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NIKOLA VUČIĆ

CRITIQUE OF TOXIC MASCULINITY

Nikola Vučić

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FOREWORD TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

AS a student of comparative literature at Sarajevo University, I had an opportunity to attend lectures given by scholars focusing on literature, gender, and culture in the broadest sense. It astounded me how poor my knowledge and understanding were of the society I was about to drift into as an adult. I was completely unaware that literature is not only *belle lettres* in which we become immersed in order to improve our mood; that culture is not innocent at all, but has been shaped over centuries by various ideological and political tendencies; that human rights are breached often without any sanction. The new knowledge that I was encountering gradually opened a door to completely new, more critical and cautious views of the world and society, of the dynamic of interpersonal relationships, and of gender regimes and social hierarchies. My curiosity was aroused, now accompanied by an awareness that the world is not as just as I thought it was and that not everything starts and ends on my doorstep. This led me to new gardens of knowledge filled with entirely different human stories, experiences I had never encountered before, and knowledge of which I had not previously been aware. From the broad spectrum of human rights theory, practice and struggles, I was most captivated by the issue of gender-based violence, which is everywhere around us and which affects many women worldwide at this moment, as you read these lines. But, many men are also victims of violence, either physical or mental, especially those entrapped by the traditional ideology of masculinity. These are among the reasons why I started studying toxic masculinity – a topic that has been

spreading like wildfire over the past decade – first amongst the activists and then in academia. What is the meaning of the phrase 'toxic masculinity'? What does 'masculinity' actually mean? Do we speak about masculinity as a single concept or about masculinities? Is it adopted, learned or acquired? What are its impacts in the world? The literature that I was avidly consulting gave me the answers I was looking for but it also raised further questions. I was, nevertheless, trying to keep my focus on the topic that motivated me to start the research and to turn it into a publication for readers of South Slavic languages. This is because I had the impression that the intellectual content concerning criticism towards traditional and toxic patterns of masculinity was very poor. It is well known that the category of 'true masculinity' in the Balkans is a topic that few men there critically and openly discuss. Due to the COVID19 pandemic, the launch of the publication was an online event during which it became obvious to me that I was on the right track: the feedback was fantastic, both men and women shared their impressions and conveyed congratulations for my engagement in this particular aspect of socially-responsible work. What followed after the book launch was a series of interviews for media in the region; I spoke about 'A Critique of Toxic Masculinity' with twenty media outlets in the Western Balkans and received numerous messages on a daily basis from young men and women who showed an interest in reading the book or who had already read it and wanted to share their impressions. I also received many inquiries and suggestions that I should translate the book into English. I first thought it was not necessary as there are many books on the subject of toxic masculinity already available in English, but after talking to a few international scholars, I realised it would be useful to translate the book's summary and help international readers to gain insight into how the concept of masculinity operates in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and in the Balkans in general. This is very important for several reasons: toxic masculinity in the Balkans is linked to violence, homophobia, nationalism, racism, and radicalism. I strongly

believe that none of these problematic phenomena can be comprehended fully without studying masculinity, and no change could be made without work on the ground. I often engage in talks with young men, trying to help them to free themselves of the burden of imposed patterns of masculinity, so as to be open to their own responsible and peaceful masculinity. While contemplating various forms of masculinity and their impact in society, it was a logical step for me to undertake further research into the history of the topic. If we look back several decades at the dynamic of gender relations, we can observe positive practices in former Yugoslavia. However, we can hardly say it was an ideal framework. Yet, what emerged after the fall of Yugoslavia was frightening. Namely, the wars of the 1990s ushered in a dark era of re-patriarchization and re-traditionalization, which particularly affected women's affairs and the role of women in family, society, and politics. The years of devastating war in former Yugoslavia not only resulted in the deaths of thousands of women and men; in the ruin of cultural and historic heritage and economic collapse, but it made a the ethnonationalist male warrior the embodiment and the metaphor of the subject's value. Such an embodiment would persist for decades as the normative model of manhood and as an image of a man ready to defend his homeland/fatherland. The male warrior (or more precisely, soldierly manhood) thus became the central figure and definition of the essence of men's existence, while women – in accordance with the patriarchal logic – became a submissive factor, narrowed to the reproductive and maternal role, deprived of equal participation in making important family, social and political decisions. As a consequence, the turn towards re-traditionalization and re-patriarchisation not only degraded the role of women in society and established the full domination of *phallus* over *vulva,* but it laid firm foundations for the division of the gender roles of men and women, which made masculinity a unit of measure; heteronormativity as a definition of the regularity of relationships;

and femininity as an entirely marginalised concept, conveying derogatory and unstable associations.

Dear international reader, what you have before you is the result of several years of research during which publications from the fields of human rights, gender studies, and masculinity studies have been consulted. This customised edition in English contains selected chapters and, hopefully, its content will help you gain an insight into gender relations in the Balkans. This publication not only draws on recent studies or engages with challenging theoretical thinking of scholars from all parts of the world; it also demonstrates a positive intention to re-examine the social patterns of the 'masculinity/femininity' binary opposition in a critical manner. I would like to open up a new space for reinvigorated interpretation of male/female roles and relationships. Further, I would like to open the door to an egalitarian approach as a prerequisite for the development of emancipation policies. However, primarily, I wish to deconstruct the concept of manhood and its associated toxic ideological implications.

I hope this English edition will encourage you to affirm a vast array of identities, to release the specificities of your identity that might have been beaten down by the hammer of dogma from which it should be liberated. Do not allow yourself to be trapped inside a normative cage. I am encouraging men and women to rise above the patriarchal, toxic understanding of the meaning of their existence. I am confident that the arguments I am making will loosen the grip of these toxic narratives. In this way, I the publication has the potential to open a door to freedom – and provide an incentive, primarily to young people, to desist from repressing those identities which, under the pressure of religious, ethnonationalist, and mythological concepts, society has branded as unwanted and ill-fitting with its norms. Such narrow cultural frameworks, ideologically regressive and often oppressive,

do not give human beings an opportunity to live their lives fully, to rise above the expectations of patriarchal communities, and to achieve their full potential. The content of the publication you are about to read is based on recent studies of masculinity in the fields of cultural studies, philosophy, sociology, and psychology, which were originally published in a range of foreign languages, predominantly in English. I would like to thank my colleague Lejla Mujagić, who was an active collaborator in the translation of the study. I would particularly like to express my gratitude to Zilka Spahić Šiljak, PhD, Dženana Husremović, PhD, Raewyn Connell, PhD, as well as Peter Hurrelbrink, PhD, who made it possible for the book to be published by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung BiH with the help of its research associate and editor Merima Ejubović, whom I sincerely thank for her support during the work. My heartfelt thanks to all beloved ones, especially Vesna Slišković, for the conversations in which the two of us tried to identify the pressure points of our simplified gender reality.

In your reading of this publication, I wish you all a pleasant, associative, encouraging, and fruitful experience.

INTRODUCTION

MULTIPLE MASCULINITIES

MASCULINITY is defined as a pattern of social behaviour or practice, which is related in a given society to the status of men in gender relations. Feminist writer, theorist, and professor Cynthia Enloe explains masculinity through distinctively gendered ideas about how boys and men should think and behave (Enloe, 2020: 3). Raewyn Connell notes in her *Change among the gatekeepers: men, masculinities, and gender equality in the global arena* (2005) that some authors speak about masculinity as a gender identity or 'male identity'. Studies conducted by historians and sociologists imply that the ways in which masculinity is defined or determined change over time. We can say that masculinity is socially defined i.e. it is not fixed by biology. The research results, according to Connell, show that the patterns of masculinity differ from culture to culture and that there are often multiple patterns of masculinity found within one culture. Many researchers, therefore, use the term 'masculinities' to point at the variety of male identities, which can exist in any context. Examination and critical analyses of the prevalent concept of masculinity, especially in a patriarchal society, can serve as an important strategy to achieve gender equality. Connell, as one of the leading authorities in the study of masculinity, argues that every society has its own account of gender, but not all of them have a concept of 'masculinity'. In modern terms, it is assumed that someone's behaviour is determined by the type of person they are. In other words, explains Connell, an unmasculine person would sooner act peacefully than violently; conciliatorily rather than dominantly; would be relatively uninterested in football, sexual conquest, etc. In an interview I conducted with her, Connell stressed the importance of recognising that

humans are 'social animals' and the most highly socialized species that has ever existed. Besides biological reproduction, our gender arrangements involve economic processes, such as division of labour and levels of income; processes of power, such as law and violence; but they also involve cultural processes, such as identities and mass media images, as well as emotional connections and antagonisms – from falling in love to hating each other.[1] In her *Masculinities (2005: 68),* Connell explains that masculinity does not exist except in contrast with femininity. She argues that cultures, which do not see women and men as bearers of polarised character types, in principle at least, have no concept of masculinity as would be understood by modern European and American cultures. Connell notes that this was, according to historical research, true of European culture prior to the eighteenth century, when women were regarded as different from men, as incomplete or inferior models of the same character (she spoke, by way of example, of attitudes which held that women were deemed to have a poorer faculty for reasoning). However, in the nineteenth century, women and men were not seen as bearers of qualitatively different characters. This conceptualization accompanied the bourgeois ideology of 'separate spheres'. In both instances, our concept of masculinity seems like a product of the near past, a few centuries old at most. Speaking of masculinity in general, we are 'doing gender' in a culturally specific way, explains Connell.

