

INTERVIEW WITH NEVENKA RIKALO

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Duration: 79 minutes

Present:

1. Nevenka Rikalo (Speaker)
2. Alisa Fejzi (Interviewer)
3. Jeta Rexha (Interviewer)
4. Donjeta Berisha (Camera)

Transcription notation symbols of non-verbal communication:

() - emotional communication

{ } - the speaker explains something using gestures

Other transcription conventions:

[] - addition to the text to facilitate comprehension

Footnotes are editorial additions to provide information on localities, names, or expressions

My name is Nevenka Rikalo, I am the director of a women's association that provides assistance to women, called Hand to Hand, from Uglar. I was born in 1957 in Pristina and my whole life was spent either in or near Pristina. I finished the elementary school and spent my childhood in Kosovo Polje [Fushë Kosovë], then I finished high school in Pristina's Technical Center. After graduating from high school, I was accepted to college, but for some reasons I never graduated. However, later, at a slightly older age, I managed to graduate from the Higher School of Business, at the Department of Informatics and Statistics.

When it comes to my childhood, I can tell you that I had a very nice one. We lived in an environment where people from different parts of Serbia and Kosovo lived together. My father was a conductor by profession, a railwayman, so we lived in a building of the railways with people from different areas. It was a mixed environment, with different cultures and different influences. We were lucky to be close to the Albanian neighbors with whom we had a very good relationship. Maybe that was thanks to the fact that my mother was a native of Podujevo, and our first neighbor was married to a woman from Podujevo, so, for years, we have been socializing and developing a common friendship. Albanian children socialized with Serbian kids, with us, we normally played and hung out together, although Albanian children needed to speak Serbian, mostly because we did not even think at that time that we should speak Albanian (smiles).

Alisa Fejzi: Do you have any interesting stories from your childhood?

Nevenka Rikalo: In our neighborhood, we had an old woman from Croatia, who harbored cats and was very dedicated to keeping our building clean, the building was composed of three buildings where we lived together with at least fifty families and she demanded that the building always be clean, and she constantly organized some ecological actions. So, together with her, we have been constantly involved in cleaning our environment and we always had nicely cleaned, tidy space surrounding our building. Even though we regularly maintained cleanliness, she always offered us candies and sweets and educated us to be neat, to respect the elderly, and at the same time to always get together, to team up and do some work together.

Alisa Fejzi: What were your parents like?

Nevenka Rikalo: What can I say, my parents were especially dear to me, at the end of the day, we all love our moms and dads. My mom is from Serbia, dad is from Kosovo, and they both were born in 1934. When they married, mom was much more advanced and progressive than dad, because she came from a family that already had a tradition of supporting children's education and employment, while dad's family had very few educated people. Under the influence of my mom, dad graduated from high school, and later even became one of the most crafted experts of the railway. So, whenever new locomotives, a new series of rail buses, locomotives or steam locomotives arrived, my dad was sent to vocational training to learn how to operate the machines and later convey his knowledge to his colleagues.

My mom had a major influence on my dad, because dad was brought up in a patriarchal manner, while my mother thought progressively, so when they got three daughters in a row, there was a question of whether they should have more children or not. I would like to point out that in 1957, when they took me out of the hospital, my dad carried me through the village, many people were astonished and said, "Look at this guy, he carries his daughter through the village!" At that time, men could carry with pride only their sons through the village, for only a son counted as a child.

Alisa Fejzi: What was your life like when you were young?

Although we lived just on one salary, dad's, mom didn't work, the four of us women in the family had a lot of respect for him and protected him, so he didn't have to do the many jobs that a man was supposed to do at home, because he was the only one employed and bringing home a salary. We weren't concerned whether it was a man's or a woman's job, we mostly did it all – cutting wood for the fire, carrying coal, feeding the farm animals, working on fields, anything... We didn't pay much attention to division of labor... I can say that our childhood was happy because we had the opportunity to go to the seaside every year, despite the fact that there was one salary, we could build another residence, although we had an apartment, we built a house...

Then, we were able to go out normally, to go to a dance, to take a walk through Pristina, to go to the movies, to dress nicely... I want to tell you that at that time there were no class differences, all of us had almost the same amount [of money]. Today you can see that richer children wear sneakers that cost 100 or 200 euros. Such a thing did not exist back then. We all had universal shoes, sandals, there were some models that were characteristic for young people, but we were all in the same range.

