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## **Solidarity in the times of Corona virus**

### **I Introduction – the context and forms of intervention of Women in Black**

Pandemic of virus Covid-19 has been one of the most overwhelming natural catastrophes of our times. The pandemic permeates all dimensions of life: health, politics, social, economic, gender, security; the pandemic has shaken the whole humanity, with inestimable consequences and challenges.

State of emergency was declared in Serbia on March 15, 2020 and it was done unconstitutionally, without say of the Parliament of the Republic of Serbia. During the state of emergency, as well after, when it was canceled on May 6, the Covid-19 pandemic has been used as an excuse for massive violation of human rights, illegal detentions, suppression of independent media, political persecutions, increased militarization of the state and the society in Serbia.

#### *Activities during the state of emergency*

Since the beginning of Covid-19 pandemic we established various modes of mutual support and solidarity within Women in Black Network: daily telephone contacts with activists, not only in Serbia but in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Croatia, Slovenia as well; communication through social networks/Facebook, visiting activists in Belgrade, especially women over 65 and providing them with basic supplies; humanitarian aid to the most socially deprived activists, modest aid according to our capabilities and giving psychological support to activists by the therapeutic team of Women's Court which operates in the whole region. Also, since the eruption of Covid pandemic we were in permanent contact with activists of International WiB Network, mostly from Italy, Spain, Belgium, Great Britain, also Turkey, Latin America, U.S.A etc. The communication gave us an insight into different dimensions and consequences of the pandemic – political, social-class, gender, militaristic etc.

#### *Activities after the state of emergency*

According to WiB's ethics of care and responsibility and our practice of 'direct intervention in the context', especially in situations of big shakes and crisis, we consider as exceptionally important the field work and direct live contacts with activists. In that sense we organized visits/encounters/exchange with our activists. We are not going to discuss here other activities within WiB Network (street actions, numerous activities within the extensive program of transitional justice from feminist perspective etc.), but we will present the findings from our encounters with the activists.

**II Collective pondering on the different aspects of the pandemic:** we organized 'mini' feminist discussion circles with participation of the core activists of WiB network, and with the activists from the area of Zvornik and Tuzla (Bosnia i Hercegovina) too.

In the period from May 10 to mid-July we visited eleven (**11**) places in Serbia (Novi Sad, Subotica, Petrovaradin, Leskovac, Vlasotince, Kruševac, Kikinda, Pančevo, Lučani twice, Kraljevo). In Belgrade we organized in WiB premises four rounds of discussions (May 13, 20, 27 and June 17). In the meeting 'The spectre of Corona is haunting the world' June 12/14 in Radmilovac near Belgrade 32 persons participated from some ten towns in Serbia, as we already reported in details, but since most of them previously took part in our visits, a special discussion was organized with activists who were not part of feminist discussion circles (Zrenjanin, Zaječar and Priboj on Lim). Also, within educational program 'Women's Peace Activism' (June 25 and 26) in Đulici we discussed consequences of the pandemic with participation of 21 women from some ten places in the area of Tuzla and Zvornik in BiH.

In 'mini' feminist discussion circles sixty female and five male activists participated, total of 65 and 32 participants in Radmilovac to be added. So, around hundred (**100**) persons were involved in discussions on pandemic and its consequences. Although it is a limited number, we think that the positions of the persons with whom we held the discussions reflect perceptions, thinking and feelings of a far wider circle of people. Namely, because of health/epidemiology reasons we did not invite larger circles but decided to invite the core of WiB Network only.

Concerning methodology, we prepared a short guide for the discussions in order to enable easier comparisons of similarities and differences as well (centar-periphery; village-town; social status, employed-unemployed, etc.)

**III Challenges of activism in the Corona times** – during these encounters and discussions we got precious experiences and findings. We are listing the following:

**Activism is a direct communication, space of collective pondering and it must not be replaced by alienated digital communication:** during the state of emergency as well as after, activism has been limited mostly on digital communication (online, zoom, social networks). *But, the fact that all the activists who were invited came, the response was even bigger than we expected, leads to the conclusion of basic need for live communication, dynamic relations and exchange.* It is best reflected in the statement: ,‘The most important is that we met each other, we know how important it is to be together’, (*Suvada*) or , Online communication became a sort of imperative which I gave up since I realized how important is a group work’ (*Nikola*) etc.

**Feminist ethics of care as a creation of a space for active listening, emotional support, solidarity:**

‘The feeling that someone listens to me lessen our burden of troubles’ (*Šaha*); ‘This came in right time, after isolation, piled up fears and intimidations’ (*Milka*); ‘Solidarity in the times of pandemic lived. Hope in humanity, space of hope and utopia’ (*Vladimir*).

**Creation of the space for discussion and exchange of experiences of fear:** this is the ground of women's peace politics and nonviolent work: ‚Fear concerning the pandemic can only be overcome by talking about it, not to be lonely in fear, but to be solidary in fear and to learn from fear‘ (*Stiša*).

**Critical consideration of activist, especially feminist engagement – dangers of depolitization of feminism or of the, NGO jobs‘ or the feminism as a strategy for social change:** ‚I examined myself how much all my work had a wider meaning or was it for myself only. Maybe it became a kind of job. I think that I lost some of my illusions.‘ (*Slavica*); ‚There are dilemmas about activism. Some women look if they would have some benefit from it, they don't work from their heart‘ (*Nadeřda*); ‚I think that there is no political substance in feminist movement. I would prefer more political substance. More solidarity to respect each other, not to relativize. A space should be created for more discussion about this‘ (*Sneřana*); ‚For me solidarity is a question of deconstruction of the history of women's movement in Vojvodina and Serbia‘ (*Svenka*).