1 Excerpts from the interview with R. Connell, November 2020; The entire interview is in the Appendix of the publication.

WHEN DOES MASCULINITY BECOME TOXIC?

WHEN we say that something is toxic, we instantly feel a strong aversion towards it. The expression is most often used in describing chemical substances. However, using adaptive logic, the term has gained traction in popular media, and academic and conversational discourse, mainly in discussions on behaviours, types of reactions, and communication among people. We often characterise interpersonal relationships – either emotional or partnership – as toxic, when trying to imply that something is dysfunctional and, as such, is damaging, poisonous, and destructive. So, if we are taught that 'real manhood' is a unit of measurement, what is it about masculinity that could be toxic, how come 'real manhood' has suddenly become a subject of social discourse? There is a range of arguments concerning the features of toxic masculinity. However, it is important to note that 'masculinity' and 'man' do not mean the same, i.e., they are not synonyms, and the critique of toxic masculinity should not be seen as a critique of men – a critique of biologically determined humans – because this cannot serve as a starting point for a better understanding of masculinity. A critique of toxic masculinity is a critique of an ideological construct of the social being of men, many would call it a critique of ideological masculinity or, in my opinion, (auto)aggressive masculinity. Such an ideological construct is rooted in traditional logic: *let them know who wears the trousers.* Unfortunately, this outlook is deeply rooted in the Balkan patriarchal stance and is often taken as justification for: men's violent outbursts; for those moments of verbal or physical violence; for aggression

that is perceived, within such a toxic system of values, as a mere 'wrongdoing', to which we are supposed to turn a blind eye. From a wide range of masculinities, some prominent theorists have singled out and named one of them as 'hegemonic'. This will be further discussed in the following pages, because the term 'hegemonic masculinity' has a longer and deeply-rooted tradition in scientific research. Although masculinity is not single or fixed, because it is subject to social and contextual (de)construction, patriarchal authorities are often trying to define it as logical, natural, non-fluid and dominant. Nevertheless, this is not how the world around us works and, in this sense, reality needs to be described, not prescribed. It is particularly detrimental and unfair to prescribe our 'gender reality' in a way that reifies and makes dogmatic any regime of gender hierarchy. Notwithstanding various approaches and interpretations about its alleged (un)fairness, I will seek to justify the use of the term 'toxic masculinity'. Primarily, as I clearly noted at the outset, this is not an unalterable category, i.e., some fixed masculinity; rather, we are dealing with specific social performative practices of masculinity, which leave toxic traces and have toxic consequences.

ETYMOLOGY AND USAGE

TOXIC MASCULINITY

THE usage and etymology of the concept of 'toxic masculinity' has evolved over time. On one hand, it is used as an analytical and terminological tool for the critique of strict adherence to masculinised gender norms, with the aim of overturning those very norms (Karner, 1996). Interestingly, it was also used by groups such as the Mythopoetic men's movement of the 1980s and 1990s (Messner, 1998) in their appeals to reject hypermasculine and warrior masculinity, both seen as detrimental to the spiritual life of communities. (Ferber, 2000, p.36). Instead, these groups advocated a return to an *a priori* 'eternal masculine', which was grounded in care and compassion, as well as 'strength' (both in terms of character and physicality). Instead of seeking transformation, they adopted a strong anti-feminist politics and embraced openly reactionary notions of a return to gendered roles, by promoting a vision of the 'benevolent patriarch' as the family provider, both economic and spiritual (Sam de Boise, 2019). However, understandings and semantic styles related to the concept of toxic masculinity had been in flux until one of the most popular scientific uses of this term emerged. We find this, for instance, in the article by Terry A. Kupers published by *The Journal of Clinical Psychology* in 2005, 'Toxic masculinity as a barrier to mental health treatment in prison'. Kupers explains that toxic masculinity first and foremost poses a psycho-social barrier for the psychotherapy treatment of prisoners, and defines it as **"the constellation of socially regressive male traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia, and wanton violence".** The term is, nevertheless, being used for other purposes and – as explained by Bryant W. Sculos (2017) – it is generally used when speaking about a loosely

interrelated collection of norms, beliefs, and behaviours associated with masculinity that are harmful to women, men, children, and society broadly. If we put aside the discussion about the biologically or socially constructed character of these norms, beliefs and behaviours, which is by no means unimportant, Sculos argues, this early use of the term 'toxic' expresses the harmfulness of the practices and discourses which incorporate this notion of masculinity. Norms, beliefs, and behaviours that are often linked to toxic masculinity, according to Sculos, include: hyper-competitiveness, individualistic self-sufficiency (often to the point of isolation nowadays, but still, and more commonly in the pre-Internet days, in a parochial patriarchal sense of the male role as breadwinner and autocrat of the family), tendency towards or glorification of violence (real or digital, directed at people or any living or non-living things), chauvinism (paternalism towards women), sexism (male superiority), misogyny (hatred of women), rigid conceptions of sexual/gender identity and roles, heteronormativity (belief in the naturalness and superiority of heterosexuality and cisgenderness), entitlement to (sexual) attention from women, (sexual) objectification of women, and the infantilisation of women (treating women as immature and lacking awareness or agency and desiring meekness and "youthful" appearance).

Although this list is by no means exhaustive and not every instance of toxic masculinity includes all of these elements, these are some of the common traits when we study toxic masculinity.

- **HYPER-COMPETITIVENESS** – refers to behaviour that overemphasises the tendency for standing out or competing, as well as the feeling of superiority or uncontrolled intrusiveness.

- **INDIVIDUALISTIC SELF-SUFFICIENCY** – when a person does not even consider the possibility of asking for other opinions

on important topics, for example, refusal to consult workplace colleagues in relation to a business idea. When making important decisions, the nature of individualistic self-sufficiency rules out the idea of exchange of opinions, relying solely on its own judgement and beliefs.

- **CHAUVINISM** – a term that is widely present in the Balkan critical political discourse, which describes the feeling of intolerance towards those who belong to different ethnic groups or nations, while favouring and having no critical attitude towards one's own group. In the context of the war and post-war periods, chauvinism was often exercised as a toxic general attitude towards different nations. When it comes to gender-based relations, the term chauvinism is often accompanied by the prefix 'male', so we frequently hear phrases such as: *that's male chauvinism* or a *typical male chauvinist*. The term 'male chauvinism' is associated with the women liberation movement and it describes the underestimation of women, as well as biases towards natural male superiority.

- **SEXISM** – a term that was borrowed from English and adjusted to local languages. It dominantly refers to stereotypical and discriminatory sex-related attitudes. The sociologist of gender Zilka Spahić Šiljak (2005: 107) notes that our everyday lives "show that women are exposed to sexism, both the aggressive kind, which is filled with tasteless and vulgar words, and the benevolent kind, which is deeply hidden and sophisticated in ways that mean the majority are not conscious of its existence. As much as we try to regulate issues of discrimination and sexism through legislation, it is hard to alter deeply-embedded and learned

cultural patterns of behaviour and the mentality of people, who often take cognitive shortcuts when making judgements about others, or when they wish put someone in their place."

- **MISOGYNY** – in simple terms, misogyny signifies hatred of and intolerance towards women. According to sociologist Allan G. Johnson, "misogyny is a cultural attitude of hatred for females because they are female." Since even Aristotle himself claimed that women exist as a natural deformation of or incomplete men, it is not surprising that history is deeply steeped in misogyny. There are multiple ways in which misogyny is manifested. Sociologists detected the presence of misogynous patterns in various forms – from jokes, pornography and violence – to teaching women to feel contempt for their own bodies.

- **OBJECTIFICATION** – this term is based on the comparison of a woman, or female body, with an object that can or should be obtained, conquered, and possessed. The reduction of a human to the status of an object means depriving it of its fullness as a human being. When sexually objectified, women may be reduced to their sexualised body parts, the destiny of which is to satisfy others' needs and desires (Bartky, 1990). Objectification is present in various forms of relations among sexes: from those among colleagues and acquaintances, through friendships, to those that are seen in the media landscape – for example, advertisements, magazines, etc.

