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'If you are a girl, stay at home' – an ethnographic examination of female social engagement from the rural 19th century to contemporary political protests in Macedonia

Abstract Balkan history has been presented, in gender terms, as a history of oppressed women, stark patriarchy and male domination. This narrative has rarely been questioned, its echoes still lingering in the corridors of those disciplines that helped its creation and promotion. Being one of them, ethnology can, and should play a central role in the deconstruction of the role of women in the so-called traditional cultures, thus establishing a potential continuity between their past and their present struggles.

Key words: gender roles, power struggle, women, protests, abortion, ethnography, Macedonia.

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It was a very hot May afternoon in a village in South-Western Macedonia, where ethnology students conducted their annual field research. The tour was jokingly called a 'Freudian' one, since most of the villages in the area of Prespa lake that we visited had names suggestive of carnal acts and fertility. In one of them, struggling to find interviewees that would answer our meticulously prepared questionnaires, we noticed an elderly lady dressed in mourning black, sitting on something imitating a bench, her wrinkled palms quietly resting on her lap. In an act of a typical ethnographic lack of subtlety, we approached, waving our dictaphones in front of her undisturbed face.

"Was it important, when you were young, to be a virgin before marriage?" asked her a female student whose research topic were pre-marital sexual relations in these rural areas. Like in a suspense scene from a Western movie, the old lady just sighed, and replied: "O, children, there were, there are, and there will be girls who want to have fun. *The penis has no end.*" While we stood there stunned by her answer, followed by a loud burst of laughter, she maintained her composure resembling one of a stereotypical Native-American chief, who has just proclaimed a universally acknowledged truth.

Ethnographic authenticity is often based upon anecdotes like this one, which promptly and decisively strike an epistemological blow, one that can hardly be matched by any theory. Our reaction to this particular one speaks louder than the 'controversial' narrative itself, since it reveals the deeply embedded disregard for discourses that do not match the already established, mainstream ones. This comes as no surprise, having in mind that the image of modest and obedient Balkan women, that would never publicly utter a phrase involving male genitals, has been perpetuated both by domestic and foreign ethnographers from the 19th to the middle of the 20th century. Their writings portray women mostly as passively experiencing social reality, not capable of social critique, rebellion or initiating change.

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The flaw of most of these materials however does not lie in their lack of authenticity, or in their deliberate aim to serve a pre-established notion of an overpowering and omnipotent patriarchy at the Balkans, although at times this might also be the case. The situation is more accurately described through a Macedonian folklore metaphor of 'being blind even though you can see' (*pri ochi slep*). What these researchers and authors have not been able to see for a long time, was the hidden, not manifest but latent aspect of gender power struggle, expressed through different actions, conflict resolutions, negotiations or tactical moves of women. These mechanisms of 'female subculture' made them active, albeit hidden agents of micro-social change.

It was not until the end of the 20th century that this idea gradually entered the academic writings of (mostly younger) ethnologists and anthropologists in Macedonia, who started re-reading and re-examining existing ethnographic materials through these new lenses. Suddenly, ethnographic data related to the active position of women in social life, collected mostly at the beginning of the 20th century, miraculously emerged from the shadows. One such article, by the well-known Serbian ethnologist and anthropo-geographer Milenko Filipovic (1902–1967), who conducted field studies in Macedonia during the 1930s, stated that, according to his field data, at the end of the 19th century there were a number of women-heads of villages. This had been considered impossible for a very long time and had contradicted the established social norms that prevented women from performing important political functions (Филиповић 1991). It is ironic though that his reports on 12 such brave and charismatic women in few of the cases do not contain their personal names, but the ones derived from their husbands' (for example Mileica, meaning the wife of Mile), something which remained a well-established practice well into the 20th century rural Macedonia.

