

# “Mother - daughter” feminism as a fight for democracy

Author: Iva Kojić

“The living of the life becomes the effect of the life as narrated.”<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

For my research project, I have decided to explore the perception of women-oriented communities and their influence on political activism through a comparison of two generations. The report consists of a historical part explaining the context in which two generations, dealing with the infringement of their political rights. The second part is an attempt of creating a parallel between to life narratives, on given by my mother, and the other a self reflection.

For the second part I conducted an interview with my mother. As a woman of Serbian and Montenegrin background, she grew up in a predominantly women-determined household with her mother and grandmother. Her parents divorced when she was very young, so the main parenting figures through her childhood were the two women with whom she spent most of her young life.

In my discussion, I uncovered what effect growing up in women-defined household had on her and how it had affected her choices later in life in terms of career and personal life. Furthermore, we discussed her years as a young activist in the turbulent political climate in Serbia--the nineties. During this time, the country had gone through a regime change, from a predominantly communist regime, to a “democracy” (the quotes are inserted due to the fact that the conditions for the regime to be qualified as democratic have not been fulfilled). Acts of civil unrest played a significant role in bringing awareness and focus to the many issues the country was dealing with (controlled elections, inability to express an opinion which differed from those in the political elite, lack of media representation for the opposing parties etc). The goal of the interview was to unravel how these experiences influenced her decisions and choices at the time. —and how her life experiences influenced her decisions and choices.

In addition to the life narrative of my mother, I wrote a self-reflecting life narrative in which I attempted to ask myself the same questions. The goal of this was to create a comparison of the two generations, to consider the many similarities and differences in our experiences, and to place them and analyze them within the specific political contexts in the country in which we both spent our formative years. The “new” generation, of which I am a part of, is now facing a similar autocratic approach to politics, with a

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<sup>1</sup> Jerome Bruner

somewhat freer economy and ability to express our opinion through social media. However, the struggle of having our voice heard and the wish for change was passed onto us. Therefore, we are now expected to fight this new “autocratic evil”. My wish was to see what might be the similarities from which we can learn, and use the differences to analyze the directions in which we may go, and gain a perspective on the role feminism and feminist activists played in both these turbulent times. My ultimate attempt was to create a bridge between the personal and the collective.

### Analysis:

How can women be a part of a revolution is a question posed by many of us, as we enter our teen years. Where is our place in the fight for democracy, for a chance to have our voice heard? Are we even *allowed* to participate, or are we meant to stand on the sidelines, and wait for those proclaiming themselves as “strong male individuals” to acquire our rights for us?

My mother is what they call a “do it all” woman. I am now looking to her for guidance on how to be one as well. Therefore, she has become a great inspiration and a key element in my political upbringing. I am now the same age she was, when she was faced with the collapse of a country she so dearly loved, and was forced to transform her disappointment into a fight for stability and freedom. The Republic of Serbia, being a part of a crumbling Yugoslavia, was faced with a dictatorship, economic sanctions, censure, war, inflation. Rigged elections, were a trigger for increased civil unrest and resistance, which included feminist resistance and activism. This is where my mother found her place, and where she spent most of her adolescent years.

Being from a women-oriented household, and a child of divorce, she perceived her upbringing as ordinary, even though for most this was an anomaly of the heteronormative idea of a nuclear family. The patriarchal grip was quite strong, and still is, but she had not been aware of it, until entering the adult world. Upon entering university, the political state in the country could have been described as a state of civil war in Croatia and Bosnia, and civil unrest in Serbia, which led her to questioning what she was meant to do in this historical catastrophe. For her, feminism was always something she believed in, but she never perceived it as a *separate* political part of her personality. She believed that a fight for equality should be sought after by everyone, but was aware that an idea like that could not be accepted by the patriarchal society she was raised in. A particular gap she noticed was between her peers and those a generation or two older: They were stuck in their old way of thinking, believing that the country would have been saved if the “great patriarch Tito” was still there.

Her first rebellion was when she refused to become a member of the Young Communist party, which caused dismay both in her class teacher and her mother. Back in 1988, being a party member was

still considered an honor and only the best students were offered that “opportunity”. For her, this was a “mini” version of a revolution against authoritarian figures and the script of belonging to the masses, whether you want to or not.

