Engendering Forced Migration, Socio-Political Transition and Mental Health in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo

-analytical report-

Author:
Ljiljana Đajić
Group 484

January 2016, Belgrade, Serbia
CONTENT

INTRODUCTION

RESEARCH SETTING................................................................. 3
  Demographic characteristics of the place...................................... 3
  Socio-economic picture of the village....................................... 3
  Appearance of the village and the households............................ 4

METHODOLOGY........................................................................... 5
  Position of the researcher.......................................................... 6

BIOGRAPHICAL PORTRAITS....................................................... 7

ANALYSES................................................................................. 10
  Identity, integration and social relations within family
  and with locals........................................................................... 10
  Different beliefs as a source of comfort and as a way of
  communication............................................................................ 15
  Gender roles, self-sacrifice, violence and endurance................... 17
  Mother-daughter relations, violence, tensions and expectations...... 21

CONCLUSION............................................................................... 25

REFERENCES............................................................................... 27
Introduction

After 1992, because of the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, hundreds of thousands of refugees came to Serbia (Mandić et al., 2006). For many people, and especially for women, stresses of war were followed by the stresses of leaving home and becoming a refugee. The state of their mental well-being remained a hidden but a serious issue.

The report deals with the analysis of data collected during ethnographic research conducted in the period October 20 to November 10, 2015, in three rural households in a village predominantly populated by refugees. The emphasis is placed on the gender roles of refugee women, examining their responses (i.e. resilience) to everyday stressful situations, and the roles of institutions, direct social networks and socio-political circumstances in the lives of these women. The goal is to analyse the extent to which the experience of forced migration caused by the war in the former Yugoslavia has affected their mental well-being, and to what extent their lives have been affected by the new social circumstances upon arriving to Serbia.

The first big ‘wave’ of refugees came in 1991/92, with the start of war in Croatia and soon after in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The second ‘wave’ followed in 1995, after military operations Flash (in May) and Storm (in August), causing massive refugee movements from Croatian regions populated by local ethnic Serbs, being under UN peacekeeping protection since 1992. After NATO forces moved into Kosovo, in June 1999, a third great ‘wave’ of displacement hit Serbia, with more than 200,000 people leaving the disputed territory of Kosovo and Metohija.

All women at the heart of this study have opted for integration in Serbia and thus have lost their refugee status. Yet as we shall see, conversations with people in the village often touched upon refugee status. The Law on Refugees of the Republic of Serbia (Official Gazette of RS, No. 45/2002) treats refugees as persons in social need, who have the same rights as the citizens of Serbia except rights and obligations related to civil status. However, contrary to international standards, the refugee status is linked with the particular period of displacement and specific ethnic background of refugees. The law does not contain specific standards to affirm the position of women in exile (Pavlov, Volarević, Petronijević, 2006). All persons who had residence and ‘citizenship’ in republics of the former Yugoslav federation and who arrived in Serbia before August 1995 were granted the status of refugees (Mandić et al, 2006). People who arrived from Croatia during the large exodus after Operation Storm in August 1995 or after that were granted the status of ‘expelled persons’. Yet this different label had no formal or significant practical repercussions: expellees had the same rights as those labelled as refugees. On the other hand, persons displaced from Kosovo are recognised (by Serbian authorities and UNHCR) as IDPs in Serbia. They are considered citizens of Serbia, who validate their IDP status through a specific process of temporary residence registration. An official process of deregistration does not exist for IDPs while termination of refugee status happens if: 1) a person has acquired citizenship of the Republic of Serbia and initiated the process of registration of permanent residence, 2) in case of voluntarily (and registered) return to the former Yugoslav republic from which he or she fled, 3) if the person moves to a third
country (through resettlement scheme). The first situation also occurs if a person applies for a housing programme in the integration process, which was the case of the respondents in this study. Such housing projects have been conducted since the late 1990s but have been especially intense during the last decade. In order to respond to the protracted refugee crisis caused by the break-up of former Yugoslavia, the governments of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia (so-called post-Dayton countries) have developed a Regional Housing Programme (RHP) which should provide durable housing solutions to an estimated 27,000 households or 74,000 individuals. Only within the Serbia’s Country Housing Project, 16,780 extremely vulnerable households (or 45,000 individuals) will be assisted on the basis of the projects submitted by municipalities and towns with the highest concentration of refugees. The RHP’s implementation started in spring of 2013 and should be completed in 2017 (Regional Housing Programme, 2013).

Integration (being recognised as one of the three key ‘durable solutions’ to refugee situation) is a life process that takes place from the moment of arrival in the new country. Refugees may remain connected with the country of origin by kinship, friendships and memories, and with the country they now live in, they may relate through a sense of security, newly acquired social relationships, work, family, housing and education.

The ethnographic approach in this study is aimed at a deeper understanding of the refugee women perspective. This required the full involvement of the researcher in their everyday lives in order to see how they cope with their past experiences and current situations.

Research setting

The research was conducted in a village near the small town (and municipality centre) of Ruma, in Srem County, Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, in Serbia.

Demographic characteristics

Before the Yugoslav wars, the village was ethnically mixed and the largest ethnic group were Croats, while the rest of population were Serbs, Hungarians and Yugoslavs. In the early 1990s, supporters and associates of the Serbian Radical Party began a campaign of harassment and intimidation of local Croats, forcing them to leave the area and exchange houses with Serbs from Croatia (Čapo Žmegač, 2002). Yet a large number of Serbs who came to this village was not able to exchange houses and they lived in temporary collective accommodation, with friends, or in rented accommodation.

In a part of the village around the river Sava, there are a number of new houses built by the government, inhabited by refugees – this area is known as the New or Refugee Settlement. The village has both Catholic and Orthodox churches that regularly perform religious services since, besides the majority Orthodox population, there are also Catholics, mostly Hungarians and native Croats, who stayed put. They now make up a much lower percentage of the population. As I learned from the conversations, there are no returnees in the village.
Socio-economic picture of the village

Most people in the village are engaged in agriculture. Serb refugees brought tobacco from Slavonia, and tobacco cultivation is now widespread in this region. Since the village is close to the Belgrade–Zagreb highway, and located along the regional road between Ruma and Šabac, many locals take advantage of the heavy traffic, selling their products successfully in stalls along the road. The village has about 15 grocery shops, a clinic, a pharmacy and a post office.

There is also an elementary school, a football stadium and a renovated sports gym, which is rarely used because of the high rents charged by the community centre. For that reason, young people generally travel to the neighbouring village if, for example, they want to practice a sport, etc.

Refugee-assisting agencies and organisations are still active, at some level, providing support to refugees who have not yet solved their housing problem. In-kind assistance is occasionally provided by the Red Cross in Ruma.

Appearance of the village and the houses

The three families at the heart of this study are located in three different streets in the village and are equally distant from each other, about 3 km. Their yards give the impression of social and lifestyle differences.

The street of Zora Katić (one of the respondents I stayed with) has neatly mown lawns, painted fences, benches under the trees; it is well-lit, with one side of the wide paved road leading to the centre of the village and the other to the banks of the Sava and an archaeological site visited by tourists over the summer season. The house of Zora - a single floor house, spacious, recently renovated (as I learned from Zora) - was purchased 6 years ago from an old woman on the basis of the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration (SCRM) housing programme, as a part the integration process. The house is relatively clean; there is a courtyard with an unfinished fountain, a neat lawn, flowers, a spacious porch. At the bottom of the courtyard, there is a dovecote, and a fenced part for poultry and pigs; and behind the fence there is a meadow, which also belongs to the family and extends all the way to the Sava River, which is 150 m from the house.

