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## PROTECTION OF WOMEN'S DIGNITY DURING THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC

*The subject of the paper is the escalation of violence against women in the social and political context of deterioration the economic (labour and professional) position of women. These are the two basic areas of possible violation of the dignity of women during the Covid19 pandemic in Serbia, both of which relate to the very basic of human existence. The aim of this paper is to, through the analysis of endangering and diminishing the dignity of women in the current moment of the pandemic crisis, simultaneously identify possible answers and measures to protect the dignity of women. The focus is on necessity of protection against gender based violence, women's human rights, institutional responses, solidarity, security and good communication. Attention will be paid to both domestic and international sources and examples of good practice, especially from the region and Europe, from the OSCE, Council of Europe, the EIGE, European Institute for Gender Equality, to maybe most interesting campaign led by the FIFA. The future is still seen by all the mentioned actors as uncertain.*

**Keywords:** *gender based violence, escalation during pandemic measures, deterioration of gender equality, uncertain future*

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## 1. Introduction

This pandemic increases all existing inequalities and seriously affects those who are already vulnerable and endangered. It is well known through history, that very crisis affects women like a big wave, which throws them miles back. (Radić, 2020). Everything that has been won in terms of gender equality, including protection against gender based violence, begins to disappear the moment the crisis brought women back home and brought them duplication of working hours and obligations. Moreover, people most of them women, who live and work on the margins of society are exposed to the highest risk of infection and difficulties and are additionally stigmatized. We are facing individually and together with an unprecedented health, humanitarian and socio-economic crisis. A large number of LGBT people who already live in fear for personal safety, significantly reduced movements, communications, educations and professional aspirations, while conducting a “double life”, and fearing of future victimization, are now particularly vulnerable (Mršević, 2017: 201). Thus the World Victimology Society is also aware of growing patterns of victimization, including cases of abuse of power in the context of particularly marginalized communities and vulnerable groups and individuals (Peacock, 2020).

The increase in violence against women should be given the most attention, because women are more exposed to the risk of domestic and other forms of gender based violence. All regional and domestic women's organizations, which were consulted, were seriously concerned because social distance and limited movement raised an additional risk of domestic violence. The home is not always a safe place for women, who are particularly at risk during restraint measures, as domestic abusers cannot be avoided and it is difficult, or impossible, to call the police due to the proximity of the abuser (UN Women, 2020). In short, the current situation is especially dangerous for women and children, who share their home with a bully (European Feminist Working Group, 2020). They warned that availability of support services for victims of violence has been reduced. We believe that it is important to react on behalf of all women and girls with the experience of domestic-partner violence, whose home has become a home cage, during curfew, every day and during the holidays for a continuous many hours. Victims of gender-based domestic-partner violence - must stay at home because of the coronavirus - at the same time they are forbidden, even in conditions of acute violence, to enter the public space, with the threat of drastic fines.

## **2. Increase of gender based violence during pandemic**

Since the lockout measures of pandemic began (in Serbia since 15. March), the police, women's shelters and NGOs have reported an increase in domestic violence, especially violence against women. People go out much less, many have lost their jobs, housing conditions are aggravated, multi-member, multi-generational families are cramped in a small flat, there is a general feeling of frustration, insecurity, increased anxiety, which all leads to conflicts in relationships between partners and other relationships. women, children, old parents are beaten.

The increase in violence against women should be given the most attention because women are more exposed to the risk of domestic violence. All regional and domestic women's organizations, which were consulted, were seriously concerned because social distance and limited movement raised an additional risk of domestic violence. Already at the very beginning of this great health crisis in the world, it has been shown that pandemics, that is, measures taken differently affect women and men. Domestic violence against women increases in times of crisis: women spend longer periods of time with violent partners at homes, so they are more exposed to violence. The home is not always a safe place for women, who are particularly at risk during restraint measures, as domestic abusers cannot be avoided and it is difficult, if not impossible, to call the police, the SOS phone, or anybody, to report the violence and ask for assistance, due to the proximity of the abuser (UN Women, 2020). In short, the current situation is especially dangerous for women and children, who share their home with a violent perpetrator (European Feminist Working Group, 2020).

