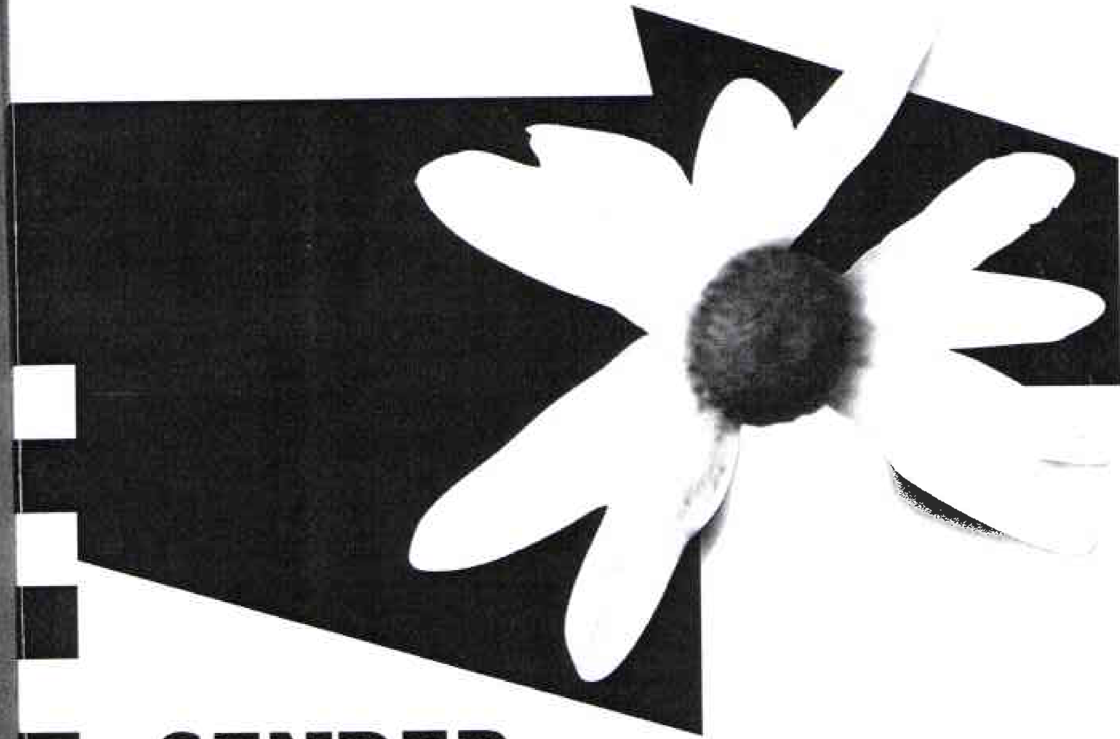

GENDER POLITICS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

WOMEN AND SOCIETY IN YUGOSLAVIA AND THE YUGOSLAV SUCCESSOR STATES

EDITED BY
SABRINA P. RAMET

AFTERWORD BY
BRANKA MAGAŠ

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WOMEN IN KOSOVO: CONTESTED TERRAINS

THE ROLE OF NATIONAL IDENTITY IN SHAPING AND CHALLENGING GENDER IDENTITY

Julie Mertus

There is no gender identity prior to the performance in which it is expressed, Judith Butler has observed.[1] Similarly, there is no national identity prior to the performance in which it is expressed. Performances of gender and performances of national identity intertwine: the boundaries of each shape the corners of the other. These processes never end, as both gender identities and national identities quickly become *contested terrains* to be won or lost, preserved, or dissolved.

Particularly when under attack, gender identities and national identities must be reconciled with each other; intersections must be examined, explained, or exploited. In his analysis of wartime propaganda, Obrad Kesić explains how political leaders in ex-Yugoslavia have manipulated gender in the struggle over national identity.[2] Conversely, political lead-

Julie Mertus wrote this while she was a fellow at Harvard Law School and the Harvard Center for International Affairs. Funding for the research for this chapter was provided by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

ers and women's groups alike have manipulated national identity to shape and challenge gender identity.