The street of Rada Janić is less appealing and rich in detail - narrow, remote, a bit wild; the yard is full of planks, old clothes for work on the fields, scrap iron, branches; along the house there are a couple of roses, concrete full of mud, leaves and walnuts that have fallen from the tree, which creates a great shade over the house; a muddy path and the smell of the stables, dried clover, and wood from the workshop. She and her family live in an old house built in the traditional way, and in this region it is called blatara, since it is walled with clay and mud. They bought it after they had received financial assistance from the Commissariat, under the programme for purchasing farmhouses. The main kitchen in Rada’s house, which is also a dining room, leads to a hallway with a stove and a sofa, which serves as an additional kitchenette. Next to the stove, there is a door to a small room with only a bunker bed. On the wall, there are a lot of patriotic/nationalist symbols: šajkača, čutura, a Serbian
flag, a blanket with a 4S emblem, and the FC Partizan coat of arms. I ask whose room it is and Rada tells me that it belongs to her son Uroš who wants to sleep separately from other household members and does not mind the room being small and chilly. The dining room, where guests are received, leads to a somewhat larger living room with a large table and quite a new sofa, next to which there are shelves with glasses, a TV and a computer (which gave Rada the opportunity to brag that they have had the Internet for a month and shows me a picture of her grandson at the computer desktop). On the living room wall there is an icon with a censer. The living room leads into a spacious, simple bedroom, which is also the brightest of all the rooms in the house.

The house of Marija Stanić is at the exit, i.e. entrance of the village, next to the highway; it is a newer, single floor house, simple, with two entrances. Behind the house, there are utility rooms, a garage for a tractor, a meat shed and a tobacco dryer. The first entrance to the house leads to the part of the house that belongs to Marija’s parents. The entrance leads to a large hallway and a living room, which is at the same time the dining room and has a large table in the centre. On the opposite side of the hallway, there is a small tidy and pleasant kitchen next to which there is a bathroom, new, clean and also tidy. To get to the Marija’s part of the house one must leave the house and enter through another front door. Marija’s living room is new, simple, with not so many details and with walls painted in different colours. Marija told me that it was her idea, representing her spirit, because she is cheerful and optimistic.
Methodology

Ethnographic research was conducted over a period of 21 days, from October 20 to November 10, 2015. I lived with one family and spent long periods of the day with two other families. The research technique was participatory observation, which implied involvement in the everyday life of the families, observation of their social relations and discussion with participants in the form of unstructured interviews. A holistic approach was applied in information gathering – taking into account statements, views and opinions of people making up the close and wider social network of the informants. The data were recorded at the end of the day, and not during observations and conversations. The conversations were often carried out in the course of a common activity, spontaneously, and direct recording was often not possible. Such a way of gathering information, on the one hand, prevents the recording of authentic statements of the research participants and relies on memory and paraphrasing of the researcher, but advantage is gained through the fact that an informal and spontaneous atmosphere of a friendly conversation gives much better possibilities to establish trust between the participants and the researcher.

Position of the researcher

During the entire research, I was welcomed and accepted as a member of the family (much in line with what is often expected as traditional hospitality in countryside households). As a young woman, I was also given tasks and roles that my hosts considered proper for a person of my gender and age. My presence in their households was explained to others in many funny ways, as a long lost cousin who found them through ads in the papers, a future daughter-in-law, a daughter of their very tall brother from Bosnia, a volunteer that helped village women in their daily duties, and so on. Very quickly, I became a person to confide in, for women, for men and their children; many saw me as their ally. However, since they showed me their trust, in many cases, they then also expected me to take sides. I was even explicitly asked: 'Whose side are you on?' That was the greatest challenge for me as a researcher – not to involve myself too deeply in their personal relations, in that sense not to be biased, and yet not to lose their trust. Although all the people I interviewed and lived with knew the purpose of my stay in the village and accordingly agreed to participate in the research, over time it seems that they forgot I was doing my job all the time. They even saw their household as a place where I rested from interviewing, i.e. doing the fieldwork. For them, the research work was something I did outside of their homes, and I was sometimes asked: 'Where are you going to do the fieldwork today?' And they might say: 'Stop by for a chat if you want to take a break from your fieldwork.' This could be the result of my presence in their homes as something new in their daily routines, as a welcome distraction from the unbearable recurring trivialities that everyday life brings. Moreover, judging by their openness to share their painful and traumatic experiences, as well as everyday problems, it seems they needed someone to share all these things with, and they were often thankful for being listened to and claimed they felt much better after our conversations.
## Biographical portraits

Table 1: Basic information about the three key informants and their families

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Country of origin</th>
<th>Education / employment</th>
<th>Household members</th>
<th>Income - occupation</th>
<th>Institutional support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zora Katić</td>
<td>BiH. Lives in Serbia since 1992, has Serbian citizenship.</td>
<td>High school of Economics. Entrepreneur.</td>
<td>Cohabiting partner Pavle Kostić (50), daughter Dana (13), daughter Zaga (17) - recently married and lives with husband and her baby; mother-in-law Mila (83).</td>
<td>Trade, service and craft activities</td>
<td>Financial assistance from SCRM, to purchase a village house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rada Janić</td>
<td>BiH. From the age of 20, lived in Croatia; lives in Serbia since 1995, has Serbian citizenship.</td>
<td>Elementary school. Farmer.</td>
<td>Husband Gavriilo (55), sons Uroš (21), and Ivan (18), daughter Olja (25) who is single mother, and lives in Ruma with her son Milan (3).</td>
<td>Agriculture and raising cattle</td>
<td>Greenhouse, financial assistance for house purchase (SCRM), in-kind assistance from RC in Ruma; state subsidies for milk and cattle.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Zora Katić** is originally from Gradina in Bosnia. She finished high school in Bihać. She was 18 when she came to Serbia. She has been helping the family financially ever since. She has two daughters - Zaga (17) and Dana (13) - and has recently become a grandma – Zaga got married in a neighbouring village. Both daughters are from her first marriage. Since 2006, she has been cohabiting with Pavle Kostić, a member of the domicile population in the village. Pavle’s mother, who has mobility difficulties, lives with them and Zora takes care of her. She has kept her ex-husband’s surname although she is formally and legally divorced. The children are in contact with their father and spend holidays with him. The family runs a service-craft business and has the only shop of this type in the village. Zora inherited this shop from an uncle who had lived in the village before the war, but she transferred it to Pavle as well as one of the three cars that the family owns. (She did not mention the reason she had transferred that property to Pavle’s name, except that now she sometimes thinks she should not have done it.) Zora is also engaged in poultry and pig breeding, but only for the needs of the family.
Her day begins at 6 am; she wakes up first, feeds the dog and the poultry, turns the washing machine on, makes breakfast, wakes Pavle up for coffee, and changes grandma Mila (Pavle’s mother). At 7 am, she goes to work by car. The shop is 1 km away from the house. Zora is in the shop until 3 pm. The workload varies and sometimes she has time to sit and have a cup of coffee and talk with passers-by (Zora seems highly respected in the village and recognised as a capable woman), but more often she is busy with customers. At 3 pm she leaves for home, buys groceries for lunch along the way, checks on her mother-in-law Mila, tidies the house, welcomes guests, mostly neighbours. Due to the nature of their business, very often Zora and Pavle must go to the shop after working hours and then they come home late. (In fact, Pavle is mainly outside, working, and only occasionally replaces Zora in the shop.) When Zora is too busy, her daughter replaces her in the shop. Zora has a close relationship with her children and her grandson, and she likes babysitting him on weekends. Almost every day Zora is engaged in solving problems in her extended family. All that is a burden for her but she seems unable to ignore the problems that others impose on her.

At 9 pm, she or Pavle drives her daughter to training. Almost every night, Zora and Pavle have guests, and then they watch TV until late at night.

