label-free zone. Thus, everyone takes pleasure in the fact that a man may sign himself, with apparent illogic, a member of 'Women in Black'. One day on the way home from a Women in Black demonstration Boban was badly beaten up by angry boys shouting 'You're a gay!' in the same breath as 'Traitor. Get out of Serbia!' If Boban can be hit and hurt as a Woman in Black he can certainly *be* a Woman in Black, I think would be the feeling. Tamara:

These are totally different guys here. Outside, men continue to perform masculine identity. This is not masculinity. The whole project is refusing the dichotomy. The words male and female don't have the same meaning in here as outside. Outside you can be beaten as a man.

Boban would later write that he sees WiB's practice of inclusion as enabling men to work outwards for change in other men: '...one women's space that accepts men at the same time becomes the space in which men are changing men... Today, men who are in the group are doing exactly this: they recognize themselves in patriarchy, learn, transform themselves, and, in the end, change men around them' (Stojanović 2005:2).

So, in this apartment in Belgrade they are re-writing identity, in terms of gender, sexuality and national 'name'. 'Woman', 'gay' or 'Serb' are not identities for them but political practices, open to continual discussion and reformulation. But identity isn't everything. Staša, reviewing what I wrote above, wanted to stress that 'the men are not here because they are gay but because we share the same *values*.' The bottom line is that, however they define their sexuality, the Women in Black men 'are active antimilitarist, antinationalist, antipatriotic, antihomophobic and antisexist men'. Nor does the presence of men, she told me, undermine the capability of women to retain the initiative in this feminist organization. Sometimes the women meet alone, and the men accept there are times when this is appropriate.

Post-war practice: reconnecting

I went to Belgrade in October this year to join Women in Black for a celebration of the 13th anniversary of their first vigil. I was able to attend a demonstration in Republic Square in which around 40 women and some men participated. The usual black clothes and placards of the participants

contrasted with the rainbow colours of an 8-metre long silk peace flag. The rainbow theme has been popularized by the Italian peace movement but it also has resonance with Gay Pride. Since the last big Pride march and the last WiB vigil had both been viciously attacked by members of the public, there was some anxiety about reactions to this anniversary vigil. But we met with no animosity.

The anniversary was also celebrated in a two day seminar on 'Women's Peace Politics' at which women of WiB Belgrade were joined by women from other towns in Serbia, and also groups from Bosnia-Herzegovina. From this event I learned a lot about WiB's recent work and current thinking. For a start, it made clear to me the scale and intensity of their activity since the wars ended. Mainly funded by a five-year grant from the Heinrich Boll Stiftung, they have organized series of workshops on feminist and antinationalist / antimilitarist issues in five locations in Serbia.

As a result of these and other activities (*WFP* 2005 forthcoming) they are no longer just 'Women in Black Belgrade', as WiB worldwide tends to know them. They have long since overcome the restrictions on internal travel and communication imposed by the war. They now comprise a network with members in many other places in Serbia and Montenegro for whom, as Staša puts it, 'the Belgrade office is our common house, a common place of solidarity'.

There were just over thirty of us at this October workshop. The age range appeared to be, with a few exceptions, 45 to 65 years.⁴ Staša facilitated the event, in partnership with Zibija Šarenkapić, of the Cultural Centre Damad, an NGO from the predominantly Muslim town of Novi Pazar in the Sanžak region of Serbia.

Staša set the scene. The purpose of the workshop was to build 'women's solidarity and friendship, trust and confidence as a tool in resisting militarism'. She asked women to remember to speak and address each other as individuals, rather than in the name of some collective identity. She reminded us that patriarchal society assigns the role of nurture to women and ascribes certain values to them – such as being 'peaceful'. But these are social constructions, she emphasized. We all know of women war criminals. It is not on the basis of being women but only by political work, knowledge and choices that we can act together as women against militarism and nationalism.

Addressing the past

⁴ Younger women were simultaneously attending a parallel workshop on a different theme, 'Sisterhood and Solidarity: Profession or Choice'. Its subject was the way the patriarchal model of domination influences even the behaviour of women to women, for instance the patronising of younger women by older women. The workshop was organised by young women of an *ad hoc* group 'Antikeve' (Ivana lists them as Ksenija F, Natasa M, Marija P and Ivana P), formed to address precisely this theme.

