

PODCAST: BREAD FOR DRENICA WOMEN'S MARCH

[The interview extracts bring forward experiences and recollections of women who participated and organized the march Bread For Drenica. The oral history interviews were conducted between 2012 and 2023.]

Organizing the march

Edita Tahiri: During the periods when the situation escalated in Kosovo, when Serbian violence began to escalate to unpredictable measures, we organized several protests, among them the Bread March, through which we showed solidarity with Drenica, which was surrounded. A protest that managed to internationalize the issue of war escalation in Kosovo. It was not done in one day, as far as I remember the preparations lasted one week, and we met as an organizing group every day.

Nazlije Bala: I remember like it was today, there was a not so big group, we were a very small group of women who organized marches and different protests in Kosovo. I'm talking about marches and protests that really managed to rock the world, to shake the world. We managed to bring together more than three hundred thousand women in Pristina to organize a march for Drenica. Of course, that march didn't reach its destination, to really go to Drenica because we were stopped on the road. But it succeeded in raising our voice, and not to make them aware, but it really woke the international community up on the killings and massacres that were happening at that time in Kosovo.

Flora Brovina: And a lot of people called me in the evening, “Do you really want to go to Drenica? Can you? Do you dare to?” There were doubts. I am not saying that we wouldn’t go, but after Fushë Kosova there were buses organized by volunteers and they would transport the women. So, we were going to go at all costs. And why, what was the motive? Because a terror against Albanian people began; they would take women and separate them from the men, they would put women and children at schools without food, without medical service, there were pregnant women among them and it was a very agitating atmosphere which encouraged us to do that.

Lindita Cena: At the beginning of March we all know and remember the Prekaz massacre of the Jashari family. They were stranded, you know, they were under the siege of Serbian forces and could not secure food or basic medicine, for which they were in dire need because they were surrounded by police forces. And then it was the Women’s Forum of the Democratic League of Kosovo, which made a call for the mobilization and rallying of as many women and girls as possible, to at least send them some bread and basic medicine to the people that were confined in Prekaz.

Florina Duli: I think there was a lot of spontaneity in the organization... I mean, the white papers protest and the bread protest. They weren’t very... to say very naive because at the time some kind of shuttle diplomacy already began with Kosovo. They would come, I mean the world saw that something was happening here, especially when *Media Unlimited* came and reported on the situation of human rights, which were much more credible than the Council for Human Rights and LDK, since they were internationals. There was the international Red Cross, the Federation of the international Red Cross, the United Nations Organizations, although they weren’t very constructive at the time in relation to Albanians. However, there was some sort of breakthrough of internationals in Kosovo and there was an increase of interest by the international media in Kosovo. Since ‘90, ‘91 and lantern on, there were journalists that regularly followed the situation in Kosovo.

And then that’s what happened, I mean women were always considered as... I mean a women’s protest was considered less dangerous, compared to a protest where men participate. Since women were always seen as more peaceful, less dangerous, that don’t carry guns, that don’t cause turmoil. So, that was it. The first protest was with papers, the second one with bread for the mothers and children of Drenica. The bread protest actually happened at the time when Drenica was totally isolated from the rest of Kosovo, and our main concern was, I mean for the people in Pristina, was how to access them, to supply them with food as much as possible. For example, how could the women who were due to give birth come and go into labor outside of Drenica? Since there were no medical services there, what would people who needed dialysis do? And we had long discussions about all of this with the international organizations, and with each-other, so there could be a larger sensitization for this bread protest to be organized and we got on our way to Drenica.

Albertina Ajeti Binaku: So according to RTP [Radio Television of Pristina] at the time, and the written press, we found that the families in Drenica were surrounded at that time, they had no food and no access to it, children were left without food. There was a mobilization of the whole population in Kosovo. And during conversations, “There is a protest tomorrow for this reason...” And it was decided to protest peacefully, to take a loaf of bread in our hands and walk towards Drenica with the goal of giving the bread to families who were surrounded by Serbian forces at that time. There was no tendency to give it a political connotation. The idea was to give it a more humanitarian connotation, because families were surrounded for days and weeks. They didn’t have the freedom of movement, I mean, to go out and buy food and other basic things. And this was it. I mean, we, as mothers, as women, empathize with the mothers of Drenica at the time, who had no food to feed their children. And on the other hand, maybe to appeal to the then-authorities to allow humanitarian aid, food, clothes and other things that they needed, to grant them the opportunity to at least receive help... to allow access to the villages and reach those in need.

