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# Feminist Resistance to War and Violence in Serbia

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## Part 3 of 3 ([Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#))

### Feminist Resistance to Violence Against Women

#### The SOS Hotline

The founders of the feminist anti-violence movement in Serbia view violence against women and children as a social and political issue, not the private interactions between men and women, or within the family. The movement and organizations working against violence against women grew out of the feminist movement established in Serbia, Yugoslavia in the 1980s. The first SOS Hotline in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia opened in 1987 in Zagreb, Croatia. Following this the women in Belgrade, Serbia tried for several years to establish a similar crisis line, but the authorities were suspicious of this work and refused to grant them space and resources. After persistent effort, on 8 March 1990, International Women's Day, the SOS Hotline for Women and Children Victims of Violence opened in Belgrade.

The original mission of the SOS Hotline for Women and Children was three fold: 1) to assist victims of violence through a hotline, 2) to make visible to the public the existence, seriousness and reality of men's violence against women and children, and 3) to initiate institutional change to bring about more prompt, serious, and sensitive response to victims of violence (Mrsevic and

Hughes 1997).

From 1990 to 1993, the SOS Hotline was the only feminist organization that women and children could contact for assistance concerning violence against women, their friends, or family.

### **The Group for Women Raped in War**

In December 1992 women from the SOS Hotline founded the Group for Women Raped in War. Their aim was to support women raped in the war with basic needs, such as food, clothing, medicine, money and friendship. They wanted to create solidarity among survivors of sexual abuse in war so the women could regain their autonomy and self esteem.

The Group for Women Raped in War wanted to help the women through the procedures of medical institutions and refugee organizations. They looked for women in hospitals where survivors went to have abortions or await delivery of babies. Sometimes, they received referrals from doctors, but there was poor collaboration since state institutions' interests were different from that of the Group for Women Raped in War. Medical personnel in gynecological wards treated women who were raped as "guilty victims." Survivors of war rape were treated the same way, unless they were Serbs—then the hospitals had a nationalist interest in their stories of victimization. Serb officials used the testimonies of the rapes of Serbian women to support their claim that Croats and Muslims were the aggressors. Thus they used women's bodies and pain in support of nationalism. In May 1993 while volunteers from the SOS Hotline sat in the hospital with a depressed rape survivor, who had just had a painful second trimester abortion, the doctors were photocopying her story and preparing to take it to the European Parliament.

The Group for Women Raped in War supported the women's decisions in whatever they chose to do: go back to parents, leave the country, stay in Belgrade, find work and, for some, keep their babies or give them up for adoption.

The Group for Women Raped in War's political goal was to make visible the systematic and genocidal rape of women with Muslim and Croat names by Serb soldiers. The media in Serbia never covered these rapes and the Serbian public could remain unaware of the ethnic cleansing, concentration camps and systematic rapes organized and carried out by Serbs in Bosnia.

### **The Autonomous Women's Center Against Sexual Violence**

The Group for Women Raped in War founded the Autonomous Women's Center Against Sexual Violence. With the financial support of organizations from Europe and the United States the Center opened on International Human Rights Day, 10 December 1993. In their opening address they said, "We wish to stress once again that women's rights are human rights, that human rights are above national interests, and that the State must not kill its citizens" (Women's Lobby, 10 December 1993). The founders of the Autonomous Women's Center Against Sexual Violence are women who refuse to be bystanders to the destruction of people—whether they live in their own neighborhoods or other parts of former Yugoslavia. They women refuse to be victims, although some have been victimized.

The Autonomous Women's Center Against Sexual Violence was created for all women who have survived rape and sexual abuse, whether from war zones or from neighborhoods in Belgrade. The Center set up a multiple approach to sexual violence. They analyzed and responded to rape at the individual, social and political level. Their goal is to respond to the emotional needs of the rape survivor, and comprehend and condemn the use of sexual violence as a method to keep women powerless in society and as a political and military weapon of war and ethnic cleansing.

The Center has a SOS Rape Hotline, individual counseling and in autumn 1994, the Center organized support groups for survivors of sexual

abuse. Women come to the Center from several different populations and backgrounds. The Center sees women coming from war zones and local women who were sexually assaulted. Mothers of children who are being sexually abused have called for assistance and teen-age and adult incest survivors call or visit the Center to talk about their abuse. Young women (ages 16–20) from the Belgrade Maternity House frequently come to the Center to find support. These women are waiting to deliver babies. Some of these pregnancies are the result of rape, but many of the women become pregnant from boyfriends and then are rejected by their families because they were not married. Also, refugee women and children come to the Center for humanitarian supplies and personal support.

For several years, the Autonomous Women's Center was the only women's drop-in center in Serbia that organized women's counseling, worked on women's rights campaigns, networked with different women's groups in the country, and had an ongoing public campaign to "make sexual violence against women socially visible." An additional aim of the Center is to maintain communication with feminists and activists against violence against women in Croatia and Bosnia–Herzegovina.

