

From State-Directed Non-Development and Organized Gender Violence to Transition in Vojvodina and Serbia

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Introduction

The introduction of gender as an analytical tool in development economics is often related to questions about the social construction of male and female productive and reproductive roles and their relationships. Gendered studies of economic development focus not only on economic growth as important; they also suppose structural changes such as decreasing rates of poverty, inequality, and unemployment for both sexes as desirable goals. However, social development, in any country, also has to be treated as a multidimensional and continuous process of solving numerous and complicated social problems, with an understanding that these solutions, at the same time, produce new and more complicated questions. In this paper, I will use a Gender and Development (GAD) approach to discuss the significance of gender equality as a political and social condition for the successful economic and social development of Serbia.

General Conditions of Non-Development in Vojvodina and Serbia during the 1990s

Wars disintegrated socialist Yugoslavia in the 1990s; the economic sanctions and consequent isolation that were introduced thereafter deteriorated the economy and destabilized politics and society. Today, social destruction and poverty stand as the essential dimensions of social crisis in Serbia.¹ The postsocialist Serbian regime actively rejects an economic transition towards a market economy and maintains, in my opinion, a generally stagnant economic policy (Djuric-Kuzmanovic 1997; Djuric-Kuzmanovic and Zarkov 1999). The government's refusal to accept the transition to a market economy is illustrated in part by their renationalization in the 1990s of firms that had previously been privatized by enterprise laws in the 1980s. Furthermore, the state has become the de facto owner of the majority of firms, exercising power over their business decisions, the elections of their general managers, and encouraging government members to remain owners or general managers of the largest firms in Serbia while in office. Administrative control over the market of goods and prices of products is prominent, and the labor market and money market are practically nonexistent. Exports and imports are also under state control. I refer to this specific form of state economy policy as "state-directed non-development." In other words, this is a systematic and complex mechanism operating to prevent not only a transition

to a market economy, but any economic and political development that will undermine the existing benefits of the already struggling oligarchy. It deliberately discredits the most important categories of the market economy and impoverishes the citizens, finding an apt justification in a self-proclaimed higher cause—the “fate” of the nation.

The economic situation in Serbia is dramatic and specifically represents an example of what I call non-development. Some elements of the Serbian market economy have been embraced by the informal economy of the service sector. As a matter of fact, it is estimated that the informal economy in Serbia makes up one half of the gross domestic product (GDP) (Dragas 2000). However, it is mainly state management in the economy that determines policy, policy which is often followed by the paralysis of functioning social institutions, penetrated by so called “para-state” structures, corruption, and criminals. Socialist Yugoslavia has the highest level of corruption in Europe with a corruption perception index (CPI) of 2.0 in 1999, and is considered to be in the same extreme category as countries such as Kenya and Paraguay (Transparency International 1999). This has had a serious economic impact. From 1990 through 1999 the average growth rate of gross national product of Serbia was negative seven percent (Group 17 2000), and the per capita gross national product of Serbia in 1990 (without Kosovo) was nearly twice as high than it was in 1999 (from US\$3250 to US\$1650). About 60 percent of the total population now lives below the poverty line (Sukovic 2000). While an average monthly salary in December 1990 was US\$376, by December 1999 it was only US\$43.50 (Group 17 2000).

The Impact of Transition on Serbian Women

Although the forms and contexts of reforms in Eastern European countries differ from country to country, the similarities of women’s positions in these countries have been noted (Funk and Mueller 1993; Aslanbeigui, Pressman, and Summerfield 1994; Holzner, Truong, and Krahl 1997). Almost all research confirms that reforms introduced by transitional governments have contributed to the deterioration of women’s social status.

Women in Vojvodina and Serbia are specifically subordinated in the public sphere (in firms and institutions) as well as in the private sphere of the family. Their labor contribution in the public sphere is substantial, but they are rarely publicly recognized for it. For example, in the teaching profession, women comprise 64 percent of teachers in primary schools, 51 percent in secondary schools, and 30 percent at higher levels (SGJ 1991:339-343). However, women comprise only one-percent of the members of the Academy of Science of FR Yugoslavia and no woman has ever held the post of Rector at the University of Belgrade (Milivojevic 1994). According to Markov and Stankovic (1991), women are seldom at the top of

management hierarchies either. Only two percent of women are directors in mainly small enterprises.

