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Doing Gender – Doing the Balkans

Dynamics and Persistence of Gender Relations
in Yugoslavia and the Yugoslav successor states

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Women experts – Public Disbelief in Women Professionals¹ in Serbia²

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The Global Network of Women in the News Media reports that there is a globally noticed permanent lack of positive media reports on professional women. The same situation is noticed when analysing the media in Serbia in the period of 2010 to September 2011. Attacks on women who are holders of public offices and state functions or who are leaders or members of opinion making intellectual elites, are always more intensive than those against men in similar positions. Even when women publicly plea for reducing discrimination and violence against women, strengthening women's access to justice or increasing women's role as decision-makers and leaders, which are not at all disputable values and goals, they are exposed to various media attacks.

Women's guilt is always twofold. Namely, together with presenting their professional mistakes, media imply as understood that they are guilty because they hold public positions in spite of the fact that they are women. High or otherwise distinguished positions are, in accordance with this patriarchal value system, almost always exclusively dedicated to men. That is the main reason

¹ <http://iwmf.org/pioneering-change/global-research-on-women-in-the-news-media.aspx>, retrieved 4.1.2011.

² In the period 2010–September 2011.

why women's hypothetical "guilt" is regularly exaggerated in a way that men who are targets of attacks as political actors never have to meet.

Moreover, the media space dedicated to attacks on professional women is not proportional to the importance of the issue. The media and/or the journalists sometimes actually are not the authors of the attacks; in fact the media sometimes just transfer somebody else's releases. However, the media are clearly very ready to provide more space to women as wrongdoers than the situation demands, more than they would dedicate to similar wrongs of men. In such situations the media usually engage additionally interviewed persons who are ready to support the negative attitude by means of presenting "expert" opinions.

The media clearly strive to be in accordance with the common public opinion which is set against professional women and, in that way, to gain popularity and sell well. The messages are not addressed only to attack directly one woman, but also to all women, who should be aware that public space in fact "is not a right place for women."³ By corroborating the limits imposed to women and their marginalization to private activities far from public life, media promote such limits as "normal". By doing so, media have also an educative role in discouraging women to pursue professional careers and to have professional aspirations.⁴

Examples

1. The media promote discriminative stereotypes by reasoning that women are not born for some professions. The opinions experts search usually are those of men rivals, but in the media they are promoted as independent, even as scientific truths. One well known surgeon publicly expressed his misogynic and primitive attitude, disqualifying all his women colleagues. "Based on some reason: women are not talented for surgery. I have seen some women surgeons when operating, and all of them function the same way. It is unbelievable how rough women surgeons are! Their behavior is so unemotional and atypical for normal woman's personality. They do not cope with these tasks in the right way. They do not fit in surgery. They cannot operate just as they cannot do some

³ The permanently present endecy of media is to diminish women and to reduce them to sex objects, see COLEMAN, BRENNAN (2010): Female Stereotypes in the Media. Media Portrayal of Women (15.1.2010). <http://www.suite101.com/content/media-portrayal-of-women-a189870>, retrieved 4.1.2011.

⁴ MEDIA AWARENESS NETWORK (2010): Media Portrayals of Girls and Women. Introduction. http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/issues/stereotyping/women_and_girls/index.cfm, retrieved 4.1.2011.

banal physical activities, such as parallel parking a car. In fact the best cooks worldwide are not women but men [...] Women as surgeons [...] For me, these two things are not connected.”⁵

2. Media attack on a woman minister

The text is published in the journal *Kurir* with the photo of a woman minister in a short skirt, shot from below, and accompanied with typical men’s taunts like “humoristic comments” on her legs – that is an example of a discriminative, diminishing media attitude towards women in politics.⁶ The main message of this article is that women politicians may always be reduced to erotic objects, to legs, cleavages, etc., in a way which in media presentation is never applied to men in political functions. The message is clear, whichever function you might have, whichever responsibilities, and whichever are the results of your work, all of that is not important, this is something that is not interesting to anybody because you are always just a “piece” of female flesh, a chicken leg. As such, you are always subjected to men’s estimation, comparisons, passions and wishes. This approach diminishes and negates all elements of women’s professions. This clear message is aimed not only at the attacked woman, but at all women. Public space simply is not for women, perhaps only for some who have enough erotic and decorative attributes. These attributes are never demanded from male actors on the political scene, not to mention that they do not have to fear being compared or graded. Obviously, the media presentation like the *Kurir*’s is of a different type. Female politicians don’t feature the results of their work, their political or professional reputation, their profile, but only their legs. In fact, they are nothing but chicken legs. Moreover, if you are a woman and dare to hold a public function, you “clearly” agree in advance to be treated differently from your male colleagues. The mentioned text in the *Kurir* legitimates the media’s right to discriminate against women, to put them on their “right” places, to reduce their actual roles and that way to constantly promote gender stereotypes; moreover to create and to maintain the discriminative public opinion and public discourse in which women are only this one thing – legs. The only question remaining is whose legs are better.

