

## **Regional meeting of the Executive Board of Women's Court Tivat, 24-26 February, 2012**

**- Report -**

*Regional Meeting of the Executive Board of Women's Court was an opportunity to analyze the reports of the first phase of field work in organizing the Women's Court (WC) for the former Yugoslavia, the process of joint thinking and planning of future activities on the territory of former Yugoslavia.*

*It was important that the trust of the Executive Board (EB) members given to Women in Black – to be the carriers of program activities – was confirmed and reassured at this meeting as well, after more than one year of joint work.*

*17 women attended the meeting (3 from Bosnia and Herzegovina, 3 from Montenegro, 4 from Croatia, 1 from Macedonia and 6 from Serbia.)*

**What has the process of organising the Women's court for the former Yugoslavia brought so far?**

Considering results of the current process (the first phase of organizing the WC for the former Yugoslavia) can be done through following aspects:

1. The process of organizing the WC as strengthening ties within the movement, and also among activists themselves.
2. The process of organizing the WC as a stimulus for new forms of work, knowledge creation and a space for feminist reflection.
3. The process of organizing the WC as disclosure of new questions and themes.
4. The process of organizing the WC as dealing with concrete situations, challenges in the field.

**1. The process of organizing the WC as strengthening ties within the movement, and also among activists themselves**

It is evident that ties got stronger within all women's groups in all of the countries of the former Yugoslavia where the process of the WC was happening. The view that war is not really finished and reopening of the questions of cause and consequences of war turned out to be extremely important factor of "remobilization" of peace activism and bringing to the public those issues that the elite wants to 'forget' ...

**Paola:** This process enriched me more than I thought it would, from closer cooperation and communication, to the fact that we were reading professional texts. I attended presentations in Lapac and Korenica and took the experience from there as a kind of emotional experience and also the work on a new type of knowledge. From all these segments I gained new experiences, and the process was inspirational and enriching.

**Rada:** I think we ourselves were surprised by how much the activists were interested in the process... The interest in antiwar issues somehow weakened in Croatia, and this has brought us a kind of awakening...

**Duška:** This was just an addition to a collaboration of organizations that already cooperate a lot.

**Meliha:** For the first time NGOs from the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska were working together on a subject uneasy for everyone. At first I thought only Bosnian NGOs would work on this but I was positively surprised that organizations from RS (Republika Srpska) were working and getting the same results like us.

**Ervina:** I am content with the process in Montenegro because majority of women there have heard about something called Women's Court. Montenegro responded to the Women's Court in the way what their attitude towards the war is – there has not been a war in Montenegro. We are now bringing a responsibility for the wars as people from Montenegro went to all those wars.

**Sabina:** I am happy with a level of cooperation among women's organizations in Montenegro. Personally and generally, I am very happy with the process.

**Ljupka:** Somehow this process in Montenegro connected women from different cities more than what NGOs succeeded...A big benefit from my point of view is connection with women from the territory of former Yugoslavia that I have gained from this process.

## **2. The process of organizing the WC as a stimulus for new forms of work, knowledge creation and a space for feminist reflection**

*Work methods like going back to 'the base' and relying on field work experience with women, were the main factors in strengthening connections within women's groups:*

**Nela:** For us in Croatia it is very important to accept the new methodology, to contemplate about ourselves in a different way, to change our attitude toward funders, UN and similar bodies... I think the war and foreign organizations moved this focus of ours, and now we got back to ourselves. Methodology of Women In Black – the one we did not have before and are now facing with – to record everything, to have self-reflection and critical analyses – is a seemingly simple, but actually very demanding methodology. And it means to keep going back to what women said, to continually go back to this wisdom.

*The fundamental values of this process (comprehensive feminist approach, democracy of the process) also enabled strengthening of the ties:*

**Duška:** Maybe the process inspired some of us to think about the war in a more feminist way, and it is a hard thing to do when you are in the place where war happened.

**Valentina:** I feel that the only feminist approach can help the women's movement in BiH not to slip into nationalism. But it also needs a great discipline and ethics of facilitators, because traps are present everywhere and always...