- **INFANTILISATION** – this term describes the disempowerment of an adult who is treated as an immature human being. In a broader discussion on toxic masculinity, we can speak about

> the infantilisation of women as a strategic means of creating and promoting images of immature women whose thoughts are necessarily childish and cannot be taken seriously. The infantilisation of women, as the poet and the literary critic Asja Bakić writes in her text on the silencing of women and women's silence[2], serves a clear purpose: if a woman is made to believe she is childish, throughout her life she will accept to be led by an authority – who will speak on her behalf.

The term 'toxic masculinity' rapidly spread in the Western media during the second decade of the 21st century, particularly in 'digital reality', to provide a description and, potentially, an explanation for men's violence and sexism. Its use and prevalence in the media and popular discourse, attempted to make a distinction between 'toxic' attributes, such as aggression, and so-called 'healthy' masculinity. 'Gillette' even used this distinction in its advertisement against bullying and sexual harassment.[3] The term was recently used in the South-Slavic academic region by the Slovenian researcher Rok Čigon in his diploma paper entitled *Toxic Masculinity at the University of Ljubljana,* which might lead to further new research based on critical studies of masculinity. Čigon also writes about the term 'toxic masculinity' as a concept that, throughout history, particularly modern history, became popular although used in various ways. The author explains that the term **"is not used to demonise men, but to emphasise detrimental effects brought about by some traditional masculine attributes, such as dominance, self-sufficiency, and competitiveness"** (2019: 11). Some

2 See more at http://muf.com.hr/2015/12/03/o-presucivanju/ (published in 2015)

3 Around the same time, the American Psychological Association (APA) published *The Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Boys and Men*, warning that extreme forms of some 'traditional' masculine qualities are associated with aggression, misogyny, and negative health-related outcomes. This will be discussed in the following pages.

of these traits may cause harmful effects, such as violence, promiscuity, or risky and irresponsible social behaviour (Hess, 2016). In psycho-analytical terms, toxic masculinity can be described as aggressive rivalry or dominance demonstrated against others. All these attributes serve to demonstrate the dominance and devaluation of women, and they also reflect homophobia (Hess, 2016). Other authors (Johnson, 2020) use the term toxic masculinity, with reference to sources that confirm its use – such as the *Journal of School Psychology* – which describes the term as "the constellation of socially regressive [masculine] traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia, and wanton violence" (2019).

> This harmful concept of masculinity also places significant importance on 'manliness' based on strength; lack of emotion; self-sufficiency; dominance; sexual virility.
>
> (Johnson, 2020)

HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

IN the interview I had with Raewyn Connell for the purpose of this research on normative masculinity, I wanted to know whether 'hegemonic masculinity' could be regarded as an equivalent to 'toxic masculinity'. The term 'hegemonic masculinity' was introduced by her in 1982 in her critical-theoretical reflection on masculinity. This term was related to the theory of cultural hegemony developed by the Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, which analyses the balance of power among social classes. Connell developed the term while she worked on a research school project, during which she interviewed students, teachers, and parents, and discovered a hierarchy of masculinity within the school structure. Namely, the term 'hegemonic' in 'hegemonic masculinity' refers to a cultural dynamic which helps a social group to aspire to and maintain a leading and dominant status in the social hierarchy.

> In the overall pattern of gender relations, in patriarchal societies where men are generally privileged in terms of authority, power, income and wealth, it is characteristic that one pattern of masculinity is socially central and associated with authority, and provides some legitimacy to the privileges of men. Such a pattern I call "hegemonic". It is not necessarily violent or abusive. Therefore, we cannot regard hegemonic masculinity as equivalent to "toxic masculinity". Authority and privilege may be asserted without direct violence.
>
> (See Appendix, Connell, 2020)

Since the concept of toxic masculinity is "based on practice that permits men's collective dominance over women to continue, it is not surprising that in some contexts, hegemonic masculinity actually does refer to men's engaging in toxic practices including physical violence that stabilise gender dominance in a particular setting. However, violence and other noxious practices are not always the defining characteristics, since hegemony has numerous configurations" (Connell/Messerschmidt, 2005: 840). The concept of hegemonic masculinity was originally formulated along with the concept of hegemonic femininity, with the latter soon being renamed 'emphasised femininity' in order to acknowledge asymmetries between masculinity and femininity in a patriarchal gender order. Such asymmetries were left out of the picture during the development of research about men and masculinities.

> (…) patterns of masculinity are socially defined in contradistinction from some model (whether real or imaginary) of femininity. Perhaps more important, focusing only on the activities of men occludes the practices of women in the construction of gender among men. As is well shown by life-history research, women are central in many of the processes constructing masculinities as mothers; as schoolmates; as girlfriends, sexual partners, and wives; as workers (...) We consider that research on hegemonic masculinity now needs to give much closer attention to the practices of women and to the historical interplay of femininities and masculinities.
>
> (Connell/Messerschmidt, 2005: 848)

Normative definitions among various types of masculinities recognise these differences and offer a standard: masculine is what men ought to be (Connell, 2005: 70). In the semiotic opposition of the masculine and the feminine, i.e. masculinity and femininity, masculinity is an unmarked term,

the place of symbolic authority, where the phallus is the main signifier and femininity symbolically defined by a lack. Miloš Jovanović also notes (2016: 162) credits the term 'hegemonic masculinity' as having been introduced in sociology by this Australian sociologist.

> She placed the stylised ideal types of masculinity and femininity in the gender hierarchy that she constructed, with hegemonic masculinity at the helm of the hierarchy. It dominates without using brutal force, through the cultural dynamics that pervade private life and various social exchanges.

MASCULINITY STUDIES IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

THE crucial studies on masculinity in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Balkans have been carried out by Anne Eckman et al. (2007), Mirna Dabić (2011), Srđan Dušanić (2012), Jozo Blažević, Feđa Bobić, Saša Gavrić and Jasmina Čaušević (2013), Gary Barker and Piotr Pawlak (2014), Srđan Puhalo and Jelena Milinović (2016); in Serbia by Marina Hughson (2017, 2018); and in Croatia by Nataša Bijelić (2011). In this chapter I will present some of the most significant findings from these publications as well as the key problems that dominant forms of masculinity import into society: What is their nature in Bosnia and Herzegovina? What do men think about gender equality? Did the war and post-war nationalist periods contribute to the construction of masculinity?

The 2007[4] study of **dimensions of masculinity and violence,** which used the Participatory Learning and Action (PLA)[5] methodology, resulted in a set of conclusions describing a specific construction of hegemonic masculinity (Connell), which was being experienced by young men[6] in the Balkans. The

4 Study conducted within the Western Balkan initiative for the prevention of gender/sex-based violence.

5 According to Robert Chambers, the PLA method entails a suite of approaches, methods, attitudes and behaviours aimed at enabling and empowering people to share, analyse and enhance their knowledge of life and conditions, and to plan, act, monitor, evaluate and reflect. Participatory methodologies emerged as a product of a long interaction between researchers, scholars, authorities, the non-governmental sector, and local populations. The development of participatory methodologies is linked to the 1970s and to the incentivization of the NGO sector in the third-world countries.

6 According to the study, the data was collected from groups of nine to fifteen young men, from five different towns in BiH, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia. The participants of the five-day PLA study were high-school students aged between 15 and 19. Most of them were urban youth who live in the towns where the study was conducted.

conclusions further addressed how such masculinity was impacting on their relationships with women and how it was shaping gender-based violence. It showed that the young men in most of the Balkan towns (where the study was conducted) emphasised their homes and schools as two social environments which most predominantly influenced the construction of masculinity in the Balkans: "in these places, parents and siblings are firmly connected to their homes, while groups of peers find a strong connection to school, where young men learn about the social rules of behaviour" (2007: 22). A study by Anna Eckman and others showed that young men, in their assessment of an 'ideal man' and in their definition of masculinity, found it crucial not to behave as a woman or be seen as being womanly.[7]

> On several occasions during the course of five-day exercises, the young men were asked about their views of the same sex. About half of them, in each group, expressed negative opinions: from being uncomfortable, to a strong feeling of disgust and violence. A few of those who showed negative reactions said a man could not be both male and homosexual. A few others openly expressed support for the rights of individuals to identify as homosexual, saying, among other things, that "to me this is a regular person, only with a different sexual orientation" (Banja Luka). Most of the young men, among those who expressed support for the same-gender relationships, said they would stay friends with those who would "come out as homosexual."
>
> (2007: 19-20)

7 In different towns the young men were engaged in creating 3D models of typical men in their communities in order to define masculinity. These models contained little reference to social interaction or relationships with women, with the exception of models that depicted penises as a sign of men's readiness to have sexual intercourse at any moment. In Zagreb, when they asked the young men where they would place the girls in relation to models of typical men placed in front of their TV sets, they replied that the girls were "in kitchen" (19).