Rada Janić is originally from Bosanski Novi, and lived in Dvor in Croatia after she got married. With a three-year-old daughter, as part of the Knin refugee convoy, she fled to Serbia in 1995, where her husband, who had been on the battlefield, joined her. While living in Croatia, she lost two children due to malnutrition, and after arriving to Serbia, three more children died because of improper medical treatment. Rada now lives with her husband and two sons (18, 21). The older daughter is a single mother and a victim of partner violence; for the last two months she lives in Ruma, visiting her parents with her child on weekends. Rada is in charge of the whole estate; her sons help her with the animals.

Her workday begins at 5 am when she lights the stove, prepares breakfast, feeds the cattle and delivers milk to the dairy. Preparing food for the animals requires a lot of energy and time. After that, she visits an old woman in the house next door. The Janić family, namely, has signed a contract with her to ‘always be around and help her’ (Gavrilo helps in the field and Rada with the animals), and in return, she will give them ownership over the house when she passes away. The entire family is already ‘on their feet’ by 7. They have a coffee break at 8 am. Rada packs breakfast for her husband who goes to plough the land they lease. All day Rada is tied to the estate and has no time to socialise with friends or go on home visits. Her sons and husband sometimes visit relatives in Bosnia, but she does not. At 3 pm, she sets lunch, tidies, irons... At six, she milks cows and feeds other animals. She greets her husband and sons returning from ploughing or from the woods at around 7 pm. She then rests with her family in front of the TV until 10 pm.

Marija Stanić1 originates from Slavonia in Croatia. She was forced to flee to Serbia in 1995 with her then 15 days old baby. In Serbia, she gave birth to a son, and she has lived in this

---

1 Since the family of Marija Stanić was, as she told me, very busy at that time, although they had previously agreed to participate in the research, I continuously had troubles reaching them, so, in the outcome, I spent only 5 days with them. Therefore, I collected less data about that family.
village for a couple of years now. Before that, she lived in another village. Before the war, she worked in a factory, and now she is a housewife, but she is open for job offers. She has Croatian citizenship and, as a Croatian (and hence EU) citizen, she worked for a family in Germany, where she was well paid but the working conditions were rigorous. In Serbia, she has also worked for wages in the fields, digging potatoes, picking tobacco, and in a bakery.

Marija lives with her husband, son and daughter (a single mother who has a son of 5), as well as with her mother and father. The family earns a living by cultivating tobacco, and lately they have developed their business and now employ some workers. Much of the day, Marija is busy with housework and babysitting her grandson. Her mother Kata and daughter Stana (24) help her with the housework.
Analysis

Identity, integration and social relations within family and with locals

According to Čapo Žmegač (2002), who conducted an ethnographic study among refugees from Srem in Croatia, identity is not the result of unidirectional influence of society on the individual. Persons, she shows, socialise through identification with the social environment, but also they maintain differences from it. An individual’s identity is negotiated on the tension between maintaining personal coherence and the cultural values and social surroundings in which she or he lives. In this ongoing process, such tensions may be resolved through a variety of identification strategies.

Focusing on these strategies of identification in the new environment, Čapo Žmegač (2002) found that the refugees from Srem in Croatia were glorifying the past and their place of origin, on the whole refusing to fit into the new environment and choosing to stay isolated.

Other studies underscore the complexity of social isolation. Isolation appeared to function as a form of self-protection from the anxiety, intrusive imagery, and painful memories elicited during social interactions with other refugees (Miller et al., 2002). Another research about effects of displacement on mental wellbeing (see Murray, Davidson, Schweitzer, 2008) has shown that post-migration stressors can have a significant impact on settlement outcomes, marking a shift away from the earlier focus on pre-migration trauma. Same authors were referring on other studies that were investigating the importance of demographic variables for predicting refugee outcomes in resettlement. According to their findings, the interaction between person and environment in resettlement cannot be overlooked. Post-migration difficulties may also be a result of the particular refugee’s compatibility with the host culture, and the nature of the resettlement program (Murray, Davidson, Schweitzer, 2008), but in the case of my research place host and origin countries has the similar or mutual traditions, language and culture. Another thing is also crucial for better adjustment of refugees in the village where I did my research: refugees, compared with the domicile population, constitute a numerical majority. In such context, they did not encounter the same volume and the same kind of requirements of new surroundings that would make them feel isolated, or pressure them to reconstruct their identity. Most of them cherished a positive attitude towards their new environment.

Discussing the adjustment of women to the new surroundings, Jansen (2008) refers to feminist studies (see Dench, 1974; Blagojević, 1994), which indicate that women had historically been expected to move into the extended household of their husbands, thereby adjusting to an unfamiliar context from the lowly position of daughter-in-law, overseen by senior women. This, according to Jansen, could explain why women cope better with displacement. And it contrasts strongly with the stereotypical image of displaced women as homemakers mourning the loss of the home they had been intimately tied to. In fact, despite being guardians of links with the place of origin, migrant women are generally more reluctant to return to the home country and the previous lives than men (Jansen, 2008). Based on an identity not rigidly linked to a particular area of origin or a social status, the motivation and intent of women seemed to be economically and socially negotiating within their new
environment (Franz, 2003). While interviewing Bosnian refugees in New York, Franz noticed that ‘women refugees quickly realized the need for personal sacrifice during adaptation to the host society and defined themselves through their family relations, their cultural and religious traditions, and their individual projects of adjustment to the host society’ (as cited in Franz, 2003:97). That also seems to be the case of my respondents. Nonetheless, I did find a similar pattern as identified by Čapo Žmegač amongst some elderly people, for whom the new environment still posed difficulties. Another qualitative research by Hugman, Bartolomei & Pittaway has also shown that older adults may have special concerns related to feeling that they are ‘aging in the wrong place’” (as cited in Murray et al., 2008). Marija’s mother, grandma Kata, for example, remembers with tears in her eyes what she left behind in Slavonia and how difficult it is for her to be in ‘a foreign world.” But the worst, she says, has passed and the important thing is that here children are well. For people like her, positive memories of an old life and hopes for the next generation are ways to cope with the feeling of being uprooted and forced to change their lives. While exploring gendered patterns of coping of refugee men, Jansen (2008:183) showed that ‘these men tended to evoke and celebrate their place of origin with gusto, for what they cherished was not a place that was still there but their place in a time-space context that had been wiped out.’ Moreover, regardless of the fact that all the refugees in the area are Serbs, some refugees from older generations insist on the superiority of people from their background, compared with the refugees from other former Yugoslav republics that also came to this village. As grandfather Obren, a refugee from Slavonia, states:

‘We (Slavonians) taught them how to dry meat and prepare it in an easy way. When they arrived, they didn’t know much. Until then, the Bosnians had used primitive methods of land cultivation. We also taught them to work with tobacco as we had expanded this business in this area. Thanks to us they are what they are today.’

Other than that, most of my informants suggest that differences do not mainly emerge from them being categorised as dođoši [newcomers] in the eyes of the locals. Instead, they point to differences that emerged amongst refugees on an individual level, based on social status, time of arrival in the village, and the place they came from. To some extent, such findings resemble to what Refslund-Sorensen (1997) has found in her study of displacement, where newcomers valued the past as neutral or negative and present as something that symbolised golden days. All respondents in my study talked about the village as their home, although they are connected with their native countries and some still visit friends and family there. On the whole, they are oriented not so much to the past but to the future.