One event that was interesting to me occurred on a rainy day when we were returning home from school. I've always had a backpack on my back {shows how she carried a backpack}, because my mother insisted on it so our back would be healthy and straight, so we carried backpacks. Returning from school together, with Albanian and Serbian children, I remember that I was in third grade, we walked past a puddle, where one of the boys shoved me, I tripped and fell into the water (smiles). Then Sanija, our neighbor, took my backpack and carried it to her house, she didn't give me to carry it, but she took it to her home, dried my

notebooks and returned my books and notebooks completely dry (smiles). It was kind of remarkable that she did that, and when my mom asked, “What happened?” She said, “We nudged a little, so Nena fell into the water.” “Ok, Nena fell into the water, but what about you?” She said, “You know what, aunt Bina, stop interrogating us, better give us your homemade bread to eat, I prefer to eat your bread, I like it more than what my own mother bakes!” You see, we have shared both good and bad, you know, we’ve never paid attention whether I was eating with them at their house or they ate with us. We often socialized with them, we always went to their house to wish them *Eid Bajram*, and they came to our home to celebrate our *slava*¹ with us. It was truly a sincere friendship, perhaps because the two women were from the same place and preferred to spend time together.

Nevenka Rikalo: During our growing up, in addition to the responsible mother who knew exactly what she wanted from us and what she wanted to make of us, she constantly guided my sisters and me to rely on each other. These two sisters are younger than I, one is two and a half years, another five years younger, I was the oldest child. My mother would constantly tell me, “Take care of them, you are the oldest of the sisters, you have to set an example for them.” She was telling us, you have to know what you want to do and how you can do it, therefore you have to rely on each other, to talk, to make joint decisions and support one another. Perhaps this kind of upbringing helped me later in my own life, I always had some kind of support and always asked for support. Not only did I support others around me, but also I was always looking for support from other people in my life. That’s how we were brought up.

The division of labor in our house was exceptional, very strict. Each of us would be in charge of cooking one week, tidying up the second, cleaning the house the third, the schedule changed, but never would one of us be in charge of everything. After we finished all the work, mom had great pleasure in seeing us hanging out with our friends. It was very exceptional that we made friends with both girls and boys. Through those friendships, we made arrangements whether to go to the *korzo*² in Pristina for a walk from the old department store to Avala, a café, to the *korzo*.

We walked from the old to the new department store, this path was particularly interesting for us (smiles). On the *korzo* there were two lanes. On the left side {describes it with her hands}, there were those who walked from the new department store towards the old department store, the Albanian population walked there, while we walked on the right side. So, you had two small lines – one next to the edge of the road, going from the old department store to the new department store, and the other going in the opposite direction, we were usually there, walking on the right side of the road. We would make two or three rounds and then return home by bus to Kosovo Polje [Fushë Kosovë].

We could stop in any bar, although we rarely visited bars, we rather went to the pastry shop, or visited some of the significant monuments that were in our midst. I can give you another example – I was one of the activists who for a long time danced folk dances, so I would take part in the parade that was prepared

¹ *Slava* is part of Serbian Orthodox religious tradition. Once a year, every family celebrates the day of a particular saint who is believed to be the guardian of the family.

² Main street, reserved for pedestrians.

for May 25, the birthday of Comrade Tito, it was a special honor to participate in these events at the stadium of Belgrade and to participate in passing the torch to Comrade Tito. That was back in 1974 (smiles). So I am very proud for participating in that activity as well, where during this big event we were all together, both Serbian and Albanian children, and we were all working hard together to make this celebration successful, we respected each other, held hands. It wasn't like {shows with her hands} – he is Albanian, I will not offer him my hand, or – she is Albanian, I will not speak to her. We had outstanding choreographers who would always say – as Comrade Tito did –, “Brotherhood and unity must be cherished as pupil of one's eye.” So we behaved well and were brought up to appreciate and respect each other.

Alisa Fejzi: What were the main challenges for youth in Yugoslavia?

Nevenka Rikalo: (sighs) Challenges... You know what, it was interesting, I've already said that, but whoever was interested in going to school and get educated, they were able to do that, there was a free education system. I speak about positive things, because these positive aspects directed people to live well and have a much better life than they live today. But you shouldn't think that at that time there were no religious sects, nor drugs, rape, murder, bad things existed, but they happened to a much lesser extent compared to today. I think this is a consequence of people's isolation, parents are too busy today, they don't spend enough time with their children, they don't talk with their kids, and they are not monitoring them to see what their children are doing. This is a great challenge nowadays, and children can easily stray from the right path, instead of getting educated and gaining trust with parents and among their friends. For us, doing drugs was a big challenge. It was like – let's put Valium in wine or Coca-Cola, to see how it reacts.