**Rebellion is a right, and crises and shocks make even stronger demand for activist ‚obligation‘ to react now and here:** ‚One should not conform with an authoritarian regime even in the times of pandemic (*Bratislav/Bata*); ‚For me it is important to rebel, to show that we have a right to rebel (*Sneřana*). Of course, crisis could be an encouragement for strengthening activist communities/networks, but crisis also works as turning from and giving up as it happened to a number of activists.

**Breaking rules and repressive measures represent acts of legitimate, justified and just rebellion:** *since the regime ordered some of the most drastic measures, based on no health/epidemiology reasons but solely its sadistic oppression, breaking the orders was an act of dignity and selfrespect:* ‚All breaking of the idiotic rules should be supported‘ (*Gordana*); ‚When it was allowed to us over 65 the right to go out for half an hour and 600 meters around our homes, I walked a couple of kilometers and stayed outside for hours. We have to resist the unjust laws.‘ (*Stiša*); ‚I did a fantastic act – turned off TV, I did not respect the prohibition of movement‘ (*Goran*); ‚My father, because of his illness was in quarantine already. In one moment he decided to break it, took his car and drove out of the town, because he could not bear it any more. I supported him.‘ (*Marija*); ‚I went out especially during the prohibition, as an act of resistance and personal rebellion. I don't say I did not hide from the police which patrolled my street‘ (*Ljilja S.*) *etc.*

#### **IV About the consequences of pandemic on economic-social level**

Most of WiB activists struggle for existence, due to losing their jobs, mostly occasional, temporary, in gray economy. But, even activists with permanent working place are faced with serious economic problems and often they are obliged to neglect their job and to take care of others, children, elderly.

Although the economic problems are very serious, the discussion – contrary to the expectations – did not focus on the issue, probably because in the first months of pandemic some reserves still existed and the dramatic consequences will surface later. On the other hand, the state of shock provoked by drastic repressive measures and the propaganda of the regime, marginalized the economic aspect: 'Maybe psychological consequences will be harder than the economic ones; permanent humiliation has been executed...' (Milka).

**Women are struck the most by the pandemic – on the public level, women are mostly engaged in the jobs of care,** services, production, education and were exposed to exploitation, blackmail and humiliation. On the family level of course women are the most engaged with care for children and elderly. Here we will focus on the public level.

*Women in precarious jobs, in gray economy, lost the jobs and those who did not yet, were under threat to lose it:* 'I work in a shopping mall. Covid is an attack on my existence, because if I stop working I have no income automatically' (Violeta); 'I feel economic consequences because I can't hold lectures. I am personal attendant of a child, I hold private math lectures and make statistics of data but this is no more the situation, anything stopped. Now I have 30% of my previous income. I could hardly live on it even previously.' (Anđelija); 'I worked in Krusevac, in a bakery until the beginning of April. I could not stand it any more and I resigned. I was sick. People would come without masks, I did not have any also. The bakery was full of people all the time' (Verica); 'President of our municipality (Zaječar) used Covid to cancel one part of the market where 90% of women gained their income and fed their families. He literally as a police cleansed that part with pretence that it was 'source of infection'. These people paid rent and taxes regularly. Pandemic is over, state of emergency cancelled, but they are not back to work' (Marija).

*Activists with permanent jobs, because of reduced salaries, barely survive:* 'It came to my 280 Eur for the three of us, me and my two sons. Without aid of my family I could not feed us' (Ivana). *Situation is similar with pensioners who maintain their unemployed family members:* 'It was hard for us to survive two months on my pension' (Zarfa); 'My daughter goes shopping, I give the money' (Svenka).

*Many activists, freelance journalists and cultural workers, lost their regular income, which was partly mitigated with modest solidary support by WiB:* 'I am unemployed, I only got modest honoraria from WiB and it meant a lot to me' (statement of numerous activists).

*Because of the engagement with elderly in the family, many activists could not fulfill their working obligations:* 'I was overwhelmed by obligations with my sick parents, panic stricken for their lives, I could not follow and respond to the demands of my working duties' (Snežana, teacher); 'As a single mother I could not work on my PhD thesis because of taking care of my daughter' (Emilija). *Factory workers in so called investment economy don't have means of protection, suffer blackmail daily, retaliation, being fired, humiliated:* 'Eight women told us that they lost their jobs in Gruner factory in Vlasotince. The workers are taken in minibuses, packed. They are scared, asked us not to write down their names' (Svetlana); 'In Jura cable factory in Leskovac no protection measures

were taken, the workers were taken by bus like sardines. No physical distance of the workers. The same is in other factories. There the virus spread mostly (*Milka*); 'In Lebane some private investors got subventions from the state to hire thousand people. They hire a hundred, keep them for some time then fire and hire others. They have hundred people permanently. Both women and men. Concerning Jura in Leskovac, the consequences of the pandemic have to be seen.' (*Bata*).

*Pandemic struck enormously freelance artists:* 'I had to freeze my status as a freelance artist so I could get a health insurance. We are frightened because nothing is regulated for us. I am scared of other maladies, not only Covid. I had pneumonia in March' (*Nikola*); 'I did not have a job. I led art dance lessons for honoraria, with Covid it died out. WiB helped me with food' (*Aleksandra*). *Some other freelance professions were not significantly shaken since they work in isolation anyway:* 'I work from home as a literary translator. I translated two books since the Corona started' (*Milica*); 'Anyway I write a script in solitude' (*Jelena*, film director).

**V The ethics of care** – from care for others to care about oneself; from traditional gender role of self sacrifice and forsaking to international ethics of solidarity care and responsibility...

*Did you have to take care of others, family members, children, elderly? Do you think that women carried the heaviest burden of pandemic and state of emergency? Would it worsen position of women, re-traditionalization – pushing women back into the home? Did you have health problems?* - these questions from the guide for discussion women answered extensively. Here we shall focus on the work done in taking care of others on the personal and family level.

