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**YOUNG LESBIANS AND TRANSGENDER GIRLS IN SERBIA<sup>1</sup>****Introduction***The woman's body is the terrain on which patriarchy is erected.*

Adrienne Rich (1977)

Young lesbians and transgender girls suffer a manifold discrimination – discrimination over their sexual orientation/gender identity (as they share the fate of the entire LGBT community, in addition to an even stronger denial of their right to self-determination), as women (exposed to typical forms of discrimination towards women, misogyny, and male violence<sup>2</sup>, coupled with rejection from their mothers, female violence and non-acceptance<sup>3</sup> (Holy, 1997)), and discrimination over their youth (as they suffer all forms of marginalization and belittling because of their age, in addition to ending of their education, difficulties in the labour market and in their search for work).

The sources of information on young lesbian and transgender girls and their parental families are sporadic as there has been no systematic study on this topic. In this work sources were used that contain at least some sporadic

<sup>1</sup> This text was written as a part of a project that the author is engaged in: “Social transformations in the process of European integrations – multidisciplinary approach”, financed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development in the period of 2011-14.

<sup>2</sup> These are mostly the documents by the Office for Human Rights and Rights of National Minorities of the Republic of Serbia, i.e. meeting records, notifications, explanations and opinions, quoted when used. National strategies were also taken into consideration, including the “Strategy for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination for the period from 2013 to 2018” (Strategija prevencije i zaštite od diskriminacije za period od 2013. do 2018. godine) [Strategija] in the Republic of Serbia, quoted when used.

<sup>3</sup> The Mothers of transgender daughters (inclined towards male gender) disagree, as they want daughters: there are family battles over gender that the daughters sometimes solve by seeking protection from their grandmothers and aunts, relations with their sisters.

information about adolescence and growing up of lesbian and transgender girls. These are mostly the collections of memories of adult lesbians about their coming out<sup>4</sup>, the statements from the parents of lesbian and transgender girls<sup>5</sup>, theoretical works on this topic<sup>6</sup>, reports and documents from the LGBT organizations<sup>7</sup>, reports from the media<sup>8</sup> and individual case studies<sup>9</sup>. All sources report a high level of homophobia in families that regard lesbianism as a dangerous abnormality, a sick perversion, a result of a negative influence from the West that is intentionally used to undermine the Serbian culture.

In addition to the state of lesbian/transgender girls, these sources reflect that their parents were never told at any level of their formal education that about 10% of the population is born as a sexual minority, that this state is inherent although not hereditary, that it is completely irrelevant that the families have no records of “that kind of people” from the mother’s or the father’s side; that “this” is not a fashion or a case of imitating others, that no one can become a homosexual (or heterosexual) by force or as a part of a trend; that no public displays of the existence of lesbian and transgender persons can “spoil” their heterosexual children; or that hiding the fact that “these” persons exist will prevent their homosexual children from be-

<sup>4</sup> Literary works and the coming out testimonies are gathered and published as a part of regular activities of Labris and Gejten. Quoted when used.

<sup>5</sup> Parent self-help groups have recently been organized within groups for the rights of LGBT persons. Gathered attitudes and statements from the parents of the LGBT children are published and quoted when used. The author of this article personally contacted and interviewed selected number of parents in order to gain more details regarding the upbringing of their lesbian daughters.

<sup>6</sup> Theoretical literature was gathered in May 2013 during a study visit to the Central European University in Budapest, during which the biggest part of the major hypotheses about growing up of young lesbian and transgender girls in a homophobic and transphobic patriarchal environment were confirmed.

<sup>7</sup> These are mostly regular annual reports by Labris - the organization for the rights of lesbian women in Serbia, Gejten – the organization for LGBT persons, and the GejStrejt Alijansa [GayStraight Alliance]. All reports are quoted when used.

<sup>8</sup> The media reports from the last three years – 2011, 2012, and 2013 – were used and they covered family violence, public incidents, peer and school violence, due to real or assumed sexual orientation of the victims. All media sources were quoted when used.

<sup>9</sup> The author of this article has personally communicated with some adult individuals whose stories of lesbian growing up she had read, in order to get a better insight into their upbringing.

ing what they are. All of this makes Fukuyama’s question whether we are poor because of the economic situation or because of our “dysfunctional social habits” all the more applicable. These are the deeply rooted habits that would be at work even if the economic situation were better and that lead us in the direction opposite of progress (Fukuyama, 1997: 20).

These dysfunctional social habits include intolerance, accepting discriminative behaviour as norm, rejection of young lesbians and transgender girls by their parental families and their exposure to the manifold risk of violence, homelessness and extreme poverty<sup>10</sup>.