We all tried it, but immediately realized that it wasn't that interesting for us. That's because we all had some other activities, where you did sports or had to go to folk dances, or exercises... At that time we had youth meetings as members of the Communist Youth, later we would become members of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia. Can you imagine what it meant to be nominated for membership in the Communist Youth? We had to be suitable, good students, respectful of each other, we weren't allowed to fight, make problems, to lie or steal. One had to be positive in all aspects in order to become a member of the Youth. Later I became a member of the League of Communists although it didn't mean a lot to me, because I didn't like politics (smiles), I preferred practical work and friendship with people, but I would like it if once again we had this sort of relationship that needs to be cultivated and maintained.

We first started sewing and tailoring training for women (smiles), it was a beginner's course, Violeta Selimi helped us a lot to set it up. She now works in the OSCE, she was our first coordinator, she is Albanian, you see, Albanian again... She helped us to set up our organization, delivered material from Pristina to us, whether it was the material for sewing or knitting or something else, she helped us to start our activities. I can tell you that Igballe Rogova also played a very important role in our work, she is now president of the Kosova Women's Network. She asked us for a meeting to see where we work, what we do, how we do it,

and then invited us to join the Network, which we naturally did. During years 2000 and 2001, we were already partners with Kosova Women's Network. I am proud to say that this was one of the positive steps taken not just by Igballë, but other organizations as well, because it meant extending the hand of reconciliation between the Serbian and Albanian communities.

I would also add that we have very good cooperation with the non-governmental organization Open Door, with Belgjyza Muharremi, a woman who leads this NGO. We organized workshops that promoted women's human rights with her as well. We also had numerous activities with women and with youth. While working during these 15 years, which is a long period of time, we thought about how to solve the many problems that our communities face. In the beginning, around the year 2001, the biggest issue was the preservation of women's health. There were also numerous attacks on the Serbian community. Thanks to the support from the organization Kvinna till Kvinna, we founded health centers in the villages, where we brought doctors who carried out medical examinations and check-ups of women living in these villages. Then we organized workshops for women to educate them about prevention and ways to preserve their health.

We monitored the state of their psychological health, because year after year, women's health was jeopardized because they constantly lived under some kind of pressure, with tension, questioning what tomorrow will be, without financial support, in a closed environment where you do not have a normal flow of information. Living in this kind of isolation and under constant stress – fearing that the bus you take will be attacked, every step you take is always followed by KFOR's escort, there is absence of doctors, lack of medication – all that greatly affected women's health.

Thanks to Kvinna till Kvinna, we founded five health centers in cooperation with the directors of health centers from the Serbian community, and brought doctors who would conduct medical examinations of these women. After check-ups, women would receive prescriptions for medications, so we would help them to get their therapy, whether from Uglar, Kosovo Polje [Fushë Kosovë] or Mitrovica, but these women were finally provided with the medication they needed. Dr. Zorica Jović paid special attention to the misuse of tranquilizers, because we noticed that there were many women seeking drugs like Bromazepam and Bensedin, or some other medicine that would make them more relaxed and provide them with better sleep. Afterwards, we paid close attention to diseases such as cancer of the uterus, breast cancer, diabetes, and other insidious diseases that are caused by stress and irregular controls of the doctor.

Believe me, this work with women from rural areas was not an easy job. We had to adjust the time of our visits and organize every activity in accordance with the busy schedule of rural women. Not to mention that these women live in areas where they do not socialize much with each other, they only have one or two friends. So, when you invite them to a meeting with fifteen other women, there was a problem to engage them to speak openly. Naturally, in the beginning we experienced many problems in organizing them, having them open up, so they could talk to each other and have their say, this process was quite difficult and long. We needed around seven-eight months of constant work with these women in order to

secure their trust, so they wouldn't believe that we think something bad or offensive about them, or that we are with them only for some kind of personal gain.