While talking about social relations between refugees and the domicile population, I encountered different perspectives amongst the refugee women I talked to, as a result of previous experiences and attitudes towards different nationalities. Marija, for example, developed friendly relations with members of the Catholic population in the village. Her son Mita was the best man at the wedding of a young man from a Croatian family. There were also Hungarians among the guests at their celebration marking the end of the tobacco season. Yet the experience of another respondent suggests fragility in such friendships and latent tensions with other nationalities. When I ask her about her relationship with the local population, Rada Janić answers she gets along with everyone. Nevertheless, while going through some family photos, I ask her about a smiling couple portrayed with her and her
husband. She says they are local Croats, neighbours from the village, and that this photo was taken during a Catholic Christmas in those neighbours' home. But then, Rada says, one year she did not get the traditional invitation to be their guest for Christmas. She later heard from a common acquaintance that they commented: ‘If we had invited the entire Janić family, we would have had to slaughter more pigs in order to feed all their children.’ Since their children are ‘not insatiable’ - says Rada - she and her husband stopped visiting them and now just occasionally wish them Merry Christmas. They are not such good friends as they used to be. Rada then tells me that there are mixed marriages in the village too, and she considers that Serb women married to Croat men are ‘worse (Croatian) nationalists than their husbands’. She gives the example of her neighbour Borka, with whom she used to drink coffee regularly, but stopped doing so when she heard her speaking badly about Serbs in the context of the past war.

These examples are showing that social networks of the respondents in this research are primarily based on family and kinship ties, or established along ethnic lines, and authors like Korač (2003) are seeing this as the result of interrelated factors, one of which lies in the fact that many of those refugees, like Rada, came from places heavily affected by war, where they were the subjects of victimisation because of their ethnic origin. Thus, this is why they were not prone to establishing ties and relationships of trust across ethnic boundaries, and also because of the issues concerning national identity, which were intrinsically related to the identity politics of war (Korač, 2003). Therefore, even when established, relations between refugee Serbs, like Rada, and their Croat neighbours were difficult to maintain.

Reduction of social distance and the establishment of social networks are important factors of better integration in the host society, but some authors are emphasising the importance of deconstruction of the conventional narratives of displacement (see Refslund-Sorensen, 1997). Discussing the issues of the remaking of home in migration, Jansen and Löfving (2009) are introducing the concept of emplacement, as the opposite to displacement, which is seen as a power to ‘put in place’ but also to invest in places with significance for oneself and for others. Therefore distinction between ‘moving people and non-moving people’ - refugees and locals - ‘is less important than that between capacities and incapacities to work, live, rest and aspire in the place you happen to be located’ (Jansen, Löfving, 2009:13). Such a point of view urges us to be more attentive to social processes under which patterns and differences develop. Conversely, Refslund-Sorensen (1997) differentiates two patterns: one narrative is formed by domicile villagers and another by settlers from the outside, both with significant differences in their conceptualisation of time and space, with different roles and identities of villagers and settlers as well. And both narratives were outcomes of conceptualisation more than of inner experience. This author implies that the locals see the past as the time when they had control and they alone defined the meaning of space, in relation in which they also defined their own identity. And the present is a time when outside forces, like refugees, changed old meanings of space and identity, replacing them with the new ones. Similar to these findings, Serbs of the domicile population in Hrtkovci tend to glorify the village’s past, depicting some of the ‘newcomers’ as regressive, primitive or prone to opportunism. A conversation with Zora’s partner Pavle provides the best illustration. Pavle tells me that 90% of the people living in his street are refugees who arrived during the exchange of houses. He says that many people abused their refugee status and received help they did not need, while many local residents
did not meet the requirements for assistance and were actually in need of it. There were cases of refugees who received greenhouses from the SCRM, as assistance, and immediately sold them to their neighbours. When someone came to monitor the grant, they lied, saying that they did not have enough room in their gardens, so they had to move the greenhouses to their neighbours’ gardens... Pavle also says that many refugees sold their property fraudulently (mentioning a man who deceived many people and because of that a bomb was thrown at his house) or exchanged houses of lower quality in Croatia for better property in the village. He says that the frequent fraud and abuse of refugee status have made the village one of the ‘most corrupt’ and that refugees that were indeed forced to leave their homes fared the worst while those who exchanged houses profited from the war. Some evidence for that, he said, exists in the many beautiful empty houses, I passed by on a daily basis, belonging to people who went abroad, but had been previously given state funds to buy houses in the village.

It is important to note that stories about the abuse of refugee status did not only come from locals but from some refugees as well. Milja, a refugee woman and Rada’s neighbour, says that she could not enter the housing programme because she did not meet the required conditions related to the number of household members. She continues: ‘Three generations in a row have realised the right to housing and firewood without being in a situation where they really needed it, while on the other hand, there are examples of local people who needed firewood but were not entitled to it. Some old people have even been found frozen on the streets.’

She also tells me that she has been a tenant for many years and endured various humiliations, e.g. she was not allowed to use the bathroom because her landlady would not let her. Today she still lives as a tenant, with her mother, and she has applied for the housing programme again. She says she is worried and rather desperate about the future.

The story of this woman, who did not have anyone to rely on in the new country from the very beginning, shows the impact of social surroundings on mental wellbeing, and the difficulties and humiliation that refugee women may go through in the new surroundings. Some authors (Miller et al., 2002) show that upon arriving in the country of permanent resettlement, refugees may find themselves further isolated because of a lack of an established community, thus limiting their opportunities for supportive contact with others who share both their background and their experiences of war and uprooting. ‘Of the various exile-related stressors that have been studied to date, social isolation and its sequelae (e.g., low social support, loneliness) have received the greatest attention, reflecting the salience of isolation as a source of distress among refugees’ (Miller et al., 2002:345).

The network of social relations, for each of the participants in this research, is complex and very important for understanding how they feel and cope with problems. Importantly, upon

---

2 In assessing the level of vulnerability, SCRM takes into account the following in particular: number of household members; social and economic vulnerability; medical status of household members; single parent households; families of persons missing or perished during conflicts in the territory of the former SFRY; elderly households; number of minor children and university students; vulnerability on the grounds of gender-based or family violence.
arrival in the country of exile, all of them had a family member in Serbia who was their support to a greater or lesser extent. While crucial for them to find their bearings, such relationships were not always without tensions. In particular, the inability to secure permanent employment made it impossible for these women refugees to provide a significant monetary contribution to the family they stayed with (Nikolić-Ristanović et al., 1995). This brings out two important facts: firstly, these women left their homes only to find a shelter from the war, hoping they would soon return home; and secondly, the crisis and the economic sanctions imposed on Serbia affected locals too, confronting them with a discrepancy between moral obligations towards refugees and a material or emotional inability to do more for them (Nikolić-Ristanović et al., 1995).

Another instance of such contradictory patterns comes from Marija’s mother, grandma Kata. When reminiscing about the past, she emphasises that ‘a person who owns a house is a happy person’. Arriving from Slavonia, the family initially lived in Mladenovac, in the house of Marija’s aunt, where 13 family members lived in two rooms. They lived there for three months and then the aunt said they had to leave because she could no longer stand so many people in the house since she was accustomed to living alone. Grandma Kata says that the decision was quite sudden. It was Sunday, and she remembers that it was difficult to find a quick solution. Fortunately, they were contacted by a woman grandma Kata had once worked for, as a cook. That woman was very fond of her and she especially travelled from Vienna, where she lived, in order to give them the keys of her empty house in Serbia. They lived in that house for 16 years without paying rent. Eventually, they decided to leave and make something of their own.