From this 2007 study, I would like to single out a detail that the young men emphasised. They reported that it would be "very important for their friends to exhibit no signs of femininity or that they 'do not come onto' them. These young men also showed concern about hanging out with someone who is obviously homosexual (who is displaying traits of femininity) as this could lead to them also being perceived as homosexual and they considered it very important to avoid that" (20). Researchers determined, however, that the opinion among some of those young men was in the process of change during the study: "Those who initially expressed a strongly negative reaction about (…) minorities said that, towards the end of this participatory study and activities, they were feeling 'a bit more' tolerant." The young men were asked to describe how their female peers spent time and to name some differences between them. Based on their answers, the study concluded that "in their observations, especially those most frequently cited regarding the 24-hour schedule of a girl, the description of activities and priorities mostly emphasised stereotypical views of a woman… The young men from the five towns uniformly identified two main activities among girls: gossiping and the use of make-up" (25).

> The young men in all five towns also emphasised activities related to stereotypical views of the habits of women concerning gossip and the use of make-up, including phone conversations and spending lengthy periods of time in the bathroom, which they perceive as quintessentially female habits. The habits of spending too much time talking on the phone with their girlfriends they see as a quintessential trait of girls, contrary to boys, who "make phone calls only because they need to do something. Not because they enjoy it." (Banja Luka). The bathroom was also described as a girls' place of somewhat mysterious power, of which the boys said they "don't

> know what they (girls) do there," except that this is the place where girls usually go together and spend a great deal of time there. (ibid)

A 2012 study titled **'Men and gender relations in BiH'** was published by the psychologist Srđan Dušanić. In the study, he outlines his research on key topics in the field of gender relations in BiH. The aim of the study was to contribute to an understanding of the process of socialisation of men in BiH and to seek answers on how the construction of masculinity affects the life and behaviour of men and also of entire families. This comprehensive research was conducted drawing on a representative and random sample of people from 56 municipalities and cities across BiH, and I will now summarize Dušanić's findings. The key findings demonstrate that men are only partly engaged in the process of care for their partner's pregnancy and childbirth. When it comes to attitudes on gender equality among Bosnian men, they are mostly shaped by stereotypes and convictions about the dominant role and position of men, but also display a tendency towards violence against women. The results show that "some 52% of men think a woman's most important roles include housework and taking care of children, while 49% of them believe that men should play a dominant role in making the most important decisions. About 23% of them think that there are situations where women deserve to be physically punished (beaten). Displaying the results through the GEM (Gender-Equitable Men) scale, some 23% of the men falls into the bracket of those with extremely low support for gender equality, 41% are in the bracket that exhibits moderate support, and 36% in the bracket that supports gender equality" (2012: 8-9). The author concludes that a great majority of these men demonstrate the features of hegemonic masculinity:

> Some 73% of them believe that a man should be solid/strong/steady, and 68% are of the opinion that honour should be protected, even if it means the use of force. This indicates that violence is

> likely to be determined by perception of masculinity and by the willingness to preserve and protect men's honour and the image of the strong man. Results concerning sexuality showed that sexuality and potency are strong qualities in the lives of men and could also be important factors in the construction of the self-image of men. This is confirmed by the study results which show that some 45% of men find that sex is more important for men than women, while 50% believe that men are always ready to have sex. 57% of these men exhibited homophobia and over 30% of men think that contraception is solely women's responsibility.
>
> (Dušanić, 2012: 64-65)

In terms of region, when comparing Bosnia and Herzegovina with Croatia, Dušanić observes that "men here are more gender-conservative in all aspects; they are less supportive of gender equality; they are more loyal to hegemonic masculinity and to seeing the world through the prism of gender stereotypes" (2007: 67). The author explains that all available data shows that the stances and beliefs among the surveyed men are traditional and patriarchal, concerning the dominant role of men, which is displayed through gender inequality, homophobia, and to a certain extent, through their support for gender-based violence and sex without protection. This study also indicates that dominant opinion among Bosnian men towards homosexuality is opposed to civilised thought and relations. Namely, more than "80% of those who took part in the survey said they did not support child adoption by homosexual persons and that they would be ashamed if they had a son who was a homosexual. Some 71-75% said homosexuality was not natural and that they felt uncomfortable in the company of homosexual men" (69). Opinions about homosexual marriages are somewhat positive, claims Dušanić, noting that nearly 44% of men who took part in the survey said they would approve of it.

> As for the women participants, their stances towards homosexual persons and their rights were mostly negative. They share similar stances to those of men, although, generally, they are a bit more positive. A lower percentage of women (59.4%) feel uncomfortable in the company of men. Women are slightly more open than men towards homosexual marriages and would feel less embarrassed if their son was homosexual.
>
> (69)

Dušanić also finds that "patriarchal norms, in general, are widely and deeply rooted in BiH, so that other factors become less crucial and important, overshadowed by the effect of such norms" (95). However, relevant data about violence against women in Bosnia and Herzegovina, warns the author, is the most alarming in the entire study, as it shows that "practically every third or fourth woman (…) has been exposed to some sort of physical violence. The data also gives evidence of the most brutal forms of physical violence, such as punching, kicking with feet, etc. Bearing in mind the perceived stigma attached to this problem, this percentage is likely to be higher. Violence against women is a complex issue that is linked to multiple factors, including psychological, social, and contextual. Violence against women can be exacerbated by various habits of life and experiences; by fixed attitudes concerning gender relations; by the environment we live in; by education; as well as by certain personality traits" (ibid: 95). The author, Dr Srđan Dušanić, concludes his study with the observation that it is necessary to work with boys and young men from an early age in order to develop healthy lifestyles with them.

> To engage all relevant institutions, such as those in the education and healthcare sectors, it is necessary constantly to organise as many trainings and campaigns as possible, to affirm prosocial stances and

> behaviours. What needs to be done will require a redefinition of certain laws and improved implementation of positive legislation that is already in place. A general goal should be to create a more just and prosperous society, because, as we see, improvements in social life promote stability, harmony, and better relationships among people. (99)

A study carried out in Republika Srpska by Srđan Puhalo and Jelena Milinović, titled **'Being a man in Republika Srpska: towards solidarity and gender equality'** (2016) shows, among other things, that men's role in marriage, family, and parenthood is influenced by patriarchal beliefs: "i.e. men take over the duties they find 'appropriate for men', and are insufficiently engaged in everyday household chores and care for children, elderly, and other family members" (2016: 108). The authors contend that the private sphere of the family and the household is still perceived as dominantly "women's work" and that, due to the lack of opportunities in the public sphere and on the labour market, this remains the only context wherein men can exercise a part of their patriarchal privileges. Puhalo and Milinović describe that "there is still (…) a strong influence of patriarchal ideology in the lives of men in Republika Srpska and in the shaping of their beliefs, more so amongst the older ones than the young, more so amongst less educated men than those with higher degrees of education, and more so amongst men from rural areas than amongst those who live in urban areas" (107).

Just as Dušanić claims:

> Men mostly find that they are "more powerful" as a group than women, and they believe that "a real man" is one who is strong and fair; a leader; brave and consistent; a pillar and head of the family;

a support to women, family and friends; the one who provides for the family and keeps it safe.

The authors conclude that there are generational shifts perceived in a gradual acceptance of "the employment and economic independence of women, as well as their stronger engagement and influence in the decision-making in households," which are leading to an increase in equality.

In her book **'Women, religion and politics',** author Zilka Spahić Šiljak provides a list of nicknames that illustrate how the division of labour between men and women in households in our society is perceived. We also have to bear in mind that this division of labour reflects the culture of the whole nation, yet these norms also define the status of every individual and prevent behaviour which strays outside of these standard categories. Many men, notes Spahić Šiljak (2007: 206), admitted they would like to help women more often, but that they would prefer not to be seen by neighbours, especially not by friends and family, providing such help: "(…) mothers play a significant role in this phenomenon –not only do they fail to teach their sons to engage in any housework and thus encourage in their sons the skills that would make it easier for themselves and their future daughters-in-law, but they support this division. Mothers often believe their sons should not be doing any housework alongside their wives; partly because their sons did not do any chores when they lived in their parents' home, and partly for the sake of preserving "the authority" owed to the head of family and his dignity." Among the nicknames for men who help women (206) are: henpecked husband, sissy, aunty, errand boy, fag, faggot, etc. Therefore, it is evident from the results of Spahić Šiljak's study that any attempt to get out of the gender straightjacket will lead to cultural punishment, which mirrors

gender surveillance[8]: it serves to discourage, undermine, and delegitimise gender expressions that deviate from normative gender conceptions, which then, in its turn, strengthens gender dichotomy.