In Serbian politics women were and still are rare and even rarer still as heads of political parties. For example, the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS) owes a large part of its victory in the federal elections last September to young women voters, but less than five percent of active politicians in the party are women (Peric-Zimonic 2000), and only eight female candidates became members of Federal (Yugoslav) Parliament.² During the parliamentary republic elections in Serbia last December women's organizations demanded that 30 percent of the candidates be women, but only 21 female candidates became members of Republic (Serbian) Parliament.³ Currently, in all political structures, from the local to the federal level, only six to seven percent of politicians are women (Rajacic-Capakovic 2000).

There are no legal grounds preventing women from taking part in Serbian economics or politics. The subordinated position of women is the articulations of what I believe are two more subtle registers of hegemony, (1) a culture of patriarchy; and (2) an economic system of domination. This is despite the fact that the Socialist state publicly proclaimed the development of a humane equal society as one of its main goals. According to the Socialist state, humanization should have been achieved through the simultaneous participation of workers in the process of social reproduction and the withering away of the state, first from the economy, and then from other spheres of social life. Both principles were especially present in the government sponsored socialist project concerning the emancipation of women. Thus, women *should* have operated as equal participants in the development of the socialist economy and society as a whole as well as being the protectors and nurturers of the young and future generations. However, as recent feminist literature on women's emancipation in socialism demonstrates, women were not equal partners, either in the public or private realm. In this patriarchal system, where maternity is the prevailing cultural pattern of female existence, women conducted unrecognized dual roles by working within and outside the home, becoming responsible for ensuring both the moral and economic security of the family, but they were only recognized for their role in the private sphere. Today, just over half (or about 500,000 members) of the unemployed population is women.

During this time, women have become the numerous victims of nationalistic collapsing processes in politics, economics, and society. When they have power, it lies in their importance as symbols of nationalist policies and, willingly or unwillingly, as the "mothers of the nations." They are also among the most numerous victims of the devastating consequences of a "nationalist hysteria" (Bibo 1991). The existing gap between the publicly proclaimed equality between sexes and the real status of women in socialist Yugoslavia and new postsocialist practices in Serbia have turned towards the absolute glorification of women's more traditional roles. They are simultaneously mythologized as possessing the "nation's deepest" essence and

instrumentalized as the “nation's life/birth saver/protector,” but otherwise they are invisible (Papic 1994). In this situation, women's already faint political voice becomes absolutely quiet; as a result public politics become primarily a male arena. The only female political subjects are members of small parties, which typically refuse atrocities perpetuated in the name of nationalism, war, and violence politics, as well as some pacifist and feminist groups. In general, these gendered political actions remain ineffective. This fact becomes especially painful in the realm of war. The rise of violence against women in war zones, in addition to areas of relative peace, is seldom addressed in public discourse. Only small women's groups deal with these issues.⁴ One of these groups, Women in Black Against War, made a document “I Confess”⁵ in October 1998, on the seventh anniversary of their anti-war activity. In it they confess that they actually took care of all other ethnicities, nationalities, faiths, race, and sexual orientation, while the “patriots” took care only of themselves. They should thus be recognized as playing important roles in the future of Yugoslavia and not reduced to the status of victims (Women in Black 1988).

During the late 1990s the situation has become worse. For women, the loss of jobs and the difficulty of finding new ones generally result from the worsening of women's position at home (Blagojevic 1955; Papic 2000). Many Yugoslavian women now accept the most patriarchal expectations of themselves, thereby sacrificing themselves for their country. They now equate the survival of their own family with “saving the nation.” Although women work longer and harder than men at home, they aren't compensated for their labor and this has become the expectation of women. While women are exalted in their roles as wives and mothers, they have been pushed out of the economic and political sphere (Djuric-Kuzmanovic 1995). All these manifestations of socio-political collapse, I understand as state-organized acts of violence against women.

