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# Violence against Women in Serbia: Collective Body of Woman or where the “Flowers of Evil” Blossom<sup>1</sup>

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## \* 1. Introduction: Family as guarantee of survival and generator of risks

The cultural pattern of a society is transformed slowly, especially if it has been exposed to the same or similar influences over centuries of economic and social developments and overall social tendencies. This was the case in the history of the Serbian national and cultural being whose transformation has always ‘mirrored’ social developments. Various forms of collective entities, primarily the family, have been involved in the social changes of the Serbian cultural ethos. Specific features and intensity of the changes within the family in Serbia depended, among other things, on the distribution of social power among its members in the conditions in which the family is an ambivalent social factor: it is simultaneously the producer of capital (and thereby a guarantee of survival) and the generator of risks. The process of social power distribution within the family was established in the form of patriarchy as a traditional matrix of the

development of the Serbian society, certain forms of which persist even today. At the same time, the process of re-traditionalization of the family in contemporary conditions is characteristic of Serbia, as the society of semi-periphery (Hughson, 2018) with underdeveloped post-socialist institutions of the system. This is why the family was taken as a unit for analysis in this research of social trends and understanding their consequences in Serbia. Its transformation is followed throughout history, exploring the influence exerted by religious, traditional, patriarchal patterns and cultural heritage on the relations and distribution of power among its members, its social role and significance until the present day, as well as its re-traditionalization. The analysis focuses on violence against women as one of the consequences of the mentioned external factors which influenced the process of gender socialization and role division within the family and allowed stability and continuity of the violent pattern as a result of (re)distribution of social power.

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## 2. “In the beginning was the word”: Methodological framework of research

The aim of this research is to explore the thesis about the existence of a diachronic, dynamic matrix according to which — starting from the mythological representations and religious dogmas, through the inheritance of traditional and patriarchal norms to the present day — the attitude towards the woman and her position within the family has not essentially changed in Serbia. Based on the uncritically adopted stereotypical representations and unfounded prejudice about the woman, her innate qualities and characteristics, a pattern of gender socialization and division of social roles has been developed, which represented a solid foundation for ideological justification of asymmetry of social power and for various forms of violence within the family.

The researchers' efforts in this study have also been directed towards seeking the answer to the following question: how have various forms of violence against women in the Serbian nation developed and survived until this day through mythological, religious images of women, cultural heritage, traditional and patriarchal social norms, taking into consideration two forms of family structures and their specific features: the traditional (patriarchal) and contemporary (re-traditionalized) one?

In order to establish these relations, the researches combined and cross-referenced a variety of data from multiple independent sources: historical archives, sociological and ethnographic collections, folklore creations (customs, ritual representations), folk stories, proverbs, sayings, popular songs. The core sample of the analyzed proverbs encompasses 7,000 proverbs from the collection of

Vuk Karadžić (1849), then Vuk Vrčević, Milan Vlajac and Milosav Mijušković. By analyzing the sample of about twelve thousand Serbian popular proverbs, the researches reached conclusions about the stereotypical representation of the woman and the relation of the society towards her contained in them.

Proverbs express the generally accepted, traditional, inherited belief of the members of a culture about the world, man and his destiny in an extremely reduced and simplified manner with an overt tendency to provide guidance and directions for coping in life (Popin, 2017). This is why the researchers thought that analyzing the contents of the proverbs about the woman from Serbian folklore may provide a reliable and a comparatively objective way in which to find out what stereotypes about the woman were prevalent in the Serbian traditional culture and which have remained in place until this very day, only in a modified and adjusted form. The analysis encompassed the traditional, social ambience of patriarchal culture in Serbia, as a contextual framework from which stereotypes and prejudice originated and in which they were preserved, as well as the current, modern patterns and family models which have developed in the established social frameworks.

Specificities of the functioning of traditional and contemporary families, family relations, roles of family members and violence against women were identified using secondary analyses of quantitative and qualitative data from the studies carried out around the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the areas populated by the Serbian people: the research of Vera Erlih which started in 1937<sup>3</sup>, between the two world wars, the study of family violence conducted in the 2001–2004 period on a sample of 580 observed village families in six

<sup>3</sup> “Porodica u transformaciji: studija u tri stotine jugoslovenskih sela [Family in Transformation: A Study of three hundred Yugoslav villages]” (Erlih, 1964). This is one of the rare sociological and anthropological studies dedicated to the woman and her position in the regions inhabited by the Serbian people and it contains sufficient material for analyzing tradition of sacrificing and violence against women.

The study divides the Serbian cultural circle into three territorial units: Christian Macedonia (Orthodox villages of Macedonia, Sandžak, Kosovo and Metohija), Christian Bosnia — orthodox villages, Serbia within its borders prior to 1921.



- counties of central Serbia (the counties of Zlatibor, Šumadija, Mačva, Belgrade City area, Nišava and Rasina) (Rajković and Miletić-Stepanović, 2010) and the research on firearm abuse in the context of gender-based violence, which was conducted in the area of Sandžak in 2016 (Spasić and Tadić, 2017).