**Ljilja:** I was amazed that it provoked and awoken interest of all women and brought them back to contemplating and rethinking...

**Staša:** I would say that this is getting back to the old ways, but in fact it is getting back to ourselves, to produce knowledge together and to de-elitise the NGO sector. We are rooted in the reality and women recognize it in this process, and also understand that we respect them as subjects of narration and history and do not treat them as target groups, objects... Thank you for taking over this challenge together.

At the same time, this is also democratization of knowledge and of money – since we can see what amount of money was invested and what are the results... we achieved a lot, even efficiency, and all that without patriarchal competitiveness.

**Nela:** Until now we spent nothing on public presentations, and we were all excited about the work.

*We have also opened a space for reflection, almost forgotten in the time of dictatorship of projects and bare efficiency with no true analysis of reality:*

**Zeljka:** We have a good analysis and reflection within the process. Getting to know various levels of knowledge, constructions... knowledge on women's courts varies...

**Nela:** This process is totally different than what we generally experience in our work, such as project coalitions that are being made. EU projects demand partnerships that are then being made ad hoc... they do not demand political coalitions. Our coalition is based on political ideas and values, and goes against the mainstream trends.

*Specific situation of BiH as a still divided country, as well as the pressure by donors (that affects all the countries of the former Yugoslavia) also require from the activists in the field to think about "civil society as a risk".*

**Staša:** Well, let's also say that all projects from Republika Srpska are linked with the Federation... The question is whether this is a space that can be used, and it is the responsibility of civil societies of both Federation and Republika Srpska... How many projects are implemented under the veil of silence?... All of them are realized together by Federation and Republika Srpska, and there is complicity on certain subjects. (...) But it seems to me that this complicity involves both sides... since when it is about applying for big money by both entities, there is no problem to do it... We turn out to be fools in a great project idyll... civil society is a risk, too.

### **3. The process of organizing the WC as disclosure of new questions and themes**

*The process made it possible for activists to focus on new subjects, and to include into activism the numerous new questions they face with during the preparations...:*

**Paola:** The idea of WC opened many new subjects, brought us in touch with new problems we did not consider before, since we, as organizations of civil society were focused mainly on one area. Now we see a bigger picture. We started seeing it through public presentations, like in Lapac and Korenica, where we listened to a woman talking about economic problems, corruption, war crimes, refugee problems, tenancy right issues... Such approach has enriched our work and what we will gain from it... We get a new picture, new knowledge, and as Nela said, it all starts from the concrete experiences of women.

**Nela:** Having several networks helped us (in Croatia), and now we reached a new quality in dealing with the war (which we did not have for a long time). We opened these issues

with your help, and this process involves absolutely no competitiveness among groups. We all cooperate with each other, having good will and intention, and support each other. Our cooperation changed and got a new quality.

**Valentina:** I think something starts and is opening. We had no time to meet and consolidate everything we saw and experiences, to pay honor to one another and see what the positive sides were, and what were potential mistakes of the process.

*The process also opened suppressed questions and topics, before all the questions of responsibility for war and war crimes, even outside the circles of activists:*

**Duška:** When it's about interest of women, we had the opposite situation from Croatian... there were mostly young people, interested only in how to get out of the country, and mostly girls, and without us interfering at all, they understood it as a story of facing with the past. Our women groups say we can not start dealing with the current issues until we complete the war story. And now we have youth also saying that we have to clear up some things. We tried to remain focused at war and war violence, since everything else is sort of covered. But women themselves realized, through the presentation, the workshop, that the WC is a chance to speak out about global male violence against women.

**Ervina:** I want to say that women are ready to speak out, and that the voice that should break through the complete silence that pressures us and is so overwhelming should be kind of revolutionary, or at least significant, and should be made public. All this topics start and radicalize a horrible pain and we therefore have the responsibility to do something with this pain.

**Sabina:** Although these themes are uneasy, dangerous, forbidden, especially in the place I live in (I come from the town that heavily took part in the war), the people were very interested in them.