A statement from a young activist for the rights of lesbians perhaps best describes their hope for change:

*Deeply rooted prejudice in a society is like a granite rock – it takes a lot of work to break that granite shell. You need various tools and aids but you should never give up as this shell can break at any moment. Perhaps this year. A pride parade is one of those tools for breaking the prejudice. When they ask me why the parade, I always say it is for the children, for the homosexual children in schools, the children who are growing up in fear and with traumas. For children who lead two parallel lives – one false, an act for the family, the school, the public, and their other, hidden life. For children who do not live freely and do not breathe the air like the rest of the citizens.*

## Parental family

As mistreated as the members of national and religious minorities are by the general public, they are still accepted within their families and communities and are in a specific way protected by their language, culture, religion, unconditional parental love and support. This micro-social acceptance is all the more emphasized as the external rejection grows. Only lesbians and transgender girls, along with other members of the LGBT population, are the minorities that are generally rejected by the members of their own

<sup>10</sup> One of the regular signs on all protest rallies is “I was kicked out of my home” (see: Protest za jednaka prava svih, 2012).

parental families, that is, by those closest to them, those whose support should be given unconditionally at all times. In two out of ten families in Serbia, a homosexual child suffers violence with threats of eviction (even murder) so they would not embarrass their family anymore; in six out of ten cases, the children are being convinced they are not normal and that they should be treated; only in one out of ten families, a child is accepted or its sexual orientation is ignored (which can last for a lifetime) (Mirković and Mikašinović, 2013). While the individuals in a traditional societies experience intensive solidarity in the wider community (of course the very same wider community can reject them or expose them to other forms of rejection, which can be disastrous for them and equal to a death penalty), an individual in the modern society experiences the most intensive emotional connection or rejection at the level of the nuclear family (Škorić, 2008). This makes help and support to the families of lesbian and transgender girls a necessity; a help not based on patriarchal values but on a modern system of values of respecting the differences in order for the families to be able to have a proper reaction to the lesbianism or transgender orientation of their daughters (Hewllet and West, 1998).

Safety is the main priority for lesbians and the LGBT population of all generations in general and their situations cannot be further improved without it (Strategija, 2013). The fundamental right of all citizens is the protection of their personal safety and the basic duty of each country is to ensure it (Pleck, 1987). Many authors (e.g. Stacey 1996), report that even the best families do not always serve the interests of women, their children and even many men, considering the prevalence of family violence, the most common victims of which are lesbian and transgender girls.

Lives of young lesbian and transgender girls are under strong influence of misogyny and homophobia of the social environment (Califia, 1997). This problem of denouncement and rejection that young lesbian and transgender girls are faced with in their homes in Serbia (and, undoubtedly, in other post-Yugoslav societies) is twofold. It partly stems from the ignorance of the parents themselves and partly from the very present and very loud and unanimous homophobia of the public discourse that affects the atmosphere in the schools, sports, political life, the media, and of course, the perception of the families of lesbian and transgender girls. Violence, hate

speech, and intolerance are all parts of a clear public homophobia that the state has so far not reacted to in a prompt, efficient and adequate manner. These factors have a strong influence on the private attitudes of the parental families of lesbian girls, which are marked by open physical violence, forced “treatments”, various forms of emotional pressures and blackmail, and even evictions from their home. In a situation marked by the economic crisis and high unemployment rate, family violence brings forth an increased risk of homelessness, especially among younger generations, of those exposed to that violence and rejected by their families.

An example of family violence<sup>11</sup>: *Andelka arrived to Belgrade from a small town in Šumadija to study at the university. She has always been attracted to women but she was not able to express such preferences at home. In Belgrade, she finally found women like herself and started to socialize with them having long-term relationships. Since she was an excellent student, her brother, with whom she lived, did not control her. By the end of her studies, she decided to stop hiding and to start a stable relationship, leave her brother's apartment and move in with her partner. Upon realizing what was going on, her brother got very angry, as he hated “fags and lesbians” more than anything in the world, threatening to “break every bone in her body”. While he was at work, his wife, knowing that his threats are serious, advised Andelka that the best thing for her is to move out as soon as possible. Andelka quickly started packing and moving out. When she came to pick up the last of her things, her brother came back, beat her up, and threatened that if she keeps seeing “that” woman, he would find and kill both of them as “such people” do not deserve to live.*

An example of family-enforced “change”: *Suspecting that his daughter, a junior in high school, is “too interested” in girls, Nada's father*

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.okurazi.se/index.php/faq/47-andjelka> (Viewed 29 April 2013; currently not available). Web Documents of the cases reported during the project „Okurazi se“ [Take Courage] implemented by the Gayten and Labris organizations were available until April 2013 on the project's website which was taken down and was not uploaded again. Cases were prepared by Zorica Mršević and Boban Stojanović.