According to frequency of the answers we could conclude the following:

**Traditional gender role of taking care of others – social/gender norms oblige women with greater responsibility, taking care about others and duties which often demand extreme sacrifice** – *women mostly took care about family members keeping relative emotional stability of the family. Taking care is a wide spectre of duties – physical assistance, emotional work, material support, and serious consequences of physical and emotional work are visible:* 'I took care about uncle and aunt, I moved in with them since they couldn't go out, I went shopping (*Anđelija*).

**Drastic measure of prohibition of movement for persons over 65 made enormous physical and emotional burden:** 'In the times of pandemic I took care of my father who is chronically ill and who had been locked in home long before' (*Marija*); 'I live with my husband who is over 65. He did not go out. I did all the shopping. My granddaughter came every day and I took care of her as well, because my son and daughter-in-law worked. Then they would come to me for lunch.' (*Verica*); 'My husband is at risk since he has obstructive bronchitis, heart and spine problems and I am over 65' (*Džana*); 'I took care of my mother because she was prisoner of the state of emergency, I did the shopping for her and her friend. I took care of my father as well who is 83 and lives in Divčibare' (*Jelena*).

**Digital schools – online schooling works over women’s shoulders:** In Serbia, like mostly everywhere, the schools were closed but the schooling went on online. In this period, which will probably continue, the pupils followed online the classes which their teachers prepared. But, the parents had to work with their children at home. The duty was mostly to the mothers, working or unemployed mothers. Next to unpaid, unrecognized and invisible domestic work, women were obliged with pedagogical work, also invisible, unrecognized and unpaid: 'Mothers had to imagine how to amuse the children since they were not accustomed to staying at home. They had to keep with online lectures together with children, and due to prohibition of movement of people over 65, there was not „granny service“' (Anđelija).

**Socially/gendered imposed sacrifice provoked bitterness:** 'In the beginning I was angry a bit and furious, because I had to take care of my old father' (Svetlana); 'I was angry at everybody, at myself, at government, curfew, at my female friends who hid scared, at all people over 65 for being silent...' (Snežana J.), etc.

**Some activists had serious health, physical and psychological problems:** 'It was extremely hard for me, that state of emergency, because I belong to the risk group who were not allowed to go out. Due to illness I did not come out at all for eight weeks. I worried intensively for my elderly parents whom I did not see for long. They could not go out either. I have a child ten years old. He was with me in the apartment' (Tanja); 'The spine, hips, legs are in pain, arms, shoulders, hands also, spasms in muscles day and night. I still clench my teeth... And I repeat all the time to myself, I am not ill, I can't get ill, I have no time for doctors, I can't allow myself to stop...' (Snežana O.); 'When the emergency state was declared I had an urge to go out, although I am not very mobile person. I could not read, or watch. It meant to me that I could talk with a therapist for an hour weekly on skype.' (Miloš).

**Next to care of personal health, many activists had to take care of health of family members:**

'I am in the group of over 65. My mother is 89 and I live with her. I decided to put us both in self isolation because of her old age and me being survivor of cancer and member of the risk group. I decided to do all the work from home' (Nadežda); 'For a year now I have diabetes. When people started to die, all of them had diabetes. I got very frightened for myself. I also worried much for my children who lost their jobs. My mother is 84, she did not leave her room, neither on the terrace nor into the garden. Her health condition deteriorated dramatically: she did not talk, she did not eat. She became depressed. Corona took away years of her life. Previously she had her rhythm, she went out, had a walk, did domestic work. Now she was pressed to think about death permanently. I had felt the war so traumatically, this time I felt even worse since I felt more powerless.' (Slavica).

**Not all the activists were in the same position – part of them, mostly those who live alone, were not obliged to take care of others as a family obligation, so some of them were ashamed because of their 'privileged' position in the situation of massive vulnerability:** 'I live with my sister. We both worked. She is 12 years younger and went to work every day. It was immodest for me not

to work. She was my heroine, and I told her so.' (*Snežana J.*); 'I was ashamed to complain when I saw how it was for shop women who were probably in the greatest danger.' (*Staća, Ljilja S.*).

**Male activists also took care of families:** 'My mother is 82 years old, every day I went to buy food and medicines, whatever she needed.' (*Bata*); 'I live with mother pensioner. She is in the 'risk' group, so I went shopping.' (*Vladimir*).

**Taking care of others as an ethical and political choice was far easier for activists:** 'It was very important that I was in a daily contact with my friends and that I could visit them. We spoke two or three times every day. It was important to go to a shop, to buy food for them, make a plan when I would visit each of them. I felt that I am useful for doing this' (*Violeta*).

**Pandemic of violence against women during the state of emergency** – according to data of Autonomous Women's Center women reported various forms of psychic violence, economic violence, during state of emergency women lived locked with perpetrators/family members, and were afraid to report violence during curfew. Witnesses are the women who continued to give support to women victims of violence: 'We were in the office every day, six of us. We announced our mobile telephones on FB. Then women would call, complain about violence, hunger, fear. A woman said she would report violence, but perpetrator is at home. She would hide, send SMS and we would call her to spare her costs. If she succeeded to call us, she could talk, but as if she was talking about a friend. In a month four women who run away from domestic violence slept in premises of our group. Many women said they would divorce after this. Women have been already back into the worst patriarchal roles.'

**It is retraditionalization working – return of women into homes because 'during pandemic women were obliged to an absolute responsibility for home and family, enormous burden of duties was put on them and they had to carry it, without choice'** (*Snežana O.*).