These complex, interrelated performances include the development of the real and imagined relationship between (1) *gender and nation-Other*; (2) *gender-nation and state*, and (3) *gender-nation and authorities*. In defining and defending their national identity and gender identity, all people of ex-Yugoslavia must somehow negotiate these relationships. This chapter explains each component in turn by using narratives from women in Kosovo, the predominantly ethnic Albanian part of ex-Yugoslavia.[3] Nation and gender in Kosovo, as elsewhere, are works in progress, with recognizable shape at any point in time but, perhaps for the good of us all, remaining in a constant state of (re)definition. Nationalism does shrink the scope for individual identity choice but, oddly enough, it may also open new avenues for identity formation.

GENDER AND NATION-ORDER

The cost of one identity is often the loss of another. Tzvetan Todorov explains: "The valorization of the group has a double aspect—it implies turning one's back on the lesser entity (the self) as well as to the greater entity (other groups, humanity as a whole). Attachment to the group is at once an act of solidarity and an act of exclusion."[4] In the Balkans, especially in times of war and oppression, one's ethnonational group takes precedence over all other claims to identity.[5] Just as Serbs are expected to be Serbs above all else, Kosovar Albanians are expected to be first and foremost Albanians.[6]

Serbian women activists and Albanian women activists, however, face a slightly different array of choices in the identity process. Serbian women who fight for the rights of women, refugees and ethnonational minorities are labeled as traitors by their own communities. To be women's rights activists, Serbian women have had to choose their gender identity over their identity as Serb—a tag which has become equated in the international community with the oppressor/aggressor/war criminal.[7] So, too, Albanian women who fight for the rights of women and speak in broader terms of human rights for all are in danger of being called traitors by their own people. However, the call for solidarity among Kosovar Albanians is so strong, and the cost of breaking rank so high, that most Albanian women cannot choose to emphasize their gender identity over

their Albanian identity.[8] And, unlike Serbs, they need not do so, as "Kosovar Albanian" is not equated with aggressor but with suffering victim.[9]

For Kosovar Albanian women, then, the cost of being Albanian is the loss of other identities, including that of "Woman." "Women here aren't living life as women, but as Albanians," J., one of the leading human rights activists in Uroševac declared.[10] Her friend, a young teacher of Albanian literature, added, "Women can't be free women when they are occupied as a nation." "After the revolution," more than one Kosovar woman has vowed, "we will have our freedom."

Even at the World Conference on Women in Beijing, Kosovar Albanian women were nearly invisible, despite their physical presence. The Kosovar Albanian delegation to the World Conference of Women in Beijing—the official delegation sponsored by the parallel Kosovar Albanian government—decorated the NGO forum with posters of Ibrahim Rugova, president of the Kosova government, and Adem Demaqi, a human rights activist known as the "Albanian Mandela" for his long prison term. The "official" Albanian handout spoke much about Serbian police violence against Albanians but omitted mention of domestic violence; it emphasized the substandard health and education system (both of which have tremendous impact on the lives of women and girls) but skimmed over the high illiteracy rates among women in villages and the lack of reproductive health education nearly every locality. The official presenters appeared more comfortable talking about the women killed by police than the alive women who are attempting to build a better society.

The image of woman as victim bolsters the larger Kosovar Albanian identity, that of the suffering people.[11] The police brutality against Albanians has been documented—people have suffered.[12] Yet an unyielding investment in perpetuating this image dissuades initiatives to improve the quality of Kosovar life. All problems lead in one direction, to the oppressive Serbian state. When village women remain illiterate, girls turn to prostitution, and women throughout Kosovo suffer from lack of medical care, the reaction becomes: "Look what they [Serbs] are doing to us."[13] Vjosa Dobruna, a doctor who co-founded the Center for Women and the Protection of Children in Priština, has seen the end result. "The woman comes [to the health care center] and says that her husband [has been] beating her for the last five years, and that he is unemployed. In this case, the woman thinks that the problem [of the beating] will be solved if the problem of employment is solved, so she keeps it quiet and sacrifices herself."[14]