When the crisis is over, it will be even harder for them to leave the bully, due to the financial insecurity that will follow. In this case, relatives and neighbors can play a big role, they can report violence if they suspect that women are exposed to violence, especially if the woman is not able to call for help (FemPlatz, 2020, 3-4). Stressful situations, such as those being experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic and economic instability, exacerbate the risk. Moreover, the current distancing measures in place in many countries make it harder for women and children to reach out to family, friends and health workers who could otherwise provide support and protection.

### 3. International actors condemned gender based violence

International governmental organizations<sup>1</sup> as well as international non-governmental organizations<sup>2</sup> already at the very beginning of pandemics were among the first who warned to increased exposure of women to situations of gender-based violence. We mention public announcements and appeals issued by the OSCO, the UN WOMEN, the Council of Europe, the World Health Organization for Europe, the FIFA, the European Commission and World Health Organization, the EIGE, the World Society of Victimology. It is important to mention also, that all international organizations usually have somewhat slow flows of bureaucratic, hierarchically strictly defined decision-making procedures. As a result of slow procedures, any expressing a public stand, not to mention condemnations or warnings, usually takes a long time. But when it came to risks of gender-based violence during the pandemic, clear warnings came very quickly, already at the beginning of pandemic measures, really at the right time, and moreover, from the highest positions. It is important that these international actors came out publicly condemning gender-based violence, starting in April 2020, meaning at the very beginning of the global introduction of anti-pandemic measures. These organizations are often partners of national and local authorities in Serbia and certainly have an impact on their policies. It is also worth mentioning that Serbia accepted the obligation to harmonize national law with the EU law, meaning to Endeavour to ensure full alignment of the existing and future legislation and its true implementation and enforcement (Mišćević, 2018: 335). In addition, these international organizations can also influence domestic non-governmental organizations, media, expert groups, research entities and individuals through various forms of partnership, funding and cooperation.

Because of all this, we believe that it is important to look at this type of protection of the dignity of women from gender-based violence.

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<sup>1</sup> International governmental organizations are non-territorial subjects of international law in permanent institutional form of cooperation between member states in achieving common goals. The founding act of international governmental organizations is a multilateral treaty and by it the member states transfer part of their sovereign powers to the international organization. At the same time, the founding agreement has the characteristics of a constitutional act of the organization and it prescribes, among other things: the goals of establishment, competencies of the organization, organization and rights and obligations of bodies, conditions for acquiring and losing membership, method of financing ...

<sup>2</sup> International non-governmental organizations are an institutional form of international cooperation whose subjects are not states, and the founders are individuals, groups, associations or institutions from different countries in various fields of human activity, with the aim of achieving common interests.

### *2.1. The Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe - OSCE*

We emphasize the reaction of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which has been the source of reactions to gender-based violence since the beginning of April 2020. The Organization for European Security and Cooperation was the first to respond concretely by press releases and especially by appeals to the governments of the member states (OSCE, 2020, April 2). Protection from domestic violence urgently needed for women and children under stay-at-home orders, a statement issued by the OSCE officials at the Vienna/ Copenhagen/ Warsaw meeting (OSCE, 2020, April 6). A warning was issued about the increase of gender-based violence, the competent government bodies were called upon to react, the media to inform about the possibilities of protection, as well as non-governmental organizations to stay available to provide assistance to those with experience of gender-based violence. “State of emergency might cause a rise in the number of domestic violence cases. We call upon all competent institutions to treat the calls related to domestic violence as their highest priority, and to take all measures to protect the victims. In these hard times, the media needs to intensify reporting about the risks of domestic violence, and highlight existing support services so that victims can learn where they can turn for help.” “It is important for civil society organizations to remain available to potential victims, and for state institutions, including police and centers for social work, to work to reduce the risks of domestic violence by conducting information campaigns and keeping services open during the crisis.” “Women and children, but also other family members, are subjected to mental, physical and sexual violence. In situations of stress and home isolation, this can further escalate. The Government has increased the availability of services for victims around the country”, said Head of the OSCE Mission to Skopje, Clemens Koja.