Mevlyde Mezini Saraçi: We started off because it was a main point to meet in Pristina and begin walking to Drenica. And we would start off from Pristina. We were on our way, but they stopped us at Gjakova’s exit. We were organized with a car and as soon as the police stopped us... they knew our next move and they received information about the bread march. So, every activity we did outside of Gjakova in an organized manner, they tried to suppress it. But unfortunately, none of us from Gjakova managed to go to Drenica, because they stopped us from the start.

Teuta Bekteshi Ajeti: There was a problem then because we planned to organize a protest to join the women’s protest in Drenica. For us in Kumanovo, it was problematic to organize, and we had a discussion at the Naim Frashëri school, with the principal of that school so we could organize, not in the street because the police wouldn’t allow us, but to do it at the school, you know? To have a protest within the school. What happened? So we organized all the villages, the girls, the chants and everything we gathered to hold a protest, and for everyone to join. But, there was a problem because at 11 PM the police reached out to me. And they said, “You organized it,” so, “you planned this organization.” But it wasn’t a problem that we organized it, but they pressure the school, and at 12 or 1 AM, the school’s principal informed us that it was canceled, without letting us know at all, you know? That the protest was canceled, without asking us at all. And there was a big chaos then, we were revolted, people from the villages came and we gathered, but we didn’t have an organized protest, it was sporadic, a reaction with parts, you know? An organization as we planned it.

Securing bread

Igballe Rexha Jashari: They would bring the bread loaves, so, they absolutely did, you would see all the bakers holding bags, so... the solidarity was at a maximum, at a maximum. It could be something someone had or they thought would serve the greater good, everyone would do it without hesitation,

and the distribution... you could see the bread loaves kept on coming, even more than were needed. All of them, we said we'd organize the protest with bread, so even the women who came from different parts got bread at the bakeries, so there was enough for all the women. I'm talking about the Bread for Drenica protest, the war had begun, and Drenica was actually an area that was more isolated than the others.

Edita Tahiri: In fact when me, Sevdije and Edi discussed it, we had a few ideas. There were ideas to use some kind of element that would characterize women, but various analyses led us to the conclusion that we should not do it to identify women, but to do it to identify the purpose. The motive was the lack of food, medicine and hygienic supplies, so out of these three we saw bread as a more powerful symbol with a greater impact. This is how we came to this conclusion. That was a very large organization, as I told you LDK was organized throughout Kosovo. The bakers were part of the movement, so all of them were activists, and it was easy to knock on the bakers' doors to... tell them how much bread we needed. Then, since we failed to reach Drenica due to the obstacles, we didn't end the protest there, we went to, at that time it was not the American Embassy but the American office, it was opened in January of '96, we handed a letter through which we sought more American engagement. Then we went to the bakeries and returned the bread.

Vjosa Dobruna: I have to admit that it was my idea to not go only with bread when it was sieged, but to go with a package of pads, to have them with us. But after the women of political parties discussed it, the next day before leaving, they said, "No, we can't." Because we went to buy pads... "We can't, we can't!" Because talking about sexuality or reproduction, or any other women's issues, was almost shameful. So, they didn't allow us, it became a sort of mood that if we turned the protest like that, we would distract from the primary goal which was to free Drenica.

Florina Duli: I bought it myself and I think everyone... people had them and the bakeries gave them away, but there were others who bought them as they were leaving, since we knew that we would... you can't imagine the level of solidarity at the time, it's indescribable. Back then we didn't even think about the monetary aspect of the activities at any point, there was always a source. Now when we think about any initiative, we think about where to get the budget for a banner, for this, for that. Back then, it was very spontaneous, and thinking about where to get the means to organize it was the least of our worries, there was a lot of it, a lot of solidarity between people, but also personal investment of people in whatever.