One of the reasons why early ethnographers have often neglected or skipped such 'controversial' data might be a result of an absence of a solid methodological basis, that could serve as a key for their interpretation. Ethnographers

have often solely registered and described a certain custom, or a certain state of affairs, avoiding analysis or connections to other elements of culture. Thus, their ethnographic data often seem contradictory, which is maybe a reason why these researchers could not have taken a conclusive, firm stance on the position of women in the family and the wider community.

An example of this situation can be found in another work of the above mentioned Filipovic, who, while writing about the customs and beliefs in the Skopje valley in 1937, states the following: “In past times, men and women could not speak to each other in public. They also dance the *horo* separately. In general women outside the house have a lower status than men. In Skopje one can often see a villager from the mountain of Skopska Crna Gora riding a horse, while his wife walks in front of it dressed in festive clothes, carrying the baby’s cradle on her left shoulder” (Филиповић 1939: 153). However, later in the text he speaks about the phenomenon of ‘tying up’ (*vrzivanje*), that is, initiating male impotence through magic: “A man is *tied up* by a female magician or a girl that he has abandoned, who is thus taking revenge [...] In Kuckovo (a village near Skopje) people say that even the brides that were not virgins on the day of the wedding cast magic spells on the bride-groom so that he does not notice that they were previously dishonored” (Филиповић 1939: 242). This means that the same women, who just a couple of pages before have walked solemnly in front of the horse that carried their ‘master’, are suddenly capable, even for the slightest offence, to take away a man’s sexual and reproductive power, thus at the same time depriving him of his social status.

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During the same period, the 1930s, such skills, but of the women of the Poreche region (Central Macedonia), have been described in detail by Polish anthropologist Joseph Obremski (Обремски 2001), who focused upon those areas of not-so-hidden power, such as certain female-centered rituals, healing, as well as ‘black’ magic (spells and curses). These acts, especially when targeting males or male domination in general, have strengthened individual positions of women, at the same time generating and sustaining female solidarity through centuries.

The role of women was especially relevant in the frames of traditional medicine. Contrary to the Western biomedical model for interpreting disease, the skill to diagnose and to cure in the frames of traditional culture lies in the intimate sphere of the individual, while the acts themselves take place in one’s home or immediate surroundings. In this private realm, women were the ones responsible for the health of the family: healthcare, especially when it came to children, was one of the many aspects of women’s domestic work. This situation was identical in most of Europe until the 17th century: “Prior to this period, orally transmitted and written systems of

belief and practice often remained entirely within the private sphere, being passed down through generations of women, to be modified in turn by each woman's practical experience" (Billington, Hockey, and Strawbridge 1998: 112). When domestic remedies did not solve the problem, assistance was sought from local healers, again mostly older and experienced women, who possessed a great range of knowledge and skills regarding healing plants, preparation of balms, and especially magical curative procedures. Obrembski registers the domination of women in the area of care-giving, and even proclaims it as their monopoly. This was also reported by Stevan Tanović (Тановић 1927: 76) in his study of the Gevgelija area (in southeast Macedonia), published in 1927:

"The one who takes care of the sick, if he is a man – it is his wife; if it is a child – the mother, if she is a woman – another woman. A man would seldom take care of his sick wife. When the illness starts to become serious relatives are sought out, so that their wives come for a visit and bring "punuda" (some food or other necessities for the sick person – my note)."

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It was only by the end of the 19th and the beginning of 20th century that the treatment of the diseases in Macedonia started to be gradually transferred from the private to the public sphere of contemporary medicine and its institutions, as well as the general care of the sick. The term 'gradually' is used since the trust in the knowledge of folk medicine, based upon life experience, built and transmitted through centuries, could not be replaced with the same level of trust towards contemporary medicine overnight. Moreover, the latter, at least at the beginning, was in a huge part based upon folk wisdom, and it recognized its relevance. People sought medical help from the city professionals only in serious cases, after they would try all other options available in their immediate surroundings.