Persistent gender inequality might worsen due to the impact of the pandemic caused by the corona virus if not properly addressed from the beginning. The participants emphasized the importance of collaboration between rule of law authorities and protection service providers as well as the need to secure increased funding and support for local organizations providing support to victims of gender-based violence. Noting a troubling rise in domestic violence in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns and self-isolation guidelines in many countries, OSCE leaders called today for measures to be taken by governments to protect women and children. Home is not always a safe haven, women and children cannot live free of violence in times of families finding themselves in self-isolation. “Some governments are already taking measures to counter domestic violence during the lockdown, which we hope can serve as best practices for others (OSCE Secretariat 2020, April 8).” World Society of Victimology issued the statement

of Victimological impact and consequences of Covid-19 (WSV, 2020, March 30.) warning that we are confronted individually and collectively with an unprecedented health, humanitarian and socio-economic crisis. The WSV is aware of rising patterns of victimization including instances of abuse of power within the context of especially marginalized communities and vulnerable groups and individuals. Since the restrictions on mobility were imposed all over Europe, intimate, sexual and reproductive violence has been increasing, affecting women and children in their homes as well as LGBTIQ+ persons living in homophobic households.

### ***2.2. Council of Europe***

Council of Europe (FoNet 2020, April 20), The Committee of the Council of Europe adopted the Declaration on the implementation of the Istanbul Convention during the corona virus pandemic. The importance of respecting all its standards and recommendations in activities during the corona virus pandemic was emphasized. It has been observed that violence against women and domestic violence tend to increase in times of crisis and that new data show an alarming increase in the number of reported cases of certain types of such violence. The introduction of isolation measures has increased, as statistics from a large number of countries show, the number of cases of domestic violence. Victims now have even fewer ways to turn to someone for help. The approach of those states that seek innovative ways to adapt their institutional responses to violence is welcomed. The approach to such violence is victim-centered and based on human rights.

### ***2.3. World Health Organization for Europe***

World Health Organization for Europe (WHO Europe Statement on Interpersonal violence during Covid-19) Copenhagen, Denmark. Statement to the press by dr Hans Henri P. Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe (Kluge 2020, May 7). Violence remains preventable, not inevitable! Member States are reporting up to a 60% increase in emergency calls by women subjected to violence by their intimate partners in April this year, compared to last. Online enquiries to violence prevention support hotlines have increased up to 5 times.

The WHO Europe president sent 3 main messages: 1) to governments and local authorities: to make sure services to address violence are available and resourced, and expand hotlines and online services; 2) to communities and the public: stay in touch, contact and support your neighbors, acquaintances, families and friends. If you see something, say something; 3) to those experiencing violence: violence against you is

never your fault. It is never your fault. Your home should be a secure place. Get in touch -safely- with family, friends, shelters or community groups that have your safety and security at heart.

#### ***2.4. The European Institute for Gender Equality - EIGE***

The European Institute for Gender Equality - EIGE. Rapid action taken by several countries shows the understanding that violence in the home is a problem which crises can exacerbate. The most wide-ranging measures to prevent domestic violence are laid out in the Istanbul Convention, which has been signed by all EU Member States and ratified by 21. Following this guidance remains the best way to protect women – in crisis times and beyond. Creativity and adaptability are key. Over the last few months, governments, support services and private companies have worked together to create digital tools that facilitate reporting and provide hotel rooms for those fleeing violence. Pharmacists and delivery personnel have been trained to assist victims. What did we get right and what will we need to do better to protect women from violence? EIGE will provide answers in a special study on Covid-19 and violence against women, to be published later this year (EIGE 2020, June 9).