As Renata Salecl has succinctly stated, "National identification with the nation ("our kind") is based on the fantasy of the enemy, an alien which has insinuated itself into our society and constantly threatens us with habits, discourses and rituals which are not those of 'our kind.' "[15] A nation knows what it is because it knows what it is not—the dangerous stronger, the Other.[16] For Serbs, while their own cause bespeaks a moral and historical imperative, "Albanians are understood as pure evil."[17] Similarly, Kosovar Albanians see themselves as the victims and Serbs as the aggressors. Serbs look into their oppositional mirror and see their women as cultured, strong, and worthy of motherhood, as opposed to the primitive, weak, and indiscriminately fecund Albanian women.[18] Albanians see their women as the strong pillars of the family, the martyrs for the nation, as opposed to the weak, selfish Serbian women who are misled by their aggressive Serbian men.

For a long time, many Kosovar Albanian women have quietly confessed their doubts that all problems can be blamed on the Serbs. "If we compare ourselves to other women's lives here in Europe, we are not living at all," a school teacher in Uroševac stated, adding "an independent Kosova isn't going to change all that." Only recently have a small but growing group of women dared to speak publicly. In a widely circulated interview, Sevdije Ahmeti, co-director of the Center for Women and the Protection of Children, declared: "It is our duty to change the mentality, to get out of the stagnation that has capture us [women]."[19] Although a handful of Albanian women's groups now exist in Kosovo, those who have publicly attempted to reexamine and redefine women's gender roles in Kosovar society have risked being harshly criticized by their own community as undermining the Albanian national struggle. For example, Xheri, a young women journalist, found herself lambasted by the mainstream Albanian press for writing an article about Albanian prostitutes. Her mistake? The prostitutes had testified frankly about the poor family conditions that had led some of them to the streets.[20] "How can she waste time tearing down our families when we are under occupation?" older Albanian journalists responded.

Regardless of the strong social disapprobation, some Albanian women seek to reshape "Albanian Woman" to fit their definition of woman—to minimize the trade-off and decrease the space between the two identities. One group has been particularly adept at using national identity to reexamine gender identity: a group of volunteers working with village women in the region known as Has, the most conservative corner of the most conservative part of the former Yugoslavia. The volunteers include local women activists—mainly young women who had attended higher education in the city—a literacy and women's rights group, Motrat Qiriazi, named after the two sisters Qiriazi, who founded the first school for girls in the Albanian language one hundred years ago. Run by two sisters, Igballe and Safete Rugova, Motrat Qiriazi had been formed over six years ago and then abandoned due to political pressures. The group had not negotiated the relationship between gender and nation well. Fearing that Motrat Qiriazi had been neglecting the nation at the expense of other aims, Albanian political leaders had dissuaded women from attending their workshops. By the time I found them, the group had already worked out a different relationship between gender and nation.

We greet each man as he enters the faded green classroom and takes a seat on the scrubbed tan wooden benches—three to a bench, just as they had learned in school. The seats at the back of the class remain empty. I look out the cracked window panes at the mountains, and the square, red-roofed houses piled on top of each other across the hill behind the school, the only common building in this village of nearly one hundred houses. A few boys in muddy sandals play with cows at the edge of a dirt path lining a chin-high cement wall. "Where are the women?" I whisper to my friend, the local teacher who has been leading workshops with women in this village for the past two months. "The men wanted to see us today," she says, snapping her pencil nervously against her thigh, "they want to know what we've been doing with their women."

She needed their approval to keep meeting with "their women." A difficult task. These men were the oldest and youngest men of the village—nearly all of the men in the middle-age bracket were out of the region, mostly far out of the country, working as bakers and laborers. Catholic and Muslim, these men deeply believe that only tradition and unquestioned solidarity have kept their families alive. Their adherence to patriarchal tradition has been unwavering.[21] Most urban Albanians living in Kosovo have never been to Has and its deeply conservative ways are utterly foreign to their own way of life.

Has is the place where Muslim girls are still being "bartered" into marriage for as much as thirty thousand German marks, a price given upon engagement at a young age (around thirteen), although marriage takes place years later (around age nineteen). This is the place where women live together in segregated quarters; where some mothers give the best food and care to their sons, leaving their daughters to take care