As women began to speak I quickly picked up their feeling of living in menacing times. Milosević was defeated in elections on September 24, 2000, and forced out of power by popular demonstrations on October 5. The regime was replaced by moderates under the presidency of Koštunica. However, since 2000, when Prime Minister Djindjić was murdered, with the Kosovo question unresolved and trials of war criminals far from complete, Serb nationalism is coming into the open again, the Radical Party commands a large proportion of the vote and the prospects for lasting democracy have deteriorated. Though militarization has decreased slightly, this has been offset by an increase in the malign political influence of the Orthodox Church. There is no sign of a recovery of truly shared living and co-operation between 'Muslims' and 'Orthodox' in either Bosnia or Kosovo.

I asked both Zibija and Staša what they hoped for from this seminar. Zibija told me: the women attending it are living in local communities where women's roles are still traditional and any solidarity between women of one community and 'the other', is deeply suspect. In such circumstances the meeting would be valuable were it only to give participants the sense 'there are like-minded women that you can count on'. At best, they might be able to plan some shared activity for the future.

Staša explained that WiB do not think in terms of 'reconciliation' – a notion that 'suggests we are different peoples who have to resolve a dispute'. On the contrary, we were all Yugoslavs who had been named and divided by nationalist politicians and militarists intent on erasing every indication of similarity and shared existence. It is not a question of 'reconciling' but of refusing the arbitrary barriers placed between people, re-establishing connection and seeking political grounds for solidarity.

A description of the circumstances from which some women came to the workshop may help indicate the significance of the discussions. Present at the meeting were women from the Bosnian towns of Srebrenica and Bratunac. They are 11 kms. apart, in what, at the end of the war, became the Republika Srpska. Before the war, Srebrenica's population numbered 37,000 (80% Muslim, 20% Serb). Bratunac had 32,000 inhabitants (68% Muslim, 32% Serb). As the Serb nationalist forces approached, many Muslims fled from Bratunac and other places, swelling the population of Srebrenica, an area supposedly protected by the UN forces. But, in spite of the UN presence, Serb extremists massacred an estimated 10,000 Muslims on July 11, 1995. The victims were mainly men and boys, though 700 women are also unaccounted for. Almost all surviving Muslims left the area, to reside (for shorter and longer periods) in the Muslim-controlled part of Bosnia or abroad. In these years many Bosnian Serbs were also killed by Croat and Muslim fighters. There is some co-operation today between survivor associations of all three communities (and Kosovans) with the support of the International Institution of Exhumation and Identification.

Two groups of Muslim survivors of Srebrenica and Bratunac were represented at our seminar – one organization which favours the return of Muslims to live in what is now in effect a Bosnian Serb mini-state; one which does not favour

return. Some thousands of Muslims have returned but they are living with little organizational support in lonely and threatening circumstances among their former 'enemies'.

Also at our meeting were women from three Bosnian Serb organizations from the town of Bratunac and the neighbouring village of Kravica. Many thousand Bosnian Serb refugees fleeing from Central Bosnia settled here during the war, and today the area is predominantly Serb, with enclaves of Muslim returners. There is virtually no contact of a constructive kind between the two communities, except what these few women's organizations have contrived. One woman from Bratunac said, 'there is a hidden border round our town – a few brave women have crossed it'. Their presence here at the seminar, together with women of the Muslim 'survivor' associations, hosted and supported by women of Serbia (including Sanzak) was thus very significant, and very characteristic, of Women in Black.

Responsibility and guilt

A central issue in the discussions I listened to at the workshop was the relationship between *responsibility and guilt*. WiB are firm in the belief that it's unhelpful for an individual to take on collective guilt. Women are conditioned to feel guilty, and it leads to self-hatred, anger and ultimately to more violence. 'Serb' women in particular are vulnerable to deep feelings of guilt for crimes that Serb nationalist forces committed in their name, for not having seen what was happening in time, for not having taken a stand against it. But crimes were committed on all sides, and this should be acknowledged without falling into a "hierarchy of victims" ('we suffered more than you'). The alternative is to increase our detailed knowledge of the past, acknowledge the crimes that have been done 'in our name' and take responsibility for them through our own choices and actions for the future. Some of the things said in the workshop, that I noted down, may help illustrate the dynamic:

'War was being prepared far ahead of its outbreak. We weren't enough aware. We got drawn into it.'

'In the 1990s I thought everyone had a right to their opinion. Now I think I should have faced up to wrongs and named them, and argued the case.'