searched her room in detail while she was on a school trip. During the search, he found and picked a locked drawer which contained “irrefutable” evidence in the form of what he believed was lesbian pornography (these were, in fact, educative materials from lesbian groups). Under the influence of popular psychology literature which underlined the responsibility of the parents to prevent their children from becoming homosexuals, he decided to take serious actions towards “normalizing” his daughter. When she came back from the trip, he beat her up and set new rules for her, which implied her spending days locked in her room thinking about her “mistakes”. He reacted to even the slightest sign of “unfeminine” behaviour with beating and she was not allowed to go out except to go to school. As the next step, Nada’s parents forced her to undergo a psychiatric treatment in a private clinic, believing there is a right “rehabilitation therapy” for homosexuality as if it was a bad habit. Nada’s attempted suicide after her graduation and her farewell letter in which she wrote that she is a lesbian and that there is no way for her to stop being that was taken as a horrible and unfair blow from their “ungrateful” daughter. Upon her recovery, her father told her he would finance her studies but at a university in another town and that she should never come home again.

Preventing the development of a normal, innate sexuality is dangerous for children and adolescents. Rejection, mistreatment, violence and discrimination from their families, peers, and schools make the process of their maturation much more difficult and cause psychological crises, desperation, and suicidal moods. As the identity is formed by inherited (nature) and upbringing (nurture), the clash between nature and nurture brings forth an interiorized homophobia that leads to self-hatred and self-loathing (Gelles, 1995). Because of this attitude of the families, the warnings about the risk of homeless lesbian and transgender girls, especially younger ones, are becoming more common and this is even more dramatic in a time of high unemployment and the general crisis. Reproduction of homophobia is, among other things, realized through authoritative promotion of non-scientific attitudes and prejudice in the media space in the attempt to protect the “tradi-

tional Serbian values”, both religious and moral, so parents are often called out to be the actors of protection of these “right” values.

An example of public violence over assumed sexual orientation. Reaction of the parents: *On the last day of a programming seminar, a high-school student Sandra went out with the rest of the participants of the seminar to a local bar to celebrate the end of the course. Regular customers displayed typical local intolerance towards the newcomers and they immediately started verbally provoking them, occasionally throwing coins, matchboxes, and cigarettes at the group, calling them out “Are you the gay parade activists coming here to spread your perversions across Serbia”? The staff did their best to calm the situation down as they repeatedly said that it was a computer programming group and a case of promoting computer literacy, which stopped the provocations. However, when Sandra sat next to her friend Zdenka, with whom she was talking the whole time and was occasionally holding hands, touching her knees and putting her arm across her shoulder, a group of local young men attacked them again, this time focusing on the female part of the group. “You there, in the green shirt, you don’t like men, do you? You like to lick c...t more than anything?” In the chaos that ensued when the attackers started beating Sandra, Zdenka was stabbed in the stomach with a knife. Sandra was later diagnosed with a concussion and she and Zdenka were transported to the ER centre in Belgrade and remained there for a few days. Police intervened and stopped further fighting. Apart from Sandra and Zdenka who were taken away by the Ambulance, the police took the rest of the participants into custody – both the attackers and the participants of the seminar. Local attackers said they were provoked by the “gay parade propaganda” to which they reacted verbally and that they only reacted physically to Sandra’s invitation to “eat her out”. The police called all the participants of the seminar “gay parade promoters, sickos and fags” and the lawsuits were filed against them. Sandra’s father, who was divorced from her mother, used this incident to stop paying the alimony for her even though she had not finished high school at the time and was still underage. He also filed the proceedings to take*

*the custody over Sandra from her mother so that Sandra could move in with him and he could prevent her from developing in the abnormal direction before it was “too late”.*

The traditional institutions of social welfare still have no adequate answer to the family violence against lesbians; even the activists failed to find the resources to organize regular shelters or even define the basic principles of work. In addition, the lesbian movement is still not too favourably inclined towards transgender women, i.e. those who are believed to have an “equivalent of male identity” (Califia 1997: 3).

An example of inconsistent standpoints about the role of shelters: *Iva was tormented and occasionally even beaten at home because of her lesbianism and her parents, mostly influenced by her uncle, kicked her out of the house “for embarrassing her family”. She contacted the shelter which undertook the measures for “reconciliation” with the family: they conducted several individual and joint interviews with Iva and her parents and Iva was suggested to come back home and that she and her parents should sign some sort of agreement on mutual respect and non-violent behaviour. This was suggested as her parent categorically denied having any problems with Iva’s sexual orientation and claimed that the reason for the conflict was her “lack of respect” for members of her family and that this (and not her lesbianism) was the reason why her brothers and parents punished her physically. They also said they felt very sorry about Iva not wanting to come back home and promised not to cause any problems to her on account of her sexual orientation, provided that she is discreet about it in the future. However, Iva rejected the option of coming back home, stating that she was afraid, mostly of her father and uncle, and claiming they did not actually accept her sexual orientation and she might easily have an “unfortunate accident” in order for her family “not to lose face”, an accident that would be caused by them and which could end fatally for her. The shelter terminated her stay, believing she was not threatened with eviction but that she simply had a falling out with her family.*

The feminists reacted strongly to the shelter returning Iva to her family. They wondered whether the shelters are made for persons to be returned to their families even against their will, instead of being places of empowerment in which the sheltered persons are supported to choose where and what they want to do without being forced either way; whether the persons in charge of the shelter were aware that the families are often vicious places of homophobia, misogyny, and violence; and how could it even be possible that the LGBT shelter trusts a (heteronormative and homophobic) family/father more than the lesbian daughter that sought their protection and support. This is still an ongoing case and the answers to these questions are still unknown as is the outcome of the case.