However, women have not always implemented their skills for the benefit of others. Obrembski reports that white, but especially black magic, is efficient only when it is done by a woman, more precisely an old woman, who is childless, or who can no longer bear children. Women-magicians are described as 'pretentious, evil and jealous', a designation resembling the one stereotypical of a witch. However, the Macedonian word for witch, *veshterka*, in fact contains the adjective *vesht*, meaning skillful, recognizing the ability to do evil as certain knowledge, even a calling. The personage of the witch in Macedonian folk tales is often related to the one of the devil – the latent misogyny of folk culture is intensified when old women are in question. They can be dangerous even solely through speaking, i.e. cursing. The fear of being cursed lies in the supposed magical power of the word, which can induce physical and/or psychological harm, especially when uttered by a woman in an act of rage.

A woman is considered 'nasty' or 'dangerous' if she does not adhere to the dominant models of female behavior, i.e. if she 'does not know her place', meaning the one socially bounded by her home and her family. In a folk song titled 'When I departed, Cveto', an anonymous male poet retells about his departure to a faraway land to earn some money, while his wife, Cveta, tearfully promises him to faithfully wait for him and take care of their children.

But I didn't trust you
 and thus came back promptly –
 Our door Cveto was closed
 our children were sleeping
 while you were at the neighbors'.
 There you were drinking black coffee
 drinking black coffee
 making sweet conversation.
 Do what you wanna do
 but forget about me, Cveto.

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Although in a very discreet fashion, the song alludes to women who are not as loyal and as ready as most of the other women to sacrifice their own cravings (for coffee or for something else) for the sake of the family as prescribed by traditional norms. Such female characters are especially dominant in erotic folk stories. The overwhelming sexual 'appetite' of women is treated in an ironical and sometimes even cynical fashion, but also providing a clear didactic message. In a story titled 'A horny woman who did not leave her husband at peace' (Пенушлиски 1985: 29), a husband is continuously sexually attacked by his insatiable wife, and thus asks for help from his friend. Together, they coin a plot to stop this unwanted trend. They warn the woman that an excess of sex can lead to death, after which she reconsiders her priorities, and stops bothering her husband. "Thus, the wife had sex with her man again, but now *as it should be done*, in a lesser extent, not too much, and not whenever she wanted, and at all times" (idem: 30).

The emphasized sexual desire of women is not only neutrally defined as atypical, but it is also sanctioned as such. On the other hand, male sexual appetite is not criticized, regardless of whether it is directed towards the lawful wife, or another woman. The only example when it becomes a target of parody and *schadenfreude* is when an old man is sexually zealous. Potency is related to youth, and it is related to getting married and having children – once these goals are accomplished, even man's sexuality seems grotesque. On the other hand, the possibility of old women having sexual desires is completely excluded.

The duality of the role of women in traditional culture is also well illustrated through other forms of verbal folklore, such as Macedonian proverbs. 'If you

are a girl stay at home', or 'When a girl is born even the rooftops cry', and 'A drunk woman is like a crazy pig' imply that the destiny of a woman is one of suffering and restrictions, but on the other hand we have proverbs such as 'Women and foxes have the same mother,' or 'Women present themselves to men from the waist down, but not from the waist up', that present them in a completely different light, as sly and manipulative. As with proverbs in general, there is no right or wrong version, their simultaneous existence simply conveys the complexity of the issue. There is also an interesting proverb, contradicting the general preference of male over female children in folk culture – 'Every mother loves her daughter more than her son' (Cepenkov 1980). A possible explanation is that emotionally and practically daughters take better care of their parents compared to their favored, and thus often spoiled, brothers, at least until they (the daughters) get married and thus become a part of a new family, taking care of their husband's parents.

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The new face of 'girl power'

After these pieces of ethnographic evidence of the dual, sometimes blurred and fluid status of women in traditional culture, that do not present them as passive sufferers of their own fate, it is somehow curious why this idea of the gap between their real and their ideal historical position has met such resistance in certain academic circles, and more generally in the local feminist camp.¹ Does the idea that our grand-grandmothers were not so humble threaten our own accomplishments in the fight for women's rights? Wouldn't it be more constructive if, instead of creating a somewhat artificial gap between the past female struggles and the contemporary ones, we promote the idea of continuity, and thus build a bridge between generations? Recent developments in Macedonia related to female agency have shown that such a possibility exists.