The publication **'18+. The book about some different men'** published in 2013 is an important contribution towards an understanding of a range of masculinities, especially those found in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The book was published by the Sarajevo Open Centre and its editors include Jasmina Čaušević, Jozo Blažević, Feđa Bobić, and Saša Gavrić. In the book's introduction, the then executive director Saša Gavrić says that the LGBT+ activists became convinced, throughout their work with local communities, that gay, bisexual and trans* men were discriminated in various ways within the heteronormative society. However, discrimination is also present *within* this community, which is reflected in inter-group confrontations among certain groups of men with prejudices. Gavrić notes (7) that bisexuality is often deemed to be non-existent and is a mere transition phase to homosexuality, while transgender identity, transsexuality and transvestites are sometimes referred to with contempt and ridicule, even in the LGBT+ community.

> Gay, bisexual and trans* men are most frequently visible in BiH in the context of violence and discrimination. The Sarajevo Open Centre wants to make visible the specificities of each of these groups of men, to empower them, and to provide them with opportunities to be able to tell their stories about identities, diversities, acceptance or rejection, stories about their inner worlds, imagination, desires, fears, shame, passion, freedom, caution, courage and, finally, coming

8 Gender surveillance, in its simplest terms, is the act of the enforcement of gender roles, based on an individual's perceived sex (Feliciano, 2015). As pointed out in the American Journal of Men's Health, gender surveillance during childhood and adolescence may have long-lasting effects into adulthood (Nov 29, 2016)

out. This is motivation for the creation of this publication. **'18+. The Book about some different men'** is a continuation of our efforts to document, display, and make the everyday life of the LGBT+ community available to a wider audience. The publication '**More than a Label: On Women who Love Women'**, that we published at the beginning of 2013, presented women's perspective, and now this is its male counterpart.

BE A MAN CLUB

IN the context of debates on masculinity in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is worth mentioning the contribution of the non-governmental organisation, the Association XY, which carried out a study in 2006 in cooperation with CARE Balkans, analysing beliefs, behaviours, and knowledge among young men across Bosnia and Herzegovina, with special focus on identifying the social factors that either impact or have a tendency to impact on the young men's beliefs and behaviour. The study has given the two cooperating organisations an insight into the complex contexts in which the young men were being raised. Risky behaviours, consumption of psychoactive substances, violence, loss of confidence and self-respect, and mental health issues were only some of the consequences of the rigid gender norms to which they were exposed. Interviewed for this publication, Feđa Mehmedović[9] explains that the 2007 study detected a link between gender stereotypes, rigid gender norms, and unhealthy and violent patterns of behaviour. Also, the findings of the study showed that as a result of these norms the youth are more tolerant towards certain sorts of violence, i.e. they find certain forms of violence acceptable; victims do not report violence due to gender norms; and victims are often seen as having provoked the violence to which they were exposed. All this combined, says Mehmedović, catalysed the development of a programme that would confront negative social norms, but would also encourage young people to recognise detrimental norms and

9 The leader of Health and Healthy Lifestyle Programme, responsible for development, planning and implementation of educational programmes in the field of health and healthy lifestyle. He is author and co-author of many educative programmes at Association XY designed for healthcare workers, education staff, parents and psychologists. He has been pa member of Association XY since 2002.

change them: "This is what we call a gender transformative approach. But besides the aforementioned reasons, our personal experiences of growing up are also a strong motivator, with gender stereotypes influencing, in various ways, our success, our desires, and what we are today, but also what some of us could have become. Gender stereotypes are chains that bind people, preventing them from fully realising their potential, hampering them from becoming what they want, from following their dreams, from achieving equality with others." (See the *Appendix* for the full interview)

Mehmedović explains that, in addition to the educational component, i.e. the implementation of this transformative programme in schools, another important aspect of the Association's work is the 'Be a Man' campaign, which is aimed at emphasising the crucial messages of the Young Men Initiative and inspiring these changes within schools and communities.

This campaign is accompanied by substantial educational materials, social media presence, and activities that are designed and carried out by students, who are members of the 'Be a Man' clubs.

"The 'Be a Man' clubs serve as supplements to the educational process based on the Programme Y methodology. Similar to school clubs, youth are engaged in various activities in the clubs, and are provided with an opportunity, in a safe and supportive environment, to practice their skills, positive attitudes, values and behaviours, whilst being encouraged to eliminate risky habits with the support of their peers who are also members of the same club(s). While applying the technique of positive peer pressure, it is easier for young people to adopt healthy lifestyles and reject risky and potentially detrimental habits and beliefs. Within the 'Be a Man' club project, the youth carry out campaigns in schools and local communities, based on their direct involvement in the campaigns' design and implementation. Studies show

that the youth participating in this project and in the campaigns adopt more easily the positive beliefs and values that are promoted, and that the impact on their behaviour is a lot stronger than among those who have not actively taken part in the project". (Mehmedović)

CONCLUSION

THIS publication rejects as unfounded and unscientific the idea that masculinity is one-dimensional and that there is an unachievable ideal that could be embodied only by the few. In line with the studies on which 'A Critique of Toxic Masculinity' draws, it has been established that the dominant social beliefs about masculinity are not grounded on scientific or objective criteria, because different societies perceive masculinity in different ways. Portraying normative masculinity as highly valued and thus reifying it is a trait of patriarchal social functioning and culture. As for Bosnia and Herzegovina – which is under the influence of different mythological concepts and models of gender relations – there is a need constantly to remind the public of healthy methods of critical reconsideration of acquired models of behaviour and challenging identity frameworks in order to change such a culture. In the context of the current systemic failure to implement necessary social reforms, individual contributions to such social reforms are immensely importance. To claim that a change starts from within and from every individual may sound like a trite 'self-help' method. Indeed, when a system shows no capacity or inclination to rise above the patriarchal logic of the world, the only thing that seems purposive to do is to convey a message and advise others to adopt a different understanding of masculinity, femininity, gender relations and roles. That would comprise the unforced instigation of revolutionary change. It is more than revolutionary to unburden ourselves of the weight of patriarchal habits and turn to others, telling them about our own experience of being released, about how we forget – as we carry that weight – how to live without it. The patriarchal system and ideology teach men and women – sometimes in a subtle and

sometimes in a radical way – about masculinity, boyhood, manhood and what it means to be a man. This is a subject of works by J. J. Bola, whose publications might arouse the curiosity of those who wish to dig deeper into this topic. Bola notes that this is, however, only a system – an ideology that humans create and keep alive, so they can also change it, transform it, or root it out. However, such a change needs people who are aware of the problem and are conscientious and passionate enough to be able to do something about it – not only for themselves but also for others.

The specificities of toxic masculinity presented in this publication ultimately need to be rejected because they are socially destructive for both men and women. Therefore, it could be a challenge for men – even now – to release themselves from this dangerous prison of toxic masculinity and to engage with the world with openness, kindness and responsibility.

APPENDIX

RAEWYN CONNELL – INTERVIEW

Let's start from the beginning. How would you define masculinity - as a natural or learned, adopted category?

CONNELL: "Masculinity" is a social term. It means the pattern of actions that a given society associates with the position of men, in the gender arrangements of that society. When we speak of "gender" we are certainly speaking of biological capacities, since the human species reproduces itself through sexuality: hence we speak of males and females. But we are also recognizing that humans are social animals, indeed we are the most social animals that have ever existed! Our gender arrangements involve, as well as biological reproduction, economic processes such as divisions of labour and levels of income; processes of power, such as law and violence; cultural processes such as identities and mass media images; and emotional connections and antagonisms, from falling in love to hating another group. It's not surprising, then, that there are multiple patterns of masculinity; so, I usually talk about "masculinities" in the plural.

Who can claim the right to declare a certain category of masculinity desirable or more valuable than other masculinities?

CONNELL: That is likely to be a matter of common belief within any given culture. Fathers may tell sons to "stand up and be a man". Politicians tell us that soldiers, killed in some military catastrophe a hundred years ago, were models to admire and follow. Teachers and priests may tell boys who to admire and who to despise. The mass media celebrate men who are expert

in combative sports. And so it goes on. These messages may conflict with each other, that is quite common; and most boys experience some distance between their own lives, and the models of manliness they are given. So, there is also some resistance to these messages.

How does your theory of hegemonic masculinity relate to Gramsci's idea of cultural hegemony and capitalism? Does the dominant pattern of masculinity rest on the capitalist system?