3. Attack on a woman manager of a women’s penitentiary

No organization for monitoring prisons, neither the autonomous women’s organization nor the Protector of Citizens, who all regularly visit the women’s

⁵ TROŠELJ, SLAVKO (2010): Više od sporta: dr Boško Đukanović. Žene mogu da budu sve samo ne hirurzi. In: Politika (15.8.2010).

⁶ EKIPA KURIRA (2010): Snežo, imaš najbolji batak. In: Kurir (2.12.2010).

prison, have ever noticed that the situation is as bad as described in the report prepared by the Helsinki Committee. It says: “In the women’s penitentiary in Požarevac are the most brutal, the most rigorous and the most conservative implementation of the Law on Penalties regarding the inmates”, said the author Ivan Kuzmanović.⁷ Describing the horror in that institution, the report mentions furthermore that the woman director was deployed without previous experience, blaming her that she got the position because of her political affiliation to the ruling coalition, which of course leaves neither her nor anybody competent to manage any penitentiary institution. The political affiliations of the other penitentiaries’ managers and their previous experience are not mentioned, assuming that men are always competent by the mere fact of their gender. Moreover, it is implied that the only problem in Serbia’s prison administration is this one woman who manages the women’s penitentiary.

4. Media lynch of Commissioner for protection of discrimination

In the beginning of 2010, the media lynch of Professor Nevena Petrušić, the candidate for the function of the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, took place. Before her nomination in May 2010, many of her alleged professional and political mistakes and omissions were presented, which continued after her nomination when all of a sudden her main “mistake” was declared to be alleged inefficiency, from the first day of entering the position. This continues and is repeated together with the permanent stress on her purported incompatibility of her professorship with the function of a Commissioner. The ugly attacks didn’t stop even when the other side didn’t respond and accept the level of discussion and the whole idea of exchanging offences via public debate. It is also interesting that the attackers only paid attention to her alleged conflict of interest but not to anybody else. In fact, many professors in Serbia are engaged in numerous public functions – as members of the parliament, ministers and/or highly ranked state functionaries heading independent regulatory bodies⁸, while still performing their academic or professorial duties. Obviously, this very unique but systemically conducted attacks targeting only her – the Commissioner – clearly showed that the motives were personal interests. The organizations and individuals who were engaged in the media campaign against professor Petrušić simply had another candidate for the function, and it was easy to continue and to intensify

⁷ Public release by the Helsinki Committee (2010). The executive director of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, Ivan Kuzmanović, argued that in Serbia prisons are overloaded. In: *Tanjug Beograd* (2.11.2010).

⁸ For example, there are deputies of Protector of Citizens, whose legal status is regulated in the same manner regulating conflicts of interests.

the attacks because she is a woman. The motive behind the persistent over-emphasis on her purported unsuitability was not the wish for Serbia to get the best Commissioner, but a very personal and not well hidden agenda.

But besides those personally colored attacks, this intensity of attacks and the type of criticism has never been noticed when men were attacked. The disqualifying attacks included also all supporters of professor Petrušić, and everybody who didn't share the opinion of the attackers. Coincidentally, they were all women too, who were called names and organized feminists. This model is very popular: whenever women ask for something, even much less than the men have, in public domain, they are called feminists as this is an "argument" per se.⁹ The gender aspect of these attacks includes discrediting and compromising female candidates to keep them from public functions and positions. Although in this particular case, the media "only" published the attacks which were created outside the media, they are responsible for enabling and providing valuable media space whose dimensions were far above the importance of just one and, in fact, a personal conflict.

5. Attack on women NGO leaders

In the Sandžak area where the Bosniak population prevails, the local religious elite regularly organizes media attacks on female NGO activists from this region. The patriarchal model of behavior can easily be recognized. Namely, socially discriminated and frustrated men usually regain their self-esteem by beating their wives at home, politically less influential leaderships gain their stand by orchestrating public media offences, they threaten and attack their own women blaming them as traitors of national interests.