In her paper, Fangen (2004) explains the distinct humiliation dynamic, which becomes activated for many refugees in their host society, where the more subtle, but even though hurtful, forms of humiliation could be ‘the day-to-day experiences of some form of ridicule, scorn, contempt, or other degrading treatment at the hands of others’ (Fangen, 2004:4). Such experiences might trigger several feelings, for instance, the feeling of being wiped out, helpless, confused, paralysed, or filled with rage. No matter how many years have passed, the experience remains vivid and fresh in their minds (Klein as cited in Fangen, 2004). As one example of this, Rada recalls that at the time they moved to this village, they first stayed in a house that belonged to Ljilja, her husband’s sister, and that was actually a stable for animals and only recently renovated. The brother-in-law (Ljilja’s husband) gave them money to start with and they spent it well, Rada believes, to care for the children, to buy some cattle, etc. Yet they also spend it on drink. During a visit, Rada remembers, Ljilja and Gavrilo (Rada’s husband and Ljilja’s brother) had a quarrel and Ljilja deliberately spilled rakija (brandy) on the snow. And when Gavrilo started to cry because of that, Ljilja’s husband made an ironic comment: ‘Why are you crying, collect the snow and you’ll have more brandy!’ Rada emphasises that this was a moment of true humiliation for her. Although she was not directly involved in the incident, it made her very aware of the inferior position in which she found herself in relation to Ljilja and his husband (i.e. her sister-in-law and brother-in-law).
Different beliefs as a source of comfort and as a way of communication

In arguing for the important role of identity as part of mental wellbeing, and the influence of family, community, and the society at large, on identity development and mental health and wellbeing, Khanlou and Guruge (2008) applied an ecosystemic approach, which means that it is important to analyse not just connections with family and locals but also the role of religion and tradition in everyday life of refugee women. The multidimensionality of religious life is a complex phenomenon consisting of cognitive, behavioural, emotional, interpersonal and physiological dimensions (Porobić, 2012). Viewing religion in the narrow and static manner, as it is sometimes conceptualised, undercuts our ability to utilise religion as an analytic category. Therefore, religion according to some authors such as Gozdziak and Shandy (2002) refers to a conceptualisation that encompasses both the socio-political and spiritual dimensions of this term. The influence of religion on identity formation may work through parental influence but might also arise from community influence (Oppong, 2013).

Zora declares herself Bosnian and at our first meeting she made me some coffee from Sarajevo. Her daughters, although born in Serbia, also spoke about themselves as Bosnian women. Yet her Serbian national identity is very important to her. In the post-Yugoslav context, this is often tightly related to religion. After her father's death in the war, religion has been something that defines her, giving her identity in relation to others. In other words, for her, to be a Serb means to be Orthodox. And to be Orthodox means to be traditional, to respect customs, etc. So Zora first of all equals religiosity with nationality. However, beyond that, since her brother's death, she says, she ‘believes in everything’ (e.g. that no payment should be made at night).

Different supernatural beliefs were a regular feature in village life during my research, most often revolving around metaphysical, sometimes undefined, powers rather than formal Orthodox dogma. They can also be sometimes disputed by others. For example, when Zora tells me in a very serious tone that people have been finding many golden coins from the time of ancient Rome on the riverbank, but that all the finders end up dead, Pavle replies that this is nonsense. A neighbour found gold, he says, he built an entire estate upon it and he is still alive.

Reference to beliefs, particularly of the dark kind, sometimes appears as a symbolic way of communication and expression of animosity and hostility among women. For example, when I mention I am planning to visit the Janić family, Zora offers me a lift there. But she then warns me to be careful because ‘the woman in that house’ (referring to Rada) practises ‘black magic’ and many people are afraid to have any contact with her. Zora also says that God has punished her for witchcraft by taking her children, because she did not look after them, and she claims the story of how they died of malnutrition is a lie just to get help from the institutions.

Supernatural beliefs are mentioned in the context of conflicts and tensions not just towards women outside the household but in the family as well. The case of Zora’s mother-in-law, Mila, who is entirely dependent on her care, provides an example of how a woman who has a
The animosity is mutual. One day Zora enters the room to make lunch for Mila. Evidently annoyed with that duty, she tells me that Mila was very ‘dangerous’ before her illness, and that, now the time has come for Zora to take care of her mother-in-law, she has accepted that ‘only so that God would not punish her through the children’. Here we see how obedience to traditional gender roles like care giving – which, as we shall explore below, entails structural conflicts in everyday life such as those between mother and daughter-in-law (Blagojević, 1994) – is maintained by fear for the fate of one’s children.

It is important to mention here that religion and spirituality also serve as ways to build a group identity and as a source of emotional and cognitive support (Gozdziak, 2008). In fact, it seems that the stronger their belief, the easier these women accept not just inherited gender roles but the better they cope with losses as well. For example, when Zora says that everything that happens is *sudbina* (destiny), Pavle confronts her by saying that there is no such thing as destiny but that everyone is the architect of his or her own fortune. Zora replies, visibly upset, that her father’s death by a grenade was destiny. Pavle calmly replies that, on that day, her father was free to go home but he voluntarily stayed in the battlefield, so in a way he created a situation in which he had an accident and died. Yet *sudbina* was a frequent topic of conversation with female respondents. When perceived as God’s will, losses and problems seem to become easier to accept. The case of Zora shows that various beliefs can then also feature as a source of resilience. In that sense, spiritual and religious beliefs are associated with ‘turning negative life events into positively valued ones by referring to the involvement of God, or a higher power, and the transcendence of suffering, injustice, fear and other negative sentiments’ (Porobić, 2012:80). In the case of other respondents in this research, their preparations for the celebration of family patron saints, or All Souls’ Day, during which they go to cemeteries in memory of the deceased, clearly show that they perceive these religious traditions as important segment of family life (that is, as a significant indicator of family cohesion). Ultimately, certain basic spiritual needs – hope, meaning, relatedness, forgiveness or acceptance – are particularly important for these refugee women because being a refugee means suffering during wartime, loss of homeland and perhaps family members, and then challenges of living in a new country. However, what I have learned from conversation with these women is that they were ‘far from being incapacitated
by sorrow’ and, as Jansen (2008) pointed out, they have ‘quickly focused on securing socio-economic stability for their households.’ Based upon their own interpretation of the refugee situation and their construction of identity, which manifested through cultural and religious traditions and focuses on the family and children, refugee women in host society realise that they have to act pragmatically (Franz, 2003). More often than men, they are willing and able to take on such challenges (...) and determined to start over again from the bottom of the economic ladder’ (Jansen, 2008:187).

**Gender roles, self-sacrifice, violence and endurance**

A large portion of the research findings relates to gender-based violence and women’s attitude towards the violence they suffer. Further analysis provides an insight into the patriarchal models of enduring violence and self-sacrifice. For this purpose, I will use the concept that Blagojević (1994, 2014) calls ‘self-sacrificing micro-matriarchy’, which is defined as ‘the concentration of women's power at the micro level, through the provision of goods and services for family members’, also emphasising that for women it was even easier to withdraw into privacy, since it was in line with the dominant gender roles. The combination of the strong position of women in the private sphere, on the one hand, and high exploitation of their resources, on the other, is possible due to extremely aggressive patriarchal ideologies that successfully domesticate and pacify women’ (Blagojević Hughson, 2014: 392, 393). Therefore, two different levels could be ‘read’ in the gender code: the level of history, which is the level of the State and Nation, and the level of everyday life – survival, cyclicity, family and networks. ‘Everyday life has remained primarily a female sphere, which means that women are those who form, organise and renew it’ (Blagojević, 1994:475). As Žarana Papić notices in one of her texts, patriarchy is not a straightforward concept and we should not have in mind only one, common version of traditional patriarchy, which implies the absolute dominance of men in the public and private spheres. On the contrary, it is necessary to be sensitive to the numerous manifestations of patriarchy, which can coexist with certain aspects of women’s power (matriarchy), i.e. transgressions of the given gender roles (Zaharijević, Ivanović, Duhaček, 2012). In that sense, although many refugee women began to provide the main family income, as it was indicated in one study of Bosnian refugee women in Australia (Franz, 2003), they did not perceive their successful socioeconomic adaptation to their host environments as a step toward emancipation. Like one of my informants, Zora, they ‘rather emphasized the importance that traditions and family relations held for them, because they perceived themselves as mothers, sisters, and daughters rather than as feminists or female independent-minded professionals’ (Franz, 2003:98).

