

NO EQUALITY WITHOUT HUMAN RIGHTS

Female Journalists in the Balkans ²⁴¹

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1. Introduction

Questions of gender equality or equality of opportunities for media professionals in parts of the Balkans and particularly in Serbia/Yugoslavia today pale in comparison to the theft of fundamental human rights from both men and women. In the past fifteen years, the slow, then rapidly changing social and political conditions which reign in Yugoslavia nowadays, wars in former Yugoslav territories, the impoverishment of society to its lowest level of existential survival, the sudden and acute polarisation of political and economic interests of various political parties and groups, especially of the governing party, jeopardised basic human rights in the country and, at the same time, isolated it from world economic, cultural and media fora. Without such basic human rights including the right to communicate, to free expression, freedom of movement, etc, there is no platform for equality to be built upon. In fact, human rights and equality are intertwined, dependent upon each other for survival. Within this environment, concepts such as *gender mainstreaming*, being pursued on national, international and inter-governmental levels, will fall on deaf ears, into an abyss.

The Uniqueness of the Yugoslav Case: Sanctions in And Outside of the Country

In Yugoslavia today, there exist two types of sanctions: those imposed by the international community which, among other things, restrict the free flow of ideas and movement of people in and out of the country and those imposed by the Yugoslav government and officials itself. Lines of independent communication within the country have been severed. Information and opinions from the world press have been suspended. The results -- informative autism. How can concepts such as gender equality or mainstreaming penetrate a system which has been purposefully amputated from distributing and fertilising a diversity of ideas?

Professional and human rights to be informed, educated, trained, to move freely and to have free access to sources of information are endangered by the mere fact that they concern (male and female) – journalists of Yugoslavia or Yugoslav journalists. For example, for every trip abroad, even professional ones, to be educated or acquire advanced training, one must break through a nearly insurmountable procedure to obtain travel visas and various other forms of permission. They simply can not travel to some European countries or to other continents in order to keep up independent links with world culture by covering, for example, the opening of important exhibitions like the Venice Biennial, film and music festivals or important political events; they have to endure, sometimes over weeks, maltreatment in foreign embassies.

²⁴¹ This text was originally produced in English and was written prior to the elections in September 2000.

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How can one practice as a free lance journalist (to meet people, to be in the right place at the right time) under such conditions?

Independent Media in Serbia and Yugoslavia Today

Below is a list of events which gives a clear picture of the situation for independent, non-official journalists and media professionals in Serbia and Yugoslavia:

- In March 2000, police entered the radio/TV tower of *Studio B* and physically attacked the staff.
- In the end of April 2000, 3 independent radio and television stations have been shut down indefinitely by the government (*RTV Studio B, Radio Index, B-2-92*).
- Independent *Radio BUM 93* was closed down in March 2000, similarly, the government closed the private TV station *Nemanja* and the independent radio station *Tir* in the town of Cuprija, independent *Radio Golf* in Belgrade and Radio and *TV Pozega*.
- In Pirot, the government confiscated all technical equipment of *TV Pirot* and equipment from TV tower Kraljevo was confiscated and only given back following a demonstration by some 10,000 people.
- Printing factory, Matroz (Sremska Mitrovica) was forced to stop producing paper. The result has been a lack of paper for independent press (government at the same time is preventing the import of paper from outside Serbia and Yugoslavia)
- At the beginning of May 2000, 13 independent journalists were arrested when reporting on demonstrations taking place in Pozarevac, Milosevic's home town.
- All independent accredited correspondents are not being admitted to press conferences in eg. the Parliament, neither in press boxes during parliamentary sessions (only accredited journalists from "official" newspapers and radio stations are allowed in)
- A new information law has been passed by the Parliament which requires journalists and independent journalists to pay large sums of money (10,000-100,000 DM) in the event they publish articles whose content is against party politics -- payable within 24-94 hours.
- 3 independent journalists are arrested and 1 (Miroslav Filipovic) was sentenced to prison for 7 years.

One example to corroborate these facts is my own case. I have been a journalist for over 25 years, publishing over 10,000 headlines. Most recently I was a permanent employee of the newspaper *Politika*. On May 14th 1998, I was dismissed from my position as a known political opponent of the ruling party (my editor in chief, Hadzi Dragan Antic, being a close associate of Slobodan Milosevic). My dismissal was slow. In 1996, following my participation in several civil protests against the falsified election results, my salary was reduced by 70% – less than the salary of a non-qualified worker. I was not the only one. 30 of my colleagues participating in these protests suffered the same fate. 4 of them, including myself decided to bring charges against the newspaper, while the other 26 simply went "underground" to wait for better times. In the end 3 out of the 4 bringing charges withdrew their complaints before the sentencing was announced (for fear of physical threats from the government). I was the only one left. The court, in fact, sided in my favour, however, the result was that I lost my job. On that day in May, I was sent a notice stating that I was not allowed to enter the building of *Politika* ever again. When trying to enter the building to collect my personal notes, journalist books, documentation, typewriter etc, the security stopped me, claiming that I was on the list of "unwanted persons". Such action, overruling the law and the decision of the court to rein-

state and reimburse me, clearly indicates the power of politics over any law of democracy, human rights, or even universal principles such as equality.