Flora Brovina: The March was thought out a little differently by some friends, regarding it being more feminist, but I didn't think so, I don't know, I won't say it here. For example, some wanted to have hygienic products and that didn't fit with our mentality, it didn't. That's why it was enough to have bread and bandages or something, but not that.

Lindita Cena: We got the bread discreetly because they, actually the protest was announced, they knew that we, they knew why we were going to Prekaz. But we had to wait for it to become dark and we got it at some bakery where we were regulars or someone else provided it, and each of us had the duty to have a loaf of bread, since the symbolic goal was to go to Drenica with bread in our hands. We secured it in whatever way we could, in discretion, without being noticed. I secured it through my landlord of the apartment where I lived. So, through them, I asked to borrow bread from them.

The march

Florina Duli: When we started off we thought we would arrive although until all of us got together, it was tiring, since we gathered that day at what they used to call the Old Train's station, near the American office and we were on our way to Fushë Kosova, and of course they didn't let us... I remember they stopped us right where *Deloitte* is now, where the British Embassy is in Fushë Kosova, it wasn't a highway back then, it was only a main road. The police got in front of us and actually in agreement with the leaders, we decided we had to go back because it wasn't worth it, since resisting them all the way to Drenica wasn't something we could do. The march's purpose wasn't only to send the bread, but more about the impact it had in international media, so we went back. I don't remember very well that part and if they used teargas or not, since it's very hazy to me...

Gjylshen Doko Berisha: I remember that protest, me and the other women going to Pristina from Gjilan, but I went earlier being one of the organizers, the other ones came in different ways, by private cars or by bus, and I remember when we started off. The beginning, I was at the forefront, in the beginning we wanted to see if we could take some steps or if there would be any obstacles. We started off from the American office, and the main road, and of course, we were followed. And then we, the women, marched, we didn't ask for help from the men but they stayed on the sidelines, just in case. And we really wanted for it to remain a unique protest.

Lindita Cena: The protest was organized on March 16, 1998. We planned to start the march in Dragodan, at the American Embassy, there were a great number of women and girls, who... each of us had a loaf of bread and medicine in our hands, hoping to reach the families confined in Prekaz. So, at the very beginning of the gathering there were various provocations by different people. But we did not stop. So initially, the march started in Dragodan and at some point when we arrived by Fushë Kosova, near the Agricultural High School there, so throughout the march, we had people following us with cars that had Serbian plates. They provoked us, shouted at us, they tried to scare us or... but we did not stop, we continued marching, we did not shout back at them because we knew very well why we were going there.

Albertina Ajeti Binaku: I know that we walked from the city center, I don't exactly remember where from. But, we continued until... back then there was the Show Restaurant where the UN offices are located today, near Jysk, and they stopped us there. The number of attendees was very high, there

were so many women. I remember that in the first row there were, I mean at that time... We held the loaves of bread up high as a sign of protest, I mean, to communicate, "Allow us to proceed because children, mothers, families need food."

And I know that we were, I mean, there was a queue and the police forces were watching us from both sides. When we reached that point, they didn't allow us to proceed any further. The organizers asked for negotiations, but they didn't want to. And they told us in a domineering way, "You have to return, otherwise we cannot risk it because something might happen to you, we cannot protect you..." But, they didn't allow us to go. I mean, we went near the part where there are the shopping malls, on the way to Fushë Kosova. They stopped us there and made us go back. There was a high number of police forces.

We didn't... and then to be honest, at that time those women who were part of the organizing team, I know that they discussed it and they decided to go back to Pristina. But I know that it was a gloomy, cold rainy day and I know that there were so many women, but also so many policemen. There were no men, at least not as far as I remember. And when we discussed and the initiative was explained to us... I mean, I am saying again, because if men were part of it, it wouldn't have the effect that we wanted it to have at that time. I mean, the idea was for us who were mothers, women and weren't engaged in politics, it was a humanitarian matter. There were young girls, but there were also older women. I mean, the demography was diverse. But there were no men, all of us were women.