#### **4. The process of organizing the WC as dealing with concrete situations, challenges in the field**

*While jointly thinking about the process, it was important to gain insight in the challenges and obstacles activists have to face and deal with. Analysis of the specificity of regions where process takes place was also important. Challenges and obstacles that we have to overcome within the process of organizing WCs can be divided into following groups:*

- a) Limits of institutional judicature as the source of distrust of people (but also as opening the space for accepting the alternative court and more comprehensive understanding of justice) and insufficient knowledge on the functioning of judicature by activists themselves, as well as the problem of omnipresent depolitization.*
- b) Nationalistic ideologies that, in some states, haven't been deconstructed enough event within the activist groups, and especially within the societies in general, so the processes of ethnic cleansing still remain (although using different means), as well as the misuse of the war rape of women, since the question of responsibility at all levels hasn't been rose.*
- c) Insufficiently developed civil societies.*

*d) "Dictatorship of the time" that obliges activists to keep reexamining the process (both technical and regarding the content), to continually learn, so that as many people as possible would take part / be mobilized within the process.*

*4a) Limits of 8institutional judicature and insufficient knowledge of activists on the functioning of judicature...*

**Valentina:** There is an effort to ban the state court dealing with war crimes... There are so many information launched from all three sides that succeeded to demotivate everyone, even activists.

**Staša:** In many situations, for example for the preservation of Kosovo, it was irrelevant to deliver certain Serbian generals. No one ever asked for Kadijević and Adžić to be persecuted for command responsibility. That's an omission of the international community, too. (...) Current minister of defense Dragan Šutanovac claims that Diković isn't guilty, since Haag don't ask for him to be delivered, as well as the Milošević ain't guilty, since there's no final judgment. It shows us the importance of final judgments for all of us.

**Ervina:** We listened to one women talking about search for perpetrators of crimes after receiving the information from Croatia.... It means that our persecutor's office does nothing until somebody else pushes it. It waits for persecutor from Dubrovnik and Neretva county to give it name and surname, and only then starts collecting information. Furthermore, they try to persuade us it is the procedure, although it shows they do nothing. But it is a clear thing that if they would do their jobs, they would have to extradite themselves.

**Staša:** The problem of persecutor's offices is that they conceal crimes in the name of the state. And it's clear why do they do it, since half of the government today consists of the people from the former regime.

**Nela:** Activists can't go, but only lawyers... and it seems as if the monitoring is not the form of pressure for those associations hiring lawyers. There is no political pressure when it comes to war crimes.

*4b) Nationalistic ideologies that haven't been deconstructed...*

**Nationalism:**

**Meliha:** (...) only we know what happened during the training, and that's when for the first time we raised the question whether we will go together or separately... Do we want BiH to be united or not... How will be represent the court in a women's way? We never sat down and talked about it... We have to discuss it ourselves, one with another, we haven't resolved anything, we sit together and talk about women's issue, but do not open the national issue... And only then you can help us, when we talk it over between ourselves.

**Rada:** And we in Croatia don't even sit together... I am afraid of the new Vukovar, we have a lot to work...

**Meliha:** We have ad hoc actions, work together, but when these topics are raised...

**Nela:** Not everyone sit together in Serbia, too.

**Duška:** We are not talking about us and, let's say, Circle of Serbian Sisters, whom we are not together anyway... We are talking about relationships between women's activist groups, joined within the network, with no explicitly nationalistic organizations, but we have never discussed our internal, let's call it nationalist story; we all agree on the issues concerning domestic violence, trafficking, law on gender equality, but when it comes to war and its consequences, and when it comes to BiH and RS... then the problems start, then you have to see what will Dodik say... and it is a problem, as well as the problem is this public statement of mine that will bring me troubles at home. Therefore, I am thinking about it – whether they also have a problem to speak out, which I can deal with, or they do not want to speak out, which I don't know what we can do with...