'I saw on social networks how women shared recipes. You could see that limitation of women to cooking. It was limited to creating recipes, imagining how to entertain children' (*Andelija*); 'I was a cook, a cleaning woman, a nurse – whatever was asked from me' (*Verica*).

**Fear of shortage of food led to so called compulsive shopping, storage of food:** 'Emptying of supermarkets provoked fear in me' (statement of many women), which made an obligation of baking bread ('I always had flour in the house').

## **VI Alternatives – strategies of resistance on personal level**

### **Feminist ethics of care = balance of caring of others and caring of oneself**

*From discussions and collective pondering, a clear statement emerged: women developed numerous practices of self-care, building resorts for their spirit, emotions and intellect; for some of them 'quarantine' meant a higher level of time and space control; some activists created their utopian projects in ecofeminist key – through closeness with nature. Instead of anthropocentric dominant position 'man is the measure of all things' they discovered value of all living creatures,*

*rhythms of nature instead of merciless destruction of natural resources, one of the causes of pandemic.*

Activists spoke of different strategies, practices, alternatives:

'I went for a walk with Slavica till curfew. It was our recreation. There is nature, singing birds (*Verica*); 'In the conditions of quarantine today many sentences in Rosa Luxemburg's *Letters from prison* sound healing: those about birds and animals that we don't precept when we are out of prison – out of quarantine.' (*Svenka*); 'I went speedwalking. I exercised every day, I downloaded an application, every day after tea. I am happy that I did that. I finished the whole cycle, 28 days.' (*Nadežda*); 'Somehow the quarantine changed my life rhythm on many levels. I was the master of my time. I even practiced yoga through viber, with a group of youth from Zagreb, I was telephoning night and day.' (*Staša*); 'I want to create conditions, in two years to be a serious producer of food. This Corona oriented me towards importance of soil and I enjoy working the land. I am fed up with the state, the institutions, the lies. I cultivate 3,300 m<sup>2</sup> with raspberries. In this country Serbia I can't expect the system to change during my lifetime. I can only change myself, by going out of the system. Agriculture is the only space, where we women actually give, we don't take. In my age it became very important to me. I want to look at a tree growing, that is what I want. (*Marija*); 'At the end we realised that the quarantine did us good, inspite of the repression. We changed our way of living a bit. We were dedicated to ourselves. There was peace, silence. No noise from caffe bars, traffic. We walked a lot, did not use Internet very much. (*Biljana and Nada*); 'In the second part of Corona, when I saw that my folks, who were in another state, organized well without me, never in my life, even in my youth I was so dedicated to myself... I was alone in the apartment. I organized my day, dedicated to things I love and which I have been neglected against my will. I listened to the music, read books, watched movies. I walked, I live on the bank of a clean river, purity and beauty. Everywhere was blossoming, I enjoyed, I gained mental strength. I had conversations with a psychiatrist. I don't use social networks, I communicated by telephone, I couldn't wait to hug all, my sisters first, then my neighbours...' (*Marta*); 'I organized online reading of Polish writer Olga Tokarczuk, in 37 languages, I gathered together 53 translators. For me it was superb. My job is otherwise lonely.' (*Milica*); 'I borrowed the dog from my neighbour so I could go out...' (*Džana, Anđelija*), 'I was taking care of cats...' (*Marko*) etc.

### **Feminist ethics of care – emotional and political choice, feminist solidarity**

*In spite of gender forced constant care and devotion within family, activists go beyond family frame of caring for one's own folks and practice the concept of feminist ethics of care – solidarity in caring, in the context of local, regional, global vulnerability. The core values of feminist ethics of care – attentiveness, responsibility, art of caring, sensibility and trust (Selma Sevenjuisen) – activists were showing in relation to others, those near them like neighbours, as well in their community and in women's network: 'I worried for those around who were crying, they were in*



worse state than me. I forgot my fear. I encouraged them, friends from Serbia called me, we mutually encouraged each other' (*Suvada*);

***Feminist ethics of care was expressed as emotional resort, moral support, tender care among friends:*** 'My friends from WiB Network have been my strength for a long time, for years and decades, they proved it now too, in the period of pandemic and state of emergency. My friends supported me (Staša, Milka, Nadica, Ljilja...), with telephone calls, artistic designed messages, to say, tenderness in all forms. ,Our mutual links, responsibility and care, as well as connection with our friends in the world, responsibility and care for them, in collapsing times like this show the strength of WiB Network' (*Snežana O.*).

***Feminist ethics of care and responsibility is expressed also in sustaining relations within international activist community:*** 'Global feeling of isolation, some kind of complicity in fear, that helped me. I constantly spoke with my friends in the region, Italy, Spain, U.S.A., Latin America... Global bond is very important to me, that is my human community' (*Staša*) etc.

**VII Social distance** – mechanism of social distance acquired, unfortunately, global character within planetary quarantine, and in authoritarian regime it has more than dramatic consequences – mental, health, moral. In the beginning it was named as ,physical distance' to become very soon control, on the state level as well on the society level, accompanied by mutual blaming, suspicion, denunciation, turning isolated victims into perpetrators. Mostly it was not justified with health/epidemic reasons, but it was a mean of 'disciplining' citizenship, and it caused emotional, psychological, ethical, political problems.

The phenomenon of 'social distance' provoked different reactions of activists, as they testified:

***Dehumanization, alienation, both in the family and in wider community, justifiable, but most often irrational fear of contagion and transmission, provoked suffering, loss of confidence and mutual trust:*** 'There was no contact with children, they could not come, protecting us from infection. If they came, they would come into the yard and put masks. This would disbalanced us.' (*Milka*); 'I told my grandchildren not to come because the two of us must not be infected. I told my son that he can come into the yard only where we spoke on distance' (*Nadežda*); 'I did not see neither my grandchildren, nor my sister. As if we were not allowed to come close to each other. We only looked at each other. That was the worst for me.' (*Mirče*); 'My mother told me that I could bring food, but I couldn't come in. Now she asks me if she has to put the mask, since I could bring everything' (*Violeta*).