It often happened that if a woman tried to find out more about some disease, other women in the village ridiculed her. They think in this way, "Oh, yes, she's surely sick of this or that disease because she's asking about it." If you say that you have some kind of medical condition, the whole village would find out about that, whether you have high blood pressure, heart disease or something else. Being sick was considered shameful for women, especially if they publicly talked about the disease they were suffering from. So we tried to find out more about them as unobtrusively as possible, through our questionnaires and analysis, tracking the state of their health and beginning to open them up, encouraging them, making them open for discussion. Through our conversations with them, we learned that many of them were exposed to domestic violence, both physical and psychological.

Then we started to educate them on how to recognize violence, and how to recognize to what kind of violence they were exposed. For them, it was completely normal if their husband swore at them, slapped them in the face, expelled them from the house, and then allowed them to return, that was considered normal behavior. However, when we started to talk about types of violence, about differences between modes of violence, about sanctions for the oppressor, when we called them to act and protect themselves from violence, they closed up again (smiles). We realized that we couldn't expect from them to act in this straightforward way, but that we had to empower them slowly and gradually.

We also worked with them on their economic empowerment, on strengthening their consciousness and way of thinking, encouraging them to think that they can acquire not only the knowledge but also the confidence to achieve whatever they want. These women were very brave when they sold their products on the local market place, they would sell their cheese, milk or eggs, all the products were sold by them, that's why you can always see more women than men at the market place. However, upon return home from work, they were obliged to give all the profit they made during the day to their husbands. We started talking with them that they should also be the ones making decisions about how the money would be spent. They all told us that they usually have enough money for their needs and activities, but they emphasized that the health of their children and their education always came first. When it comes to their daughters, it's not that certain, they might have the money or not, but for their sons everything had to be arranged – sons are sent out of Kosovo, supported to go to Mitrovica or some other city and enroll in college, they are provided with private accommodation, while all this was not applicable to their daughters.

We started to influence them by organizing trainings so they could start their own business. I can tell you that we have organized dozen women who produced piecrust, honey, some of them received greenhouses, so they could together with their husbands and family members produce tomatoes, peppers, food for the winter and then sold these products at the market place (sighs). The most interesting thing happened when we asked one of the women how she felt when she received a greenhouse, she said, "My husband listens to me better now!" (smiles) That was a sign for us that we had

achieved something, that women's attitudes and consciousness had changed, because if a woman had the economic support and the family support, she would fulfill her aspirations much better than without support or funds.

Afterwards, we focused our attention on the protection of women from domestic violence, where we had many problems for this activity, we never said openly that this protection must be done, but always talked about it giving examples, through workshops, meetings, conferences, exposing them to experiences of other women, so they would recognize their own needs and problems. We are living in an environment in which a woman is hardly allowed to say that she suffers some kind of violence because of the tradition and upbringing, because of the attitude towards violence, it's shameful even talking about it. Although many families do not live in violence-free environment, although many women and children are exposed to violence, it is more likely that the community will blame the woman for it, saying that she is not able to organize a peaceful family life, that it is her fault if she is abused, that a woman has to be obedient. Women here never had support, and even when some of them reported that her husband was abusing her, or the husband's father and brothers, she would never get support from anyone, not even from her own parents, for the parents thought that she is a daughter in someone else's house and that she has to behave in accordance with the rules determined by the family in which their daughter lives.

Seeing that we were getting results with the women (sighs), we launched an initiative to work not only in Uglar, not only in the area of Kosovo Polje [Fushë Kosovë], but also in other areas and with other organizations, like the NGO Our Home from Novo Brdo and the NGO Luna from Priluzje. We created a coalition with these organizations to defend women from domestic violence. We became recognized in public as organizations that can provide advice and help, so in 2009, we opened an SOS counseling line and I can tell you that we had a lot of success with that. We had a lawyer and a psychologist who provided the legal, psychological and social support to women who reported violence and asked for protection. We were also able to establish cooperation with officials – with the Kosovo Police officers, people from the Social Welfare Services and others, who became regular visitors of our workshops offered to abused women.

During 2013, we had six workshops with women from the Serbian community in the rural areas, where we talked about the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence and also the legal mechanisms introduced by the Government of Kosovo that can be used to protect them. When it comes to protection of these women, our results are best seen through services we provided them, so to speak, we informed and advised them how to protect themselves and what resources are at their disposal. Believe me, even though they came voluntarily for legal and psychosocial support, hardly any of them decided to get out of this cycle of violence. But we employed other methods for empowering them as well, like working with them within their communities...