'Only when my husband was to be called up, then I supported his refusal to serve and went out into the street myself. But I ask myself now, why only then, when I was personally affected? Why not before?'

'We as citizens of Serbia have more moral responsibility for the war because our politicians were more to blame. And we had more possibility to oppose them because we didn't get bombed till '99. '

'For years I have been ashamed of saying I am from Serbia, because of collective guilt.'

'It's not easy to experience being one of a people that do crimes.'

'I warned my son when he went to Sarajevo "don't tell anyone where you are from".'

'Those who started the war must be punished, to absolve the rest of us from collective guilt.'

'Every war criminal should be named by individual name, not by national identity. It hurts me when they say it was "Serbs".'

'We must constantly remind ourselves who is responsible. Who drove the vehicles, who dug the graves? They must all be arrested.'

'A victim is a victim, a mother is a mother, regardless of identity.'

'We are finding war graves. It isn't publicized. People should come and see the places where crimes were committed.'

'To say in this country that we committed crimes and have criminals that should be punished isn't easy. My brother is one. I hope he will be punished.'

'We must find the criminals, who still go free in our cities and get promoted in the police because they were good killers and rapists, and burned a lot of houses.'

'People are so obedient to the state. If you rebel you are immediately stigmatized. You get to feel you're crazy. Other peoples' silence silences you.'

'We can':

- work individually;
- clarify our minds, read;
- talk to friends and colleagues, reveal prejudices;
- network, form organizations;
- work in schools, change the curriculum;
- create public opinion, make space in the media.

'Personally, I'm going to refuse to receive any visit from the priest in my home, because the church is encouraging nationalism. That's something concrete I can do.'

'We don't want to take on collective guilt. But we must face and take responsibility for the fact that crimes were done on our behalf. The dignity of the victims must be restored through our solidarity.'

'I take responsibility but I don't feel guilty.'

I was struck by the fact that, when participants were asked to prioritize from among twenty or more sayings or slogans for their shared work, the following three came top of the list: 'No war crime should be left unpunished', 'We are crossing boundaries; we are jumping over the walls!' and 'Solidarity with women across all state borders, ethnic and religious affiliations and divisions'.

Things the visit to Belgrade made me think about:

The age gap.

The typical WiB woman, I've learned in my travels, is in her middle years. A lot of WiB groups around the world wish they could attract and hold younger members. Belgrade is unusual because, as we've seen, there are several activists here in their twenties. What's more, they mobilized ten or eleven other young women, from around the Yugoslav region, to come to the international WiB encounter in Marina di Massa, Italy, in August 2003. The young 'ex-Yugoslavs' were bright, anarchistic and made a refreshing splash – actually in the swimming pool, conceptually in the discussions.

In Belgrade WiB there are young women and older women, with a missing generation in between. This is because women between 25 and 40 tend to be overstretched earning their living while raising young children, and cannot spare much time for activism. The young group are thus working with women quite considerably older than themselves. I asked Tamara, Ksenija and Dana what the dynamic was like between the two age groups, in case there is something there from which other WiB's can learn.

Dana said, 'There can be problems. Probably it's not age so much as personality. But we do sometimes stereotype each other, as young, as old.' Ksenija said the real issue isn't one of age but of seniority in terms of activism. Some women who are very experienced assume they know best how to deal with things and don't trust that the younger women will know how to proceed without their guidance. Sometimes advice is welcome, but sometimes it may be overwhelming, patronizing. She took up the issue with one woman, who had replied, 'But you've not the experience yet! Don't you want to learn?' Ksenija said, 'It was as though her way was surely better than ours.' But, she added, 'It's only some women. It's patriarchy in our own relationships.' This issue was addressed at the young women's seminar – see footnote 2 above. Tamara said, succinctly, in her quiet way, 'I mostly practice active listening with the older ones'.

Patriarchy and militarism are inseparable

One thing I've found particularly helpful in the analysis and practice of Women in Black Belgrade has been the irreducible connection they make between feminism and antimilitarism (and antinationalism – although of course

militarism historically is antecedent to nationalism). This thinking is evident in many of their writings, but here I am drawing on two articles by Staša Zajović. In one, she writes

Patriarchy is the basis and precondition for the survival of militarism and nationalism. Hatred towards the 'other' and those deemed different, which can lead even to tendencies toward their extermination, is at the core of patriarchy' (Zajović 2004:2).