### **School – the educational system**

Young lesbians and transgender girls are members of every school in our society. They are often invisible, the laws that regulate the education, the curricula, the teachers and the schools ignore them; the peers brand them, ridicule and insult them, and expose them to peer violence if they notice their deviation from “what is normal” (Fetoski, 2012). The results of this are often isolation, depression, low self-esteem, victimization, dropping out or leaving school early (Puača, 2008). The results from other societies (there are no information for Serbia) show an increased suicide risk as the LGBT youth attempt suicide two or three times more than any other group. Suicides among gay/lesbian youth make up 30% of suicides among youth. The suicide rate among the LGBT youth is even higher than among the persons older than 75 and the terminally ill.

In the field of education, there is a huge lack of understanding in terms of lesbianism and transgenderism which results in a reproduction of negative attitudes in educational institutions. The school is usually the place of severe gender differentiation where the process of imposing social norms does not allow gender deviations and is particularly rigid for girls (Rapaport, 1989). Every new generation leaves school ready for violence towards different minorities, LGBT persons in particular. A possibility to pave the way for a better society for generations to come is not being used here. No

measures have been taken to increase the level of information and awareness among the people, the youth, the media, the public figures, the political decision-makers, and the educational system in general that lesbianism is not a disease but a variety of normal human sexuality; that there is no danger of spreading homosexuality by publicly talking about the topic and without any prejudice, by holding pride parades or other public events, or by giving legal acknowledgement to same-sex communities (EuroActiv, 2012).

The attitude of the society towards the different is best reflected in their attitude towards the LGBT population: 80% of high school students believe discrimination against them is justified and 38% of young men support violence against that population. The members of the Romani community are in a similar situation in Serbia as they, in addition to exposure to violence, also have a hard time finding work (Petrović and Joksimović, 2013). The adult citizens also report a very high degree of social distance towards the LGBT population as these persons are the ones they would least want to see in their environment (Diskriminacija u Srbiji, 2013).

One of the recommendations of the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality directed to the Ministry of Education and Science, the National Council for Education, and the Institute for Improvement of Education is to undertake urgent measures to ensure the introduction of affirmative and correct depictions of same-sex sexually-emotive orientations, transgenderism, transsexualism, and intersexualism in all school books (for both social and natural sciences), including the examples of LGBT individuals as a part of the historic and contemporary democratic societies. The attitude that no child or young person should be afraid for his or her own personal safety in their family or school has been adopted a while ago, but that does not seem to apply to lesbian and transgender girls, which is why postponing, especially if it is endless, is not a solution for the problem at hand. Non-discriminative education is one of the assets for the development and the current situation represents an obstacle as it is dominated by unscientific, discriminating attitudes towards almost every “other”, the lesbians in particular. This is why it is important to examine the possibilities of non-discriminatory education as the necessary tool in the battle against intolerance, discrimination and readiness for violence against everyone that is perceived as the “other” or the

“different”. These attitudes of the youth are acquired from and supported by the educational system so the changes should be made primarily in the field of education (Mršević, 2013).

An example of peer violence that the school failed to prevent: *Vera stood out in elementary school with her mannish looks and attitude but there were no problems as the students and the teachers accepted her for who she was. There was some teasing as she was openly called by the male name “Veroljub” and “Vera, my brother” etc., but Vera did not mind. The problems started as soon as she finished elementary school and enrolled into high school for technical vocations. Admittedly, the classmates did not harass her but the word soon spread throughout the school that a “dyke” started the first grade and the groups of older students showed their open intentions to give her a “healing treatment”. At first, they “only” insulted, threatened and cursed her, and then they slapped and beat her, tore her clothes etc. Vera reported each assault to her homeroom teacher but nothing changed and the homeroom teacher advised her not to “provoke” things and everything “would pass” eventually. Vera’s parents were told that the alleged accidents happened outside of school and that the school could not be held accountable for them. When the parents asked whether the school had a team for protection against violence, he said that it was not their legal obligation, that very few schools had those and that, according to his knowledge, no technical school had something like that. His exact words were: “Let us be real, we neither have the time nor the patience for some psychodrama here, this is a technical high school, not a ballet school”. Because of that situation, Vera’s parents started driving her to and from school as much as they could. Inside the school, Vera would not leave the class during recess in order to avoid older students that assaulted her in the hall or in the stairwells. When they noticed that Vera was successfully evading them, the group of assailants decided to take the initiative. During recess, they chanted “Lesbians to asylums”, stormed into Vera’s classroom, kicked several of her classmates out of her class, beat her up as an example for other “lesbos and faggots” and promised they would gang rape her to*