As I said, during 2013, we organized six workshops with women from rural areas to help them recognize domestic violence. Officials from the Centre for Social Welfare Services and representatives of the Kosovo Police were invited to participate in these workshops. We didn't call representatives from the judiciary

because women were wary of lawyers and judges, given the fact that the process of divorce usually is such a difficult period that women rarely go through. We wanted to help them with advice so they would gain enough confidence and decide by themselves whether to divorce or not. Basically, we strengthened their awareness of the fact that they should not tolerate violence, that they must demonstrate understanding, they must not fight, not raise tension but calm their husbands down, and gain the support of the children against domestic violence.

Particularly, this was well received by the people of Uglar, because when we started to organize such meetings, we were meeting in a café, it was a men-only café where only men went, the women didn't go. You can imagine when we organized our first meeting, all the women from the village came, and then the men said, "Look, all these disgraceful women entered the café. Who knows what will they talk about so they can preach to us when we get home!" (smiles) Men had this philosophy that the café was their exclusive meeting place for gathering and sharing information, and that a woman's place is at home. Eventually, they accepted our workshops, meetings, visits, excursions, our frequent travels to Pristina and visits to the Network [Kosova Women's Network] and other organizations. Later they said that they no longer knew where their wives went, that they have begun to disobey. They realized that they needed to change the situation.

These women were about 30-40 years old, this generation was very resistant to change, and we are not even talking about women my age, I'm nearly 60 years old. These women already had the mindset that one should not change some things, I was always for it, why not make some changes, because any change, whether good or bad, brings a new experience, a new challenge. So, we broke this prejudice, this stereotype that only men should be in café. Now it's completely normal when we organize a meeting in a café, nobody reacts, I consider this our success, because in the beginning we had to beg women to come to the meetings, now we just say when and where the meeting is scheduled and they come.

In addition to the protection of women against certain types of domestic violence, we realized that the young people are exposed to violence too, peer violence among the youth. [We realized] that they too have their own problems, that they have too much spare time, that their life in rural areas is very poorly organized, that they don't have normal conditions like we had in earlier times, for example, to be able to play sports or to be socially active. You don't even have a community center in a village, health centers are usually in private houses, sports fields do not have cover, you don't have a balloon hall where sports activities can be held indoors. Only four years ago, the village of Begren got a balloon hall, where displaced persons from Kosovo are accommodated in social housing.

Next, we conducted research with young people and we noted that they also don't recognize certain types of bullying among young people. In order to find out what interests them in the first place, we asked them to fill out some questionnaires. They said that they were interested in gender roles, sexually transmitted diseases, early pregnancy, early marriages, they didn't distinguish between sex and gender, assertive behavior, not to mention some other activities that young people would like to undertake and how they could organize them. Thanks to the enthusiasm of these young individuals, we formed a group

of boys and girls who were interested in folk dances, as was I, so now they practice folk dances on a regular basis. This year they participated in a competition in Bulgaria, and they won the first prize (smiles). The problem with young people now lies in the fact that they have too much free time, they're going to cafés, they smoke and drink a lot, they gamble... Thanks to the new laws, now it is illegal to gamble in the vicinity of schools, and selling cigarettes to minors. We noticed that these laws are largely accepted, young people resisted it a little, but they should understand that this system of values should be nurtured and respected.

During this year, 2014, we held three multi-ethnic workshops for young people. We invited youth from Pristina, Gjilan and from Serbian communities – from Novo Brdo, Priluzje and Dobrota, from the municipalities of Kosovo Polje, Pristina, Gračanica, Novo Brdo and Vučitrn [Vushtrri]. These three multiethnic workshops showed us that these young people faced common problems, whether they came from rural or urban areas. They all recognized that they lack internet and computer science workshops, that they don't have proper labs for physics, chemistry and biology in schools. They noted that they have a lot of free time, especially young people from the Serbian communities, that they can't use tennis courts or organize other types of sport competitions. If they want to spend their time differently, they need a place where there is a cultural center or sports field. When we asked what we could do to help them, they proposed that they themselves would write a letter addressed to the Ministry of Education to provide them with the means that would improve their skills and knowledge. They asked the Ministry for indoors toilets in schools, for running water in school toilets, so they don't need to use outdoors toilets anymore. They also complained that school premises are not decorated, that they're freezing in schools due to lack of the wood for fire and steam heating...