In an article published in the daily journal *Danas* (14 February 2011), there was an open hate speech against the very prominent activist leader Aide Ćorović. Ms Ćorović is also well known as the winner of the prominent media prize "Gaining Freedom"¹⁰ for courageous public reporting and criticizing religious leaders.¹¹ The Commissioner for the Protection of Equality reacted by warning the perpetrators that their ways were discriminatory and menacing for the physical integrity of the attacked woman. It was also stressed that the manner of attacking was offensive to all middle-aged women when called frustrated, not successful, and in dangerous hormonal condition. On 15 September the

⁹ Preliminary brief on the online discussion: Women and the Media. Conducted by the UN Department of Public Information, 1–28 February 2010. http://www.un.org/womenwatch/beijing15/Women_and_the_media_preliminary_brief.pdf, retrieved 4.1.2011.

¹⁰ In: *Danas* (23.9.2011).

¹¹ Dani: Spomenik pozitivnim energijama [Independent review]. BH DANI – ONLINE. http://www.bhdani.com/default.asp?kat=txt&broj_id=745&tekst_rb=19.

Sandžak press¹² attacked another female NGO leader, Semiha Kačar, without any arguments and by calling her various offensive names which certainly are not suitable for public media.¹³ She therefore pressed charges for the crime “public offence” against her (*Krivična prijava zbog uvrede*).¹⁴

In fact, the main reason is that these women are financially as independent as they are regarding their program, running their non-governmental organizations without asking the religious leaders for permission and certainly not sharing their resources with them.

Legal aspects

This media attitude offends the dignity of the (individually) attacked women, but it also, as it was said before, leads to group offence and discrimination. Moreover, maintaining this type of media reporting and promoting gender stereotypes regularly corroborate, customize and “normalize” a specific media tolerance on misogyny. Such media style is not only the issue of lack of media taste and good media manners. These are motions between deliberately not recognized misogyny and the ruthless utilization of tolerated hate and discrimination. But these media manners are also against Constitutional provisions and sanctioned as such. The Constitutional duty of everybody to “respect and protect human dignity is unquestioned” (Constitution, article 23).¹⁵

The law on gender equality (article 41) is also violated because its provisions stipulate the duty of the public information to develop public consciousness on equality regarding gender and to undertake adequate measures to change social and cultural models, customs and all other practices which condition stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination based on the concept that one sex is either subordinated or superior.¹⁶ Not only do the mentioned examples not meet the legal duties, but the outputs are totally opposite: by promoting the stereotypical presentation of women, all prejudices based on the concept that women are subordinated to men are maintained.

¹² FEHRATOVIĆ, JAHJA (2011): Odbor za jednokratnu upotrebu. In: Elektronske novine Sandžak Press (3.9.2011). <http://sandzakpress.net/odbor-za-jednokratnu-upotrebu>.

¹³ Kačar was accused that she took money from certain people for providing them legal aid which is meant to be free of charge. She was called very mean, corrupt, immoral – and difficult to be translated names “*opajdara, babetina* who robs other people, boot licker and sold grandmother, newly discovered boot-licker of Belgrade” (*Danas* [14.9.2011]).

¹⁴ NOVOSEL, S. (2011): Krivična prijava zbog uvreda. In: *Danas* (14.09.2011). http://www.danas.rs/danasrs/drustvo/krivicna_prijava_zbog_uvreda.55.html?news_id=223645. See also <http://www.sandzacke.rs/vijesti/drustvo/krivicna-prijava-zbog-uvreda-protiv-sandzak-presa/>.

¹⁵ Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, “Official Herald RS”, no. 98/2006.

¹⁶ Law on gender equality, “Official Herald RS”, no. 104/2009.

It is important to pay attention to the law on public information (article 38)¹⁷ which stipulates the ban of hate speech in its article. It forbids to publish ideas, information and opinions which stimulate discrimination against persons or groups of persons because of their sex, regardless of whether a criminal deed was committed or not.

The law on prohibiting discrimination¹⁸ is the most effective in regard to misogynic and discriminative media attitudes against women, since it comprises various provisions by which such attitudes are sanctioned. First of all, there are provisions on hate speech in article 11 which ban the expression of ideas, information and other opinions that stimulate discrimination in public media and other publications against groups of people because of their personal characteristics – in the given situation, because of their belonging to the female sex.

The same law in article 12 bans intimidation and degrading behavior, which violates or aims to violate the dignity of groups of people because of their personal characteristics. The same law in article 20 prohibits discrimination based on sex which is in opposition to the principle of gender equality, equal rights and liberties of women and men in political and other aspects of public and professional life. Discrimination based on gender is also forbidden as well as prejudices, customs and other social patterns which are based on the concept which includes either subordination or superiority of one sex to another and/or stereotypical sex roles.