‘The paradox of everyday life is exactly in the fact that all solutions are blocked to the extent that it becomes increasingly complicated,’ — as the strong external pressure, along with the shaken traditional division of labour, obligations and rights within a family, kept generating family conflicts. ‘The need for individuality and safety were conflicting’ (Blagojević, 1994: 474, 475). These ambiguities may increase and intensify in situations of displacement. In such contexts, self-sacrifice and endurance can give a purpose and meaning to the life of women
but at the same time, it can pose serious challenges to them. Small things, says Blagojević, in their cumulative effect, paradoxically determine the quality of life, and managing trivialities turns into the coping skills and becomes crucial for survival.

The story of Rada is particularly instructive in this way. For her endurance was a patriarchal pattern transferred on her by elder women in her family: ‘Even as a child’, she says, ‘I remember my mother used to say, when a man is drunk – bow your head and be quiet! I was taught that the greatest misfortune for a woman is to leave her husband and because of that, I put up with everything’. Rada originates from a multi-member patriarchal family. She lived in a village in Bosnia with her mother, two sisters and three brothers. Her father died early. Her mother was very strict. She tells me how, on one occasion, her mother hit Rada’s sister with a frying pan full of boiling fat, because she had not seasoned the lunch, as she should have. That sister still bears a scar. Rada says she worked hard and having finished 8th grade she wanted to continue attending school, but her mother did not let her because she had a lot of work with the household chores. The school excursion to Dubrovnik at the end of 8th grade was paid by her brother from Zagreb. She says she travelled in men’s trousers and had no bathing suit, and that she felt ashamed and as she could not fit in because she was poor. The brother wanted her to come to work in a flower shop in Zagreb, but her mother thwarted this idea and forbade her to go.

Rada said she was often beaten for no reason, and when she ran away from the violent environment of her primary family, she entered a new one in marriage. Social conventions, economic dependence, fear of social condemnation, an emphasis on the need to endure suffering and putting one’s own needs into the background, all contributed to her staying in such circumstances. At the age of 17, Rada married Gavrilo, who lived near her home with his brother and sister-in-law, father and mother. They were also very poor. She says that the crucial point for her to decide to get married was when her mother did not let her continue education. She lived in the house of Gavrilo for a year, after which they moved to Croatia. Rada describes that year as terrible. The house was shabby, at the bottom end of the kitchen there was a hole for garbage disposal that also served as a toilet, the windows were never opened because they were very old and could easily come apart. Rada describes the mother-in-law as vulgar; for example, she would urinate standing, sometimes in the middle of a conversation with someone. Her father-in-law, she says, was good and quiet; he was not asked for anything, because ‘he had moved to his wife’s house’. Rada worked hard and often received beatings from Gavrilo. On one occasion, when her brother-in-law ordered her what to do, Gavrilo quarrelled with everyone in the house, and this resulted in a division of the house, with she and Gavrilo in one part and others in another part. Soon they began to communicate with each other, except with her. Gavrilo was often called to their part of the house for coffee, and after each coffee, she ended up ‘black from the beatings’ because they were telling lies about Rada, and, she notes, Gavrilo was horribly jealous.

Writing about domestic violence, Dench has stated that ‘Although there is an undoubted psychological component (jealousy), it plays a small part in explaining physical violence against women. The explanation must be sought in structural terms. […] Although the husband is usually the direct administrator of punishment, the severity of those sanctions
articulates the collective dominance of the agnatic household, rather than simply that of individual husband over his wife’ (Dench, 1974: 254, 255). According to this logic, in order to maintain a multi-member patriarchal household, a male must keep his wife under control, because it is believed that a woman needs to make a nuclear household, i.e. to break the family down to smaller units. Another thing is also noticeable in the description of Rada’s father-in-law. According to patriarchal hierarchy, he should be the head of the household, but instead his wife has the final word. What determines the position of an individual in the micro-sphere, then, does not only depend on the gender affiliation, but on a complex constellation of factors, such as partner/domestic violence, age, cyclicality of family life, economic resources of the households, and other situational factors (Blagojević, 2012). The experience of Rada shows the continuum of violence suffering and endurance, before and after the war, with roots in structural conflicts of patriarchal kinship arrangements. Yet as the literature indicates, women in refugee situations are particularly vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence due to numerous risk factors: disturbed family structures, which can feed into alcoholism of a husband and domestic violence; isolation and lack of social support networks within which women could share their problems; lower educational status than men; unemployment and economic dependence on men (Pavlov et al., 2006). As shown by other studies, domestic violence may be a consequence of frustrations resulting from the refugee experience itself. Sometimes conflicts are the result of the changed social status and financial situation in which the husband or the wife, or both, depend on other people (Nikolić-Ristanović, 2000).

However, the experience of exile, followed by poverty, is often a breaking point for refugee women to confront their husbands (Nikolić-Ristanović et al., 1995). Here it is possible for the interests of children to be deployed to put an end of violence. In this regards, Rada tells me the story of one New Year’s Eve, when things came to a head. They were now living as refugees in Serbia and Rada did not have food for the festive dinner and so she was not in the mood for a celebration. She sent the children to bed while her husband Gavrilo decided to go to the village to buy brandy. Then she remembered her mother’s words – ‘bow your head and be quiet’ – and she decided not to be quiet anymore. She told her husband he should be ashamed because he was not giving a good example for their children, neither food, nor joy, and if he wanted people to point the finger at them, he should indeed continue drinking. Rada says she was afraid he would hit her but she kept talking. Then she went to sleep. Gavrilo remained awake and, as Rada says, he had his last drink that night and never again, not a drop of alcohol, even when they celebrated the birth of their grandson Milan.

In a survey of gender roles in everyday life in Serbia (Blagojević, 2012), the question of who in the family carries out various activities yields by far the largest frequency for the response ‘together’. However, if we ignore the answers ‘together’ in order to better comprehend the gender division of tasks and responsibilities, individual answers show that women are more likely to initiate reconciliation, maintain kinship and friendships, engage much more in ‘sacrificing themselves for the children,’ often taking care of the elderly family members and making decisions on everyday finances. In the given circumstances, the social and cultural construction of gender is still such that women form a sense of responsibility and motivation to take care for others, which can override monetary awards. That is why care, according to
Blagojević, cannot be explained as ‘rational’ behaviour aimed at satisfying ‘individual interest’ (Blagojević, 2012). A story that Zora shared after one intense fight with her partner Pavle illustrates this particularly well:

One day Zora tells me she is angry with herself and she is fed up with Pavle and she cannot wait for the house to be finished so that she can ‘send’ him to live there and manage on his own. (They have recently bought a small property in the neighbouring village and they are finishing the house they have agreed to transfer to Pavle’s daughter.) She is angry with herself for allowing him to behave like a boss, without any respect for her. Because Pavle and her brother did not get on well, she says, she had to communicate with her brother secretly and she did not visit him. Bursting into tears, she says she will never forgive herself that, because her brother died and she saw him only when he was already in a coma. She continues that she was hurt that night when she was in mourning after her brother died, and Pavle was listening to music, increased the volume and respected neither her sadness nor her brother... And then Zora emphasises that every mistake in her life is the result of her compassion for others: out of pity for the wife of her former boyfriend, she did not renew a relationship with him; out of pity, she paid the debts of her half-brother who has brought her nothing but trouble, being sentenced for domestic violence as he threatened his daughter’s boyfriend with a gun, almost losing his house because of unpaid loans, etc. Blagojević Hughson (2014) says that the main care providers, the women like Zora, generally can neither describe their caring practices as related nor can clearly perceive the connection between the caring activities and other dimensions of their own lives (including their position on the labour market, career advancement, fatigue, their own health status, etc.). ‘Caring relates to activities (...) but also to thoughts; it includes the current behaviour and anticipation of the needs of others, both responsibility and obligation, as well as the internal need, arising from love, but also from a sense of duty, which is socially prescribed and expected, and often deeply internalised’ (Blagojević Hughson, 2014: 396).