The wave of protests in Macedonia, that started in December 2014, aiming to fight political corruption and provide better living conditions, promoted the idea of strong, brave and smart women and girls, who were often, hand in hand, in the first protest rows, delivering public speeches and vocally expressing their dissatisfaction in the media. The Special Prosecution team, that

1 A good overview of the feminist attitudes towards traditional roles of women in Macedonia is presented in "Patriarchy is Guilty for Everything" by Ana Ashtalkovska, published in the Journal of the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, *EthnoAnthropoZoom*, n. 5, 2005, electronic version available at http://www.iea.pmf.ukim.edu.mk/EAZ/EAZ_05/EAZ_2004_PDF/Ashtalkoska_A.na_EAZ_2005_ang.pdf. The author critically examines the overwhelming utilization of the term 'patriarchy', as a universal synonym for discrimination of women, without leaving necessary space for different and sometimes contradicting narratives concerning power and gender in the local cultural context.

has been formed in order to analyze the potential criminal activities of the current political elite, consists of three such strong and courageous women.

However, among activists' actions that paved the way for the mass protests that followed, were the ones of May–June 2013, targeting the proposed changes of the Law on Abortion, that have contributed to the creation of an atmosphere of solidarity and free expression, that culminated with the so called 'Colorful revolution' of 2016, a term stemming from the practice of the protesters to throw paint on the government buildings and monuments from the project Skopje 2014.²

In order to explain the events that led to this particular law-changing initiative and the reactions that followed, one has to take a step back and analyze different statements of Government officials and high church representatives prior to this period. Three events in this sense point to the conclusion that, besides the general conservative ideology promoted by the ruling structures during the whole duration of its mandate (the last ten years), a particular timing has been chosen to emphasize the topics of family values and decreased birth rate, and their connection to the societal role of women.

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One of these events is the speech given in 2012 by now ex-prime minister Gruevski, at a celebration of the Day of VMRO, 23th of October, a state holiday introduced after right-wing VMRO-DPMNE came to power in 2006. At a mass public gathering heavily covered by the media, he commenced his speech noting that it would be 'non-standard for such occasions', however dedicated to an important topic that requires 'mutual mobilization and action'. The challenge i.e. the problem that he addressed was the one of depopulation, or as he has put it, 'the recession of the nation'. "We live in times when families seldom have a second child, not to mention a third or a fourth. We discuss false values, such as same-sex marriages, we talk about so called women's rights, while our country is becoming less and less populated", stated Gruevski during the speech.

Despite the formal division of religion and the state, high church officials have publicly supported such ideological statements of politicians, offering interpretations that are not only based on religious doctrines, but also on their personal views of socio-cultural phenomena. Such was the statement

2 The project is a Government-funded revamp of the Macedonian Capital, that aims to give the city a more impressive and 'historic' look, through construction of monuments, sculptures, facades and new buildings. At the time when it was first announced, back in 2010, the project envisaged the construction of some 40 new objects, estimating a cost of 80 million Euros. Current data provided by Balkan Investigative Report Network claim that the price of the project is 650 million Euros, while the number of objects is around 140. More at: <http://skopje2014.prizma.birn.eu.com/> (last accessed 03.02.2017).

of bishop Petar, a vocal high representative of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, who has interpreted the high divorce rate in Macedonia as a result of female 'capricious' behavior:

"A major part of the couples that got married in church are getting divorced since they do not want to show humility, due to their vanity, since everyone wants to be in command, forgetting that the man is the head of the house, and the women should be submissive, not in the sense that she should not have human rights – she has more rights than men. I am convinced that women will either save or destroy our Macedonian nation and our church, since what is planted in their wombs should be born if we want to survive as a nation."³