Discriminative social environment in Serbia

It should not be forgotten, that the professional women in Serbia have to live and work in a public environment which generally is very discriminative. Hate and rejection of all “others” permanently diminish women’s aspirations and possibilities to realize them. Some of the professional women who are not married and have no children, not to mention who are hidden lesbians¹⁹, are in particularly vulnerable situations and get accused of being “perverts” or “selfish” women who pursued their career rather than being mothers. In evidencing discriminative environment against non-heterosexuals the survey prepared by the Labris organization for lesbian rights should be mentioned. At the end of 2011, with the intention to evidence shortages in the implementation

¹⁷ Law on public information, “Official Herald RS”, no. 43/2003, 61/2005, 71/2009 and 89/2010 – decision of the Constitutional Court.

¹⁸ Law on prohibiting discrimination, “Official Herald RS”, no. 22/2009.

¹⁹ Hidden, because being professionally successful and open lesbian is currently not yet possible in Serbia.

of the existing legal antidiscrimination provisions, Labris conducted a survey examining the public opinion, according to whom a systemic discrimination against LGBT persons²⁰ was obvious: About two hundred people voted on the Labris site, out of them 80% confirmed a systemic discrimination of the LGBT population in Serbia today. In the public release by Labris it is concluded that: 1. LGBT population is a minority in Serbia that isn't allowed to freely gather together and demonstrate the rights warranted by the law and the highest legal document, the Constitution. 2. LGBT persons are threatened by death if they wish to enjoy that right. 3. LGBT population is systemically discriminated against when the point at issue are the rights stemming from partnership relations, either conjugal or non-conjugal, which are governed by the law and which are available only to heterosexual persons. 4. Due to a systemic non-recognition of the same-sex partnerships, a series of laws are discriminatory towards LGBT population, including the Law on Family, the Law on Inheritance and the Law on Healthcare. 5. A systemic discrimination against LGBT persons is also obvious when the existing laws are implemented. Those laws ban discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity, whereas LGBT persons are regularly and mostly discriminated against in various ways at work, in educational institutions, in their families, as well as in governmental institutions, such as the police, the prosecutor's office and the court.

The greatest shortcoming of legal regulations on the position of persons with non-heterosexual orientation in Serbia is also a lack of definition of the institution of "hate crime", which would, according to the experiences of other countries and the stands of LGBT organizations, contribute to a more efficient processing of cases where people are accused of violence and other criminal offences committed against LGBT population. The Criminal Code should include the category of "hate crime", which would enable a faster and more efficient identification and processing of homophobic and trans-phobic crimes. Serbia should improve its legislative scope by adopting changes in the criminal code, by introducing "hate crime" as a specific criminal offence, or by increasing the penalties for violent criminal offences committed on the grounds of race, religion, ethnic affiliation, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, mental or physical disability etc.

²⁰ Saopštenje Labrisa o postojanju sistemske diskriminacije (28.12.2011). Belgrade. <http://www.labris.org.rs/poll-results/da-li-mislis-da-u-srbiji-postoji-sistemska-diskriminacija-lgbt-osoba.html>, retrieved 22.9.2011.

Conclusion

Political, economic and cultural systems always significantly influence media contents. Media and communication technologies cannot change the lack of equality on their own, power structures in the media are just a part of an omnipresent wider social lack of gender equality.

But in that respect, media are also producers of leading values and social models, mirroring the social system. Thus, the media space in Serbia still is the domain where a misogynic discourse is produced and reproduced, where the fear of “otherness” and “changes” is clearly visible.

In fact, nobody leads an open public campaign against women professionals and their roles in public life. But a hidden moral panic can be noticed in the media. For example, there are permanent claims that the current social changes contribute to the weakening of traditional moral values, even that all moral values are totally abandoned. Among these changes, women having professional careers are, of course, perceived as main causes of the “negative” social effects, such as the changing of traditional gender relations, sexuality, and the role of women, family organization and child care. The main scenario of all moral panics is the same, from the golden age and the age of moral stability and security, changes created social degradation and ordinary people therefore are now confused and cannot differentiate between good and evil.

The role of the media is to construct pseudo events by exaggerating individual events or incidents which are not connected and by presenting them as connected and as parts of dangerous systems, threatening symptoms of widely spread problems. Women professionals or just prominent women usually are depicted as evil mistake makers, more responsible than men in similar situations.

The media have an important and – in most of the cases resulting in panic – even the main role. Still, it is not only the media creating moral panics. The media’s main interest is to gain a better market position, to increase the number of their regular customers and to improve the stability of their sources. Other actors and creators of moral panics have different motives. For example, religious leaders and churches are motivated by their religious doctrines, individuals by personal interests; political leaderships conduct in fact political campaigns against other political parties and options, etc. It seems that to all of them, women professionals are easy targets.