**Nela:** And ethnic cleansing still goes on in the minority environments, people outside these communities are being brought to work, to manage, while members of the communities have no jobs. All those are processes of ethnic cleansing. We have to open issues of double responsibilities, since they were first victims of their minority leaders and then of majority leaders. In Lapac we brought to the public the story of three sisters thrown in the well... Well known doctor Lukač, a true positive example from Zagreb, belonging to the majority nation, did not want to go with the refugees and Croats killed him.

**Misuse of war rapes:**

**Nela:** For already a year we have a strong manipulation going on. This woman (Marija Slišković), with the organization Women in the Homeland War... in November took 80 women to Haag, and in front of the tribunal they sang, recited and lobbied. You can suppose who paid for the trip of these 80 women to Haag... They performed pressure for their generals. Furthermore, I think the pressure is also done in order to obtain withdrawal of the indictment for genocide.

**The question of responsibility:**

**Staša:** I think it would be a big step for Serbia and Croatia to admit the status of aggressors against Bosnia and Herzegovina and to admit they were defeated. It would be a giant leap if the majority of populations would become aware of it. Only after we get aware of the initial position of aggressors, we can talk about being in the position of victims. Daša insisted on the citizens responsibility in Serbia for what was done in our name... everyone agreed, but is it only about citizens responsibility, since it is more comfortable to say that Hungarians also voted for the regime, so the women added that it was not enough, and that they were also interested in the question of responsibility in accordance with the ethnic belonging, because the war that was led invoked the collective identity.

**Rada:** Exactly this division, the fact that Croatia considers itself a victim, represents the greatest obstacle to accepting responsibility of any kind, neither individual nor collective... It is really being forgotten that the Croatia functions as an ethnic state, and that's why it is impossible to help resolve the problems of Serbs coming back to Croatia when acting only from the position of citizens responsibility. I think it is very good to always bear in mind the slogan "not in our name", since that's what women can recognize. First we have to break down the paradigm of victim and aggressor...

I remember getting into the antiwar campaign, when many people asked me how could I do that when we were attacked, and I answered that it was EXACTLY WHY I did it. Everyone is happy when Staša says “I am coming from the aggressor-country”, but no one will stand up and say “Croatia was also the aggressor in BiH”.

**Valentina:** Most people in BiH have forgotten to speak in their own names. They’ll never say something risky, since we have to protect ourselves. The safe place for talking is really necessary. There are always persons willing to risk, but those are nobodies, with nothing to lose. The others calculate how much they could lose.

#### **4c) Insufficiently developed civil societies**

**Valentina:** The responsibility in BiH is distorted and mostly means accusing the others. I think that the crucial political knowledge comes from Hannah Arendt, while using the personal examples. What I am interested in is civil society that got professionalized, and the persons who, instead of being allies, ask questions and give demands that lead to pseudo-objectivity.... BiH has significant initiatives for transitional justice, but there is also this mainstream thinking that keeps....

#### **4c) “Dictatorship of the time”...**

**Nela:** It was hard to raise the question of responsibility... Two hours are very short, women get touched by the movie and it awakens their themes... But I think it is not only about short time, but about lack of our readiness to open these questions. That’s exactly what we need to focus to.

**Valentina:** We can say it started from the middle... after the training in Sarajevo, we had not a single meeting... We had the mailing list, and surely we need more training... when we see how the presentation was done, with no feminist point of view, then it is not persuasive enough at the public presentation, and that’s how we lose both public and those willing to continue to work. I think we need, as well as you in Croatia, to systematically discuss it all together.

**Ljupka:** My opinion is that difficulties and problems are – how to mobilize, how to interlink these women, how to keep them in the process and mobilize even more people, both women and men, because of the complex circumstances.

**Facing of activists with challenges and obstacles in the field work of organizing WC, when it comes to working with the public, can and should be solved by continual work (repeated “visits” to places where public presentations have already been organized, as suggested by activists from Croatia, and accepted by others). It is also needed to strengthen ourselves (activists) through continual learning, sharing knowledge and experiences.**

Prepared by Staša Zajović and Marija Perković