Flora Brovina: However, we all gathered also through the experience of the Women's League. Women from the Women's League were actually in Drenica that day, only some activists were in Drenica, while most of us, and me as a leader, were here.

Albertina Ajeti Binaku: I remember that in the first and second row there were the women who were part of LDK. And when we reached the part where the police were located, I remember that we attempted, I could say we waited for half an hour, 45 minutes for them to let us go further, I remember that they negotiated, But they didn't allow us to keep going. There was no army, as far as I remember, there were policemen. A lot of them! I don't remember seeing military forces. It was definitely a threat. It is not, we didn't see, I mean, there was no understanding from their side. It was definitely a threat, you could see it from their approach, the way they expressed themselves, how they talked, I mean, with the representatives or the organizers of the protest, it wasn't positive, regarding us continuing further. Those were troubled times, troubled times.

Ajnishahe Azemi: I was at the forefront as I said, all my friends were there, Edita and the others. And I was at the forefront, in front of the police. I mentioned it was very difficult, but we felt proud because we stood tall, in the face of repression and stuff, you could be a boy but you wouldn't know if they would take you to the police station or torture you or your friend or somebody else, that could happen to anybody...

Edita Tahiri: Those of us who were actively dealing with the process of independence and liberation, we also had the obstacles in mind. However, we were aware that the protest itself would be a manifestation with great impact, because the message went all over the world. Actually, when we started confronting the Serbian police, I spoke in English because I could convey the message to the world. While some who were close spoke Albanian and Serbian, I spoke English. Why English? Because the world needed to understand our message, not the Serbian police, because they had decided to stop us anyway.

Gjylshen Doko Berisha: When we were near Fushë Kosova's entrance, the line of police were armed to the teeth and they stopped us and said, "You can't go further!" At the time Edita Tahiri started speaking, she knew English well and she spoke to the police in English. Fortunately, international media outlets were here, they reported the news and it became quite a big fuss.

Flora Brovina: You saw who was at the forefront, anyway, it's not important who it was, I had a different duty and I'm not sure if the women at the forefront, our co-organizers, knew how going to Drenica was organized till the end. We organized a control team to tell us about possible risks on every step of the way, for example, where the patrol was waiting and where we would be at risk, we received information every minute. I was at the edge, I mean I was at the front but at the edge of the line and besides that, I had a hat for protecting my hair and a white trench coat so the informants would recognize me. Informants were also driving around, but they were also among the demonstrators.

One of our activists who was very hard working with whom we also worked on the field, Nazlije Balaj, she took a very difficult task upon herself, along with some friends, she took it upon herself to keep the order, I mean so we wouldn't walk out of order, basically as a traffic cop. They kept order by using a tape so we would resemble civilization and I remember that she carried out this task with honor.

But among us, the real activists were behind us, the ones who knew the field too, we only symbolically presented our subjects sometimes and not proportionally, and when I say not proportionally, I fully mean it and I know what I am saying. At one moment, two students, when they were before the bridge, two students in Dardania, on our way to Fushë Kosova, two students came near me. It wasn't the first time I got informed that a white car was constantly passing by; it was a police car, but I was aware of it and as one of them was telling me something and the other one was close, the car drove by us and hit us. These two students fell to the ground, I stood, but they hit my leg and that injury left consequences, but I didn't fall down.

Our car came quickly and took these girls and took them to the hospital, and I was asked, "How are you?" "Okay" I said. I didn't tell them and to be honest I didn't feel the pain a lot in that rush. And then we continued to the bridge, the police surrounded us and I got informed by these two girls that the people in Fushë Kosova who were mostly Serbs, were prepared to kill us, they got stones and guns and

that they were on both sides of the streets and there would be a massacre. At that moment, I had a dilemma whether if I dared to, would it be a good thing to sacrifice the women with all the will they had?