CONNELL: I have never advanced a theory of hegemonic masculinity on its own. This is my argument, in brief. In the overall pattern of gender relations, in patriarchal societies where men are generally privileged in terms of authority, power, income and wealth, it is characteristic that one pattern of masculinity is socially central and associated with authority, and provides some legitimacy to the privileges of men. Such a pattern I call "hegemonic". It is not necessarily violent or abusive. Therefore, we cannot regard hegemonic masculinity as equivalent to "toxic masculinity". Authority and privilege may be asserted without direct violence. Other patterns of masculinity exist in the same society; they are, by contrast, marginalized. So, there is often a hierarchy of forms of masculinity, or ways of being a man. Antonio Gramsci's account of hegemony concerned class relations, not gender relations. Gramsci was trying to understand how a highly unequal society, like that of southern Italy a hundred years ago, was stabilized. I borrowed the term 'hegemony' to help understand the parallel problem in gender relations: how patriarchal gender arrangements could gain legitimacy. Part of the explanation, I suggested, lay in the hierarchy of forms of masculinity. That could be true in capitalist societies, but it could also be true under communist regimes, which were also patriarchal, though they claimed not to be, just as capitalist regimes claim to be gender-equal.

When does masculinity become problematic for society and when does it have to be curbed?

CONNELL: In all gender orders that we know, there are forms of masculinity, usually multiple forms. It is not problematic that there should be socially recognized ways for men to conduct their lives. What is problematic is if those recognized ways lead to exploitation, violence, destruction or hatred. In that case, we have reasons to look for other ways of being a man, which are more just, more peaceful, more constructive, and more orientated to human solidarity.

Conservative critics accuse gender theorists and human rights activists and sexual and other minorities of "trampling on masculinity." One of the loudest among them is Jordan Peterson. How tenable are his remarks and, in your opinion, why do young men gather around his ideas?

CONNELL: This kind of complaint has been made by angry men ever since women first claimed equality! The same kind of complaint has been made by the wealthy ever since workers claimed rights for labour. When any oppressed group revolts, it is accused of trampling on culture, on religion, on nature, and on the rights of the privileged. So, there is nothing new in this rhetoric. And there is nothing new in some of the privileged group being enthusiastic towards a media figure who supports their privileges and pretends that the privileged are now the oppressed group.

You wrote about 'patriarchal dividends' in your scientific work. This is an interesting and important phenomenon for the Balkans, therefore for Bosnia and Herzegovina. On what do you base the phrase the 'patriarchal dividend' and is this part of our reality?

CONNELL: In any patriarchal society, where men hold predominant power and authority, we can ask what do men as a group gain from this pattern of gender relations. This is what I mean by "patriarchal dividend". In a simple sense, the dividend is economic: do men generally have higher wages than women, better pensions, more wealth, own more land, etc? But we can look for gains in other areas too. Do men generally have more organizational privileges, have better access to promotions, to political office; do they have more respect in everyday life, do they control religious organizations? Do men generally have more sexual freedom, are they more entitled to pleasures such as drinking, travelling freely where they wish, etc.? And do they have more presence in the mass media; among university professors, do they have more access to scientific knowledge and technology? I think we can ask such questions of all societies!

Is it possible to establish mindful masculinity as a social norm? When I talk to my friends, many disagree and tell me that is a utopian vision of society.

CONNELL: It is important to recognize that there are many possibilities for men's lives beyond the narrow, power-orientated ones. Many men do construct respectful relationships with women, in families and in workplaces. More men today are becoming involved directly in the care of children – I think this is very important. Patterns of masculinity which define care of babies and children as "women's work" are emotionally impoverished, and men who deny themselves this engagement are missing out on wonderful human experiences. It is important to recognize that alternative masculinities are also multiple. We will have a great diversity of men and masculinities in a more equal and just society. So, we need to find ways of respecting contributions to society that take many different forms.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is a country where the majority of the population profess a religious belief (Muslims, Catholics and Orthodox Christian). But there is a paradox that believers choose politicians who are maintaining nationalism as the dominant ideology. How is that possible? In your opinion, what is the relationship between nationalism, religion, and patriarchy?

CONNELL: I don't have the same experience, since I was brought up in a Protestant tradition. But I remember that when I was a child, we were taught to pray for the Queen every week in church. It is familiar that powerful religions, almost all of which are patriarchal, make compromises with the State. Many actually become state religions, enforcing a religious monopoly with fire and sword. But it is also the case that kings and presidents often want the approval of religion, and so try to construct an alliance from their side. Even president Trump, a completely irreligious man, has tried to do that! In theological terms it makes no sense to expect God to favour a given nation in its rivalry with other nations; indeed, it seems to me almost blasphemous. But nationalistic emotions are strong and it's not surprising that religion is often recruited to a nationalist cause.

Speaking of nationalism, let me ask you the following question: Would you say that nationalism is destructive for both women and men? Unfortunately, many women still participate today in spreading nationalist rhetoric around the world, including the Balkans.

CONNELL: The direct costs of nationalism to women can be different from the direct costs to men. Most of the deaths and mutilations in combat are injuries to men. It's very common for women to suffer rape and other forms of abuse in war. Usually, women suffer costs from combat indirectly, in death and injuries to men in their communities, in economic resources directed to

building military power rather than to health, education, housing or nutrition. But women too may have their housing destroyed, their livelihoods lost. Even without combat, nationalism diverts people's attention from the task of constructing better ways of living. Because nationalist movements usually exalt men and treat women as merely the mothers of the next generation of soldiers, they are often retrograde in their policies about women's rights and authority.

Professor Connell, violence is a huge problem in my country. The most common victims of violence are women, with men as the most common perpetrators. This is, unfortunately, a topic that is not discussed as openly in public as in Western countries. What is the key to eliminating violence?

CONNELL: It is important to get a full picture of violence. In some forms of violence, men are more commonly victims than women - including assault, homicide, military conflict, and brawls in public places. In most of these cases men commit the violence too. Women are more commonly victims in domestic violence, rape, and sexual harassment. Again, men are mainly the perpetrators. I believe those patterns are, broadly speaking, connected, but the connections can be complicated. Ending violence is a vast and complex problem. It requires a reduction in economic inequality, for a start. It requires a sustained critique and rejection of models of masculinity that make violence the proof of honour, or bravery, or prestige. It requires negotiation to make family relations work with more tolerance and cooperation. And it requires a shift away from organized violence in the form of armies, police forces and prisons. There is no single "key" to this - but there are many points where we can make practical changes that start to reduce violence.

ADDITIONAL NOTE: Asked if she would agree with the theory that both gender and sex were socially constructed, as suggested by some scholars, Connell said she did not support this idea. *"Sexuality is embodied and includes bodily arousal, pregnancy and other processes that can be called 'biological'. Gender, as a social structure, relates to families and children, reproductive sexuality, and so forth; even in their most abstracted forms, gender relations connect directly and indirectly with biological reproduction. At the same time, biology is affected by social relations, e.g. marriage customs, nutrition, etc. If you need a formula, you can say there is a co-production of the social and the biological, in what we call gender dynamics in history."* Elaborating on the part of the interview where she said that when we speak of 'gender' we are certainly speaking about biological capacities, Connell said she referred to *"a whole terrain that we have in mind when we use gender terms, such as masculinity, femininity, patriarchy, gender division of labour, wife, heterosexual, intersex, father, sisterhood, bachelor, and so on."*

"I meant it in an expansive, not a narrow, sense," she said and added: *"In this passage I am pointing out that it is fallacious to separate "natural", "biological", "bodily" from "social", "cultural" or "learned" as if there were two sharply distinct spheres of reality. In all the cases referred to by the gender terms I have just listed, there is a complex interplay of processes in human life. If we happen to focus for the moment on one kind (for instance, for purposes of research), we must also recognize that in reality this is interacting with other kinds of process. That is why I insist that gendered humans are embodied beings AND social beings, and they are both at the same time."*

FEĐA MEHMEDOVIĆ – INTERVIEW

When did you become involved in the emancipation of young men and girls? What motivated you to start this gender transformative work?

MEHMEDOVIĆ: The Association XY has been working actively since 2001 on the protection and improvement of the health of all citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, with special focus on youth and marginalised groups. It is important to note that the Association XY is a full member of the IPPF EN (The International Planned Parenthood Federation European Network), and we obtained this status by fulfilling international standards and principles, which ensure quality, scope, availability, and the appropriateness of the services that we provide as well as the programmes we are implementing. Why am I saying all this? Our motivation to focus on this gender transformative work is a positive consequence of the analysis we carried out in 2006, which helped us to understand better the impact of social factors on the stances, values and behaviour of young people.