During the war in Bosnia, my mother decided to get involved in her own “soft revolution”. An acquaintance of hers from Bosnia, with whom she lost contact after elementary school, had one day appeared on her doorstep. The young woman, then being around twenty years old, came from war torn Sarajevo sharing horrible stories about the destroyed city, information which was not available through government-run official media. After hearing these stories, my mother decided not to be a passive bystander but instead actually help. The country's activist groups at the time were separated into those helping vulnerable groups and those organizing political changes. She decided to partake in one attempt to do both, and that was the “SOS hotline for women and children, victims of violence”. They would organize fundraisers and help for those most affected by war and loss. One of the most heartbreaking moments for her was when she learned about a significant number of women who were raped in Bosnia, rape being used as a means of retribution in a predominantly male war. Once they were rescued and helped to come to Belgrade, some of them decided to have abortions, but for some of them it was too late and they had to give birth to children conceived through an appalling act of war violence.

A key memory dealing with the censorship of media at the time, was a live concert that was broadcasted on national television. The conceptual artist and singer Rambo Amadeus disrupted a colleague in the middle of a set, coming out on stage and saying “How is it possible for you to enjoy this show and sing with us, when at this very moment bombs are being thrown at Sarajevo?”. The clip can still be found on Youtube and even today it triggers the same reaction of horror in her, where people were kept in the dark, not knowing what was really going on. This was the time when she heard about the most famous feminist organization at the time: “Women in Black” – a non-governmental organizations most hated and harassed by hard core nationalists, even today. My mother has a photograph of a small group of women protesters, standing alone, in the main square in Belgrade with a banner stating “Don't kill Sarajevo”, while nationalists men shout death threats. This helped her realize that, apart from the political voice women have during elections, protests and activism that attracts attention of the media are available as action to her. If a sufficient number of people come together, the authorities shall be forced to listen.

The leadership in the main political protests and acts of civil unrest, which became famous afterwards, was predominately man-oriented, and yet the burden of retribution and verbal violence, fell onto those in back rows. Those who were raising funds for the most affected groups in war, marginalized groups who were run out of their homes all over the country, this was all thanks to feminist and equality based organizations fighting for representation of the many minorities present in Serbia. even though the main problems of the country seemed to be resolved after the 2000. Democratization of the political system, nothing has really changed. The people who were politically active during her activist years, who

took part in the horrible wars and massacres, are now, once again, leading the country, and the position of women, has not changed. In the current government, Serbia has an openly lesbian woman as a prime minister, a woman as the head of the National bank, and several women at the top of political institutions, and yet, neither women, nor those who openly identify as queer, are safe or really “free”. This saddening truth is what led my mother to speak openly with me about what might my actions in the future be. She then “passed the baton” to me, and is now helping in navigating my anger and disappointment into working towards a better future.

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I am grateful to my mother for being open and sharing her struggles and experiences, because they help my sister and me, learn what it means to be a feminist activist, even if she would not explicitly call her activism feminist herself, and more a “general care for the wellbeing of others”.

The political context of Serbia today may be perceived as quite different from the nineties; however, in reality there are quite a few similarities. However, the conditions in which I, as a young woman, am living nowadays, differ from those of my mother’s in both positive and negative aspects.

Enrolling into the Faculty of Political Science with the idea that my generation may be the change Serbia so desperately needs, now seems childish to me. During my high school years, the image I had of my country was heavily influenced by the opinions of the adults that surrounded me. Under the care of my mother, I was given the freedom to explore concepts such as feminism, democracy, queerness and liberty. I spent many weekends prior to the pandemic, walking the streets in political/ecological protests, debating with peers about what can be done to motivate a shift towards a more democratic, hence less patriarchal system. And yet, when it came to defining ourselves, whenever I would proudly state that I am a feminist, I would be faced with this (more or less) hidden disapproval, as if I have said a “dirty” word. The biggest disappointment to my previous perceptions was the fact that my University peers would so proudly share their nationalist and misogynist ideas. There is a misconception that the major feminist “fight” is over, since the most important battles were won, hence there is no need for it anymore -, we can vote, and drive, and speak openly, and participate in politics. The sad reality is, even some of those victories are subject to reactionary politics, such as the right to an abortion. The fact that our male politicians decided to put “women in charge”, since men are pulling most of the strings is a strategy to silence criticism about the lack of genuine representation and more equality: How can I say that Serbia is a patriarchal society, when we have a lesbian woman for a Prime minister, while more democratic EU countries don’t?

