

Women's Rights in Bosnia: An Interview with Aleksandra Petri?

by Jasmin Mujanovi? - Wednesday, May 23, 2012

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In the 1990s, Bosnia-Herzegovina became synonymous with the horrific violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide which characterized the country's experience within the broader dissolution of the Yugoslav state. In particular, the systematic rape and sexual violence of Bosnian women during the course of the war has continued to remain pertinent both in international legal affairs and as the subject of [major Hollywood productions](#). Despite this, Bosnia remains a sort of [static metaphor for bungled international responses to humanitarian crises](#)—with solid, critical analyses of present day conditions being rare.

Frustrated by this fact, I recently reached out to Aleksandra Petri?, a Bosnian women's right activist, [blogger](#) and [Twitter friend](#). I wanted to hear the view from the grassroots level, as it concerned the question of women's rights in Bosnia since the end of the war, the development of feminist activism in the country and its relationship with the emerging queer and LGBT scene. It is my hope that readers (especially those who have followed our coverage of women's and feminist issues) will find Petri?'s wealth of information as engrossing as I did. In this respect, I should like to draw particular attention to Petri?'s discussion of how allies in Canada and elsewhere are able to assist the important work ongoing in Bosnia today (Question #10). We have provided a link to a central database in English, which provides contact information for a variety of groups around Bosnia, as well as individual links to many of the groups in question (though only a few these, as of this writing, had web pages which were both in English and Bosnian-Croatian-Serbia [BCS]).

Finally, a big *hvala* (thank you!) to Aleksandra for taking time out of her busy schedule to answer my questions with incredible detail and knowledge on this very important subject.

1. Can you tell us about your human rights and women's rights activism? What sorts of projects have you been involved with and what are you currently working on or planning?

I became active in civil society sector in Bosnia and Herzegovina about 16 years ago, through [Helsinki Citizens Assembly \(hCa\) Banja Luka](#), a local NGO that is part of a broader peace and human rights network at the international level. Together with hCa activists from Tuzla, I worked on establishing [hCa Youth Network of BiH](#), the initiative that strived to connect young people throughout BiH to work together on promotion of peace, nonviolence and multi-cultural values, as contra-balance to ethnic and nationalistic public discourse. This was a challenging task, as communication and travel between the two BiH entities was almost non-existent, and war rhetoric was dominant in the public. We offered something different for young people that were tired of hate toward "those different from us." The Youth Network gathered more than 100 local youth groups, and facilitated many successful actions, such as youth conferences, art workshops, pre-election youth voice campaigns, anti-corruption campaign, cultural festivals, etc. Although mainstream media did not support these activities, Youth Network became recognizable and accepted as alternative to nationalistic groupings of youth. It fulfilled its mission, and exists today through capacity building and resource information center for youth. Through my work with

young people, I became interested in empowerment of women, and work on gender violence prevention. Since early 2003, I became active in [NGO "United Women" Banja Luka](#). I am working with my colleagues on prevention and fighting gender based violence against women, and empowering women in governance and decision-making. We combine direct services for women in need (free legal assistance, SOS telephone, safe house, psychosocial support), education, action oriented researches, and legal and public policy advocacy in our work.

2. What is the status of women's rights in Bosnia-Herzegovina, today?

Formal legislative and public policy framework related to protection of women's rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina significantly improved in the past ten years. We have Law on Gender Equality and Gender Action Plan on the BiH level, gender quota in the Election Law, entity level legislation and public policies aimed for prevention and fighting domestic violence. BiH signed and ratified all major international documents in this area. However, real change in the practice is very slow, and women remain deprived of possibility to enjoy human rights in both private and public sphere. It is important to say that many categories of women are exposed to double discrimination, namely because of disability and race, but also their social status, age, or fact that they live in rural areas. For example, Roma women have limited access to adequate health care during pregnancy due to lack of health insurance, but also prejudices of health workers. Many young women in BiH are deprived job opportunities as employers fear they would become pregnant – this issue became widespread practice that remains unreported and unsanctioned.

Another example is continuous under-representation of women in political decision making at all levels of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Nowadays, women make up approximately 17% of parliamentary representatives across the country, and there are governance institutions, such as joint BiH Presidency and BiH Council of Ministers with no women members and ministers. BiH laws in this regard lack harmonization, and provide space for discrimination, and there is continuous lack of political will by key political leaders and parliamentary political parties to provide equal chances for women to be elected and appointed at governmental posts. It is ironic that BiH Parliamentary Assembly adopted the Gender Equality Law, while in the same time continuously rejects proposals from the women's NGOs to increase gender quota in the Election Law. These issues are pointing at lack of systemic efforts to change practices of discrimination against women, and violation of women's rights. It is obvious that formal recognition of rights did not bring positive change for women in BiH.

3. What is the status of women's access to reproductive health options (e.g. birth control & abortion) in Bosnia-Herzegovina?