The projects implemented by the Association XY are developed in cooperation with those who are the target groups; i.e., our projects reflect the true needs of those with whom the projects are being undertaken. In cooperation with CARE Balkans, we carried out a study in 2007, analysing the stances, behaviours, and knowledge of young men across Bosnia and Herzegovina, with special focus on identifying the social factors that impact or have a tendency to impact on their stances and behaviour. In this way, the Association XY and CARE gained an insight into the complex circumstances in which

young men grow up. Risky behaviours, use of psychoactive substances, violence, loss of confidence and self-respect, and poor mental health, are only some of the consequences of the rigid norms to which the youth are exposed. This is a crucial motivation both personally for me and for the Association. This study unveiled a link between gender stereotypes, rigid gender norms, and the appearance of unhealthy and violent behaviour patterns. At the same time, the findings have shown that, due to these norms, youth had a greater tolerance for certain types of violence – i.e., they find some types of violence acceptable; victims of violence do not report their experience due to gender norms; victims are often seen as responsible for the violence which they suffer. All this has led us to develop a programme that would confront negative social norms, but would also empower young people to recognise harmful norms and change them. This is what we call a gender transformative approach. But besides the aforementioned reasons, our personal experiences of growing up are also a strong motivator, with gender stereotypes influencing, in various ways, our success, our desires, and what we are today, but also what some of us could have become. Gender stereotypes are chains that bind people, preventing them from fully realising their potential, hampering them from becoming what they want, from following their dreams, from achieving equality with others. We live in a country where every second woman experiences violence after the age of 15, in a country where a woman feels safer in the street than in her own home – given the fact that women are mostly exposed to violence from their partners and that the sphere of domestic relations is actually the most frequent site of violence. We live in a country where everyone keeps silent about violence, a country where people see violence as an individual, personal matter of those involved in it. And most importantly, we live in a country where a significant majority of the population blame the victim for the violence s/he has suffered and where the majority see reporting violence as something inappropriate, something that defies the social expectations

that are imposed on women – i.e., to put up with violence because their role is to preserve those social expectations, no matter what form they take. This has led our organisation to immerse itself in developing the programme that we have been implementing for the past 14 years, which addresses all the previously mentioned issues of violence in our country. And the strongest motivating factor may also be the most personal and the most selfish – that is, the society we want for our children and for future generations. Not this world, but a better and more equal one.

How would you explain the 'Be a Man' club? How did the idea emerge, how did it spread and did it meet resistance or acceptance? Who were the main actors of this project and who implemented it in the field?

MEHMEDOVIĆ: In addition to its educational component i.e., the implementation of the gender transformative programme in schools, another important aspect of the YMI (Young Men Initiative) programme is the 'Be a Man' campaign, which aims at emphasising the crucial messages of the Young Men Initiative and promotes the changes for which it is advocating within schools and communities. This campaign is accompanied by substantial educational materials, social media presence, and activities that are designed and carried out by students, who are members of the 'Be a Man' clubs. The 'Be a Man' clubs serve as supplements to the educational process based on the Programme Y methodology. Similar to school clubs, youth are engaged in various activities in the clubs, and are provided with an opportunity, in a safe and supportive environment, to practice their skills, positive attitudes, values and behaviours, whilst being encouraged to eliminate risky habits with the support of their peers who are also members of the same club(s). While applying the technique of positive peer pressure, it is easier for young people to adopt healthy lifestyles and reject risky and potentially detrimental

habits and beliefs. Within the 'Be a Man' club project, the youth carry out campaigns in schools and local communities, based on their direct involvement in the campaigns' design and implementation. Studies show that the youth participating in this project and in the campaigns adopt more easily the positive beliefs and values that are promoted, and that the impact on their behaviour is a lot stronger than among those who have not actively taken part in the project. The 'React as a Human' campaign affirms the role of youth in preventing the violence they witness, and the aforementioned approach is identified as a core aspect of the prevention of violence. This campaign also affirms the role of the youth in discouraging their peers from risky behaviours, which is an important feature of positive peer pressure in the preservation of health of and care for youth. Another important campaign called 'Are you OK' promotes pro-social behaviour amongst youth with the aim of protecting the mental health of their peers. Studies show that seeking help and support is often absent because it is perceived as a sign of weakness. This campaign mobilises youth in schools to approach their peers and offer them support in situations when they need it, and there is a special focus on encouraging youth to seek the help and support of pedagogues and other authorities within the education system.

The 'Be a Man' clubs were designed to offer youth a safe and affirmative space, where they adopt positive beliefs and values, led by experienced members, teachers and facilitators, and where they form healthy friendly relationships, which is an important social and developmental resource they have at their disposal in the club. The 'Be a Man' clubs, regardless of the title, were designed to provide equal opportunities both to boys and girls. Over 600,000 young people have been reached with the campaigns and activities within the 'Be a Man' clubs, in 120 local communities throughout the Balkans.

Where can we see the consequences of 'toxic masculinity' and in what circumstances?

MEHMEDOVIĆ: This is a very complex question, given the fact that toxic masculinities are the norm and norms are generated by people through their stances, habits, beliefs, and behaviours. Simply put, the consequences are present both in individual and social circumstances. The consequences do not only affect men; reciprocally, they also affect girls and women. This applies both to youth and the elderly.

For years, we have been making assumptions about young men's health and about how they grow up. We often assume that they are doing fine and have fewer needs than those of girls. On some occasions, we tend to think it is hard to work with them, that they are aggressive and are careless of their health. We often see them as perpetrators of violence against other young men, against themselves, or against women – without taking a moment to understand the ways in which society tacitly accepts such violence committed by young men. New studies and perspectives require better understanding of the way in which young men are socialised, what they need in terms of healthy development, and how health educators and others can be engaged in more adequate and efficient ways. Although many initiatives through history have focused on addressing these inequalities by empowering women, there is an increasing consensus today on the need to engage men of all ages in the promotion of gender equality and in the improvement of the health and well-being of women. The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in 1994 in Cairo and the 4th Conference on Women held in 1995 in Beijing provided the grounds to involve men in enhancing the status of women and girls. For instance, the ICDP action programme set out to promote gender equality in all spheres of life, including domestic life and life within communities, and to encourage

and enable men to take responsibility for their sexual and reproductive behaviour and their social and family roles. Since then, many UN agencies, governments and civil society organisations have affirmed the necessity to work with boys and men. In 1998, the World Health Organisation decided to pay special attention to the needs of male minors, recognising that they were often neglected in health programmes for minors. In 2000 and 2001, the UNAIDS devoted the World AIDS Campaign to men and boys, coming to conclusion that the behaviour of many men is risky to both themselves and their partners, and that men must be engaged in far better ways as partners in HIV and AIDS prevention, as well as in providing support to people living with AIDS. Soon afterwards, in 2004, governments worldwide expressed their commitment, during the 48th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), to implement a series of activities that would involve men and boys in the efforts to achieve gender equality.

In addition to the increasing recognition that the work with men and boys in combatting gender equality can have a positive effect on the health and well-being of girls and women, there is also a better understanding of how rigid ideals of gender and masculinity can lead to vulnerability in men and boys. This is evident in a higher mortality rate in traffic accidents among men and boys, higher suicidal rates and rates of violence, as well as increased use of alcohol and harmful substances compared to similar rates among women and girls. So, for the benefit of both boys and girls, it is important for these programmes also to include a gender perspective in their work with youth. But, what does it mean to apply the 'gender perspective'? Gender – as opposed to sex – refers to the multiple ways in which men and women are socialised to think, behave, and dress; this is the way in which these roles, often stereotypical, are learnt, strengthened, and internalised. Sometimes we assume that the way in which boys and men behave is 'natural' – that 'boys will always be boys'. But, the roots of behaviour of many boys and men,

including whether they talk to their partners about condom use, whether they take care of their children, or are violent with their partners, can all be found in the way in which the boys have been raised. It is not easy to change the ways of raising and perceiving boys. However, there is potential to transform gender relations, and to reduce numerous health and social vulnerabilities that both men and women are facing. There are often one or multiple versions of masculinities in societies, or the ways in which someone behaves as a man, which are considered as 'real' or dominant ways as to how a man is supposed to behave. This is normally called hegemonic masculinity. In most environments, this hegemonic masculinity is idealised and has become a way to subdue or marginalise men who are different. When we look at different contexts, we actually often observe many similarities in how masculinity is defined and in how men are expected to behave. For instance, many cultures support the idea that being a 'real man' means to be a food-provider and protector of his family and community. Boys are often raised to be aggressive and prone to competition – the skills that are considered as useful for their role as food-provider and protector. They are also often raised to believe in firm codes of 'honour', which oblige them to compete, or use violence to prove themselves as 'real men'. Boys who show interest in housework, such as cooking, cleaning or care for younger siblings, or those who express their emotions, who have no sexual experience, can be mocked by their families or peers as 'sissies' or be labelled as not 'real men'. As for their behaviour in terms of health advice, boys are often taught to rely on themselves only, not to take care of their health and not to seek help when they are under stress. But, the ability to talk about one's problems and ask for support is a preventive practice against the misuse of substances, against unprotected sex and, against participating in violence. This could partly explain why there is an increasing probability that boys, rather than girls, would be predominantly involved in violence and misuse of substances. Indeed, there are many studies that confirm that the ways in

which boys are raised directly influences their health. For instance, a study that was carried out at the national level in the USA, among adolescent men aged between 15 and 19, revealed that those young men who had sexist or traditional views of masculinity were more prone to misuse of substances; were involved in violence and delinquency; and were practising unprotected sex, rather than those adolescent men with more flexible views about what 'real men' can do. Similar results were discovered in the studies that were carried out among young men in different contexts, including Brazil, India, South Africa, and the Western Balkans.