***Alienation in the closest surrounding/neighbourhood:*** 'When I meet my neighbour, she runs away from me, I from her. We turn heads from each other' (*Rejha*); 'I meet some neighbour and only wave my hand, I don't stop, even on a distance. Well, this is not human, because saying hello and conversing is part of human relations. So, I skip even those habits which for me as a human being were mine by default. The whole neighbourhood act like me. Alienated' (*Svenka*); 'People

were put in a situation that because of oppression, panic, orders, intimidation, you must not look at anybody or you die.' (*Nada*); 'Nobody entered our house, to the gate only...' (*Snežana O.*).

**VIII Militarization of consciousness** – *in wider surrounding, in the town and in the whole country, spreading the climate of aggressiveness and animosity, shutting in, suspicion of others as of all possible sources of infection – gained characteristics of low intensity war:* 'When I walk a street I feel like fainting, people spread even more animosity to each other. Sadistic abuse, inflicting and sowing fear.' (*Jelena*); 'When we were allowed to go out for the first time, people over 65 were scared. Did not dare to go out.' (*Staša*); 'When we could go, I did not have the will. I was hurt with people's changed behavior. I am the woman who walk with a cane. It is hard for me to go up and down. People used to help me always. I did not have to ask, ever. Now it is changed. For the first time I felt animosity, what this old bug wants?, and it hurts quite a lot.' (*Dana*); 'Rampage of regime media, intimidation of citizens with all enemies, and especially Corona as 'the enemy', when real problems and 'enemies' are – poverty, misery, unemployment, criminality – pushed in the rear...' (*Snežana O.*); 'A climate of paranoia, state of extreme anxiety and level of fear of others was created. Most of the citizens were on the level of elevated fear from each other and unpersonalized hate. Everybody was a potential source of infection of Covid-19' (*Nastasja*) etc.

**Blind acceptance of imposed measures, denunciation, fear of reprisal for disobedience count on deep rooted patriarchal obedience and servitude:** 'A woman visited me every day, I was scared that someone will denounce her' (*Rejha*); 'Neighbours denounced elderly people who went out. We were pushed into situation to accept everything we were told' (*Violeta, Nastasja*); 'Clarks in the banks had an order to denounce elderly people who came to the bank' (*Anđa*).

**Disobedience to social distance** was easier to exercise for women who live in houses with gardens, especially in rural area – they worked in the field, gathered together, kept contacts, and for many of them it was a test of the strength of friendship...

Women from the area of Zvornik testified: 'I walked to my field. Walked through the village. To visit neighbours' (*Zarfa*); 'We visited one another for a coffee (Ismeta); 'I worked my land, planted, mowed, whatever I wanted' (*Beska*); 'Who did not want to meet me then, I don't want with them today...' (*Enesa*); 'Some our folks did not want to mingle with us, because we go everywhere, as if we could bring Corona. I am on distance with them now, if they did not need me then, I don't need them now' (*Elvisa*).

## **IX Corona and war – it is incomparable!**

*In the whole world, during pandemic propaganda endorsed war metaphors, war terminology (Corona virus= enemy, etc. ) with an aim to create atmosphere of threat and unsafety, fear and panic. Of course, the aim was to justify repressive measures and control of citizens.*

Women from areas of Zvornik and Tuzla who suffered the most severe war atrocities, loss of their family members, deportations in nineties, we asked a question: *Is it im/proper to compare Corona and war? What you who survived the real war, who were refugees, deportees, think about it? Is the virus a new war or not?*

**'War and Corona could never be compared'**, that is the opinion of most of the women and they explain big differences (*'difference like sky and earth'*); in the war (1992-95) their dearest were killed, their male relatives prior, they were deported, starved, forced to become refugees, and in comparison they see Corona as *'something natural'* (without fear of hunger and deportation). Still, they feel vulnerable (because *'Corona virus is in the whole world'*).

*Women's statements:*

'During the war I did not have a place to sleep, to wash, nothing to eat. They killed all my family. During Corona I lived in my house, I have telephone, TV, Internet, full freezer, I could go freely, do whatever I want. It was easier because Corona virus was all over the world. It is not even comparable' (*Suvada*); 'I can't compare, because I know what I survived in the war. Then I did know where to go, I was pregnant, I didn't even know where I would deliver. I run from grenades, from land mines, hiding. I gave birth in the morning and at noon I was out of the hospital. And now this state is normal for me' (*Hanifa*); 'I can't compare this with the war. I was two month pregnant. Seventeen members of my family were killed. Now I walked somewhere every day, then I could not. I couldn't forget the war ever' (*Enesa*); 'For me as if Corona did not exist. I was on my turf, I had to eat whatever I wanted. War can't be compared with this' (*Mirsada*); 'I can't compare the war and Corona. I remember, my sixteen years old son was taken from me. They led him and killed on Bijeli potok and his children will never meet him' (*Ismeta*); 'This is incomparable, difference like sky and earth. We lost many people in the war' (*Fatima*); 'This is normal for me. We have everything now, and in the war I was on the frontline with my children. I was scared of bullets and grenades' (*Hava*); 'Everything was unpredictable in the war. Now I was going where I wanted, mingled.' (*Fehida*); 'War is something else, I lost those most dear to me. Corona is different. We had everything, we walked around, we had freedom' (*Alma*); 'I can't compare Corona and the war; in the war I lost my dearests. I left my home for an unknown, I did not know what way and where to go. I am not afraid of this' (*Elvisa*) etc.