Birth control is formally accessible to all women, with no legislative restrictions. However, limited researches in this area indicate that approximately 40% women use some methods of contraception, but less of 10% of women use modern methods, and these data actually point at strong influence of patriarchy. It is unknown how many women have the option to negotiate birth control with their partners, and have access to reproductive health services and information, regardless of their age. BiH policy makers in reproductive health policies, or rather to say, they acknowledge it, but do little effort to improve the situation, often neglect these issues. Women in rural areas and Romani women are recognized as especially vulnerable in terms of accessibility of the birth control, and health services in general. They have limited access to health insurance and information on health protection. I would say,

for them, birth control is rather privilege than accessible option, and this issue requires more efforts from public health programs and official institutions at all levels in BiH. It might sound radical to say that health and social protection services are expensive, and vulnerable categories of women are not top priority on political agendas, but this is not far from truth.

Similarly, abortion is legal, and covered by health insurance funds. It is important to say that women in all areas of Bosnia and Herzegovina have legally protected right to independently decide on termination of pregnancy, which is in accordance with the international standards in this area. I've had the opportunity to monitor public discussion prior to adoption of the Law on Conditions and Procedure for Termination of Pregnancy in Republika Srpska in 2008. There were lobbying groups that advocated introducing consent of a male partner for termination of pregnancy, and limiting conditions under which abortion can be allowed. This was disturbing to me, but fortunately, this option didn't meet sufficient support among legislators. Such retrograde tendencies can be very harmful to basic women's rights.

4. Are there significant differences, in this respect, between women's positions in [the Federation or the Republika Srpska or the District of Brcko](#)?

No, I don't believe so. I would say, this issue is universal in the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, perhaps in the whole region as well.

5. How has the Bosnian state or its international partners dealt with the survivors of sexual violence in Bosnia during the war?

This is very sensitive issue. I would also add it represents highly politicized issue, on the harm of women survivors. It speaks for itself the fact that Bosnia and Herzegovina still does not have state level strategy for improving the position of women survivors, although this has been topic of discussion for several years. Women survivors of sexual violence during the war in Federation of BiH have limited benefits recognized by the law (e.g. priority in employment and state financial support, according to the Law on Civil Victims of War of FBiH). In Republika Srpska, this category of women is invisible, as mainstream politics never encouraged discussions on this issue. Due to that, after being ignored for such a long time, with little or no help, they choose to remain silent. These are facts. This also indicates that status of women survivors of sexual violence and all other issues related to women's human rights are not prioritized on agendas of the official authorities.

As a woman and activist, I feel the discontent of the women survivors. I am too disappointed with masculine politics of both BiH authorities at all levels of governance and the international community. Persecution of perpetrators that are responsible for sexual violence against women during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina is important part of justice for women survivors. However, this is just one-step. Women survivors need sustainable, gender sensitive and institutionalized services of support to recover and work through trauma, build their strength, and empower their lives. Instead, they are stigmatized and pushed to the social margins.

6. What is the status of violence against women in Bosnia today?

Certainly, the most visible form of violence against women in Bosnia and Herzegovina is domestic violence, although there are no reliable BiH level official statistics. One thing is certain – it is widely tolerated as “socially acceptable” behavior, judging by penalty policy and response of the key official institutions that should provide efficient protection for women survivors of violence. Another form of violence that is hidden and remains largely unreported is sexual abuse of young girls – if one closely analyzes news reports from the BiH and whole Western Balkan region, you can identify many articles covering these issues. Women’s NGOs in BiH are struggling to raise public awareness on this issue, and influence media reporting that often reveals identity of young survivors of violence, and exposes them to additional stigma, trauma, and security risk. We often react through petitions to the Press Council of BiH (as self-regulatory body for printed media), and Regulatory Agency for Communications of BiH, and we pressure key media management structures to follow human rights responsive and responsible reporting.

Additional issues represent the fact that many women remain in abusive environments due to lack of support from the official system. I heard many testimonies of women survivors of domestic violence on lack of protection by police officers and social workers – from expressing doubts to survivor’s experiences of violence to suggestions to reconcile with abusers “for the sake of keeping family together,” refusing to provide physical protection or inadequate collection of testimonies and evidence related to events of violence. Once that victim reports violence, and receives no adequate help and protection, she would most certainly hesitate to report it again. In many cases, we witnessed severe violence to exposed women and child survivors of violence immediately after police and social workers “hit the doors.” With such reactions from the official institutions, it is difficult to convince women that they should report violence every time it happens.

Many women survivors of violence are economically dependent on the abusers, unemployed, with no income, no way out. The criminal laws of BiH entities incriminate domestic violence, but Republika Srpska Domestic Violence Law also recognizes domestic violence as a minor offence, and penalty policy indicate that vast majority of cases end with symbolic monetary fines, or suspended sentences. Protection measures (e.g. restraining orders against abusers) are not implemented in the practice, and many women chose to be silent on violence rather than report it, as they are legitimately afraid of provoking another cycle of violence. Effects of public policies in this field are hardly visible in the practice.