So, this was the first meeting and exchange of views between Serbian and Albanian kids, what do they do in their free time and what objections do they have to the educational system. When we asked what they would like to organize, if visiting the fortress in Novo Brdo or some other place, just to get a little more acquainted, to create a friendly atmosphere and talk to each other, one girl asked, "Why don't we make a trip to Serbia? We have never been to Serbia." That question caught us unprepared, I looked at Sevda Bunjaku from the association Calabria, she said to me, "Nevenka, I am shocked that children want to go to Serbia, I'm very surprised" (smiles). I thought that we would organize an outing in Kosovo, visit the fortress or take a walk in Pristina, something, however, a colleague with whom I usually work said, "Why not? Here, I have a suggestion." I say, "Well, come on, say it." "We could go and visit the monastery of Dečan [Dečani], the Patriarchate of Peć [Peja], Prizren and other places, the *kulla*³ in Djakovica [Gjakova]... We could make this round trip and see both Serbian and Albanian values" (sighs). The kids were thinking, then I said, "OK, let's do it this way. You go home, talk with your parents and decide if you want to take a tour in Kosovo or to go to Serbia. If your parents decide that you should stay in Kosovo, we'll stay here." But then, that little girl that initially asked the question said, "I'll tell to my mom and dad that I want to go to Serbia!" Then I spoke with my colleagues Beti and Sevda, and they said, "OK, let's hear what the

³ Traditional, fortified Albanian house, tower.

parents say.” We joined another organization, the NGO Partners in Action, which is also led by Sevda, based in Gijlan. She said: “I will take the kids we can go, but only those who have identity cards.” Sevda Bunjaku said, “Not only identity cards, but only those who have the consent of their parents will be allowed to cross the border” (smiles). When we talked with the parents, the parents gave us their consent, and we organized the transportation and went for a day to a place called Prolom Banja, where there is a natural phenomenon called the Devil's Town. Now I'm sorry that I haven't brought photographs with me to show you, I have photos from that trip where all the children were together, went together to the mountain and the columns that nature has made, with a stone at the top that stands like a kappa {shows with her hands}. So, we had that trip together and experienced that if we want to change something, we can do it together, we can make decisions and work together to improve our lives and build peace. Fifteen years is a long period of time, not only for Albanian and Serbian communities, we should continue along the same direction. It's not nice to live either in isolation or separated from each other.

In September [2014] our organization Hand to Hand organized a workshop and invited representatives from the Center for Social Work Services, the Kosovo police, the Agency for Gender Equality and the Office of the Ombudsperson. Many representatives from other non-governmental organizations that are engaged in protecting women from violence and promotion of women's human rights also participated in the workshop. We organized this workshop to ask a question, “What happens after women leave a safe house?” We talk all the time about issues regarding the accommodation of Serbian women in shelters, although we have had excellent cooperation with the NGO Liria, which had a safe house in Gijlan. In previous years, when we asked several times for accommodation of Serbian women in safe houses, there was an issue regarding how victims of Serbian nationality would be accepted in an Albanian environment.

Thanks to Nazi [Nazlie Bala] who ran one of the safe houses and who openly said, “Nevenka, obstacles are huge for every woman who comes to us. First, the change from a Serbian to an Albanian environment, whether your community approves the housing, the second question is whether my associate who provides legal and psychological help knows Serbian, the question of what'll happen if we put Albanian and Serbian women who were subjected to violence together, will they respect each other... If we were paying even a little more attention to the Serbian woman who stays with us than to an Albanian woman, that would be discriminatory. I would not like to have such problems.”

So, we advised women who have similar problems not to leave their homes and go to a safe house, but that there was a different way to fight back. This was done with the help of the media and the community itself. We often held meetings with men and village leaders and talked with them about penalties and how to influence husbands who beat their wives. Naturally, we didn't make the names of the victims public, or said here is a husband who beats his wife, but we talked about what sanctions are and how to use protective orders, restraining orders... This resulted in a change of awareness among men, not as much as we would like, but there were changes.