### 3. *Family in transformation: conceptual approaches and initial assumptions*

The theoretical foundations for explaining the transformation of the Serbian family from patriarchal (traditional) one to the contemporary (re-traditionalized) one, taking into account conditions and circumstances in which it has been developing, are found in understanding the theory of structuring of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 2001). This theory starts from the proposition that the contemporary society is insufficiently transformed and therefore liable to re-traditionalization due to which the traditional family becomes an element of social development of modern societies. In situations of post-socialist crises, intense social exclusion, poverty and unemployment, the processes of re-traditionalization and familization occur, wherein the functioning of the society unfolds based on the traditional mechanisms of securing wellbeing (Koložova, 2016). According to Tadić et al. (2018), this process is influenced by forms of partial transformation of patriarchy from its traditional form, in which the husband-father has the authority, to the modern one, in which the authority is assigned to the man as such.

According to Hajnal (1983), there were two patterns of marriage and household in pre-industrial societies of Europe: west-European and east-European ones. In reference to the Hajnal line<sup>4</sup>, Serbia is in the east, within the east-European model of marriage and household. This model consists of the so-called complex households, among which the Balkan complex household (family) represents

one of the social instruments in the traditional and patriarchal society, with a high degree of adaptability to social and economic problems (Mosely, 1976, p. 77). The traditional form of family life which was characteristic of the Serbs is a rural community called *zadruga*, as a specific “cultural model of life, behavior and thinking” (Milić, 2001).

The ethnographic, sociological and historical approach in the analysis, that is, in the conceptual foundation of the research included the evidence on the existence of symmetry or asymmetry in the functioning of the family in terms of social power distribution between men and women. What is understood as a symmetric family is the social, economic and historic form of the family in which a husband and wife have equal power, that is, the roles of both of them are equally (essentially) important for the survival of the family and they are similarly valued by the society (Pavićević, 1999).

Earlier studies showed a prevalence of asymmetric families in Serbia and the influence of tradition, cultural heritage and patriarchy on the maintenance and strengthening of asymmetry (Blagojević, 2002; Trebješanin, 2011; Belić and Jovanović, 2013; Spasić and Tadić, 2017). As a result of asymmetry, the said studies identified different forms of domestic violence as a result of this asymmetry, and the results indicated that domestic violence was predominantly aimed at women. The “reasons” for violence against women in the contemporary Serbian family include five principal groups of behavior, including the following: neglecting family obligations, shortage of money, infidelity – jealousy, sexual issues and dependent personality disorders – alcoholism and drug abuse (Rajković and Miletić-Stepanović, 2010; Spasić, 2017).

According to the sociological model, the relation between violence against women in the family and social reproduction (survival) of patriarchy is systemic and can be noted at all levels. At that, the relation between (re)production of violence against

<sup>4</sup> A border line between west-European and east-European models of marriage which stretches from Trieste to Saint Petersburg (Hajnal, 1965).

women in the family and (re)production of the social system is not direct and simple because the system daily produces violence against women through a complex system of mediators, wherein the relations between sexes in the family are of particular importance as part of overall relations of unequal power (Konstantinović-Vilić et al., 2019).

Contemporary empirical research has also shown stability of the cultural stereotype of the woman, its traditional foundation and 'rational' justification, the relation between the social power or social powerlessness of the woman and domestic violence, and indicated the need to explore social, historic, mythological and religious roots of contemporary stereotypical image of the woman and prejudice related with it. We must first find its roots deep in the conscious and unconscious part of the 'collective psyche' of the Serbian cultural ethos.

#### 4. Contextual framework of research *Mythological and religious image of woman: from Great Mother to Accidental Being*

In the deepest archetypal mythical-magical and religious layer of the Judeo-Christian culture we find the twofold dark image of the woman as Great Mother, who gives birth but also kills – the image of goddess Lilith. Judeo-Christian tradition regards the woman as being an unclean, lower being and source of evil. Eve, the original woman, was later created from Adam's rib, hence the woman's centuries-long subordination to the man. And because she tempted Adam into sin, which resulted in expulsion from Paradise, God cursed and punished the woman. According to the Old Testament, God told woman: "I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee" (*The First Book of Moses [Prva knjiga Mojsijeva]*, 3, 16). According to the same canonic source, the woman is unclean a week after childbirth, and twice as long if she gives birth to a female child (*The Third Book of Moses [Treća knjiga Mojsijeva]*, 12, 1-5).

The New Testament also explicitly states that the woman is ritually unclean and subordinated to her husband. Holy Apostle Paul says in his *First Epistle to the Corinthians* that "the head of every man is Christ and the head of the woman is the man". During the service, the woman has to cover her head, and the man does not "for the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man" (*First Corinthians* 11, 8-9). According to St Thomas Aquinas, the woman is a defective, misbegotten man, "an accidental being". Upon analyzing the Bible, it can be established that in Christianity there is a less than favorable image of the woman as sinful, frivolous, spiteful, treacherous person. Other major religious traditions worldwide consider the woman to be an inferior being, ritually inadequate and therefore inevitably subordinated to the man (Sloukem, 2003).

In the Jewish prayer, for example, the man says: "Praised be, God, our Lord and master of the entire world, who did not make me a woman," and the woman says: "Praised be the Lord who created me by his will". In Judaist prayer there is also the phrase: "Blessed may you be our God because you did not make me heathen or woman or ignorant!"

In Slavic mythology and popular religion, which the Serbian mythological and religious ethos derives from, the image of the woman is rather dark. Myths and legends show the woman as an imperfect man, an inferior being, prone to sin, ritually unclean and subordinated to the man. "The woman is juxtaposed to the man as left to right, as negative to positive" (Kabakova, 2001). The Slavs also excluded the women from the sacral sphere: they did not participate in religious rites because they were considered to be 'unclean beings' (only virgins and old women were regarded as ritually clean).