7. In the period immediately after the war in Bosnia, the country became a major center for human trafficking, in particular of young women—has this changed?

It did change in a way, in that it went “underground”. By coordinated police actions, bars and places where young women from other countries of Eastern Europe were openly and brutally sexually exploited and trafficked were shut down. Human traffickers focus more on young women from Bosnia, so we have internal trafficking, or recruiting girls from Bosnia for sex industries in Western Europe. It must be noted that BiH adopted all necessary laws, signed international conventions in this area, adopted public policies, and established other institutional mechanism to counter trafficking, such as the Office of the State Coordinator for Combating Trafficking of People in BiH. I believe it is very important to have this issue integrated in regular school curricula in final grades of elementary schools and all through high school education. This would decrease the chances of vulnerable categories of children and young people of both sexes being caught in the tempting traps of human traffickers on promises quick and easy money. Additionally, it must remain the focus of teachers, social workers, pedagogues, and parents to recognize early signs of the problem, and to react in order to save children and young people.

8. What is the status of feminists and feminism in Bosnia? What role do they play in society and what has been the reception of feminism in the society as a whole?

Apart from the civil society in Bosnia, namely women's organizations with open feminist orientation and actions, feminism remains largely invisible. Regardless to that, I would not agree to say it is weak, as I witness many strong feminist ideas and actions, such as public advocacy related to increased participation of women in politics and decision making, fighting violence against women, increasing gender sensibility of media, etc. There are many events, such is Pitchwise Festival of Women's Arts, coordinated by Foundation CURE Sarajevo, and Campaign 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence, coordinated by women's groups joined in the Women's Network of BiH, where feminist ideas are promoted continuously.

In relation to reception of feminism in BiH society as a whole, I would say that feminism is largely subjected to unjustified stereotyped perceptions on feminists as "man haters" or "women that rose against good old traditional values," and similar constructions. Such perceptions are based on lack of knowledge on its values and ideas. Due to that, many progressive women and men that advocate for women's rights in BiH would refuse to identify themselves as feminists, or would deny it in a public arena. Likewise, if they do that in the public, they can face ignorance and open verbal attacks. I believe it is ultimately wrong to keep feminism in a sort of "restricted ghetto," and would like to see feminism more open to grassroots work in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I consider this very important for enhancing support for feminist ideas and concepts in a future – common women and men citizens must have access to information on what feminism stands for, and why it is important that they actively participate in actions aimed for improving women's human rights in practice.

9. In the West, the past 20 years have been marked by increasing co-operation between feminist and queer and LGBT activists. Have similar trends begun emerging in Bosnia?

I see this cooperation starting to develop in Bosnia and Herzegovina, although I cannot say it is strong and satisfactory. The Sarajevo Queer Festival that was organized in September 2008 was surrounded with violence, hatred, and open security threats against queer and LGBT activists, and many women NGO activists and human rights workers publicly condemned this violence. Women's NGOs joined in Women's Network of BiH are reacting frequently to calls for solidarity and support by queer and LGBT organizations in concrete cases of discrimination, [such was recent homophobic attack on students of Faculty of Philosophy in Sarajevo](#), or reactions on discriminatory writings against LGBT population in some BiH daily magazines. However, I see these positive steps still as isolated activities, and more should be done to strengthen impact of these actions in the practice, namely in terms of joint work on raising public awareness and diminishing stereotypes against the LGBT community in Bosnia and Herzegovina. We also have to work more on developing joint agendas, and clear objectives of how to work together, and for now, this is missing.

10. Finally, are there any particular projects or organizations that people abroad can get involved or support if they are interested in promoting the status of women in Bosnia?

This is very important, as many women's NGOs throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina, namely in smaller

local communities lack support and capacities to work on improving women's human rights at the local level. People with willingness to share their knowledge, skills, donate equipment, or simply volunteer to support their work are always welcomed. There is [an on line data base of women's groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina administered by CURE Foundation](#), where interested women and men individuals can search for contacts, and get in touch directly with the women activists.

Additionally, there are safe houses for women and child victims of violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina run by women's NGOs – in Bihac by women's [NGO "Women from Una"](#) [BCS], in Modrica by [NGO "Future" Modrica](#) [BCS], in [Mostar by "Woman BiH"](#) [English], in Banja Luka by [NGO "United Women" Banja Luka](#) [English], in Zenica by [NGO "Medika" Zenica](#) [English], in Sarajevo by [NGO "Foundation of Local Democracy"](#) [BCS]. Safe Houses are in need for continuous financial support, but also contribution of through development and implementation of various programs aimed at psychosocial rehabilitation and economic empowerment of women and child survivors.