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Feminist organizing in Serbia: 1990-1994

by Donna M. Hughes and Lepa Mladjenovic

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At the beginning of our work with women war survivors we felt fear and anger, pain, and helplessness, but we made a decision to work on changing the conditions of our lives and the lives of women around us. It was a personal and political decision of feminists to oppose male violence against women, which included nationalist hatred, ethnic cleansing, mass rapes in war, prostitution for the soldiers, four million refugees, half a million dead and many injured. We decided to transform anger into action and in the last few years we organized initiatives for women.

Autonomous Women's Center Against Sexual Violence, Belgrade, 1995

The campaign of genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina, initiated by the Serbian regime, moved the women in Belgrade to confront women's human rights violations on all levels, in their neighborhood and in neighboring states. An energetic, committed group of feminists have created a flourishing women's movement in the hostile conditions of nationalism, militarism, and poverty. This article will examine a number of the organizations formed from 1990 through 1994.

Democracy, nationalism, and feminism

Socialism constrained the development of a feminist movement in several ways. First, socialism did grant women significant rights of employment, divorce, contraception, and abortion. Access to these things was to have ended the oppression of women. Second, communism did not allow alternative political groups to form, and specifically, feminism was discredited in all Eastern European countries as an enemy influence from the West. Third, the ideology called for revolution to be made by women and men working together. Women were discouraged from having women - only meetings and often could not justify such meetings even to themselves.

Despite these conditions, a feminist group has existed in Belgrade since 1980. By 1990 opportunities for change emerged with the democratization of Eastern Europe. Women started talking to one another, organizing, documenting problems, and creating strategies for change.

Men started to organize also, but in other ways. Soil, blood, and surname became the basis of their organizing. They used all their means of power and state institutions to create hatred and fuel the rise of nationalism throughout Yugoslavia. Differences among people -- nationalities, ethnicities, religions -- were exaggerated and exploited to present other groups as threatening. Hatred of "the other" was taught by calling upon unresolved conflicts and atrocities from previous decades and even centuries.

In June 1991 Slovenia and Croatia declared their independence from Yugoslavia; Bosnia - Herzegovina followed in April 1992. The Yugoslav National Army, controlled by the Serbs, intervened to stop these moves for independence. As Yugoslavia divided, nationalists formed paramilitary groups and fought to control their geographic regions. Serb military groups -- the official army and paramilitaries -- possessed greater arms and supplies that enabled them to initiate "ethnic cleansing," a genocidal campaign of forced removal, rape, and murder against civilian populations.

This is the environment in which the feminists in Belgrade organized. In an effort to oppose all the forces that foster violence the position of all the groups is anti - nationalist, anti - militarist, multicultural, and feminist. For discussion we have categorized the organizations and activities of the women in Belgrade into five general groups: violence against women, political, anti - war, academic/publishing, and lesbian rights.

Violence against women

Feminist organization coalesced around violence against women, which has subsequently influenced all feminist organizing in Belgrade. The SOS Hotline for Women and Children Victims of Violence opened in Belgrade on March 8, International Women's Day, 1990. The hotline is non - hierarchical and run by volunteers. Since its opening the hotline has received 6000 calls from women who have been threatened with violence, battered, or raped. In May 1993 the SOS Hotline expanded its services to include outreach services to give women direct contact and someone to accompany them to agencies or institutions.

Militarism and war increased the violence against women. The SOS started receiving calls from women threatened or assaulted with weapons of war. Wives, partners, and mothers called to report assaults from soldiers returning from war, but they had little hope of getting assistance because the soldiers had the full support of the regime, institutions, and the general public.

The United Nations' call for an embargo and sanctions against Serbia for its aggression in Croatia and Bosnia - Herzegovina resulted in economic crisis, hyper - inflation, unemployment, and poverty. Women and children were the hardest hit.

As the war(s) expanded refugees arrived in Belgrade. In December 1992 the SOS Hotline formed The Group for Women Raped in War. The volunteers assisted the survivors by providing basic needs, solidarity, and sometimes counseling. Shortly thereafter the women decided to establish a rape crisis center. The women opened the Autonomous Women's Center Against Sexual Violence one year later. The Center provides a hotline and personal counselling. It also provides humanitarian aid to refugees

in Belgrade and started a project called "Packages to Sarajevo" for women of all nationalities in the city under siege. It also organizes adoptions for children who have lost parents in the war.

As the Hotline became more widely known, adolescent girls started calling to talk about incest, abuse, and alcoholic parents. To meet their needs some women from the SOS Hotline formed the Center for Girls in 1994. It provides workshops and discussion groups about personal experiences with violence. It also runs educational programs about women's bodies, sexuality and awareness, and prevention of sexual, domestic, and social violence. The Center also has a program specifically for refugee girls.

One of the most serious problems for women in Belgrade trying to escape violence is finding a place to go. Housing has always been limited, but with economic crisis, war, and a city filled with refugees, there is nowhere for women to turn. In the Spring of 1994 women from the SOS Hotline and the Autonomous Women's Center opened a shelter for battered women. The shelter quickly filled with women from diverse backgrounds -- Serbs, Gypsies, Muslims, refugees, and Belgrade residents.