I can tell about one particular case about a man and a woman who were married for almost fifty years. This grandpa is an alcoholic and when he drank, he took a stick and chased the grandma through the

yard or inside the house to beat her up. Once I saw that he got mad at her, cursed her, so she left the house, silent. I arrived at that moment and said to him, "You know what, if you don't calm down right now, I'll call the police and report you because you're psychologically abusing your old wife." He told me, "Who are you to get involved in my life and what I am doing? She's my wife, this is my garden, this is my house, I can do whatever I want!" I said, "You cannot, and I will call the local police." He came, arrested this old man and put him in prison to sober up (smiles) and when he realized that someone could report him, he calmed down. Later this woman told me that he's not beating her anymore, that he just curses her and that she can stand it. I told her, "You don't have to suffer anymore, just tell him that you will call me and I'll report the violence."

This story spread out throughout the village and I was particularly surprised when a woman from Priluzje who attended one of our workshops told the meeting, "I said to my husband, 'When you start yelling at me, I'm going to call Hand to Hand and then you'll get what you deserve! You are not allowed even to yell at me!' He asked me, 'How am I not allowed to yell at my own wife?' 'You cannot because it is psychological violence, I am going to tell you what types of violence exist, they told me about it'" (smiles).

There is a change of awareness among these women, but they still cannot stand alone behind their standpoint, but say, "Now I'm going to call Hand to Hand!" (smiles). I was very glad because I thought that after working for three years I didn't see any change in women. However, when some of them say something like this and when you realize that they're now speaking up publicly, in presence of other women, then it is a great satisfaction for me. Talking about violence you suffer from, about physical torture, or when a young husband doesn't permit his wife to even visit her family, when he devalues her economically and decides the amount of money she's allowed to spend, all of this is really hard to cope with (sighs).

Alisa Fejzi: We have seen that you had a lot of success with your organization, what are your plans and dreams for the future?

Nevenka Rikalo: I can tell you this, Hand to Hand has developed into a serious organization that works with women thanks to the Swedish organization Kvinna till Kvinna. We are very thankful for Kvinna's support, for the support of Violeta Selimi, for the meetings at the Kosova Women's Network, building contacts with other NGOs, whether it was Aureola, Open Door or Motrat Qiriazhi, Marta Prekpalaj is a very dear person, although she lives in Has,⁴ I love to see her and talk to her... These activities opened us many doors and gave us the strength to fight together for the promotion of gender equality laws, and now we have the mechanisms to achieve it. Violence as violence is just one link in the chain of gender inequality, we also need to think about the position of women in politics, in education, in health care, the economy. The Law on Gender Equality opened doors for the possibility that we can work together with Albanian organizations in the promotion of this law, we have already started, and prepare joint activities of

⁴ Mountainous, isolated region in the South-West of Kosovo.

Albanian and Serbian women so they can present the status and problems of all Kosovo women. Thanks to this latest project supported by the Kosova Women's Network, we're now working on the promotion of the Law on Gender Equality, we organized meetings with ninety women from the municipalities of Gračanica and Pristina, and chose nine women from each community who will talk further about the problems of women from the Serbian and the Albanian communities. In a few days, we will organize a meeting with the women members [of the Assembly], they will hear the problems from both communities and then make a joint activity to see how these problems can be solved. This is my biggest wish and dream, to work together with others on improving the position of women in both Serbian and Albanian communities. I'm sure we can do it, if we sit together and talk, exchange experiences, make decisions and through legal mechanisms force others to listen to us, so we can improve women's position in our communities (smiles).

Nevenka Rikalo: When Albanians left Kosovo in 1999, that was a very strange time, the political situation wasn't good for either Albanians or Serbs. There was enough disunity and intolerance, many friendships and contacts between the Serbian and the Albanian communities were lost. We didn't think about leaving Kosovo. My family especially. My husband was a teacher, he worked at the elementary school Aca Marović, our three children were born here, we raised them here, directed them to the right path in life. Our daughter graduated in pedagogy, both our younger sons have completed secondary technical schools and they all are now displaced. I'm sorry it happened, but no man knows what life will bring...

Since 1991, I worked as a clerk in the municipality of Kosovo Polje, therefore, I was informed about the situation. I had good contacts with people because of the nature of my work, I was working on issuing building permits. Wherever I needed to issue a permit, I went to talk to people about what their wishes were, how they plan to build a house, in which part of their lot they want to build the house. We had our requirements, but we wanted to respect the wishes of the citizens. Until 1999 we had that kind of respectful relationship. After, our neighbors left Kosovo and went to Macedonia. After they left, there was a bad period of time in which their houses were burned and destroyed, but when they returned, we continued talking with them (sighs). Although the situation was very difficult, there have been accusations, like, you took this or that.