Women and Transition in Vojvodina and Serbia: Current Developments and Future Trends

However, recent developments in Yugoslavia towards democracy create a new space for discussing more hopeful and possibly egalitarian and yet undefined future away from dictatorship and isolation. The recent victory of the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS) at the Yugoslav federal elections in September implies the end of international isolation and the beginning of true democratic reforms in FR Yugoslavia. The anti-Milosevic plebiscite at the federal elections, the protests and democratic revolution in October, and finally, the recently completed Serbian republic elections in December confirm that the last authoritarian regime in Europe may be over. But the consequences of their regimes are clearly visible and painful and it will be very hard to cure them. The experiences of other ex-socialist transition economies in Central and East Europe warn of many potential difficulties and some socially painful consequences of transitioning to a capitalist economy. In Eastern Europe,

economic transition has generally meant the liberalization of bureaucratic management of the economy, wide-scale re-privatization, and economic restructuring (Djuric-Kuzmanovic and Zarkov 1998). In the case of Serbia, a radical reform of the existing mixed economic system towards a more market oriented one will necessarily integrate market factors such as labor, capital, and goods, but these will be difficult concepts to introduce to the society at large.

To some extent it is possible to predict how transition towards a market economy in Serbia will effect women's positions in the labor market.⁶ Unfortunately, if development strategies do not include sensitivity to gender, the estimation cannot be good. Research on Central and Eastern European countries has already confirmed that economic transformation impacts women especially negatively, contributing to their losses in the fields of employment, social welfare, and participation in political processes (Kandiyoti 2000:124). In a country like Serbia, where women are struggling to remain employed primarily to secure not only survival for their families, but also to maintain their own economic position and self-worth, any decrease of female labor supply during transition is unlikely. However, paid maternity leave and privatized childcare, as institutionalized benefit categories, are impossible features for the moment. Women will thus continue to play their dual economic roles in the public and private sphere without recognition of their special needs as women.

I anticipate that the increases in pay associated with a market economy will also fail to ultimately benefit Serbian women. In developed capitalist countries women still earn 30 percent less than men with the same education, experience, and position. Furthermore, the difference in pay is generally higher in the private sector than in the public sector. In transitioning countries, the private sector is the fastest expanding sector and is largely dominated by men. Thus, it makes sense to expect that the gap between women and men's wages will increase further. In our situation of generally high unemployment, it is to be expected that the structure of employment changes will generate more temporary, seasonal, and low-paying jobs for unemployed men, pushing women out of such marginal employment opportunities. Highly educated and skilled women may still get new job opportunities in newly expanding sectors, but these will be a few female winners among many female losers.

Thus, I think the general question for Serbia now is not so much if development will become the priority of the Serbian government, but rather will development be constructed merely in the sense of economic growth and structural change, or will it also be constructed as a form of social justice? The most recent data from other former socialist countries demonstrates that in general, development strategies used in transitioning countries have sharpened economic inequalities between women and men, as well as among women, and that this has delayed the successful transition of these countries. In this paper, I have attempted to describe Serbia on the brink of transition, a country ready to move forward but perhaps resistant to learn from the knowledge of other's past mistakes. We have an

opportunity to transform the nation now, but our development strategies must include sensitivity to gender, and must specifically recognize women's large contribution to Serbian society. To exclude the needs of women in a time of such great potential is ultimately to reduce the chances of Serbia's successful move towards stability.

Notes

¹Some Yugoslav sociologists defined the situation in Serbia as "destruction of the society," "breakdown," "organized chaos" (Lazic 1994; Bolcic 1994)

²One of the few is Mira Markovic, Milosevic's wife, who heads the neo-Marxist Yugoslav Left party (JUL).

³Recently, Vuk Obradovic, head of Socialdemocratia (one of the eighteen parties which makes DOS) gives his place of member of republic Serbian Parliament to female candidate O. Kircanski in order to fulfill the demands of women's organizations (Dragas 2000).

⁴The most famous women's' group in Serbia is Women in Black, Autonomous Women's center Against Sexual Violence and Women's Studies Centers. They were mainly fighting against war, nationalist polices and its effect on women, but they did not attract massive public attention.

⁵They "confess," like they did some criminal act by having and showing respect for all men and women, because it was not to much popular to admit in public. Official ideology proclaimed that the Serbs are only victims in wars in Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. So, in these circumstances, Women in Black were also very brave.

⁶There are more factors influencing the female labor supply: the level of salaries, the level of unemployment, the contribution of male in household work, the number of children, state policy towards family and childcare, the availability of household appliances, social norms, and values of female labor market participation. Some of these factors will not change by transition, at least in the short term. For example, the number of children per household is not expected to change dramatically. Some other factors, like the male contribution to household work, will remain unchanged. We can make the same predictions for the traditional gender division of other unpaid work.

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