#### ***2.5. The FIFA Fédération Internationale de Football Association<sup>3</sup>***

The special global attention is to be drawn to the very clear engagement of the FIFA (FIFA 2020), the WHO and the European Commission who have joined forces, to launch the #SafeHome campaign to support women and children at risk of domestic violence. The campaign is a joint response from the three institutions to the recent spikes in reports of domestic violence as stay-at-home measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 have put women and children experiencing abuse at greater risk.”Together with the World Health Organization and the European Commission, we are asking the football community to raise awareness to this intolerable situation that threatens particularly women and children in their own home, a place where they should feel happy, safe and secure,” said FIFA President Gianni Infantino. “We cannot stay silent on this issue that negatively affects so many people. Violence has no place in homes, just as it has no place in sports. Football has the power to relay important social messages, and through the #SafeHome campaign, we want to ensure that those people experiencing violence have access to the necessary support services they need. Joint News Release. #SafeHome campaign to support those at risk from domestic violence. (FIFA European Commission

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<sup>3</sup> English:International Federation of Association Football

and World Health Organization 2020, May 26).” Almost one in three women worldwide experience physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner or sexual violence by someone else in their lifetime. In a majority of cases, that violence is committed by a partner in their home - indeed, up to 38% of all murders of women are committed by an intimate partner. It is also estimated that one billion children aged between two and seventeen years (or half the world’s children) have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional violence or neglect in the past year.

There are many reasons why people perpetrate domestic violence, including gender inequality and social norms that condone violence, childhood experiences of abuse or exposure to violence and coercive control growing up. Harmful use of alcohol can also trigger violence. Stressful situations, such as those being experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic and economic instability, exacerbate the risk. Moreover, the current distancing measures in place in many countries make it harder for women and children to reach out to family, friends and health workers who could otherwise provide support and protection.

“Just as physical, sexual or psychological violence has no place in football, it has no place in the home.” said Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organization. “We are so pleased that our partners today are joining us to draw attention to this critical issue. As people are isolated at home because of COVID-19, the risks of domestic violence have tragically been exacerbated.”

“Violence has no place in our societies,” said Mariya Gabriel, Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth. “Women’s rights are human rights and should be protected. Often abused women and children are afraid to talk because of fear or shame. This ‘window’ to speak-up and seek help is, during confinement, even more restricted. As a matter of fact, in some countries, we have seen an increase in reports of domestic violence since the outbreak of COVID-19. It is our responsibility as a society, as institutions to speak up for these women. To give them trust and support them. This is the purpose of this joint campaign which I am honored to be part of.”

“We call upon our member associations to actively publish details of national or local help lines and support services that can help victims and anyone feeling threatened by violence in their locality,” added the FIFA President. “We also call upon our members to review their own safeguarding measures using the FIFA Guardians toolkit to ensure that football is fun and safe for everyone in our game, especially the youngest members of the football family.”

The five-part video awareness campaign features 15 past and present footballers who have stressed their support to addressing this critical issue.<sup>4</sup> The campaign is being published on various FIFA digital channels, with #SafeHome also being supported with multimedia toolkits for the 211 FIFA member associations and for various media agencies to help facilitate additional localization and to further amplify the message worldwide.

### 3. Uncertain future

We live in one of the greatest social experiments we will ever attend. Crises can lead societies to do things that were previously unthinkable. Neither international nor domestic actors, in addition to their condemnations of gender-based violence and the rise of discrimination and inequality, offer nor solutions neither any vision of the near future. For anti-discrimination activists, what governments will do in the next few months and years is practically crucial. We are entering the new state of general insecurity, but we should have on mind that between moral system and security there is strong interdependence (Stevanović, 2017: 107-109). They decide whether the burden of the recession will be carried by the rich, or the afflicted middle class and the poor (BBC, 2020). That is why it is extremely important that measures that take into account the gender impact are introduced now, and that perspective must be used to find appropriate solutions for the current situation.