Zora claims that she is actually a lot like her father and brother because her mother was always able to detach herself emotionally and reject people who would bother her with their problems. Zora says she feels tired and ill... In tears, she spills the contents of her bag in front of me, showing me the medicines she uses for her heart, for headaches, for nerves. In doing this she shows me that she ‘only pretends for the outside world that she is fine, but in fact she is falling apart’. In fact, she says, she endures everything only to guide her youngest daughter onto the right path. Money is not important, Zora adds, she just needs ‘kind words and someone to understand her’ and she does not have that with Pavle. So Zora identifies with the male members of her primary family – father and brother. In some ways, she nurtures a cult of personality as far as they are concerned, now that both are deceased. And even when she talks about her own ‘flaws’ – compassion and faith in people – she identifies with them and thus takes over their role in the family: the role of protector and the one who earns for the family. Frequent and relatively prolonged situations of high conflict of roles, between professional/work roles and care for others (children, the sick, the elderly), have very negative consequences on care providers, as is the case with Zora, the most outstanding being the neglect of their own needs (Blagojević Hughson, 2014).
Note that despite all the differences, ultimately, like Rada, Zora legitimises her endurance and self-sacrifice through worries for her daughter’s future. Also, both women on the whole pretend to be fine. On one occasion, Rada is busy with dinner. It is not a regular dinner, guests are about to arrive and Gavrilo is out to meet them. He is very happy because the guests are his old friends: Gavrilo’s colleague and his sister from Croatia. He has not seen them for twenty years. When Gavrilo enters the front yard accompanied by a man and a woman, we shake hands and Gavrilo jokes: ‘This is my daughter-in-law, when my sons get a bit older!’ They enter the house and, after a while, I hear laughter and loud, cheerful conversation coming from the living room. Rada and Gavrilo reminisce about the days when they got married and I hear Rada saying ‘how happy and beautiful life was back then’. So during the visit of old family friends Rada plays the role of a happy woman, evoking happy memories of the first years of marriage, although she previously pointed out to me that ‘every day in her husband’s family was hell’. As we saw Zora, in turn, plays the role of a competent and strong woman, although discontented with the relationship with her partner, feeling vulnerable and unstable, showing the tranquilisers she uses in an emotional outburst. Therefore, in both cases we find an important difference between what is shown in private and in public – there are family taboos and unspoken rules about what can be articulated, when and where.

This is perhaps even more so in the family of Stanić. Marija and her mother Kata gladly talk about their struggle for better living conditions, and about the hardships of other family members. In contrast, they are reluctant to discuss the experience of their daughter Stana who ‘married’ at a young age and soon returned with her little boy to live with her parents. I noticed, not just in this family, but elsewhere in the village too, that once a girl starts living with a partner, although not legally married, she is considered to be married. This reflects another patriarchal attitude – a girl living with her partner breaks ties with the ‘father’s home’ and becomes an adult. She is then married, becomes a woman, and for the same reason a broken ‘marriage’ is perceived as a loss of honour and something regressive for the entire family. I did not obtain any more information about the story of Stana, or about her reasons to return to her parents. When I asked about this, the long pause and the desire to change the subject of conversation, led me to conclude that Marija was extremely uncomfortable to talk about it. More generally, this family was more reserved towards me, and so my stay in their house did not exceed a few hours a day. Yet in the next section we will explore parent-children, and especially mother-daughter relations, in some more detail.

Mother-daughter relations, violence, tensions and expectations

For all the women in this study, everyday life revolves to a large degree around juggling act of meeting the multiple, sometimes conflicting, expectations of others. The women put the wellbeing of their children ahead of their own so that the children would be able to make the most of opportunities that they themselves did not have (Lenette, Brough, Cox, 2012). In turn, they also have various expectations from their children – and specific ones of their daughters. Those expectations are again shaped by inherited patriarchal patterns of dependence on male-controlled resources, which means that any failure of marriage results in a lack of alternatives
for women (i.e. daughters). As Denich found in her ethnographic study in Serbia several decades ago: ‘Once married, a woman was no longer welcome to return to her natal household, which belonged to her brothers’ (Denich, 1977: 217). While times have changed since then, we can still notice the traces of this pattern today. This could be seen in the story of Olja (25), Rada’s oldest daughter, who now lives with her son Milan (3) in Ruma in the rented flat. The following paragraphs explain her reasons to move from her family house and how her surroundings and her mother in particular responded to that.

A frequent guest in the house of the Janić family, known by everyone in the village as ‘the Godfather’ (a joke on account of his occupation, since he is a gravedigger and sooner or later ‘becomes a godfather to everyone in the village’), enters the kitchen for a cup of coffee. He interrupts the conversation between Rada and her daughter Olja, asking Olja how she plans to cover living expenses in Ruma with such a small salary and without a husband to support her and why she did not at least wait for spring to move from her parents’ house. She says that she made that decision because she ‘could not stand the mental torture and scolding from her mother’ who called her a ‘whore’. Rada, who stands beside her, frying meat for breakfast, calmly turns towards the Godfather and confirms that she called her that, because she was taking care of her grandson, Milan, keeping him company and cooking for him, while Olja spent everything she had earned on clothing and makeup and useless toys for the child. That, she said, is not a way to raise a child. Then, outraged, she continued to repeat: ‘You cannot buy love of a child with toys; that is not the way to raise a child!’

In line with this, I have found that a key issue for my respondents is related to female children and failed marriages. Everyday tensions and quarrels are the result of ‘new conflicts which emerged out of the weakening of traditional roles, on the one hand, and frail but nevertheless increasing individualism, especially of younger generations, on the other’ (Blagojević, 1994:474). The complex relationships and circumstances forcing women to suffer various forms of violence seem to encourage early marriage. Blagojević Hughson (2014) points out that the crisis of everyday life increases tensions, conflicts, and deprivation, in all aspects of parenting. The crisis and the refugee experience, as emphasised by the author, stopped the processes of individualisation, i.e. blocked the shifting from sacrificing for others to meeting own needs.

One day, as little Milan has a temperature, he does not want to eat and so he starts crying. Olja is complaining to me that he has been like that, spiteful, since they moved from the village to Ruma. Rada says that the child should be taken to Mitrovica to see the doctor because he is delicate and has chronic lung problems. This, she points out, is because Olja and his father smoked in front of him when he was a baby, and on one occasion, he even barely survived. Had it not been for her, and Gavrilo, who had taken the child to the hospital, he would have died. Olja says it is not true and refuses to take the child to Mitrovica, and instead goes out to take some antibiotics in the neighbourhood. Rada does not like the idea. When her daughter goes out to get the medicine, Rada takes the opportunity to complain to me that Olja is stubborn and that she could have waited until after winter to move to Ruma or to go there alone to work and leave the child with them until he grows up and becomes stronger. She does
not believe her daughter will succeed, because the working conditions in the company in which she works are rigorous, and she loses a part of the salary every time she is absent from work. Rada recalls that Olja was ‘her daddy's favourite’ and that perhaps this is the reason she is so ‘pig-headed’. She says also that Olja could have applied for a house based on her refugee status and, as a single parent, she would have got it, but she did not because she is thoughtless. Instead, says Rada, she made plans to go to Ruma with her friend-neighbour, who suffered violence from her husband. They were supposed to live together and share expenses, but that girl gave up at the last minute, because her mother-in-law promised to leave her the land and property if she stayed with the child. So Olja was stood up and stuck with the cost of living in Ruma, says Rada, but she still does not give up.