*“teach her to be a real woman”. Vera got a concussion, a fractured rib, a dislocated shoulder, several bruises and hematoma, was sent to ER and then had to spend another month recovering. After that, the school principal advised her parents that it was in the best interest for school’s reputation, Vera’s safety, and the safety of other students in her class for her to leave school and either transfer to another school, or even better, that she finishes the class in private as she “does not fit in” with other students. They accepted the latter option “realizing that the problem was, in fact, caused by their daughter”.*

Strategy for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination for the period from 2013 to 2018 of the Republic of Serbia also states, in the section concerning measures against discrimination of the LGBT persons, that the right to education has to be enjoyed without any discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity, acknowledging that in the area of education there is still a high degree of misunderstanding with regard to LGBT persons. This is reported in several analyses of elementary and high school books during the past decade (Strategija, 2013).

## The public

Constant negative public reactions to valid requests for increase of the protection of rights of sexual minorities that are still dominant in the public discourse in Serbia still justify violence as the acceptable means of fighting the unacceptable “other”. In the dominant homophobic discourse, the same-sex love is forbidden or taboo and the people’s ambassadors animate their voters through hate speech, making use of the fact that they are protected by their parliamentary immunity<sup>12</sup>.

“Acceptability” of violence is a clear political message that has been present in past years in right-wing meetings and rallies, and in sporting

<sup>12</sup>The leader of JS [United Serbia] Dragan Marković Palma has given more statements about the LGBT population than any other member of the Parliament. He repeatedly emphasized that he is against any gathering of the homosexuals as a propagation of something abnormal as normal. Because of these statements, a lawsuit was filed against him at the court in Belgrade (Info center GSA, 2013).

occasions that are an ideal public platform for expressing such attitudes. Homophobic graffiti that contaminate the communicational space of cities for months are written everywhere, especially around schools and universities. The educational system has so far failed to find the right answer and systematic solutions.

The problem is that the public perceives the existence of lesbian and transgender persons as a threat to the “healthy” or “natural” family, which is almost a regular part of a daily discourse of hatred against them. Measures need to be taken to suppress this negative and faulty perception of the alleged “danger” for the family that their existence supposedly represents. Efficient measures against hate speech are necessary, especially those that would allow for a more efficient identification, prosecution and sanctioning of the perpetrators who cause, spread, promote, and support hatred and other forms of intolerance towards lesbian and transgender persons, regardless of whether they are made on public rallies, through the media and the internet, hateful street ads or graffiti. It is important to encourage state officials and politically prominent persons to publicly advocate the respect for human rights of the LGBT population and for tolerance. Inflammatory speech by the public officials has the effect of nullifying the perennial efforts of the institutions and the civil sector to diminish the negative perception of the LGBT population among the public, it contributes to the creation of negative atmosphere in the public towards the LGBT persons, and creates a negative image of Serbia in the general international context.

Popular psychology significantly contributes to the prejudice through the promotion of the term “wrong-sex child” as if the homosexuality and transgenderism are a result of the parents’ mistakes in the children’s upbringing. According to it, the problem occurs when the parents set a certain sex as a condition for accepting the child. The “wrong-sex child” occurs in those families in which there are obstacles for accepting the child’s identity, which the psychology dubbed the “ban to be of their own sex”. Lesbians are women who experienced rejection from their parents when they were children on account that they are “not worthy” because of their sex. If a girl of the “wrong sex” realizes that the parents will accept her better if she behaves the way the opposite sex behaves, she will try to imitate the boys’ behaviour

to please her parents, develop male features, choose a male profession and spend her whole life proving that she is if not better, then certainly not any worse than men in everything that men do (Milivojević, 2013). Pseudo-scientific understandings like this are not based on results of studies but mostly on selectively chosen fiction of previous times, such as *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall (1928).

Under the influence of such homophobic atmosphere in the public, the results of studies conducted in the past five years show that the children and adolescents are becoming increasingly intolerant towards gay population and are open to violence against them (Živanović, 2013). A significant portion of children and youth has a negative attitude towards the atheists, the HIV positive individuals, and supports the idea of ethnically pure state. But what stands out is that the persons of different sexual orientation top this list as 36% of participants have a negative attitude towards them, followed by the atheists (23%), members of other nationalities (21,8%), HIV positive individuals (19%), and excellent students (18,9%). Men who are not sports fans are also perceived negatively as 15,3% of children and adolescents have a negative attitude towards them, followed by those who have different opinions from the majority (15,2%), members of nongovernment organization programmes (14,5%), disabled persons (14%), compatriots of different religion (11,8%), members of other races (11,2%), and women (10,5%). Studies show that the situation has deteriorated, among other things, in terms of attitude of children towards human rights, as this idea is even more distant to them than it was to previous generations (GaySrbija, 2012).