The passive note with which we accept everything our politicians serve us, hurts my ears. Most of my generation, including myself, believe that Serbia cannot be changed, and we should take our beliefs

and fights elsewhere. If we want something better, we should leave and “go west”. I myself believe that I shall obtain a better education and perspective on life if I were to leave this country, that it would give me the necessary education to understand these democratic practices, and see how they function in places that are not an “undercover” autocracy. And yet, it makes me sad. Looking at my mother, who was a firm believer that change is possible, who never really wanted to leave her home country, while had a chance to do so, I feel as if I am now a traitor, for wanting to leave.

The COVID pandemic and the elections that have taken place in the past two years in Serbia, opened up many unhealed wounds. The continuous lock downs, and our inability to move safely during the pandemic without fear of infection, but also fear of those making the rules, cause many of us to shut down. During these two years, the president used the terrifying state of the world and the country, to guarantee himself a re-election. Due to the pandemic, some of Serbia’s “finest”, took it upon themselves to create false narratives driven by extreme right wing ideas and misconceptions, which led me to do a more careful examination of the historical tendencies this country has shown. Looking into the past and present political structure of the country, it has come to my attention that we have a tendency to look for those patriarchal “father figures”, to be at the very top and lead us. And the horrifying truth is that, the man on top today, our very president, was an apprentice of those political figures causing the most harm in the nineties. Now, some might say that this is all made up by those who are not true patriots of Serbia. I love my home country, but the fact is that, if we look closer, and do a bit of research, president Vučić was one of those participating in war crimes all over ex Yugoslavia, and had very nasty things to say when it came to minorities, women, LGBTQ+ people etc.

With the isolation imposed upon all of us by the COVID pandemic, and social media being omnipresent, I have reached a point where I believe that most of us feel even more distant from the important issues at hand.

Thankfully, not everything is so gray. Through my mother’s activist experiences, I learned that there are feminist organizations working on the issues I consider close to my heart. Their political activism may not be as loud as it once was, but their work in helping and educating women of all ages, on their rights and opportunities is very much relevant. It seems to me that my mother’s and my activism had reached a full circle once I began attending seminars organized by the “Autonomous Women's Center”. There I became even more aware of how small gestures might help someone, and had become a firm believer of the cliché political motto “Think globally, act locally”. With this forth feminist wave, it is my opinion that feminism in Serbia did not disappear. Instead, it shifted its perspective on the different spheres of activism that need support. It seemed to me that, throughout history, the feminist movement mostly stood alone. Nowadays, I understand that no feminist perceives themselves as fighting only for the rights of women, but rather attempting to create a bridge between various social justice movements. One such example are the collaborative politics between feminist and environmental movements, which, similarly to other European countries, are growing stronger in Serbia in the past several years.

There exists a perception that my generation would be the one to bring the much-needed change, required by the 21st century millennial agenda. Oftentimes, when I talk with those older than me, they have the notion that their fight is over. Some of them are disappointed that they did not reach the desired political changes and some have found the way to convince themselves that the things are as good as they get, given the unfavorable global circumstances. They did their job, back in the 90s and this mess we're in now, is no longer their fight. However, I believe that we have to fight together, since the world as we know it, will implode. We do come from different eras and different political contexts, but some of the experiences and circumstances may be quite similar. I hope to have the chance to further develop this thought, at a later point, with more people with whom I might talk to. After all, age is just a number. Willingness to change things for the better is what should be the common denominator for all of us.

We need collaborative feminist politics between generations in order to strengthen democratic institutions. The mother-daughter narrative is precisely the approach necessary for this idea, since I aimed to show how several different experiences with similar sentiments and ideas, has brought together the idea that a more promising future is certainly better than focusing on the small disagreements due to the time context.