### **Growth of Women's Movement–1995 through 1998**

The SOS Hotline and the Autonomous Women's Center Against Sexual Violence provided the training grounds for many feminists in Serbia who have expanded the women's support and anti-violence work by founding many other organizations in Belgrade and throughout Serbia, including Kosovo. Although patriarchal cultural traditions and the totalitarian political climate in Serbia make the rise of women's organizations difficult, the feminist movement against all types of violence has spread to towns and cities outside Belgrade. At the end of 1998, there were

initiatives in seventeen towns that are part of the feminist network. The Belgrade groups supported the new organizations with written materials, education and exchanges of experience.

Two new women's centers were formed that gave support to victims of violence—the Incest Trauma Center and the Counseling Center for Women. Two houses called "Lastavica," meaning The Swallow, were established for single women refugees from Krajina, an area of northern Croatia that was "ethnically cleansed" of Serbs at the end of the war. "Women on Work" is a new organization that supports women's enterprise initiatives. "Out of the Circle" supports women with disabilities and their families. In addition, "Bibija " a Roma Women's Center was formed.

### **Nationalism, Militarism and Violence Against Women**

The nationalist hatred generated in Serbia has increased the violence against women also. In the autumn of 1991 the SOS Hotline started receiving calls from women who were battered after men watched the TV news in which there were stories filled with hatred for "the enemy." Women said the men became enraged after listening to and watching the nationalist propaganda and beat women as a way to avenge their wounded national pride. Some women reported that they were beaten for the first time in their lives after the men watched one of the nationalist reports on Serbian victims of war. Women reported that their husbands cursed the Croats and Muslims in Croatia and Bosnia–Herzegovina while beating them. In most of these cases the ethnicity of the woman was the same as her partner. In cases where the ethnicity of the man and the woman was different, the man beat the woman, claiming "Our five minutes has come," meaning that this was the man's opportunity to be the victor for his ethnicity for a short period of time (Mladjenovic 1992, 55).

Men who were in the Yugoslav army or paramilitary groups returned to Belgrade

traumatized, angry and violent. They brought weapons they used in fighting with them and used them to threaten or harm women. Since the beginning of the wars, weapons are kept in many homes. Pistols, hand grenades, and automatic weapons have become part of households.

"Some of the men who came back from the front (from regular army or paramilitary battalions) continue massacres in their homes: they abuse women, beat their children, sleep with machine guns under their pillows, rape their wives while they are sleeping, destroy the furniture, scream, swear, spit and accuse" (Mladjenovic 1992, 54).

Women report an increase in men's alcohol abuse that increases their violence to women and children. Men, who participated in paramilitary groups that loot houses and businesses as part of ethnic cleansing, are angry and violent because they have not received the material rewards they thought they would. The men expect and demand emotional understanding and support from the women around them, and see their wives as someone on whom they can displace their rage.

The longer the wars continue the more tolerance and acceptance there is for violence as a way of resolving conflict or gaining control. Since the wars, violence is legitimated in Parliament, streets and homes, with the result being an increase in violence against women in the streets and homes. In Serbia, nationalism and militarism have become dominant ideologies in society.

Women's groups that have formed to resist war and violence bring a feminist analysis to Serbian nationalism and men's violence against women. They see parallels between men's defense of their private abuse of women in their homes and

Serbia's defense of the violence perpetrated against people of other ethnicities inside the borders of former Yugoslavia. Serbian President Milošević resists international intervention in his war against ethnic Albanians in Kosova, especially the presence of peacekeeping troops by claiming that Kosova is Serbia's land, and that the violence, as with men's violence against women and children, is an internal and private matter, and outsiders should not intervene. Feminist groups in Belgrade point out that both private and state violence stems from patriarchy.

"Patriarchy considers that men's violence in the family is a 'private family matter'—this ideology or privacy permits violence in all other domains of society. When the SOS hotline for women and children calls the police to intervene in violent scenes, a violent husband standing beside his bruised wife claims, 'This is my wife, it is my issue.' Policemen, also with male understanding, confirm that it is a 'family matter.' That is exactly the model for how the first man of the ruling regime leads the war in Kosova: 'Kosova is an internal problem of Serbia'" (Independent Women's Groups in Belgrade, 22 May 1998).

### **No Ending**

In 1994, we wrote that an ending could be written for this paper because the story of feminist resistance in Serbia was far from over. In 1994, as the paper was sent to the publisher, the city of Bihac in Bosnia was being destroyed by Serbian artillery. It is now April 1999 as we write an update for this paper, and still an ending cannot

be written. As this update of the paper is sent to the publisher, Serbian police, military and paramilitary units are emptying all of Kosovo of ethnic Albanians. NATO is dropping bombs on Belgrade, Novi Sad, Karljevo, and on Pristina and other sites in Kosovo and Montenegro. We can only hope that the words of Women in Black, written in 1994, still apply:

"Women will remember, women are telling each other stories of the reality we live in and we are witnesses of many crimes for which this regime is responsible. Women, our friends from all parts and states of the former Yugoslavia are still telling us about the suffering they went through and what is happening to them now. Nationalism didn't separate all of us, a stream of trust still exists between women of all names" (Women in Black 5 October 1994).

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