We would like to point out several aspects of the negative public perception that could certainly be improved or eliminated from the public discourse through education and which would enable a more tolerant relation towards young lesbian and transgender girls (Zaštitnik građana, 2010):

1) “The institutions should take the side of the common citizens and the majority of population”. The institutions should treat and protect the endangered rights of all citizens equally – that of the so-called “ordinary citizens”, i.e. the majority, and the rights of the minority. The logic of things dictates that in Serbia, and everywhere else in the world, the rights of minorities are threatened to a higher extent and with a higher

frequency, be they national, religious, age, or sexual minorities. It is important to understand that the rights of minorities are not contradicted with the rights of the majority and that their protection does not imply the diminished rights of the majority. On the contrary, respecting the rights of the minorities additionally increases the extent of respecting human rights of everyone, and the whole society can benefit from this.

- 2) “It is all coming from outside, from other cultures and it is being aggressively forced upon us”. There are members of the LGBT population in every country, including Serbia. Their relative invisibility in the public sphere or in the private relations until recently does not mean they appeared out of nowhere, or that they came from somewhere on the outside. They are around us, they are our children, brothers and sisters, our relatives, neighbours, colleagues from work or the university, friends we spend holidays with, celebrate New Year, support our sport teams. We sometimes know about their sexual orientation and sometimes we do not as they still often choose to lead a “double” life, i.e. decide to keep their sexuality discrete, afraid of the judgement of their society, of losing a job, of various forms of violence, discrimination, harassment, and insults.
- 3) “This cannot pass in Serbia”. Right-wing conservatives in many countries say the same for their respective countries but they have not succeeded in preventing the existence of homosexual people and their battle for human rights, equality, and protection from discrimination and violence anywhere in the modern era. Of course, apart from the tyrannical regimes which prosecute homosexuality.
- 4) “The West is against the Serbian culture”. This is just one form of the well-known paranoid anti-Serbian conspiracy theory. Even if it were true that the “Serbian” culture includes killing, violence, harassment, discrimination, and elimination of homosexual persons, Serbia would then have to change not under the Western influence but under the influence of modern perceptions of human rights and needs of the modern man.
- 5) “There are more important problems”. Everyone’s problems seem the most important to them – unemployment to the unemployed, violence to those who suffer violence, hunger to the hungry, discrimination to

the discriminated. It is hard and unjust to rank problems according to their importance. That is why political freedoms and rights exist – so that those who believe their rights are threatened or withheld can express their dissatisfaction publicly. It is wrong to believe this right belongs only to the popular groups or that only those problems that afflict all citizens or most of them can be publicly expressed. The right to express one's own problems has to be used by the unpopular groups the most precisely because of their social marginalization and rejection, because they are small in numbers and do not possess the social power to solve their problems in any other way.

- 6) “Lesbians endanger the rights of the majority that is opposed to homosexuality”. No right of the majority is threatened by anything, unless this “right” implies the non-existent “right” to a life free of other, different minorities.
- 7) “Abnormality and immorality according to general standards”. Minority in terms of sexuality is not a deviation but a normal manifestation of human differences. General standards as the standards of the majority are just a reflection of greater numbers and they should not be confused with normality. Human differences should be accepted, tolerated, and spread and not judged, eliminated, fought against, discredited or regarded as less valuable in any way, abnormal, even dangerous.
- 8) “Now is not the time”. This attitude indefinitely postpones the inevitable reform of the educational system as a “nextopia” (a constant postponement of a solution that turns every change into an endlessly postponed utopia). Some parts of the society have matured, some have not. The question “do you support homosexuality” in a survey will always get more negative answers, but if you ask the citizens whether they support human freedoms and the right of choice, the majority will answer positively. The Serbian society, like all post-Yugoslav societies, values human freedom, the right of choice and this is what non-discriminative education should be built upon without the nextopic indefinite postponement. If we sit and wait for the change to come on its own, we would never see it – political history has shown us that the marginalized groups have always been forced to fight for equal rights. The women and

the African Americans are a good example of this. The unacceptability of the nextopia (Dahlen, 2008) that is, the indefinite postponement of a solution, lies in the fact that it not only fails to bring any changes, but the waiting makes the situation even worse.

