

There are at least three high-profile women in Serbia's politics, but many women are still in the margins of society as a result of the war that began in 1991. Yet, if anyone bothered to ask the women then,

There Would Have Been No Wars...

by Vesna Peric-Zimonjic



Serbian women suffer the consequences of a war that is not of their choice

BELGRADE—An influential handful of women who have staked out a place in Serbia's political mainstream since the latest Balkan chaos began in 1991 are very much the exception that proves the rule.

For the rule is that women's positions in society have declined since the end of communist control, and that an unfair share of the country's problems has been placed on female shoulders.

Serbian politics today enjoys the high-profile contribution of three influential women: Vesna Pesic, one of the leaders of the Zajedno opposition coalition that guided three months of street protests in Belgrade this year; Danica Drascovic, the sharp-tongued wife of fellow opposition leader Vuk Draskovic; and Mira Marcovic, powerful orthodox Marxist party leader and wife of Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic.

Markovic, whose influence stretches far beyond what might ordinarily be granted to the spouse of a national leader, has a favorite line; that "the 21st century will be the century of rule by the Left, by science and by women."

Yet despite her rhetoric, women in Serbia have been pushed to the margins of society by developments in the country since 1991.

According to a study by an independent group of sociologists from the Philosophy Faculty of Belgrade ("Women in Serbia 1991-95"), Serbian women were the main losers in the post-1991 troubles that began with the breakup of the Yugoslav federation and the wars in Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

For its part in fomenting the war in Bosnia, Serbia was punished by the West with draconian sanctions, some still in place, which had dramatic effects on the economy but little effect on the authoritarian regime of Slobodan Milosevic.

"The women were the first to lose their jobs in Serbia when the economic crisis started in 1992, the year when the sanctions were imposed," the study says. "Firms that traditionally employ women workers, such as the textile and shoe industry, were the first to close. The women were the first to lose jobs, as it was believed that men should stay employed to keep up the families."

But in the years that followed, the husbands lost their jobs too. Out of the four million people employed in Serbia in 1991, officials now admit that only 1.7 million people are presently employed in the country.

During the wars, when hyperinflation raged, the average family income fell to the equivalent of 30 U.S. dollars a month. Since then the average salary in 1997 has risen to some 100 dollars, but officials admit that only three percent of the employed can feed their families with the money they bring home every month.

Unsurprisingly, for the first time in decades, the mortality rate in the country was higher than the birth rate during 1991-95.

"The result is a growing conservatism in society, billed as 'a return to traditional values'," says Andjelka Milic, one of the authors of the study. "Everything that women here have won in more than 40 years has gone down the

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Women are forced to have large families to replace an aging population

drain since 1991.”

Official propaganda in Serbia, especially during the war years, made much of women as the “pillars of the family home.”

TV campaigns dedicated to “traditional values” urged women to start large families and reverse the demographic trend of an aging population. After all, as one program put it, unemployed women have “nothing else to do.”

“Who would be crazy enough to bring another child into this world when our basic health care system is almost dead and there is no money to properly feed, dress and educate the children you already have?” says Mila Stankovic, a Belgrade psychologist.

Again, according to state figures, the Serbian police force receives 22 times the funding now made available to health care.

A forced return to the family does not necessarily mean a better quality of life, adds Milic. “Although the divorce rate in 1991-95 was far lower than in the earlier years, the return to the family was a forced one. Meaning that family members had nowhere else to go. It has a special psychological effect, as it is involuntary. People are pushed into a kind of cage, and that is not normal or healthy.

“It is all far from what women in Serbia won during the years between 1945 and 1991. The relationship based on partnership between men and women has disappeared,” says Milic.

Yet the women of Serbia have responded with vitality and vigor, the study says. As most of the men turned to the semilegal economy to support the family, women in smaller towns turned to gardening, home crafts and even agriculture to earn some money.

In bigger towns, including Belgrade, they turned to whatever jobs they could find. Now about

21 percent of families in Serbia depend exclusively on what women earn during the month.

Of 600,000 Serb refugees from Croatia and Bosnia living in Serbia now, 60 percent are women. Studies found that women were better able to adapt to a new life far from their homes.

“The women survived the war, torture, running for shelter to Serbia, leaving everything behind and, in many cases, loss of their loved ones,” the study says. “There is not a single refugee woman that did not go through a change during the war years. Yet they are playing their new roles with unexpected brilliance and vigor.”

“While the husbands are always keeping silent, it is the women who talk about their hardships and problems,” says Biljana Stanojevic of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia. “In 90 percent of cases, the wife has found a kind of job and is the sole supporter of the family.”

“The women refugees were fantastic,” says Marina Blagojevic, one of the authors of a study of Serb refugee women. “They were the first to take any kind of job, the first to pull their strength for a new start, to return their lives and the lives of their families to a kind of normality.”

Nevertheless, both studies conclude that the women living in Serbia are victims of past developments they had little influence over at the time.

“There would have been no wars, if anybody had asked the women in 1991,” one concludes. “Now they have to pay for whatever their fathers, husbands or brothers did. They are forced to play a cruel survival game and do it the best they can, with the final outcome yet to be seen.”

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