In the conception of the Serbian tradition, as shown in a semantic study by Nikita Tolstoj on the Serbian linguistic and ethnographic material, the following series of negative poles of binary oppositions is related to the woman: left, west, lower, →

→ rear, later, even, etc. The image of woman is associated with all those attributes that in the mythical-magical opinion have negative meaning because these attributes are at the same time related to the 'yonder, the other' world, underground and 'demons' (Sloukem, 2003).

This imposes a conclusion that this dark and negative determination of the woman provides a mock-rational and justifiable reasons for her marginalized position in the family, asymmetry of social power and various forms of violence against the woman which must be used to punish her for her original but everlasting sin and which strive to "suppress or change" her "evil and untamed nature".

#### *4.1. Serbian patriarchal family, culture and tradition: man as man (human being) and woman only as woman*

In order to understand stereotypes and prejudice about the woman and the 'rational' reasons for violence based on them, it is necessary to become familiar with the attitude of the society towards the woman in the traditional Serbian society. Based on ethnographic, historical data, several characteristics of male-female relations have been established. The attitude of the man (human being) towards the woman is the attitude of a superior being towards an inferior one, a powerful being towards a weaker, subordinated one (Sultana, 2012).

The position of the woman in the Serbian patriarchal culture was, objectively speaking, exceptionally difficult, as testified in the writings of Vuk Karadžić: "Among all Serbs, wives are much subordinated to husbands, and in Montenegro they are almost held as slaves. In addition to their female jobs, such as spinning, weaving, cooking, milking, etc., they perform the largest portion of field and other work, which is elsewhere performed by men. A wife can often be seen struggling across rocky mountains carrying a heavy burden while her husband goes unburdened, with only a rifle on his shoulder and a pipe in his hand. And on top of it

all, the woman is lucky if she gets the husband who does not beat her without any provocation, just because he feels like it. A young husband and wife must not speak to each other in the presence of other people because it would be considered rude. Also, the wife must not call her husband by name but only refer to him as 'he'... (when a Serbian man has to mention his wife before a respectable man, he will most frequently say 'if you'll pardon me, my wife')" (Karadžić, 1987a, p. 343).

In a survey conducted by Bogišić, a respondent from Herzegovina gives a picturesque description in response to the question on the rights and duties of the wife in relation to her husband: "A wife is obedient to her husband, so that a single glance in the wrong direction causes her to tremble; she keeps silent when her husband yells at her even if she is right; she must not defend herself or run away when he beats her; she sees to it that everything is right and proper in his house, obeys his orders and in addition to bearing children, she performs all other female jobs, and avoids hard work in the field" (Bogišić, 1874, p. 268).

Discrimination against a female child is noticeable the moment it is born. The birth of a male child is accompanied by universal joy, unbridled happiness, pride of the parents, shooting from rifles, and treats, whereas the birth of a female child is accompanied by silence, sorrow, shame and sometimes an exclamation: "May there be no female born!" "A son is the foundation of the home, the candle lit in honor of the family patron saint, an eternal family book of names, the defender of the church and people... And a girl? She is nothing else but someone else's dinner for the house she is destined for" (Vrčević, 1881).

In patriarchal Serbia and in the areas populated by the Serbian people, the girl who "loses her chastity" was despised by her closest relatives, sometimes made to leave home and sometimes even stoned as an outcast who disgraced her family. "Our people everywhere take care that a girl should go to her husband intact." (Đorđević, 1912). The attitude of a husband to an unfaithful wife was

even more brutal. The ‘unfaithful’ wife was frequently disgraced in public, in front of the entire village, stoned or had her nose ripped off, so that she should “remain an example to the world and be recognized for her deformity.” (Đorđević, 1984, p. 252). As a girl, a woman is subordinated to her father, and when she gets married, to her husband. Yet this does not mean that a girl/woman has no protection whatsoever or that she is left at the mercy of men to treat her as it pleases them. Quite to the contrary: while she is a girl, the entire family takes care of her, and when she gets married, then she is under protection of her husband and his entire fraternity.

Violence targeting women in family or partner relations is a heritage, cherished for centuries as a pattern in the Serbian national culture in the form of the so-called sacrificing micro-matriarchate. “The sacrificing micro-matriarchate is a construct of authority which gives women power at the level of primary groups, wherein the women achieve domination through sacrifice. The sacrifice renews domination and vice versa, and both of these together renew the patriarchal structure at the global social level, in the public sphere.” (Spasić, 2017). The prerequisite of the sacrificing micro-matriarchate is the tradition of sacrificing women, and its basic traditional strongholds include: 1) violence against women; 2) low status of women; 3) massive exploitation of female workforce; 4) significant contribution of women to decision-making; 5) prevalent number of women after the wars; 6) readiness for protest and rebellion; 7) strong affection and alliance with children. On the other hand, there is the continuity of patriarchy – which is complementary asymmetrical, almost conflicting with the micro-matriarchate – as a system of authority based on the mentality of the Dinara region, as the dominant type of mentality in the Serbian population, which possesses the following characteristics: strong temperament, emotionality, violence, combating and warrior tradition, competition among peers in heroism and manliness, and irritable disposition (Dvorniković, 1939, p. 344).