Earlier she had asked herself why such a high proportion of those signing a petition calling for a civilian alternative to military service were women. It's because, she believes, these issues, and indeed militarism itself, are seen by women as connected with their everyday lives, with their marginalisation, inequality and gender roles: '... militarism, sexism and nationalism are part of patriarchal control over women'. Women, she goes on, were the ones who cared for their male relatives, hiding and protecting those who evaded the forced draft or ran away from the front. In being active now in the struggle to change the law, 'their own marginalization and devotion to caring for others is transformed into a kind of opposition to militarism... Women are very willing to participate in antimilitarist activities that are connected to their personal life and everyday experience' (WFP 2001:276-78).

Men for their part, in refusing military service, are rejecting a given gender role. In a Women in Black leaflet dated May 2001, are the words 'I am a conscientious objector because... of the patriarchal system and especially because militarism is armed patriarchy' (WFP 2001:286).

Synergy of linked projects

What struck me a lot here was the way a small community of women, on an impulse that came from an incipient women's movement in peace time, had on the outbreak of war formed three organizations inspired by similar principles but directed towards different kinds of response: conceptual, personal, political.

The Women's Studies Centre set out to develop the conceptual foundations of a women's response to these terrible times and enabled a lot of women to see the war as gendered and to think of themselves as feminists. (Feminist Publishing 94 contributed to this too.) Two instances where theory enriched practice. First, the WSC includes theory of bodies and sexuality, and latterly queer theory, in its curriculum. We've seen how that is lived out in WiB. Second, the WSC teaches the thinking of philosopher Hannah Arendt on 'responsibility'. We've seen (above) how this too informs WiB practice.

The Autonomous Women's Centre responded to the needs of traumatized individual survivors, whether of domestic violence or of rape in war. They demonstrated the practical connection between the violent oppression of women in the family and in society, in peace time and in war. And Women in Black provided a framework in which women could dare to take a public stand in opposition to militarism and nationalist aggression by their 'own' state. It

also built and maintained important links between women across local and international borders. It could not have done this work as effectively as it did had the two sister organizations not existed – the one a ‘school of feminist thought’ and the other a place where women were caring for individual women.

The existence of this cluster of organizations enabled women with different abilities and inclinations to get involved in whatever way was possible for them. The written and spoken word; individual acts of compassion and care; and risk-taking demonstrations of disobedience (refusal of ethnic identification, refusal of militarism, refusal of sexism) were all necessary and together they seem to me to have added up to a sustainable feminist response to war.

Contacts

This profile is based on an eight-day visit to Belgrade as part of the fieldwork for my research. While there I had the chance to interview (in alphabetical order) Boban Stojanović, Cica (Nevzeta) Josifović, Dana Johnson, Daša Duhaček, Jasmina Tešanović, Ksenija Forca, Slavica Stojanović, Staša Zajović, Tamara Belenzada and Zibija Šarenkapić. I draw on an interview I had in London with Lepa Mladjenović, and comments she made on this Profile in draft. I also had conversations in the course of the seminar with women of the Bosnian organizations Women’s Association ‘Maja’ of Kravica, Women’s Association ‘Podrina’ and ‘Forum Žena’ of Bratunac, the Association of Mothers of Srebrenica and Žepa, and the Citizens of Žepa and Srebrenica living in Tuzla. Daniela Durkalić and Tamara Belenzada generously helped me with interpretation. I wish I had been able to sit down with each and every woman I met in Jug Bogdanova – especially more of the older generation of women. The story would have gone on gaining richness with each new interview. But to everyone in Belgrade who does this important work for all of us, and in addition made time for me - a big thank you.

I returned a first draft of this Profile to everyone I had interviewed, and from many of them I received helpful comments and amendments, which I took account of in producing a second draft. This second draft was returned to everyone to see whether they would feel comfortable to have the profile put up on the WiB international website. It is now with their agreement that I go public with it. We hope it will interest WiB and other active women in other countries. ‘Watch this space’ for forthcoming profiles.

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This document is one of a series of local and regional profiles that will appear on this website in coming months. They are interim products a two-year research project *Women Opposing War: Organization and Strategy in the International Movement of Women against Violence and Militarism*, being carried out by the author from her base in the Department of Sociology, City University, London, during 2004/6, with the support of several charitable trusts. The profile is not intended for publication in its present form. I would be grateful if you would not quote it in published work without first seeking my agreement.

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