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Activism without Borders

Jo Anne Howlett
ACTIVISM WITHOUT BORDERS
by Jo Anne Howlett*

Every Wednesday, from 3:30 to 4:30 p.m., several dozen women stand together in silence and in black, in Republic Square, Belgrade, Serbia, as they have every Wednesday since October of 1991. They stand to protest war and violence against women in Yugoslavia and all over the world. Among the signs they hold are those that tell the Serbian government and passersby, "YOU DO NOT SPEAK IN OUR NAME," referring to the policy of Serbian nationalism and the promotion of ethnic cleansing, war-rape and violence against women in the former Yugoslavia.

The Women in Black are part of a network of grass roots women's organizations devoted to ending war and violence against women in Serbia and the former Yugoslavia. Such feminist organizations are a relatively recent phenomenon in Yugoslavia. The first feminist group in Belgrade was started in 1982; in 1990, its members founded the SOS Hotline For Women and Children Victims of Violence. At the time, the women who founded it had no idea that within three years most of their hotline services would be devoted to counseling survivors of war rape and the increased domestic violence that accompanied the growing social militarism. An outgrowth of the SOS Hotline is the Autonomous Women's Center Against Sexual Violence which opened in 1991, largely with the help of international funding that flowed in after global attention focused on the mass rapes that occurred as part of "ethnic cleansing." The Autonomous Women's Center was established to provide counseling, educational workshops, and support groups for survivors of rape and other sexual violence, and for women refugees of war. Additionally, a Women's Law Group was formed which advocates for women referred by the Hotline, and makes efforts for the change of laws which discriminate against women.

The Women In Black express public mourning for victims of all wars by wearing black. With their silence, they defy the empty rhetoric of useless words. For many in Belgrade, their presence in the main square is a rare sign of public resistance to the war in Yugoslavia. The state controlled media fuels the nationalistic feelings that led to the disintegration of this formerly Communist Balkan nation. Their headquarters is a small flat several blocks from Belgrade's main square. In addition to the space the flat provides for the Women in Black, it is also likely to provide a safe haven to a young man seeking to resist the "forced mobilizations" that occur in a country which has never "officially" been at war, or a place to sleep for fellow activists who visit from countries such as Spain, Italy, or less often, the United States. Each week after their public vigil the women meet in the flat first to share a meal, then exchange information, plan strategies for activism, or otherwise update each other on the forms of military and political oppression that are taking place. A woman who has lived in Belgrade for thirty years tells of being harassed at the Hungarian border on what had always been a routine crossing, because her maiden name is Croatian. A young woman's mother, who is a Muslim married to a Serb, has not gone to the doctor for over two years, because she fears the exposure of her Muslim heritage. Sweeps are made of high school graduations, where young men are picked up under the pretense of "enforcing immigration laws," to be "deported" to the area where Serb soldiers are needed for
fighting in Croatia. Twenty-six percent of Yugoslavia's people are of mixed heritage, and in Serbia, mixed ancestry or a Croatian birthplace can place one in a suspect class. In a country obsessed with national purity, one is at risk of being considered "not Serbian enough." As one activist explains, "In Yugoslavia, your last name is more important than your life."

In addition to the weekly demonstrations, the activities of the Women in Black include regular visits to "collective centers," their term for the refugee camps which provide homes to the thousands of families displaced by the war (estimates place the number of refugees due to the war in Yugoslavia at over 5 million people). During their visits, they bring supplies to the families who have left homes, jobs, and all their possessions to escape violence and murder. At the centers, the children, women, and men live in makeshift quarters, where ten or more families may share a single large room. They spend days, one like another, without proper papers for work outside the center, waiting and wondering if they will ever be able to create a life for themselves again. As part of their weekly visits, the Women in Black bring needles and yarn to the refugee women, who knit hats and mittens for the Women in Black to sell back in Belgrade, the proceeds of which are used for the refugee families. The regular visits provide the opportunity to chat, form friendships, talk about better times, and bring a bit of activity and hope to the otherwise endless days of uprooted lives and loss. The formation of friendships is important because it is consistent with the Women in Black's philosophy of "solidarity, not charity" and respects the act of exchange that occurs when groups and individuals reach out to each other as an act of humanitarian solidarity, rather than as one group or individual who has the power to give to another. This is in contrast to many programs of humanitarian aid, where often times ill suited material goods are donated to faceless beneficiaries. Unlike programs based on the idea of solidarity and exchange, such programs deny the humanity of the recipients by reinforcing a power dynamic which is demeaning and dehumanizing.

In the shorthand understanding that the international community has of the situation in Yugoslavia, the tendency is to see Serbia and all Serbian people as aggressors. This perspective denies recognition and funding to the women activists in Belgrade and throughout Yugoslavia, and to their work, which challenges traditional notions of nationalistic ideology, and loyalty to nation-states. These groups are multiethnic, and the women served are Hungarian, Muslim, Croat, Gypsy, Albanian and Serb. Through their activism, the women in these organizations are building an alternative to international politics which defies the destructiveness of traditional notions. It is important that we recognize these women and the work that they do.

*CIRCLES members Martha Ehmann and Jo Anne Howlett spent the summer of 1995 in Belgrade, Serbia working for human rights.*