#### 4.2. “A snake and a woman are but the same thing”: attitude to woman in oral folk literature and customs

Stereotypes and prejudice about a woman are present in many forms of Serbian oral literature (proverbs, popular saying and bywords), but also in everyday customs. The proverbs, bywords and sayings are short forms of folk oral literature. They are ancient poetic forms whose beauty lies in their simplicity and conciseness. A proverb, which is extremely pregnant with meaning, colorful and beautiful, expresses a widespread, typical belief or experience regarding some basic human issues, needs or values, such as the questions of life and death, destiny, God and devil, justice and injustice, a woman and child, etc.

Modern paremiologically study, structural semantics and linguistic folklore analysis of the structure of proverbs, their language and meaning, all reveal to us an archaic view of the world contained in these expressions. On the one hand, the Serbian language uses the same word ‘žena’ to denote an adult female and a wife. At the same time, the word ‘čovjek’ denotes an adult human being, but also a man. When the expression ‘čovjek i žena’ is used, it implies that the woman is not a human being in the full sense of the word, that she is inferior to man. In the Serbian folk literature and customs (Karadžić, 1987b), the woman is ‘adorned’ with predominantly negative attributes:

##### **The woman is treacherous (unfaithful, whimsical):**

*Ne veruj ženi, jer se kao mesec meni.*

(Don’t trust a woman, because she changes like the moon.)

*Ne veruj ljetini dok je ne metneš u ambar, a ženi dok je metneš u grob.*

(Don’t trust crops before you put them in the barn or a wife before you put her in her grave.)

##### **The woman is talkative:**

*Gori je ženski jezik no turska sablja.*





→ (A woman's tongue is worse than a Turkish sabre.)

*Žene su da zборе, a ljudi da tvore.*

(Women are made to talk, and men to work.)

### The woman is hypocritical:

*Što žena više plače, više muža vara.*

(The more a woman cries, the more she cheats on her husband.)

*Ljude je Bog odlikovao snagom za deset žena, a jednu ženu lukavstvom za deset ljudi.*

(God gave the man the strength of ten women, and the cunning of ten men to the woman.)

### The woman is evil (spiteful):

*Sve zlo dolazilo je oduvek od žene.*

(the woman has always been the source of all evil.)

*Zmija i žena stvar je jedna.*

(A snake and a woman are but the same thing.)

### The woman is vindictive:

*Gore je zlu ženu dirnuti no zlu guju.*

(It is worse to provoke an evil woman than an evil adder.)

*Ko će đavola da drži, nek ženu vređa.*

(Who wants to see the devil, he should insult the woman.)

### The woman is stupid:

*U žene je duga kosa, a kratka pamet.*

(A woman has long hair and short wits.)

*Žene su mudrije od gusaka, kad kiša padne one se u svo sklone.*

(Women are wiser than geese, when it rains, they take shelter.)

The proverbs and other Serbian folk literature mainly depict the woman in dark, shady tones, unfavorable for her. The popular proverbs depict the woman as cunning, evil, chatty, unfaithful, and whimsical. The stereotypes about the woman in the Serbian traditional culture are predominantly negative, but they are not equally negative in re-

spect of all female roles. It should be taken into consideration that the attitudes of men towards women in a patriarchal society vary in respect of different social and biological roles of the women.

The worst view is taken of one's own spouse, one's wife. The proverbs say:

Wives die to a lucky man, and mares die to an unlucky one.

*Srećnome žene umiru, a nesrećnome kobile crkavaju.*

(If a man is lucky, his wives will die, and if he is unlucky, his mares will die.)

*Dva puta je čoek u svom životu veseo: prvom kad se oženi, a drugom kad ženu ukopa.*

(A man is happy on two occasions in his life: first when he gets married, and second when he buries his wife.)

*Prođi se kučke koja ne ošteti i žene koja ne rodi.*

(Beware a bitch that has no litter and a woman who bears no children.)

According to the proverbs, the Serbian people traditionally took a very unfavorable, repulsive and arrogant attitude towards a beautiful woman:

*Lijepo kolo vode, a ružne kuću kuće.*

(Pretty ones dance, and ugly ones maintain the house.)

*Lepa žena i dobro vino, to su dva slatka otrova.*

(A beautiful woman and good wine, those are two sweet poisons.)

Where does this paradox stem from? It seems that the explanation is to be sought in the value system and ideology of patriarchal culture. In this culture, the main task of the woman was to be a good mother and housewife. If she was pretty, they believed, it would only hamper her in performing her basic task. Also, there was probably a suppressed fear that a beautiful woman may not only be an inadequate as a housewife, but also unfaithful, and that would grossly embarrass her husband and his family. In support of this hypothesis, we can quote the following proverbs:

*Ružna žena – valjana sluga.*

(An ugly woman – a good servant.)

*Lepa je žena retko poštena.*

(A pretty woman is seldom honest.)

The most favorable view is taken of the mother, as if she were not a woman, but a saint.

*Nema ti bez matere dobra na svetu.*

(There is nothing good in the world without mother.)

*Materin blagoslov i božji sve jedno su.*

(A mother's blessing is as good as God's.)

This idealization of the mother and her sharp distinction from the woman in general is best illustrated by the following proverb:

*Žena je žena, ali majka je majka.* (A woman is a woman, but a mother is a mother.)