***Everything happening around Corona virus was a kind of war, most of all psychological war; the atmosphere of fear and misuse provoked even more remembrance of war trauma...***

'War is something completely different: we were grenaded, we were starved. And now, people are killed not with bullets, but psychologically. This is also a kind of war' (*Šaha*); 'This was worse than the war because through this virus all people were locked. The war killed me totally, but this as well' (*Beska*); 'The war was painful both physically and psychologically. Corona is painful too, but much less. What it means to me to have food and drink, when I live in fear. What that I survived when I could maybe get insane. We did not overcome the war' (*Rejha*).

Although we did not ask these questions the women in Serbia, from other discussions we could conclude their perceptions of Corona and the war is that they are incomparable events (*'there is no way for a comparison'*), but they see a psychological war as well: (*'this was harder than bombing'*).

### **X Responsibility of the state, mis/use of pandemic and state of emergency on the political level**

Serbia imposed the most drastic measures in the region and the world: state of emergency was declared without the Parliament, without time limit, with brutal limitations of human rights, not to prevent Corona but against freedom of speech and movement.

#### ***Brutal election campaign was ongoing with excuse of care for 'our health'...***

'The biggest blow to me was denial and limitation of freedom, meaning declaration of state of emergency' (*Ljilja S.*); 'All the time the regime used pandemic for a brutal political manipulation' (*Nastasja*); Occupation of institutions – absolute terrorizing of citizens by the president of the state and his party (*Snežana O.*); 'For me the hardest was that he (A. Vučić) keeps logorrheic speeches for two months on TV, all the time leading pre-election campaign' (*Džana*).

One activist summarized the responsibility of the state as: *'responsibility is immeasurable, primitive, ignorant, simply there is no word in Serbian language to define the state of this state'* (*Svenka*).

### **Senicide – house arrest for 65+ for 42 days – the most drastic measure during the state of emergency**

**Senicide/parenticide/lapot** is the name for a custom to kill parents, and all the participants in the discussion name this as the most drastic measure. It meant absolute prohibition of movement for people over 65, from declaration of state of emergency on March 15 to April 27 when going out for 30 minutes on Tuesday, Friday and Sunday, in the distance of 600m from one's home was allowed. Decision on March 22, 2020 for people over 65 allowed that they go shopping 4-7 a.m. and only on Sunday. That was actually continuation of war system of concentration camp for people of different name and nationality, so during the state of emergency, concentration camps for elderly were created – for members of the same nation...

***House arrest for the generation 65+ in the name of health 'protection'*** – a drastic endangering of their health; in the overall economic and social collapse the generation 65+ is a meaningful economic resource of the state, necessary for the stability of the regime, now reduced to superfluous beings. House arrest has a gender dimension also – it hit female pensioners more...

'Imprisoned, elderly persons, far more of us are women than men, house arrest is pure attack on our health. Imprisonment justified as care for our health is a fraud, double fraud. Actually, care for our life is care for those who are financially supported by us, and most of the families have

unemployed younger members and pensioners to support them, and more women than men are in that role. We are guarantor for economic survival of the state. Discrimination against elderly everybody practice: youth, politicians, other endangered, not only in virtual sphere but in public, in the shops, buses, everywhere' (*Svenka*).

**From stigmatization to sanctioning of elderly:** ,People looked in the shops who had white hair' (*Nastasja*); 'I was in front of my house with a neighbour. We are both over 65. A policemen asked us where we were going, she said we were taking a walk, he asked us for our age. Many pensioners were chased and harrassed by him' (*Senka*); 'During lockdown I decided to go shopping by myself, I woman harrassed me, saying that it was not my age group and my time. If you come again, I will denounce you' (*Svenka, Staša*) etc.

'Elderly were not only discriminated, but exposed to health risks when they were allowed to go shopping before dawn, as it was said at ,the times of the lowest pollution of the air' (*Nastasja*); 'It seems to be a continuation of the war system of concentration camps which were established for people of different names and nations, but during the state of emergency ,concentration camps for elderly' of the same nation were created. In this society elderly are superflous and useles beings. They only serve to work in the family and to give money to their children and grandchildren' (*Staša*); 'Such discrimination and terror was nowhere, the regime threathened citizens ,for their own good'. And the culmination was the brutal threat of A. Vučić at the end of March 2020: ,Dear pensioners, don't go out! If you listen to such propositions (by the opposition) all the graveyards would not be enough... they would be too small to take us all.'

**Collapse of the health system, due to lack of protection means, fear of medical stuff of Corona provoked loosely and inhuman attitude of health workers:**

'I took care of my elderly and sick parents. My parents were of serious age, my father was 87 and my mother 82, both with many chronical illnesses. With pandemic increase, my father started to cough, which was forbidden and threatening condition, for the state and for the society... I communicated with doctors in Covid-19 centers. They also worked 'on distance' even the diagnostics. I did not have physical access, as many others, to the health center. A week before my father died, both father and mother had high temperature and were ridden to bed. For five long days I've phoned begging doctors from the Home care medical service, Emergency service, Covid-19 center, to come and help my parents. On the fifth day a doctor from Home care health came and on the gate changed to protective suit. When examining my father, the doctor, although in scafander, avoided to touch him. I am sure that my father died not from infection of Corona virus. But from bacteria in urinary tract, which invaded his cardiovascular system and led to overall poisoning of the organism' (*Snežana O.*); 'I am devastated by the fact that medical profession withdraw before politics. I can't believe that someone took Hippocratic Oath and now withdraw in front of the politics and offend us, they say something today, something different tomorrow' (*Ljilja S.*); 'Many people died from other illnesses for they were neglected because of Corona. They called emergency service in vain...'*(Milka)* etc.