Rada feels obliged to care for her daughter, even when she does not want her help. The care is, as pointed out by Blagojević (1995), stagnant and cyclical, and does not allow for any development (maternal care, for example, often hampers the child’s development). Therefore, the care often blocks those who are the object of care, pushing them into infantile regression, because it gives meaning to one who cares, who therefore wishes for the object of care to remain helpless. According to the author, female children are particularly at risk, because they possess increased sensitivity to care, learning about care from the model of the mother, identifying with the mother. The extent to which the care produces pain and involves work, i.e. energy, time, health consumption, it is real. The suffering of a woman who takes care of her children or husband is so overwhelming and absorbing that it strengthens her helplessness and nurtures her care. The examples of all the respondents and their relationship to the children, and / or extended family, confirm that they do not define ‘themselves by themselves and for themselves but through others and for others’ (Blagojević, 1995:595).

It is also important to point to a research on domestic violence conducted a few years ago (see Nikolić-Ristanović, Petrović, 2010), which demonstrated the connection between the experience of violence in male-female relations in the primary family and the subsequent violence perpetrating, by the male children, i.e. the acceptance of the role of the victim, by female children (transgenerational transmission of violence, or victimisation). The data clearly show that the female children who witnessed violence in male-female relations in their primary families are at risk of becoming victims of that same violence later in their own families. Notes from the interview with Rada’s daughter may serve as a confirmation of such findings:

Later that day, Olja wanted to walk me to the main road on my way back to the house where I was accommodated and she was eager to share her point of view on things. She tells me it is not true that Milan nearly died because she and her husband smoked in the same room and were indifferent to the baby, but because of the doctor’s mistake. After all, she did not have better conditions herself while she was little: she slept on the floor, ate sunflower seeds, because they did not have anything else to eat, and lived in a room without windows where everyone smoked. When they were older, after school, she had to work and help out, while other girls of her age were hanging out and playing. Perhaps because of that, she says, she ran away with a young man at the age of 20. The boy, says Olja, was good, but under the
influence of his mother. This mother-in-law mentally harassed her and because of that, she returned home. Olja says that while she lived with that boy she started taking tranquillisers. She practically lived in a collective, with eight members of the household; she and her husband were working while the rest were unemployed. After the collapse of her first ‘marriage’ (she was never legally married), she met her second husband, who was violent and beat her, and until the last day of pregnancy she worked on the tobacco fields for a wage. Barely saving herself and her child, she returned to ‘her father’s house’, where she was hardly accepted. She felt ashamed.

Olja’s case shows how marriages and partnerships, if unstable, can produce vulnerability of single mothers and their children (Blagojević, 2012). Back with her parents, she tried not to be a burden to anyone and went to work in the tobacco fields. The boss paid her less money than they had agreed and asked for a sexual favour. She refused and left the job. She then worked as a saleswoman in a store. She was actually a dressmaker by profession but always hated that job. Now she is working in a textile company under extremely poor working conditions. She points out that her parents helped financially when she got married and after she and her son came back to live under her parents’ roof. Yet, she also says that Rada often beats her. Rada told me earlier that she had often defended her daughter from her husband’s anger, but Olja never mentions her father in the context of violence. Instead she only refers to her mother, and the resentment she feels toward her is obvious. As the final straw, Olja remembers a situation when she came home tired from work late one evening, eager to hug her son, but then Rada woke the child up with the words ‘here, your whore is back’. Ever since then she has been determined to remain independent from her mother and has been successful so far.

Olja’s move to the city was based on her decision to escape social condemnation because she had been unable to maintain marriage and endure violence, and was thus labelled as a person who, by losing her partner, lost respect and morality. It looks like she has no support and understanding from her mother, who went through a very similar cycle of violence. Rada’s reactions seem like impulsive culminations of tensions and represent her way of releasing the frustrations and coping with stress. Still, like the family of Stana, although a daughter who has returned home with a child is a disgrace for family, Olja’s family accepted her back. Stana is obedient and dependent, because, as stated by Blagojević (1995), where the process of individuation is well underway, the conflicts of roles are more emphasised; and vice versa, where women are not aware of their needs, accepting to be an object or subject of care comes without much inner resistance. Therefore, the situation of Olja is different. Staying in the village, even in a separate house, Olja could gain only apparent independence, and she is not willing to settle for that.

The story of Olja provides sharp insight in the tragic dimensions of the contradictory predicament of being a woman in a patriarchal environment, which validate women by her ability to endure misery and respond to the gendered expectations of the surroundings. It may be that these contradictions are increased by displacement, but this is hard to assess. Olja was exposed to a whole range of difficulties: refugee experience at the young age, living in a
family with problems of violence and alcoholism, lost childhood, poverty, lack of communication and understanding from the family, and strict traditional gender expectations. These amount to a cluster of stressors that affect the mental well-being of this young woman. Here we may ask the following question: if resilience can be understood as the ability to bounce back, in the case of domestic violence, what should a resilient woman actually bounce back to, given life circumstances in which violence has become normalised? Therefore, some authors think of resilience as a process (Lenette et al., 2012), suggesting again that the capacity to endure has to be understood within a micro context of ordinary life, where resilience is something achieved daily and over time rather than consisting of a static inner trait of one’s personality.
Conclusion

Within the refugee context, being resilient is generally evidenced through overcoming poverty and disadvantage, limited opportunities and trauma. Before the post-Yugoslav wars, the village where the research has been conducted was populated by a large Croatian community, and owing to the ‘exchange’ of the population in early 1990s, Serbian families of refugee background now make up the majority of its residents. That fact has affected the integration of the refugees – they perceive the village as their home, although older generations of refugees remain strongly attached to their past lives in their places of origin. Social distance between refugees and locals, whether Serbs or Croats, is not that obvious here but, in some cases at least, connections among them are fragile. Moreover, both refugees and locals denounce the abuse of refugee status by many individuals in order to secure gains for their family even when they were not in a state of need. It suggests weaknesses in the selection process and the lack of field visits, and poor monitoring capacities and inadequate reviews, by the institutions and organisations that provided assistance.

Relatives provided support to their refugee kinship when they arrived in Serbia, but many refugees also felt a sense of humiliation as if they were a burden to the family. However, there are cases where refugees themselves became the source of support for a number of relatives in the host country. A key finding of this research is that both support and stress have been experienced in a deeply gendered way. For some of the respondents, a history of domestic violence before the war culminated after exile. Clearly, in addition to war traumas, losses and poverty, we must consider this as a result of broader inherited patriarchal behaviours of making sacrifices and enduring. In a patriarchal value system, where the woman is ‘behind’ the man, sacrifice serves as a channel for women to preserve dignity, and may provide them with a purpose, for the fact that they have less admittance and status in the public sphere, i.e. they are limited largely to the private, family sphere. This encourages their adherence to the necessity of belonging to a hierarchical kinship group, the imperative to endure subordination and even violence, and gendered expectations of care giving for family members. Disobedience to and exceptions from such patriarchal patterns are generally seen as disgraceful, and women who do not meet family expectations are labelled and pressured. Women’s acts of resistance to certain dimensions of these expectations can be empowering. However, it remains problematic to interpret the cases of Olja (who wants to live separately from her primary family, even as a single mother) or Zora (who is divorced, running her own business, and unwilling to marry again and accept the surname of her new partner) as signs of their emancipation. The contradictions, it seems, remain sharp.

What, then, about well-being and mental health? Whether due to the fact that mental health is still a taboo topic, especially in rural areas, or due to institutional gaps related to psychological support provision (to refugee women and/or in rural areas, or in general), none of the respondents mentioned any psychosocial support programme intended for them or people in their surroundings. Instead, institutional support is recognised only in terms of the
contribution to their material wellbeing – housing programmes, etc. Provision of such programmes, of course, is significant for their mental health as well, because financial security can reduce tensions in interpersonal relationships caused by poverty and deprivation. However, it cannot fulfil substantial needs for psychosocial programmes, especially in the cases of pronounced traumatic experiences. In addition, the fact that respondents in this study were very open to talk about their lives and problems, and the very content of their stories, strongly suggest a need for psychosocial support and a space for women’s voices and needs.
References


