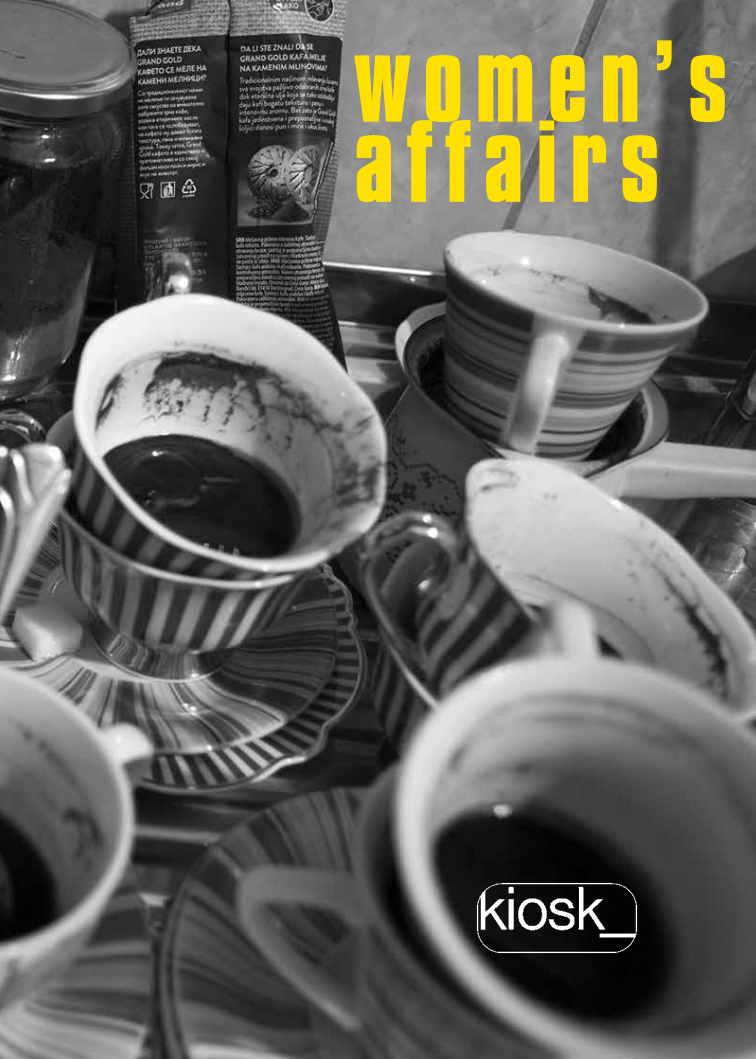
ДАЛИ ЗНАЕТЕ ДЕКА GRAND GOLD КАФЕТО СЕ МЕЛЕ НА КАМЕНИ МЕЛНИЦИ?
DA LI STE ZNALI DA SE GRAND GOLD KAFA MELJE NA KAMENIM MLINOVIMA?
women's affairs
kiosk_

The *Women's Affairs* small book of stories is the result of a series of encounters and conversations with women in towns, cities and villages across Serbia, within which experiences were shared about survival techniques and navigating the gaps of a state benefit system which constantly fails to assist and support life. Hospitality, honesty, wonderful homemade specialties, vital energy and strength were all major ingredients of our informal gatherings full of playfulness and joy. The stories and experiences we recorded testify to the incredible imagination and heroic endeavors of women in hostile environments and the various skills acquired through living and coping. We want to thank to all our wonderful hosts and the dear women we met through this adventure and we hope that this small book represents just the beginning of our joint endeavors.

Heroines

We all know how it goes: women are left on their own, their husbands go, but their children remain, and she is left in a lurch with only herself to rely on. She has to be healthy, she has to be upright and she has to be organized: somebody needs to bring up the children! Women forge their own paths… Kudos to each and every one of them! They're all my heroines.

This is a woman's life.

See you later

He goes like: young lady, what are you here for? I say, the health card for my son. And then he goes on and on about what I need. And I say, I've got it all. So he leafs through all my documents but he's not happy: you don't have your husband's insurance. I say, there is no husband. In that case, he says, the *son's father's* insurance. I say, there's no father either. To which he's like: I've never heard that one before. And I say: you would have, Mister, if you were doing your job properly. I reach for the documents from him, grab them, and I dig out my son's birth certificate. I say: is this my son's birth certificate, is it not? He nods: yes, it is. Is this where the father's name is supposed to be? Yes, he says. Is there a name there? He looks at me and says, you're right, there's none. And I say: but you see the mother's name here? He nods again. Well then, I say, now you know there is such a thing as a fatherless child. Now please, just issue that health card - and I'll see you later.

Fake divorce, part 1

Let's be frank: women don't want to work. They don't want to work simply because they don't want to just make the minimum wage. So, women think of other solutions, which involves circumventing the law…a little. If I'm to work, doing stupid deliveries, for 200 euros a month, I'm better off getting a divorce and collecting welfare. So women go through with fictitious divorces to get welfare, but they still stay within the family to take care of the children, and his parents of course! So they're still trapped. A woman has no chance. She's financially dependent. She's a slave.

Tito - Allah - my late mother

This country has never given me a penny….Only Tito did. Tito schooled me for free, Tito gave me a job for free, Tito gave me an apartment for free, and he gave me stable employment.….And Allah the Almighty….And my late mother. But no one else. I'd been struggling since I was 17, and then finally I managed to get my own thing going. I think I must have educated at least a hundred students. I was the manager, the worker, the supplier, the seller, I was running production, I was even the first aid clinic. I worked 24/7. And I got inspected more than anyone else. Take my word for it, I've got no reason to lie to you now, they'd come at least twice a year. Checking everything. And now I'm in this predicament, I'm on the street. With 38 years of employment behind me. After 38 years of working and paying all the benefits for myself and my workers.