No one can yet predict the real consequences of the crisis, but they may be the result of views that indicate that the epidemic is an essential product of “the greed of our civilization, because it was entered from an abnormal global situation, pollution, abuse, senseless consumption.” unfairly distributed opportunities” (Ćuk 2020, 14). Historian and philosopher Yuval Harari is on the same line of reasoning, warning that the greatest danger is not the virus itself. Humanity has all the scientific and technological tools to overcome the virus, so that the much bigger problems of humanity are “their own inner demons, hatred, greed and ignorance” (Carthaus, 2020). French philosopher and sociologist Bruno Latour e.g. it even appeals not to rush into a normal life before the restrictive measures that caused the economic blockade. He urges that instead of a hasty return to “business as usual”, in order to revive the economy stopped by the corona virus pandemic, countries

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<sup>4</sup> Álvaro Arbeloa, Rosana Augusto, Vítor Baía, Khalilou Fadiga, Matthias Ginter, David James, Annike Krahn, Marco Materazzi, Milagros Menéndez, Noemi Pascotto, Graham Potter, Mikael Silvestre, Kelly Smith, Oliver Torres and Clementine Touré

should build a new norm in which the fight against climate change would be the most important task (Van Overstraeten, 2020).

This is followed by the question of Nobel laureate Olga Tokarchuk: Hasn't the global pandemic crisis actually brought us back to the normal rhythm of life? Isn't it wrong to accuse the virus of disturbing the norm, on the contrary, wasn't the previous, pre-viral hectic world abnormal? (Politika, Kulturni dodatak, 2020) Arundati Roy, a writer and human rights activist, thinks similarly, writing recently that the virus is a portal between two worlds: the old, once abnormal “normality” and the potential for us not to agree to it. Now that choice is up to each of us (Golubović-Trebješanin, 2020), and it depends on the duration and possible second wave of the epidemic, which we cannot predict. There is also a warning from Michael Houellebecq, a French novelist and poet, that we will not wake up in a new world after isolation. Everything will be the same, only a little worse (Houellebecq, 2020). Perhaps the only thing that is certain, as George Soros believes, is that we will not return to where we were when the pandemic began, because it is an unprecedented event, which probably never happened in this combination, which completely disrupted human lives and forced us to a rather different behavior. And it really threatens the survival of our civilization. A bad variant of future expectations is if the current situation continues and if the restrictions are partially lifted, and then reintroduced due to another wave of corona virus (Milošević 2020: 33).

#### **4. Conclusion**

This crisis, however, offers a chance to think about the type of world we want to live in, world without gender based violence, where people and solidarity are priorities over capital and corporate interests. It may already be the preparation of a great battle for a new reality, which we cannot even imagine, but we are slowly realizing that nothing will be the same as it used to be. That is why it is necessary to get the best out of this crisis, which is a kind of crisis of humanity. It is inevitable that the consequences of the pandemic will be visible in all areas of society. It is clear: there is one big test in front of everyone. In addition to disinfecting hands and space, it is time to disinfect concepts, strategies, and even thoughts themselves (Hrnjak, 2020).

This crisis, however, offers a chance to stop and to think about the type of world we want to live in, where people and solidarity are priorities over capital and corporate interests. It may already be the preparation of a great battle for a new reality, which we cannot even imagine, but we are slowly realizing that nothing will be the same as it used to be (Politika 2020). That is why it is necessary to get the best out of this crisis, which is a kind of crisis

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More than ever, there is a need for awareness that equality and the empowerment of women have immeasurable positive effects on society as a whole. Progressive forces, from parties to unions, academia and research bodies, human rights and feminist organizations, are now set to their biggest rehearsals - whether they will be able to discuss solutions during and after COVID-19. Legal regulation and legal protection of the sphere of private life nowadays require not only a professional but a creative approach to the development of a system of legislation that can introduce an adequate legal basis (Streltsov, 2017: 57). If not, it would mean renouncing the centuries-old struggle of generations of women for equality, social justice, democracy and human rights. Women and men deserve better. A better legacy must be left for generations to come (CEE Gender Network Newsletter 2020). A possible way out and hope is in women who support each other, because today, more than ever, feminist principles are needed, a human ethic of caring for oneself and others, with much-needed publicity of work, with solidarity and cooperation.

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