A conclusion can be drawn that the most unfavorable stereotypes relate to the woman as a *spouse*, who is an epitome of evil and cunning. There seems to be a particularly unfavorable opinion about a *beautiful woman*, who people shrink from in patriarchal culture, just as they shrink from a dangerous and unpredictable being. The only truly bright point in this dark picture of the woman is a very affirmative representation of the *mother* as an incorporeal, unselfish and immaculate being. Summarizing numerous morals of the stories, bywords and proverbs which openly or covertly express the views of the woman in her various roles, we can certainly establish a profoundly *ambivalent* attitude of the man towards the woman in the Serbian patriarchal culture, the attitude which is probably best expressed in the following proverb: *Žena je muka bez koje se biti ne može* (The woman is a torment without which one cannot live.) (Karadžić, 1987b).

### **5. Traditional family and violence: Collective body of the woman under control**

The stereotypes and prejudice about the woman which have been accepted and handed down for centuries, have influenced the position of the

woman in the Serbian traditional family. The traditional Serbian family is frequently referred to as “patriarchal” and “communal” in ethnographic and historic analyses. The first definition refers to the fact that men are given a privileged position in such a family structure, that economic and social power is in the hands of the men and that descent is reckoned through the male line. This epithet, which denotes one of the basic features of the Serbian traditional family, can be further elaborated on and it may be said that the family was patricentric, which implies that the woman, after getting married, would come to live with her husband's family. In the ‘male society’, there is a basically male principle of grouping, patrilineage and patrilocality, and this fact in itself can be regarded as a form of violence.

Women are forced to change their immediate surroundings, to adapt to the new environment, and the new environment is even less willing to accept and support them (“a daughter-in-law is a real slave in the village”). In the circumstances of the dominance of the family cooperative, one of its characteristics being a high rate of nuptiality, wherein the choice of a daughter-in-law has a greater specific weight for the household than the choice of the son-in-law, and the young men's parents have a clear role in it (“Parents force their son to marry in most cases, because they look for a good girl (dowry) and good workforce.” (Spasić, 2017).

As for the other definition, it is known that communal family life prevailed in Serbia until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The foundations of the commune were a mother and a father with married sons and their offspring (paternal commune) or brothers with their families (fraternal commune). The family and property were managed by the head of the house (Pavićević, 1999). The communal life was organized so that all members of the family had their respective roles, and this involved including children in the work processes from their early childhood.

Girls of six or seven started looking after younger children, helping their mothers with domestic

→

→ chores as well as with less demanding work in the field. Boys did the same, but when they reached a certain age, they started spending more time with fathers or other adult men (Malešević, 1986). This was of decisive importance for the formation of the gender role among the boys, i.e., for establishing the role of the ‘man’ in the community. Older girls (and girls of a marrying age) performed a large portion of housework, did handcraft, and, alongside their mothers, prepared for their future role – that of a spouse, mother, housewife. Upon getting married, a girl would leave her family and move to her husband’s home in which, upon arrival, she would take the lowest position in the family hierarchy. This position was reflected in the unconditional obedience towards all men and older women as well as in the absence of possibility to influence any decisions that had to be made in the family, even the ones that concerned her at the beginning of her married life (Pavićević, 1999).

The value system of the traditional Serbian society was structured in such a way as to demand women and girls to show conspicuous shyness, diligence, goodness, obedience, and devotion to the family. Female offspring was expected to show obedience and ‘girl-like shyness’ but they were not discouraged from standing out among their peers; sharpness of mind was valued, along with capabilities, knowledge, friendliness, cheerfulness, seriousness and good looks (Konstantinović-Vilić et al., 2019).

Women’s behavior was controlled at several levels: 1) economic, 2) social, and 3) ritual. Namely, according to the system of customary law norms, the woman was always regarded to be ‘legally’ underage, i.e., she was represented before the law by her father before her marriage or her husband, when she got married (Bogišić, 1874, p. 543). The provisions of traditional law which preached inequality of sexes in inheritance issues derived from such a legal system, implying that all family property was inherited by men, while women were entitled to *prćija* (the property inherited by a widow from her late husband) or to remain in

the parental home if they did not get married (Pavićević, 1999, p. 79). Social restrictions on the women’s conduct involved the following: a) restriction of movement essentially aimed at preventing premarital and extramarital relations of girls and women; b) restriction of public expression – primarily at village assemblies; c) absence of right to make any decision, even if it concerned the choice of a spouse. The patterns of ritual control encompassed three crucial moments in the lives of women (first menstruation, wedding and first childbirth) and the rituals performed on those occasions (Fostikov, 2004). Biblical attitudes towards the woman can be recognized in these forms of control, alongside the influence of Serbian folk literature. Based on the data from ethnographic collections, a conclusion can be drawn that the right, granted to the husband in a traditional village setting, to corporal punishment of one’s wife was only formal. This right was rarely exercised, and we know that harassment of women became practice only at the time of dissolution of the patriarchal family.

The basis for historical and cultural study of domestic violence against women in the traditional Serbian family is the monograph titled *Family in Transformation: a Study of three hundred Yugoslav villages* (Erlich, 1964). The principal conclusions reached in this study are the following: there is a correlation between the belligerent, warrior tradition and violence against women and violence against children, as well as a correlation between a general combatant disposition, on the one hand, and the tradition of the Dinara region, warrior and immigration past, on the other. Violence is particularly prominent in the areas where the only communal-type of family fell apart and “the old communal order” deteriorated, i.e., especially in the territory of Serbian in its borders before 1921.