Despite tremendous public support from journalists, academics and intellectuals, subsequent court decisions in my favour (5 of them), orders to reverse this political decision have not been granted. To this day, I remain on the list of "unwanted persons".

This case, my case, is clearly not an isolated phenomenon as can be clearly seen from above. There are currently over 500 journalists in such positions who are currently seeking regular or part-time jobs. Two years ago, I wrote a letter to Mrs. Kathy Morton, of the Committee for the protection of journalists rights in New York. Until today, I have not received any answer.

In spite of the common political challenges facing both female and male media professionals, one can draw some comparisons between their working conditions. The analysis presented in this article is based on statistical data provided by two professional associations (Association of Serbian journalists, a so-called "dependent" or official journalist organisation and the Independent journalist's association of Serbia, a non-official organisation) as well as on interviews conducted with practising and non-practising media professionals regarding their perception of the status of female journalists.

2. First a Few Facts: Female Journalists in Serbia And Yugoslavia

The practice of journalism in Serbia is two centuries old; the first Serbian newspaper appeared in Vienna on 3rd of March, 1791 and was produced exclusively by men. More than half a century later, the first women journalists appeared in Serbian society; quite unusual persons with extraordinary talents and qualities. In fact, Serbian women were the first women journalists in South-East Europe.

Today, the Association of Serbian journalists ("dependent") reports approximately 7000 members, nearly 60% of them are women. Of course, that wasn't always the case, but it is very interesting that in the last years there has been a tremendous increase in the number of women. For example, of the 1000 new members who joined the association in the last three years, 80% are female journalists!

The independent journalist's association of Serbia (NUNS), reported 1076 members in 1999, out of which 398 are women (37%). An investigation into their membership on the professional status indicated that 627 members (53%) held permanent positions, while 43% are unemployed, and 4% of them are retired. Today, these figures have drastically changed. Not only has the membership increased by 250 journalists, but the employment figures have turned on their head: 30% are employed, 70% unemployed.

Despite the growing numbers of Yugoslav women in journalism and media today, twice and three times more men hold editorial jobs and all of the principal managing editorial positions; in 1998, 95% of all managers and editors in chief were men. Furthermore, there is not one influential daily political newspaper (either opposition or governing party) which is edited and managed by a woman journalist. Women are rarely found among editors of foreign policy or of internal policy columns, they most frequently edit pages for women or ones which have culture as a topic. Out of 43 radio and television stations in the association of the independent electronic media (ANEM) only eight are managed by women as editors in chief.

There is a general perception that wage discrimination does not exist as "equality of salaries is guaranteed by law" (or more realistically "all are equal in poverty"). Regardless the fact that there is no "official" discrimination between men and women, it is generally known that

women have to show much more diligence, knowledge and education than any average man in order to succeed in journalism, to achieve recognition and status in a media organisation and receive proportionate compensation.

3. Voices From the Field

Below is a collection of voices which identify three clear messages regarding differences in the professional status between men and women working in the media field, specifically in journalism.

First Men, Then Equality

The archetype of men and women and their traditional roles in society (especially within the family) continue and are perpetuated in "modern" professions such as journalism. This is reinforced not only through politics but also within educational structures. Regarding the former, Gordana Susa, journalist, recounts the countless attacks on women in politics via the media such as on Vesna Pesic who "bears the most insults of all political leaders only because she is a woman and because it is thought she is unprotected and more vulnerable than men in politics". On the latter, a radio journalist in Belgrade recalls her study days in journalism when her political science professor, Dr. Sergey Lukac, told his female students to "go home and be ladies".

Male Domination in Politics -- Reflections in Official Journalism

Visnja Vukotic was, until recently, a journalist of the paper "Express Politika". Her perceptions regarding the problems women face in journalism is in part due to the overwhelming majority of men in politics; posts in major media companies are allocated by government officials. She says, "women as editors in chief in state media, radio, TV or in newspapers such as *Politika* or *Borba* not only do not exist today, but in fact never existed. This is due to the fact that such posts are attributed by the government, a reign of absolute male domination. At the end of the day, women represent the majority of journalists, but it is men who tailor their fate and set limits". This reality changes, however, when examining the structure of the independent media: out of 12 editors for the newspaper "Blic", 8 were women. According to editor-in-chief of "Blic", Manojlo Vukotic, "women are much less politically burdened than men, which is important when working for a political column", especially an independent one. At the moment, there is not one female editor in chief of any of the numerous and well-known (distributed) private newspapers which deal with political issues.

Fear

Most female journalists interviewed recounted a high degree of fear from political retaliation and physical threats. They felt in a more vulnerable position than men -- more open to theft, rape and killing. According to Tanja Jakobi, journalist for the newspaper NIN, women journalists are "more susceptible to physical violence and that is something we have to take care about when writing and choosing our topics".