From the beginning, the founders of the SOS Hotline viewed violence against women as a social and political issue for women. In addition to helping individual women their mission was to raise the consciousness of the city and campaign for legal and institutional change. In 1993 a Women's Rights Group formed to analyze the legal status of women in Serbia and within the context of global human rights. In 1994 the group campaigned in the Serbian Parliament for a marital rape law which only brought them laughs. They were more successful in countering a effort to restrict women's access to abortion. In 1994 the Group founded the Women's Advocacy (Law) Center. Its mission is to provide immediate legal counselling to women, to promote women's humanrights, and to campaign for legal reforms.

Political organizations

In the Fall of 1990 the Women's Party (ZEST) was founded with the purpose of improving women's lives through public discussions and projects for women. Unfortunately, this organization was short lived. Conflicts arose over nationalism and the position ZEST should take. By 1991 ZEST had disbanded.

The first "free" multi - party elections were held in Yugoslavia in the Fall of 1990. The result was a Serbian Parliament with only 1.6 per cent women, the lowest in Europe. In response a Women's Parliament was set up on March 8, 1991. Its purpose was to follow the work of the Serbian Parliament and protest any proposals that would decrease women's rights, especially those dealing with family law and abortion rights.

The Women's Lobby, formed in 1991, is an ad hoc group that has taken the most active role in accusing perpetrators and war criminals. The Lobby has made public statements to the media in opposition to the Serbian regime and its role in the war and the production of hate and nationalism. It has protested Serbian fascism, war, misogyny, nationalism, homophobia, and fundamentalism. Since its inception it has organized protests and street demonstrations and issued more than 40 public letters of protest and petitions.

Anti - war groups and protests

After the start of the war, the political anti - war group Women in Black was established in Belgrade. This group modeled itself on the Israeli women pacifists who protested their government's actions against the Palestinians and the Italian and German women who protested their government's involvement in the GulfWar. Every Wednesday afternoon since October 9th, 1991, Women in Black has stood in silence in the Republic Square in Belgrade to protest the war, militarism, nationalism, and violence against women. In addition, Women in Black has several programs for women refugees. Their goal is to spread the culture of peace among women.

Lesbian rights

Lesbians and gay men started meeting informally toward the end of 1990. Arkadia - Lesbian and Gay Lobby was officially established in December 1990. The mission of the group is to promote the visibility and the rights of lesbians and gay men. There were early conflicts over nationalism. When the decision was made to be non - nationalist, however, the group became predominantly lesbian. They have organized workshops on lesbian identity, health, families, and violence against lesbians. They have also promoted lesbian visibility through workshops and media presentations. There is an ongoing campaign, "Lesbian Rights Are Women's Rights," for equality in education, in the work place, and in the family.

Academic organizations and publishing

On March 8th, 1992 the Center for Women's Studies Research and Communication opened its doors. It is an independent collective with no institutional affiliation. Its mission is to research and critique patriarchy as well as to teach feminist knowledge. Some of the subjects that have been taught include: literature, linguistics, law, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, violence against women, psychology, archaeology, and visual arts. In 1994, the Center started publishing their own journal.

The feminist organizations in Belgrade have done a remarkable job of documenting their work. The SOS Hotline has published four volumes of the SOS Bulletin. Later, along with the Autonomous

Women's Center Against Sexual Violence, they started publishing the Feminist Notebooks. Women in Black has published two anthologies on their anti - war work, Women for Peace Anthology and Women for Peace. Arkadia has also issued a booklet entitled Arkadia.

In 1994 a group of women started a publishing house called Ninety - four. Its mission is to publish works by women, children, and marginalized writers. One of its first publications is In Exile by Jasmina Tesanovic. There are current projects for an anthology of writings by women refugees, a workbook on human rights, and translations of Virginia Woolf and Taslima Nasrin.

Organization and work continues

By the end of 1994 a number of organizations, each with many ongoing projects, decided to form an umbrella group to coordinate the work. The Women's Network is composed of all the women's groups and individuals working against violence against women, militarism, nationalism and for feminist education and publishing. The feminist groups in Belgrade have maintained communications with feminist groups in Zagreb, Croatia. These groups are dedicated to maintaining connections among women and refusing to allow men's nationalism and war to divide them. The new Women's Network hopes to coordinate more communication and activities with women in other cities.

Nationalism and war has permanently changed the lives of women in Belgrade, some of whom are from war zones. The lives of some of the women have been permanently changed by their response to nationalism and war. A strong influence on the women and their ability to form feminist projects and organizations is the international solidarity of other women's groups and funding. Although no one knows what the future holds, the feminists in Belgrade are dedicated to continuing their efforts to assist individual women and to resist misogyny, nationalism, and war.

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Donna M. Hughes is a Lecturer in Women's Studies in the Department of Applied Social Studies at the University of Bradford, UK. During the summer of 1994 she went to Belgrade as part of a team of rape counsellors to present workshops on violence against women, the sexual exploitation of women, counseling skills, and the administration of rape crisis centers.