The Serbian family commune constituted a form of traditionally-structured family. Being a delicate cultural model of thought and conduct, the Serbian commune is characterized by a set of relations between sexes in which the most prominent

relation is the one between a husband and his wife, used for showing courage, military renown, and manliness (Spasić, 2017). Women themselves in the position of victims exposed to violence. And violence is incorporated in the structure of patriarchal domination; it is normatively regulated social action in the relationships between sexes, whereas evil is considered to be a universally female feature. “Husbands beat (their wives) in public in order to show their masculinity.” “A man should beat his wife and his horse once in three days” (the

said that a husband should beat his wife when his parents complained that the daughter-in-law had insulted them (to confirm the dominant role of the mother/mother-in-law within the family). When he beat her in the presence of children or neighbors it was aimed at strengthening his authority. “The husband is the wife’s master and it is his right to beat her” (Erlich, 1964, p. 240). Demonstration of power and violent behavior against one’s wife generated a ‘favorable image’ of the husband, which reflects the prevalent values accepted at that

*Such cultural background was a strong foundation for “understanding and rational justification” upon which universal patterns of violence developed, undergoing qualitative and quantitative transformation, in keeping with the demands for modern definition in the development of the Serbian ethos, yet retaining their key feature — the collective body of woman.*

county of Niš); “If you don’t beat your wife, she will go mad in forty days” (the Morava county); “He is no man who has never slapped his wife on the face” (the county of Dragačevo); “A husband should beat his wife, so that it is clear who the male is”.

Customs in certain parts of Serbia convincingly depict the reality in which corporal punishment of women was deeply rooted and expected. In 1940, the *Politika* daily of July 18<sup>th</sup> wrote about customs persisting from “ancient times” in the villages of Zaplanje, where on the wedding day the bride’s mother would hand over an iron rod to the groom, in the presence of other older women and the girl who was getting married, saying: “So that you may beat her if she is not good. So that she should obey you, as her elder...” Then the bride and groom would eat fried eggs prepared by the bride’s mother, so that her daughter would obey her husband and not disgrace her family (Isić and Gudac-Dodić, 2011, p. 65).

Sometimes violent behavior towards women was of a predominantly ‘demonstrative nature’. Inhabitants of the villages in the county of Vlasotince

time and maintained the position of the woman, primarily a married one (Gudac-Dodić, 2012).

Besides threatening the physical integrity of the women, punishing children was customary in Serbia. Rigid discipline, obedience instilled by fear, external authority, early suppression of instincts and harsh response to infringements characterized the attitude towards children as well. However, special emphasis was placed on punishing female offspring. There is also a predominant authority of a younger brother over an elder sister (70-75% cases) in the Serbian cultural pattern. Girls and young women are given a particularly low status: they are in the focus of control, exposed to multiple injunctions, and a rigid model of behavior is imposed on them. “Sisters are subordinated to the will of their brothers... If a sister is 19 and a brother 15, he will still be the commander: it is thought that the man is more capable, even if he is younger”. “The son is allowed to see or hear everything, go out without asking (for permission). They are sure of his proper conduct. The girl never goes out alone, she is not to talk to anyone or leave the house unless necessary” (Erlich, 1964, p. 91). In addition to this, →



→ bad, cold partner relations are imposed (“A husband does not look at his wife in the presence of his parents... they have no affection or love for each other... men are rough, they are always being just males...sexual relations are discussed coarsely, with cynicism” (Miletić, 2002, p. 199). Therefore, the possibility to experience the sense of partnership is seriously hampered.

Culturological dimension of domestic violence in this historic sequence was characterized by an extreme form of interiorization of inferiority which is manifested and maintained through the model of male control, i.e., through acceptance of beating or hard labor. “If I am guilty, I keep quiet and suffer. He has the right (to beat me) because it is his home, I eat his bread, and my work is not recognized... a woman must always be obedient to the man because the man is one thing and the woman is another” (Spasić, 2017). On the other hand, the dominant role of the women for the survival of the male group is based on the female potential to bear children, on her fertility, so that negative evaluation of female infertility is almost universal, and a woman’s infertility implies the ultimate impossibility of her integration in the system (“They take a second wife if the first one has no children... An infertile wife is despised. It is frequently said ironically: he has but a wife and a mare” (Erlih, 1964, p. 262)).

The defined and accepted model of family relations imposes an imperative on the fidelity of wives (“A husband abandons an unfaithful wife... rips her nose off, or her tongue, cuts her hair...or — if he finds his wife in an adultery — he kills them both”), yet it tolerates, silently implies and justifies extramarital relations of married men (“Love affairs are as a rule related to the head of the family, who may have missed his youth under the egis of the father, and who makes up for it after he is married... the wives silently endure it” (Miletić, 2002, p. 201). The Serbian family commune is also marked by a specific relationship between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, and the position of the women is additionally aggravated by ex-

tensive exploitation of their labor. Raising the level of the third-rate power of mothers-in-law, as elderly women who are maximally integrated into the male society, on the female line of hierarchy is conditioned by their violence against other women — daughters-in-law, young, unintegrated women.

The position of the woman generally — as a foundation for explaining and understanding the still persisting patriarchal stereotypes and centuries-old, prevailing aspects of gender socialization — is characterized by the following description: “So far no one has worn the shoes on the head, and the hat on the feet... wives are nothing else to husbands but proper slaves and men do not marry for any other reason but to have offspring, just as they buy a field to give them bread without which a man would die as a dried-out tree-stump in the forest, he would see no offspring of his own so his family candle would be extinguished...” (Erllich, 1964, p. 151; Spasić, 2017).