Is it possible to get away from dominant, adopted patterns of masculinity in Bosnia and Herzegovina?

MEHMEDOVIĆ: It is possible. This has been shown in the evaluation of the interventions and approaches that we have carried out in cooperation with CARE Balkans and other partners. Not only are we successful in achieving a higher degree of gender equality, which independent evaluators have confirmed on many occasions, but we have also had significant success in mobilising youth to be role models of change, to change trends, to spread positive messages and values among their peers. However, one should not be naive; to achieve a wider scope of social changes – it is impossible to get there overnight or indeed in the next several years. This is a complex matter that requires a systemic and comprehensive response from various institutions, and partnership between governmental and non-governmental sectors is crucial. We are well placed to develop all our activities in coordination with key institutions at cantonal and entity levels of authority. Why does it matter? Gender transformative programmes are not based on trainings; they pay particular attention to changes at the level of local communities and the enhancement of capacities of local institutions that should carry out those changes. In this way, we implement contextualised programmes

that are specific for each local community. At the same time, we enhance the capacities of local NGOs and improve their cooperation with other sectors so we can enable each local community to have a self-sustainable, comprehensive and scientifically grounded violence prevention programme, through transformation of rigid and potentially detrimental norms that exist in any given local community.

What is the role of schools, the media, and religious institutions in redefining masculinity?

MEHMEDOVIĆ: Everyone plays a role in redefining masculinity, but unfortunately not everyone is aware of their own importance or potential to contribute to that process. This is why it is of the utmost importance to work on the enhancement of institutional awareness about the issue of violence, about the consequences of passive attitudes towards violence, and about available programmes which can address this problem appropriately. We are all responsible in the prevention of violence, whether we are an institution or an individual. But, some institutions, even if they demonstrate readiness to do so, often have low or no capacities to deal with the issue of violence in a scientifically-informed and appropriate way. Therefore, we are focused on increasing the individual as well as the institutional awareness about violence prevention and on reaching a higher degree of gender equality. Schools play a crucial role as they have the possibility to have an impact on the stances and behaviour of students within the curriculum, by introducing educational programmes that are based on the development of life skills which aim to develop new generations who will not only confront harmful forms of masculinity, but will also change them. Educational institutions play a crucial role in that process but other important institutions, such as health ministries, gender equality agencies, gender centres at entity level, social welfare centres, mental health centres, as well as NGOs should not

be overlooked in this process. The media has the potential to inform, to mobilise the public, and to influence stances of citizens about any topic, including violence. The media is a crucial ally because it can make an impact on public perception and contribute to the development of critical opinion about the part that gender stereotypes play in the emergence of violence and of unhealthy life habits. But, instead of sensationalist articles, it is important for the media to send messages that contribute to creating zero tolerance towards violence; to demystifying masculinities and gender identities; and to emphasising the harmfulness of blind adherence to potentially detrimental norms. The media can encourage youth to end the cycle of violence, to stress that victims are never to blame and that violence is the gravest breach of human rights. The media is an essential ally in the prevention and response to violence. Religious authorities should not be underestimated either. Indeed, religious leaders and institutions have the power to influence the stances and behaviours of their congregations. We are currently working with representatives of the three leading religious communities on a framework for violence prevention and for the transformation of harmful social norms through religious classes and gatherings. The readiness of religious institutions to be active participants in violence prevention programmes proves their commitment to building a better society than the one in which we currently live.

This leads us to the conclusion that partnership between us, solidarity and mutual respect are essential principles to build a strategic and comprehensive response to violence and to work on violence prevention.

BOOK REVIEW

IS IT ABOUT TESTOSTERONE OR US?

ZILKA SPAHIĆ ŠILJAK, PHD

Whenever violence happens, either in a family or in public, we hear explanations that we should blame hormones – i.e., testosterone – for aggression. Scientific literature and studies about gender-based violence show that the great majority of perpetrators are men, while women and children are victims of violence. Although the studies find that the causes of violence exclude lack of education, poverty, use of alcohol, PTSD and hormones, violence continues to be justified by drawing on these categories. All these may contribute to violence, but the main causes are institutionalised patriarchal gender regimes, gender binary socialisation and culture, within which violence is encouraged, rewarded, and justified. When men and women socialise in such a culture, we see attempts to justify violence, instead of insisting on personal responsibility and the responsibility of institutions and society, which anyway use double standards ethically when judging and sanctioning the behaviour of women and men. In most patriarchal cultures, men's violence is accepted and justified on the grounds of a traditional understanding of anthropology and hormones. A number of studies in the fields of medicine, psychology, anthropology, sociology and other disciplines throughout the 20th century and at the beginning of the new millennium, found that although men and women have a different set of hormones, owing to their differing reproductive functions, both testosterone and oestrogen are important hormones for both sexes. Testosterone plays an

important role in ovulation and in preparing the follicles for conception. Likewise, oestrogen is important for certain functions of the male body. Hormones impact the lives of women and men, but that does not mean that hormones determine who we are as human beings, how we behave and what system of values we accept. In addition to hormones, people are free to accept or reject imposed models for the socialisation of masculinity and femininity which often culminate in their toxic forms, and it is about this that the author of this publication writes.

In the book *Testosterone. An Unauthorized Biography* (Harvard University Press, 2019), the authors Rebecca M. Jordan-Young and Katrina Karkazis dispel the received wisdom about testosterone. In their critical review of the most important studies about hormones, the authors point out that one's testosterone level does not predict competitive drive, appetite for risk and violence, or athletic success. Testosterone is not a biological essence of masculinity or 'the male sex hormone'. However, it is hard to deconstruct decades-long studies that engrained already-embedded images of masculinity and further essentialised its biological foundation. Gender essentialism in any form, either the one that glorifies masculinity or femininity, can be aggressive but also very sophisticated, making it hard to recognise. For instance, we can sense the frustration with the slowness of expected changes demanded by those who expected that legal regulation of women's civil and political rights would finally bring about gender equality. In the answer to such demands, we often see gender essentialism at work. Today, questions continue to be asked, such as: *Why, even after so many years of applying positive legal regulations and policies, women are still underrepresented in decision-making posts? Why are there still very few women in STEM roles? Why are fewer than five percent of them in the world's largest 500 companies? Why is the percentage of violence against women still so enormous?*

When we refuse to look at the problem as a whole and deal with the culture of violence and socialisation patterns, in which we cultivate and justify toxic masculinity, then the easiest way out is to blame it on hormones i.e., testosterone. In this way, we produce and perpetuate the following myths: *Testosterone is to blame for the urge that men feel urge to dominate and rule. Testosterone influences competitiveness, thus there are more men in STEM jobs, which are also the best paid jobs. Testosterone is to blame for aggression and violence.*

It seems unbelievable that so much blame is pinned on a single hormone, while men and women who face the problems that toxic masculinity brings about are not willing to face their own responsibility in perpetuating it. This is why it matters to speak about these things, as Nikola Vucic, the author of this publication, does. 'A Critique of Toxic Masculinity' is an exceptionally important book and is much needed in the Bosnian socio-cultural and political context. In this context, violence has been normalised to such an extent that the greatest challenge becomes how to perceive and understand the seriousness of the destruction of the lives of individuals, families, and society as a whole by toxic masculinity.

In his book, the author is opening the eyes of the readers to see the consequences that toxic masculinity has on the lives of individuals and the society as a whole, but the book also encourages us to question the ideological constructs behind the embedded and sanctioned masculinity but it also encourages us to think about how to change its toxic elements. A society ruled by sexism, misogyny and the objectification of women is not a healthy one and will not and cannot produce gender relations based on respect and mutual action.

I recommend this book and hope it will serve as an incentive and challenge to young people, to dare to question the gender boxes into which they have been put and to create new gender policies that are free from violence and militarism.

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