48 That this rhetoric served a premeditated purpose became clear in May 2013, when amendments to the Law on Abortion were proposed. The argument for changing the existing Law was that it was outdated, 36 years old, and that it should be adjusted to the new, modern medical procedures. However, the changes were far from 'cosmetic'. Four of the articles significantly differed from the previous Law, threatening the privacy, dignity and health of women. Those were:

- An introduction of a written request for abortion that should be filled-in by the woman, and whose content should be established by the Minister of Health himself.
- An obligatory counseling of women who wish to cancel their pregnancy, which in case it is not provided could result with the doctor being sanctioned with 2000–3500 Euros.
- Introduction of the 3 days 'deliberation period' for making the final decision on abortion.

Activists, women's organizations, female parliamentarians from the oppositional parties, as well as (mostly female) citizens from different generations, have gathered on three occasions in front of the Parliament, at the time when the proposal was discussed, as well as during the final voting. Their arguments were that the Law is not only restrictive, but harmful to women's rights, that instead of making abortion more difficult the main focus should be put on prevention and reproductive health, and that the abortion rate in Macedonia (11 of 1000 women in 2012) is far lower than the average global and European one.

The success of this action, to stop the Law from being adopted, was unfortunately very limited. Only two provisions were changed from the first draft

3 For a collection of media articles containing the statement see: <http://www.time.mk/cluster/9974db7f73/g-petar-zenata-e-vinovna-mazot-e-glava-na- semejstvoto.html>, from 6 May 2013.

– the article that prescribed obligatory counseling of the woman *together* with her partner/husband, and the one that prescribed obligatory informing of the partner/husband on the decision for abortion. The whole action was also handicapped by the fact that the whole procedure was hasty, with the Law being finally adopted just before the Parliament closed for collective summer holiday.

On the positive side, however, this event gave strength to the different initiatives and organizations that participated in the protests, and led towards their unification. The latest follow-up to the above mentioned events happened recently, prior to the Parliamentary elections in Macedonia from December 11th 2016, when ten political parties of the opposition have signed a declaration obliging them to initiate changes on the controversial Law of 2013 once the elections are over. The issue of abortion and women's rights in general has thus connected different political actors from the center and the left, as well as men and women from different generations and ethnic backgrounds. Despite the preliminary disappointment of the direct participants in the protests due to the lack of immediate effects, in retrospect a very important goal was achieved: gender issues have been recognized as one of the most important elements of political struggle, along with fighting nationalism, corruption and nepotism.

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Through combining ethnographic data on the past status of women, and their sometimes secret and hidden, but still vivid strategies for fighting the gender power structure, with the fresh and still ongoing struggles of girls and women from Macedonia, this article tries to show that cross-generational, multi-cultural and other platforms of 'networking' among women bear results. Although the effects of their resistance might not be immediate, when acting together, especially in times of social crisis, in the long run women can push not only gender, but also human boundaries. Just as an avalanche might start with just a snowflake, they can initiate or play an important auxiliary role in creating big political and more general cultural changes, not as the proverb advises – by staying at home – but by inhabiting public spaces, city squares, political arenas and virtual territories with their bodies and minds.

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„Ako si žensko ostani kod kuće“ – etnografsko propitivanje ženskog društvenog angažmana od ruralnog 19. veka do savremenih političkih protesta u Makedoniji

Apstrakt

Istorija Balkana nam se predstavlja, kad su rodni odnosi u pitanju, kao istorija potlačenih žena, potpune patrijarhije i muške dominacije. Ovaj narativ se retko propitivao, te i dalje odjekuje u hodnicima onih disciplina koje su pomogle njegovom uobličavanju i promovisanju. Budući jedna od tih disciplina, etnologija može i treba da igra glavnu ulogu u dekonstrukciji shvatanja položaja žena u tzv. tradicionalnim kulturama, te da uspostavi mogući kontinuitet između prošlih i sadašnjih borbi za ženska prava.

Кључне речи: rodne uloge, borba za moć, žene, protesti, abortus, etnografija, Makedonija.