### *6. Violence and contemporary (re-traditionalized) Serbian family: Where the “flowers of evil” blossom*

The literature mentions the main causes that have brought about the dissolution of the patriarchal family commune, such as the following: transformation of traditional economy, transition to money and market economy and an ever-increasing influence of innovations from the cities and from abroad. The most important result of this state of affairs was the demise of one of the basic principles underlying the traditional Serbian family. It is the principle of collectivism which began to disintegrate with increasing individual needs, i.e., with clashes between the needs of the community and those of the individual. As a sign of aggravated position of the women, the literature mentions an increase in alcohol abuse and harassment which became widespread in the period of the dissolution of patriarchal, communal life, and the dowry appears as a testimony of the reduced value of girls (Erlih, 1964).

On the positive side, the dissolution of the patriarchal order is marked by husbands' increased counseling with their wives, as well as by increased freedom for girls. During romanticism, when a view was adopted, that marriage is primarily based on love and that it concerns exclusively a man and a woman, the marriage and family as institutions began to fall apart. One of the consequences of this situation was a demand for female emancipation from the power of the spouse or father and their integration in the civil society equaling that of men. A possibility that the basic social community – the family – may be jeopardized and the beginning of the process of changing roles of sexes and momentary instability of the social structure have led to the implementation of certain procedures aimed at re-establishing balance in the society (Pavičević, 1999). Such processes led to the formation of a certain 'model' of a woman whom Tihomir Đorđević characterizes as a semi-patriarchal type: "The women of this type are as backwards as the women of patriarchal type (village women), but they are no longer in quite the same position as the village women. A semi-patriarchal woman has started to gain independence, yet, being unprepared for and incapable of taking the proper positions of the woman, she did not know what to chose, so that where she freed herself most, she distantiated herself most and turned into something that is nothing, into empty appearance, an absurd gesture and fruitless, even harmful conversation which fills most of her life." (Đorđević, 1912). Due to this, although the male and female roles were formally equally valued, we can speak about actual asymmetry of the Serbian civil society of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This entire process resulted in an intense need of the society for a sharp division (polarization) of sex (gender) roles, which all corroborates the conclusion that the civil society in Serbia of that time was marked by less equality between men and women than it was the case in the traditional society.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the prevalent attitude was that the role of the woman is to

take care about the home and family, and of the man to earn and bring home the means for living from the outside (extra-familial) world. However, this was more of an inherited, traditional opinion, whereas actual state of affairs was different: most jobs were performed by both men and women, and an employed woman contributed significantly to the organization and survival of family economy. Namely, the oldest women in the family, as well as the women of middle generation, give up the property inherited from their fathers without much thinking for the benefit of their brothers, i.e., they decline the possibility offered to them by the existing legislations: to gain a certain economic independence and independence from their husbands by inheriting a part of the family property.

In the modern Serbian village family, the only economic restriction imposed on women implies the formal right of the men to make final decisions regarding the organization of economic goods. In reality, the woman is in charge of her income (if she is employed) and of the mutual 'cashbox', just as much as the man. As a result of increased freedom of movement, as well as due to deconstruction of the provisions of patriarchal morality, there is a large incidence of marital infidelity (among both men and women) (Duhaček et al., 2019). As the modern society has offered the woman possibility to refuse the role of the mother, wife and housewife, in response to her acceptance of this possibility, the phenomenon of overemphasizing motherhood occurs in the modern society on the one side and marginalization of fatherhood on the other. Thus, another reduction was made in respect of the role that man used to share with woman in the traditional society. On the basis of these facts, it can be concluded that there is a formal equality of sexes in the contemporary urban Serbian setting, i.e., that there is a formal social symmetry, whereas in reality there is asymmetry which, in this case, 'favors' women. Understanding of phenomenological-etiological dimension of domestic violence in thus defined formal asymmetry of the society indicates that (re-traditionalized) →

- cultural patterns are still present in the development of the Serbian ethos.

For instance, in research conducted from 2001 to 2004, at the level of the whole sample, the patriarchal model of ownership of the house and estate prevailed in 86 % of the families. At the county level, the patriarchal model was the most prominent in the counties of Zlatibor with 94.8 and Mačva with 92.0%, while it was the 'lowest' in the county of Nišava – 83%. There is a minimal participation of women in the ownership of the house (only if she is a widow or the only child). On the other hand, the head of family remains the formal owner of the house and land even after his death. The findings of the said research confirm continuity of the traditional pattern within family relations and a strong culturological influence of the stereotypes and prejudice in which false rational justification is found for violence against women. At the same time, women themselves, within all age, educational, and professional structures, in the re-traditional modern setting with pronounced asymmetry of their social power in respect of men, find the reasons for their 'sacrifice' even to the extent of threatening their existence:

Mačva county: "He beat me even though I did all the work myself, he did not even care if I was pregnant, he had other women, drank, gambled, and I was not allowed to say anything" (67, a peasant woman, without education); "I wash his feet in the presence of his mother, and he beats me" (55, a peasant women, eight-year elementary school); "Often, because of jealousy, a woman has no right, I keep quiet, I work, I have nowhere to go, and he has hurt me, once he put me on the gallows, and other people saved me" (36, a peasant woman, a high vocational school); "When he felt like beating me, he used to beat me, whenever he wanted and as much as he wanted, I was not allowed to spend a dime, it was his right and his pride" (65, a peasant woman, without education). The county of Šumadija: "Sober or drunk, it is the custom to beat their wives and enjoy in it" (40, a physics professor); "In the village of Guncati a husband beat up

his wife and she died" (53, a peasant woman). The county of Zlatibor: "He beat me, breaking my arm" (31, a worker in a café owned by the family). The county of Rasina: "When he is drunk, and she won't keep quiet, he then goes mad"; "a small quarrel is enough for him to slap her face"; "when they find another"; "When there is no reason, he puts bread upside down and beats me because I have turned the bread upside down". The county of Nišava: "He beats me often without any reason, I took tablets to poison myself, I am all black and blue" (31, eight-year elementary school, a worker); "They beat when the wife is not good, she thinks she is not guilty, but she is, because the husband is older, I got slapped on the face twice, I went into the village, and he arrived home earlier" (75, a peasant woman, no education); "He beats me, I am lucky, he has not beaten me for five years, my mother-in-law makes it all" (27, a peasant woman, no school).

In support of these findings, we shall mention the statements by women from Sandžak which pertain to the patterns of violence and understanding its dynamics: "He beats her, beats her, then he takes a break to rest a bit. He cuddles her and takes care of her and then he starts again. The moment she thinks, there, it's stopped, he won't do it again, he starts again. That is violence. And that is why violence continues for years, because it's not always bad. And also, the fact that she loves him and tolerates him. And that is also our tradition." (39, eight-year elementary school, a worker, the village of Ribariće) "A few months ago, we had a case here in which the violent offender was sincerely puzzled when the police came to take him in. *But, people/folks, I have beaten MY wife.* To him it was quite normal, it wasn't someone else's wife; he would never beat another's wife. But he had beaten his wife and they arrested him? This means that insufficient information, a great impact of tradition, patriarchal upbringing, various social circumstances and he simply does not know that he must not beat his wife, not even his wife." "It is hardest when you sleep next to someone who beats you

every day, and you know that he always has a gun under the pillow.” (Spasić and Tadić, 2017).

### 7. *Instead of conclusion*

Research shows that, the traditional, expanded family confirmed itself as a social asset and an instrument which has a high level of adjustability to social and economic problems, based on the ability to convert social assets into economic. On the other hand, violence against women is present in keeping with family re-traditionalization and degradation of the position of women in the post-socialist crisis in Serbia. In the hardship of everyday life, women compensate for negative social consequences of the crisis by their human resources (health, emotions, time, and knowledge).

At the same time, there are clear signs which speak of deconstruction of the traditional patriarchy (the authority of the chief) towards strengthening the modern patriarchy (empowering all men) in Serbia. This process indicates blockage in

the transformations of authority, i.e., discrimination and exploitation of women. Such views are more likely result from socially construed sex and gender roles, which means that they are the product of a system of culturally prescribed and anticipated attitudes, values, beliefs and patterns of behavior.

The attitudes towards the woman and prejudice about her and her relations towards the man in Serbia have been formed through mythological and religious representations and rituals and maintained for centuries through various forms of patriarchal, traditional and customary patterns.

Such cultural background was a strong foundation for “understanding and rational justification” upon which universal patterns of violence developed, undergoing qualitative and quantitative transformation, in keeping with the demands for modern definition in the development of the Serbian ethos, yet retaining their key feature – the collective body of woman.

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**ABSTRACT**

*Researchers in Serbia have been trying for decades – without much success – to find the causes and factors that would unequivocally establish the origin of domestic violence as a social phenomenon. This is partly due to the fact that the Serbian society, through a dynamic development matrix, has not transformed from the traditional form into a modern one, but rather into an underdeveloped society of conspicuous social risks with prevalent re-traditionalization of collective entities, family in particular. This is why we have studied available ethnographic materials looking for sources and “roots” of culturological guidelines which still define the position of the woman and the distribution of social power within the family. The study has showed diachronic stability of the culturological inherited stereotype of the woman, its traditional foundation and (ir)rational justification, the relation between social power(lessness) of the woman and domestic violence.*

**KEYWORDS**

*woman; violence; tradition; patriarchy; Serbia*

**Násilí na ženách v Srbsku: kolektivní tělo ženy aneb kde kvetou „květiny zla“****ABSTRAKT**

*Srbští vědci se po desetiletí – bez většího úspěchu – snaží najít příčiny a faktory, které by jednoznačně prokázaly původ domácího násilí jako společenského fenoménu. Částečně je to dáno tím, že srbská společnost se prostřednictvím dynamické rozvojové matice nepřeměnila z tradiční formy na moderní, ale spíše v nerozvinutou společnost nápadných sociálních rizik s převládající retradicionizací kolektivních entit, rodiny. Proto jsme prostudovali dostupné etnografické materiály a hledali zdroje a „kořeny“ kulturologických směrnic, které stále definují postavení ženy a rozložení společenské moci v rodině. Studie prokázala diachronní stabilitu kulturologicky zděděného stereotypu ženy, jeho tradiční založení a (ne)racionální zdůvodnění, vztah mezi sociální silou (méně ženy) a domácím násilím.*

**KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA**

*žena; násilí; tradice; patriarchát; Srbsko*