Lindita Cena: At one point, I don't remember it myself very well, it was a matter of seconds, and one of them drove the car into the crowd of the protesters. From that point on, I don't know what happened, I lost consciousness, I was one of the women who was hit by the car and I don't know, I don't remember what happened afterwards. Next thing I know I was in the hospital, my leg in a plaster cast and there were some people who accompanied me, whom I didn't know, and who didn't know me but...

I was somewhere in the middle of the mob, but as the athletic type that I was, I wanted to contribute a little bit more. We had these red bands, those of us who made sure that the mob doesn't go out of line, the line which defined where the protesters should walk. And we had a red band in our arms in order to be identified, for them to know that this is the line where you should walk and I was somewhere in the middle of the mob. I know that we also held each-other's hand so we didn't get separated. There were also people close to me that got hit too, but my case was more severe since I had injuries.

Gjyshen Doko Berisha: We arrived at Fushë Kosova's entrance, and there were policemen there, but there were provocations along the way. Since I was at the front, I couldn't see them, but other women from the Women's Forum leadership who were appointed to stay at the end of the line and supervise the situation did. There were cars which came and provoked the women, they even injured one and she was taken to the hospital, she was taken from the march and at the hospital.

Igballe Rexha Jashari: I was at the front. That happened somewhere in the middle. When we hear, at that point the mob of people got concerned about what was happening, about what they wanted to do, and... but fortunately it wasn't, nothing bad happened. That woman stood up, she awakened, we, we took them out of the mob, so nothing bad happened. But, that was expected. Personally, speaking for myself, it was expected at any moment, everything that could happen was expected at any moment. It wasn't something you wouldn't expect, it could be a bullet, I mean... but you didn't stop.

The return

Albertina Ajeti Binaku: To be honest, they followed us all the time, but they only allowed us to reach a certain point and then they stopped us, they didn't allow us to continue further. They told us, "Go back, because we cannot assure you that nothing is going to happen. This is war... some things have happened..." Which they didn't tell us about, we didn't know what had happened but they didn't let us continue. And they said, "If you want to continue, you will be responsible for yourselves because we cannot assure you..." I mean, that we could continue up to where we had initially planned to go. Yes, we went back on the same road and then we spread. There was a call for us to scatter, to stay in groups because there was a chance we could be imprisoned and tortured and...

Flora Brovina: We consulted with each-other and we saw that the best thing would be to go back, not to risk anything more. And when we returned with bread in our hands, we decided to give some of the bread to the International Red Cross so we would incite them to offer help to the people, and we sent some of it to UNHCR. We were actually going back symbolically, because some of the women were actually in Drenica, that's what I wanted to say, we were in Drenica. I feel bad to mention some of my friends now, but maybe it will remain an unfulfilled wish their entire life that they didn't participate in the demonstration, but they were actually in Drenica.

Edita Tahiri: The main motive was the difficult situation in Drenica, so they were surrounded by the military and the people were suffering for food, for medicine and other things. There, the first idea was to show solidarity with Drenica, on the other hand to raise international awareness that it was time to stop the war in Kosovo. Immediately after that, after the obstacles that the occupier created for us, we faced Serbian police forces here in Fushë Kosova, we verbally confronted them. We decided to have the next protest in order to continue to make the world react through the voice of women.

Lindita Cena: My leg was in a plaster cast, there was, I'll never forget this one, there was a protest with keys, to go out in the city with keys, so to jingle the keys and make noise. Unable to go out in the city, I went out on my apartment balcony and I did my part. I couldn't stop myself, it was in our blood and we knew the purpose and the reason why we were protesting and it was impossible to stop yourself, even if I wanted to stop myself I... it was impossible.

Albertina Ajeti Binaku: We had developed that feeling of patriotism, the feeling of solidarity, to help each other, the feeling that we were all endangered, not only were they endangered, but we were all endangered. The feeling that somebody who lived in rural areas needed the help of those living in the urban areas.

Flora Brovina: The demonstrations with white papers, the demonstrations with bread and the demonstration for peace which were held in Dragodan later, were the ones that made noise internationally, even prominent newspapers in the world wrote about it and they had a lot of photos and we enjoyed the support from women all around the world.