**Many improvised Covid-19 hospitals established during the state of emergency provoked panic and fear in people;** because of lack of basic hygienic conditions, they were perceived as concentration camps so that the largest of these hospitals, established in Sajam/Belgrade Fair was called *Sajmište* after notorious concentration camp from Second World War: 'The other night my husband said he was dying, I wanted to call Emergency service, he got up and threw a chair downstairs, saying I wanted to put him in *'Sajmište' - Covid-19 hospital'* (Sonja) etc.

**Misuse of religion and religious holidays by Serbian Orthodox Church and the state:** after the state of emergency was declared, and before orthodox Easter on April 19, a big public debate started concerning limitation of keeping religious gatherings, especially concerning communion in orthodox churches: 'The state did not forbid explicitly religious services during Easter, so we had increased clericalization, scenes when people received communion from the same spoon. The Church did not explain to the believers that there was an epidemic danger' (Vladimir, Tanja); 'Shameful and criminal behavior of the church and its clerics in a situation of overall danger, which is not the first time by Serbian Orthodox Church. The church and the state came together in a criminal venture against their own citizens' (Snežana O.)

**Criminalization and punishment of disobedient and rebellious people** – we shall describe the most drastic example:

*Sadistic abuse of the state over family Milivojević*, whose son Milomir perished in the factory 'Milan Blagojević-Namenska' from Lučani on July 14, 2017 from gunpowder. Milivojević family over two years already has demanded from state institutions to make clear the circumstances of the tragedy in the factory. There is a criminal case opened in the court in Ivanjica against those who are responsible for this crime.

'On April 8 a police patrol stopped me when I was coming from my work in Čačak and my parents who were coming from working the raspberry field. Although we presented all our permission papers in order, we were told that we committed a delict, breaking Order of prohibition and limit of movement. My family and myself has been systematically persecuted. It is obvious that the director Radoš Milovanović has been involved. The word which describes the factory director Milovanović and his collaborators is boundless power, and the words to describe my family and me are sorrow, pain and prosecution, because we only want to find the facts and circumstances of my brother's death.' (Mirjana); 'The state – police and judiciary – define our past, present and future...' (Nela and Mirjana).

**XI Organized social resistance** – *On participation in social self-organized actions during pandemic:* about applauding to health workers in the action 'Noize against dictatorship' ('Šerpanje') the activists said:

**Most of the activists participated in the action because it was not only liberation from fear, but a visible collective resistance, disturbing the regime:** 'That was my way to express that I am against' (Goran); 'I needed to show my revolt' (Nastasja); 'It was not simple psychological vent,

not at all, it was a political rebellion' (*Ljilja S.*); 'I was banging pans from the first day and it was important to me, psychologically and politically. I think that the banging disturbed Vučić' (*Violeta*); 'I enjoyed to applaud to health workers because my granddaughter works in a Covid-19 hospital, and I was also banging pans' (*Marta*); 'It was awakening of an energy...' (*Milica*); 'These actions are important, as a visible and responsible expression of discontent, liberation from fear, but also a mode of self respect and dignity' (*Snežana O.*).

**Many activists were motivated to participate because it reminded them of ,their youth' in nineties** when mass rebellion in 1996 shook the regime of S. Milošević and led to his fall in 2000: 'This reminded me of the protests when we were young' (*Aleksandra*); 'This meant a lot to me, since I was banging in nineties' (*Džana*); 'I was moved by the moment when the pans started. I cried, because me and my mam banged pans in 1996 when I was eleven' (*Emilia*).

**The 'pan banging' action was more massive in bigger towns, in buildings, but activists made 'noise' in smaller places as well, encouraging the others, but were mostly alone:** 'People mostly participated in the ,noise' in estate housing, in larger buildings, but also in their yards, on balconies' (*Bata*); 'I live in a suburb which was silent. I was walking and banging a pan in the yard and on the street. My neighbours thought I was crazy, but I didn't care. I was blowing a whistle from all the corners of the yard. That was an act of rebellion, maybe the only possible in that moment' (*Snežana J.*); 'We went out on the street, our neighbours locked themselves in their homes, not to look at us. We did that as an act of solidarity. If there is a noise from buildings, it is good to come from houses too' (*Marija*) etc.

**In the action 'noise' women were more numerous and bolder:** 'It was obvious that women were bolder, more women participated' said Anđa and Svetlana. 'In my building only a couple of women participated and the men denounced me to the police for making 'noise'. I was told that it was illegal and that I am not allowed to do that. I have my free will...' (*Svetlana*).

**Potential of such actions is insignificant, they can't generate collective resistance to the regime** – that was opinion of one part of activists: 'It was disgusting and boring because I can't see that this is the way we could fight this evil' (*Vladimir*); 'It is funny, nonsense, stupid' (*Nikola, Vesna, Marko, Miloš*); 'Banging pans is not a liberation act for me, but a frustration' (*Slavica*).

**Part of activists expressed mistrust and suspicion in the action, believing that it was manipulation and cheap politics:** 'I am always reserved concerning such actions because I never know if they are really self-organized or someone is behind it, and than, who, with what purpose, how the gain of self-organizeng would be perversed, suspicion is a basic state of mind' (*Svenka*); 'This mode of cheap politics bothers me, people who banged unnerved me' (*Tanja*) etc.

**In place of conclusion – lessons learned...**

Since the beginning of pandemic Covid-19 we established various modes of mutual support and solidarity within WiB Network. During collective pondering of the core activists of WiB Network about various aspects of pandemic and the state of emergency, we came to precious findings:

**About activism and its challenges:**

- *Activism is a direct communication*, a space for direct collective pondering and this can't and must not be replaced by alienated digital communication – turnout was bigger than expected;
- *Solidarity* among activists of WiB Network was alive on local, regional and global levels; mutual support and exchange strengthened both relations of trust and friendship as well as political, feminist-antimilitarist, principles;
- *Critical questioning of activist, especially feminist engagement*, because of the danger of depolitization of feminism and ‚NGO jobs‘;
- *Rebellion is a right*, and the crisis and shakes even strengthen activist ‚duty‘ to react, and breaking rules and repressive measures are acts of legitimate, justified and just resistance. Etc.