## Sports

Sports clubs and associations, and the sporting arenas are still the venues of undisturbed public display of high-intensity homophobia and transphobia that occurs as a “normal” addition to sporting duels, fan groups and chants. Legal regulations and other policies in this domain are still insufficient as the sportsmen and the audience are unprotected against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

An example of discrimination based on sexual orientation in sports. The reaction of the parents: *Alenka started doing sports as a child in Novi Sad, she continued in Italy, where her family lived for a few years, and she eventually signed a professional contract with a major club from Belgrade when she reached the senior age. The first year was a dream come true for her in sporting terms, as she immediately gained the trust of her coach and her teammates. She was very happy with the treatment at the club, the money she earned, the life in Belgrade, and the support of the fans that she had; she improved rapidly, she was healthy, she even played for her national team. The problems started at the beginning of her second season when her coach invited her for a “friendly” conversation due to her participation in a panel for the rights of young lesbians, which made him question her sexuality. Alenka opened up and admitted she liked women, expecting his support and protection. The coach, however, expressed his disappointment and immediately let her know that she had no future in the club. He said that she would no longer be able to train with the first team, let alone play and “embarrass” the club, but that this could be avoided if she made a solemn promise to keep her sexual orientation a secret and if she stopped publicly supporting lesbians; the club could not risk losing money from sponsors and adver-*

*tisements which would be a definite possibility if it got a bad reputation as a “lesbian” club. He invited Alenka’s parents for a conversation and they were deeply struck by the information that she was a lesbian and that she might end her sporting career. They said that they were afraid of drugs, alcohol, criminal – of her succumbing to the life in the big city and that she disappointed them deeply by doing the worst thing imaginable and putting her sporting career at risk with her carelessness. They fully agreed with her coach that “this” had to remain a secret and that they would do all they can to make sure that Alenka kept her privacy discreet so that she could save her sporting career.*

The education of people on the existence of sexual minority rights is one of the basic problems in Serbia as no form of education has so far included even elementary information about the existence of sexual minorities. In this aspect, denying the existence of sexual or other types of minorities, or suppressing this fact – since what is not mentioned does not exist – is regarded as the “right” set of values by default. Our parents have never learned (Seksualno obrazovanje, tabu tema?, 2013) and they often do not know (or do not want to know) that their daughters are lesbians, which does not mean that they are sick, that that is a result of their mistakes in upbringing, or that it implies a bad influence by some dangerous people in their daughters’ environment.

### **Conclusion: the necessary changes in the institutional educational system – utopia today, reality tomorrow**

Violence, hate speech, and intolerance are the aspects of a publicly performed lesbophobia to which the state has so far not had a timely, efficient, or adequate institutional answer. It is important to note that when talking about discrimination, we are often dealing with discrimination that literally presents a risk for one’s life. Discrimination that the lesbians are exposed to consists of family violence that involves being beaten up, being denied free movement, forced rehabilitations, being evicted from home. This is compounded with peer violence in schools. Street violence, violence in public

places motivated by hatred against lesbians has become a constant threat in the atmosphere of the omnipresent hate speech in which the lesbians are openly called sick, deranged, a shame for their people and family, an error in upbringing, immoral, abnormal etc. It is no wonder that the youth follow the examples of political leaders. The youth have repeatedly expressed their attitude that they regard violence against lesbians as justified. In public debates about the LGBT population, one can feel the fear of the “Different”, the very “brutal existence” of which is perceived as a provocation and a threat to the Serbian society (Pančić, 2012). In this social atmosphere, it is often the case that the victims of the violence are blamed to have caused violent outbursts with their previous “provocations”.

In order for the parental families to become a sanctuary and protection against homophobia for their lesbian and transgender girls and not the extended arm of the oppression, institutional changes need to be made, especially in the educational system. It is necessary to identify ways of setting up a system of values in which the otherness and the difference will not be perceived as a threat, as utopian as this possibility may seem from the current situation. In the name of future progress, it is necessary to dismantle the retrograde matrix based on the belief that the minority has to be in a worse situation so that the situation of the majority may improve. Regardless of how utopian that may seem today, even if we were the advocates of limited action politics (Badiou, 2008), the educational system has to be changed, at a faster or slower pace. It has to denounce the negative consequences of discrimination, violence, and intolerance towards the other and the different instead of supporting them, as this means missing out on a chance of making a new and better society for the younger generations. Discriminative content of the current educational system needs to be analysed as do the schools that do not combat expressed intolerance and peer violence openly. We need institutional research and even utopian suggestions for improving this situation. The following points are regarded as necessary (Petrušić, 2013):

- 1) the content of the teaching materials and the teachers and their educational practice should nurture the awareness of difference and promote non-violent culture, equality, and non-discriminative practice as the