One of our first neighbors, he's Albanian, always said that we could go to his house, that the house is in same condition as he left it, not even curtains were changed. That has always been one of the pleasant memories, because it gave me hope that there are people who are still able to trust each other. I felt sorry for the people who have lost everything, but still, they recovered after some time... Some members from these families went abroad, some of them came back and got help, some had the opportunity to build a new house, many of them are now getting better houses than they had. No one can understand how much it hurts and how much grief there is for the memories and what one carries in their soul when they're forced to leave behind everything that took years to build and achieve.

We have experienced the same in 2004 when our family house was set on fire. On March 17, 2004,⁵ we moved from Kosovo Polje to live here [Uglar] and we stayed here. In the meantime, our house was rebuilt. Coincidentally, I was on the panel which had the task to assess the damages, to determine how many people were killed, kidnapped, how many houses were burned, how many extra facilities were destroyed... So, with the help of our municipality and the European Commission we received a new building but before moving in, this new house was also set on fire. The house is still in Kosovo Polje, but we did not go back and now live here as tenants. . .

On March 17, 2004 we moved in this village, and believe me that in the beginning, working in this area was very hard and tedious. In 1999, in Kosovo Polje, life in the community was stimulating, we had the motivation to get together and work on making changes. Since September [1999], when Albanians returned to their homes, whether they came back to their houses or were coming from Pristina, there were a lot of attacks, insults, some unpleasant silence between us, because we needed to meet with these people and talk about what happened. Five women took the initiative to found an association in order to gather women to deal with this fear, which was present when we took our children to school, when we waited for them, thinking whether they will be kidnapped, attacked, because we had a series of attacks, especially from Albanian children when we passed by the elementary school Aca Marović, which once a school for both Serbian and Albanian children. But over time, from 1981, 1982 to 1989, Albanian children were withdrawn from the Serbian schools, and got their education in private homes, for their own safety, such was the policy of the time.⁶ Albanians taught according to Kosovo educational program, we taught based on the program of the Republic of Serbia, so the years were passing, and we were separated (sighs).

I can tell you this, once, when I was escorting my son to school, there was transportation organized to take children from Kosovo Polje to Uglar, it was the 2000-2001 school year, all Serbian children left the school Aca Marović in Kosovo Polje and moved here to the elementary school of Uglar. Three, four shifts were organized in order to accept all the children from Serbian areas, so they could get their education in this old school. When I told my son that I would escort him to the bus, so he didn't have to be afraid of passing by the elementary school and the railway station, where there were always young Albanians who if they knew we were Serbs would throw stones and insult us, my son said, "And you are my big security and will see me out, when you're as afraid as I am." I told him that I was afraid, but still, being together was different from going alone.

⁵ In March 2004, riots broke in Kosovo following rumors that two Albanian children had been chased by Serbs into the river Ibar, where they drowned. While the only evidence alleging the attacks was the testimony of a surviving boy, fear and resentment spread quickly, mobilizing thousands against Serbian individuals and property. A subsequent UN investigation, led by Norwegian diplomat Kai Eide, recounts the events.

⁶ By 1991, after Slobodan Milošević's legislation making Serbian the official language of Kosovo and the removal of all Albanians from the public service, Albanians were excluded from schools as well. The reaction of Albanians was to create a parallel system of education hosted mostly by private homes.

This was that awful period when (sighs) both Albanian and Serbian mothers worried about the safety of their children. We were under constant pressure and tension that something will happen and that we should avoid any conflict. You know about those media campaigns regarding ethnic Albanian children who drowned in Mitrovica, when they accused Serbs for their deaths... That wave culminated on March 17, 2004 with demonstrations in Caglavica and Pristina where protests against Serbs were organized... So, when young people returned from these demonstrations they threw stones and smashed the windows of our house. We had to keep the wooden shutters on the windows, because buying glass and installing glass doors and windows was not worth it any longer. It was scary and the women revolted because we couldn't allow our children to just play in the yard. For example, there was a basketball backboard and the pillar for children to play, and I needed to stay by the gate and look over my son while he was playing, and if I saw Albanian children coming, then I had to rush my son into the house so he wouldn't be targeted. Do you know how much hatred and intolerance was there between Serbian and Albanian children?... Then, finally, four other women and I got together and decided that we didn't want just to talk anymore about how difficult our lives were, and decided to get a little organized, to have some public activism, and that's how we started our work.