**On consequences of pandemic on economic-social level:**

- *State of shock provoked by drastic repressive measures and regime propaganda marginalized the economic aspect* – contrary to expectations, the discussion was less focused on these questions, probably because in the first months of pandemic some reserves existed, and dramatic consequences will be seen in next period;
- *Women are the most struck by pandemic* – women are the most employed in the caring professions, services, production and education, where they are exposed to exploitation and humiliation; a large number of women in precarious work, gray economy, lost their jobs, and those who did not, were exposed to the risk of losing it; *factory workers in south Serbia are in the worst situation* (Jura etc.) they don't have protection means, suffer blackmail, dismissal, reprisal and humiliation daily; activists with steady jobs, because of salary reduction merely survive; many activists, freelance journalists, artists, workers... lost their regular income; because of taking care of elderly in the family many activists could not fulfill their duties at work, etc.

**Ethics of care** – taking care of others on personal, family level:

- *Traditional gender role of taking care of others: mostly women were occupied with taking care of members of their families, physical assistance, emotional work, material aid...*



thus keeping relative emotional balance of the family; drastic measure of prohibition of movement for those over 65 was enormous physical and emotional burden; next to invisible, unpaid, unrecognized physical and emotional work in the household, women were obliged to do pedagogical work, also invisible and unrecognized and unpaid, due to online schooling; social/gender imposed sacrifice has been accompanied by serious health consequences;

- *Not all the activists were in the same situation* – part of them, mostly those who live alone, did not have to take care of others as fulfilling a family duty; caring for others as an ethical and political choice was far easier to activists;
- *Pandemic of violence against women during the state of emergency* – women reported various forms of psychological and economic violence, and during the state of emergency they were imprisoned with violent partners/family members and were scared to report violence during curfew;
- *Retraditionalization – women back to homes* – ,During pandemic women were entitled for absolute responsibility for home and family, enormous burden of duties was put on them and they had to carry it, without choice' (*Snežana O.*).

**Alternatives – strategies of resistance on personal level; feminist ethics of care = balance of taking care of others and of oneself:** women developed various practices of taking care of themselves, building their spiritual, emotional and intellectual resorts; for some women ,quarantine' was higher level of time and space control; some activists imagined their utopian projects in ecofeminist key – closeness with and within nature. Instead of anthropocentric dominant positions that ,man is a measure of all things' they discovered beauty of rhythms of nature instead of merciless destruction of natural resources which is one of the causes of the pandemic. Activists practiced concept of feminist ethics of care – ethics principle of solidarity in care and global vulnerability; feminist ethics of care and responsibility appeared also in keeping relations within international women's peace community.

*During collective pondering on various aspects of pandemic activists also warned about extremely devastating consequences of repressive measures of the regime:*

**Social distance** – mechanism of social distance had dramatic mental, health, moral and political consequences; social control on the level of state and society was accompanied with mutual blaming, suspicion, denunciation, perverting isolated victims as perpetrators. Justification mostly was not health/epidemic, but turned into a form of ,disciplining' citizens, and provoked emotional, psychological, ethical, political problems.

**Militarization of consciousness** – in wider surrounding, town, the whole country... there was a drastic increase in climate of aggressiveness and animosity, reclusiveness, suspecting others as possible source of infection etc. Militarization was also expressed as blind acceptance of imposed measures, fear from reprisal for 'disobedience'. But, many women expressed disobedience to social distance, although it was easier for women who lived in houses with yards, especially in rural areas.

**Corona and war** – women from the area of Zvornik and Tuzla who survived the hardest war sufferings, loss of the closest people, deportations in nineties, are of the opinion that 'the war and Corona are never to be compared' because in the war (1992-95) those closest to them, primarily male relatives were killed, they were deported, starved, forced as refugees and, considering that, they see Corona as 'something natural', but feel vulnerable since 'Corona is in the whole world'. Part of the women think that 'everything what has been happening around Corona virus was a form of war, especially psychological war; atmosphere of fear and abuse provoked even more our memories of war trauma' etc.

**Responsibility of the state, misuse of pandemic and state of emergency on the political level** – described are the most drastic phenomena:

- *Senicide – house arrest* – for people over 65 for 42 days; drastically endangering their health; stigmatization and sanctioning of elderly;
- *Collapse of health system* – fear of health workers of corona, mostly due to inadequate protection, led to loosely and inhuman behavior of health workers; many improvised Covid-19 hospitals, open during state of emergency, provoked panic fear, and due to lack of basic hygienic working conditions, were perceived as concentration camps;
- *Misuse of religion and religious holidays* by Serbian Orthodox Church and the state – health danger and political danger in a form of strengthening clericalization;
- *Criminalization and punishment of disobedient, rebelous citizens – sadistic behaviour of the regime etc.*

**Organized social resistance – in anti-regime actions ('Noise against dictatorship')** - most of the activists participated in the action because it represented not only release from fear but a visible collective resistance, disturbance of the regime; the actions were more massive in cities, buildings, but the activists made 'noise' in smaller places also, encouraging the others; in action 'noise' women were more numerous and bolder; potential of such actions is insignificant, they could not generate collective resistance to the regime – that is the opinion of part of the

activists; part of the activists expressed mistrust and suspicion in the action, considering it a manipulation and cheap politics.

*(The report was presented in the meeting of Women in Black Network, September 2020, and the full report of Staša Zajović in Serbian and English is available on WiB website)*