- postulates of a democratic society based on respecting human rights;
- 2) to raise awareness about difference, interculturality, and common values through representation of famous persons from various ethnic and religious groups, cultures etc.;
  - 3) the teaching content and materials should present children with various models of families in the modern society (single parents, foster families, childless families, the rights of same-sex partners to have a family etc.),
  - 4) to remove stereotypical depictions of gender roles/professions and supporting variety, insisting on multiplicity and multiple layers of personal identities, valuing individuality, solidarity, and creativity regardless of sex;
  - 5) to improve the curriculum of the Civic Education so that it includes concrete workshops about the prevention of discrimination and alleviating prejudice towards children from sensitive and marginalized groups (children with developmental disabilities, learning difficulties, socially-impaired children) in all classes but in accordance with the principles of inclusive education and by using modern and adequate terminology;
  - 6) to include the elements of Civic Education into other classes;
  - 7) to make children from marginalized groups more present in the textbooks, the curricula (texts, workshops, photographs), in accordance with the principles of inclusive education;
  - 8) to introduce affirmative and accurate depictions of homosexual orientation, transgenderism, transsexuality, and intersexuality into all textbooks (for both natural and social sciences), including examples of the LGBTTIAQ<sup>13</sup> individuals as a part of historic and modern democratic societies;
  - 9) to remove outdated and offensive terminology from textbooks and the curricula, and especially the content abundant with medical approaches, stating the diagnoses and prejudice;
  - 10) to use and insist on standardizing and regulating the usage of gender sensitive language and the language of non-discrimination (children and youth with disabilities and developmental problems and not per-

<sup>13</sup> A broader variant of the abbreviation LGBT which includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, intersexual, asexual, and queer persons.

sons with special needs, persons suffering from/inflicting violence and not the victims/bullies, persons using psychoactive substances and not drug addicts etc.);

- 11) using appropriate professional development to improve the knowledge and capabilities of the teachers in the domain of children's and human rights, equality, non-discrimination, gender equality, non-violence, to overcome the prejudice and stereotypes and increase the sensibility for gender contents of the teaching materials and the teaching practice.

Changes in the educational system have to be accompanied (and caused/initiated) by changes in the perception of young lesbian and transgender girls by their families. Families must work together to find a way to treat discrimination and prejudice. The question of helping the parents accept sexual orientation of their children and making their relationship more tolerant and honest has so far not been answered in Serbia (Fetoski, 2012). Facing the fact that their children are lesbians is a difficult and stressful process in which it is necessary to work together to end the silence. The parents are the only ones who can devote their unconditional care, love, and understanding to their lesbian daughters and the educational system should offer solutions and answers. It takes time and support for people to understand that being silent and hiding does not bring people together and does not support self-confidence and self-respect. The aim is for the different to stop perceiving their difference in Serbia as a fate that forces them into isolation and loneliness instead of seeing their uniqueness as the meeting point of the endless diversity and richness of the world they live in. The role of the family, coupled with the institutional educational system, is to help their children and adolescents and all others and different find this other way through acceptance and support, so that the memories of the lesbian youth like the following one can become an exception: "Adolescence is hell. But lesbian adolescence is a hell of its own. And I was the loneliest teenager in the world" (Barzut, 2012: 73).

Every discriminatory policy is dangerous. The only reasonable, the only honourable goal is a fight for the right of each citizen to be treated as fully fledged citizen, regardless of their background (Maluf, 2003). Nothing re-

garding human rights can be denied to our fellow citizens under the excuse that we want to preserve some belief, some tradition. Since we know that the driving force of a potential change does not necessarily have to be material wellbeing, we are aware that all of us – not just the countries and the politicians – are responsible for the future (Camps, 2007). New ideas on gender assignment and gender identity increasingly point out the damage that the distribution of gender role brings, as it prevents boys and girls from achieving their full potential and individuality. Providing children with a period of acceptable gender neutrality (which became increasingly popular during the 1980s and the 1990s (Coltrane, 1997) might be one of the possible ways of alleviating the rejection of young lesbian and transgender girls in post-Yugoslav societies.

### Post-conclusion: Lucky Eddie – the transgender Viking, or how a comic can breed acceptance

Lucky Eddie is the best friend and the inseparable companion of Hägar the Horrible, despite the fact that he does not look at all like a “real” Viking man (Browne, 2005). He is small, has narrow shoulders, thin neck, no beard, and is dressed in girls’ clothes. The question whether Lucky Eddie was born a girl and then joined the male gender with which he identifies remains open to speculation. The decisive moment of his acceptance into the warrior Viking society is him being accepted by the head Viking – Hägar. His difference is not highlighted anywhere in the comic or articulated as a difference, and it does not even exist, as it is so invisible. It only exists in our interpretation of the comic, which is, in turn, supported by an interpretation of something that is not even there, by posing questions that were not posed (let alone answered) in the original comic, and giving our own answers to them. However, the questions and the answers brought us to certain conclusions, i.e. if Lucky Eddie is accepted by Hägar, his family, and the entire Viking society of warriors without even a single question, perhaps this comic, as conservatively patriarchal and traditional in terms of family values as it may be, may serve to pave the way for its consumers to accept gender mismatched children and young members of the family and gender

“otherness”. Moreover, perhaps it points out that this acceptance is already possible today without changing the entire patriarchal context and without a radical reform of the entire mentality.

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## CHAPTER 5: CULTURE