The woods

I've done every job under the sun. Cattle ranching, wood chopping, tree felling, fixing things, any damn thing. All illegally. And I was a market trader. Yes, and I smuggled, too - during the war - cigarettes from Montenegro. Anything, really. And now I'm going from one doctor to the other. I had a stroke three years ago, I'm not well. And that's all there is to it.

> *What rights have women here compared to men? None.*
>
> *No rights. There are no rights here.*
>
> *The mother-in-law may have some rights. After the father-in-law. And the brother-in-law when he bothers to come and visit.*
>
> *Only when everyone else, all the in-laws and others, have had their belly-full of rights, her turn might come.*
>
> *When virtually everyone else has had their fill…*

The story of my life - the husband who took off

There's literally nothing I haven't done. I don't even know where to start! I've pickled vegetables for the winter, cucumbers, chopped peppers, *ajvar*, that's what we call it here, roast pepper chutney. Here, in this very cellar and all that was under the table. It's not as if I had a choice. What was I supposed to do - call the government and ask them to tax me? I'd weave on a loom at home, that

was worth something for a while, but not anymore. I helped out at a tailor's, I helped out at a shoemaker's, I'd do anything to feed those children of mine. I'd wash, fold, iron, clean, do whatever came my way. I have a husband, but here in the Balkans, and especially here in Sandžak, it can just so happen that your husband goes AWOL; he just takes off and disappears for a long time. Mine was one of those. I'm telling you the whole truth. If my husband were here, even if the President himself were here, I'd still be telling the same story. I'm 57 now, with three years of pensionable employment. Three measly years, and eight months! That's it. And when I can no longer work? I don't know, I'll probably hang myself unless someone feeds me. I've fed three children, maybe someone will take pity and buy me a slice of bread and some smokes…And that's the story of my life.

And what do people say in Despotovac? How's life there?

The passport

I'd already been divorced when the opportunity came up for me to go to Switzerland and take care of some relatives' kid. My younger son was 4 at the time, the older 6. Long story short, I had to leave my kids with my mom and go to Zurich to babysit the other people's kid for three months. Truth be told,

that period of coming and going lasted for a while. I had to change passports a few times just to be able to go. I also changed families with whom I stayed. And those people over there are so stuck up and full of themselves, it's a total disaster. They're all from here, but they look down on you. To those kids you'd be their mom and dad, brother and sister, their doll and nanny. You'd have to do everything around the house - babysit, wake 'em up, tuck 'em in, take them to school, bring them back, feed, change, give them baths, everything. But, hey, at least with all that we could afford to take summer holidays.

Fake divorce, part 2

About those divorces: people from over here, from these parts, they often live abroad – and when I say people, I mean *men*. And then they fictitiously divorce…But it's a double-edged sword since they have to hand over their children to whoever's going to get welfare. A single mother can't get financial aid unless the father gives up custody of his children in court. That's the rule. But then we have this boomerang when women are often left completely without access to the children. He says: "Just divorce me fictitiously and I'll do the paperwork, send the children abroad to be with me, it's going to be easier for me to get them papers". What happens, though, is that they get this fictitious divorce, and then he falls in love over there. He falls in love with some German lady and then he takes the children away from the mother. And throughout everything, the legal system never protects the woman.

Fake address

Here, women simply can't get child benefits. But over there where there is a Serb majority, in a Serb village, women get benefits regardless of how many children they have. So in order to fool the system, women would declare their residence in that other place, change their address, register themselves in the other village, and then they'd get the benefits.

Estranged family

- I lost access to child benefits when I started working. And it was a pittance to begin with! I remember, it was 14 euros a month! Just enough to buy a pack of Pampers and some wet wipes, nothing else. It was next to nothing. But then they took even that away from me 'cuz, hey, I had my salary! At minimum wage! 300 euros a month! And, on top of that, in order to get the benefits in the first place, I'd had to declare separation from my parents before the court. My parents had to bring charges against me to show that we were an estranged family and that we could no longer live together as a household, and so now I'm supposedly just living on my own with my children in one separate room and occasionally sharing the bathroom with the parents. We had to hire a lawyer to write it all up for us. "Estranged family" - I'll never forget that bit. I found it simply crazy! My dad explained it to me. He said "it's just make-believe, it's not real," but to me it seemed like kind of a big deal. When the court ruled that I was indeed separated from my

parents, we got 68 documents necessary for me to get the child benefit. And the worst thing is, it was all for nothing. We never managed to trick the system because I lost the rights to those benefits as soon as I started working.

- We had to bring forward charges against my mother so she could get disability benefits. She had to retire, but her pension was something laughable like 110 euros per month, so people told her she could get disability on top of that, but her children would have to press charges against her. She told me: "Well, it's simple, really. You come with me, we go to some office somewhere, and then you kinda sue me". By then I wasn't even registered as a household member, I wasn't living there, but I had to pretend that we'd been fighting and that I refused to take care of her. And that worked.

Are you happy?
Yes, I'm always happy… I always think positive. I've been through a lot, I've cried a lot, but I've stopped doing that. I just laugh now, no more crying…

2,000 eggs

Right now I'm working in a laundry. Minimum wage, plus a bus pass within the city limits…pure misery. It's billed as easy work, but the money is awful. I keep moonlighting to survive. I clean a coffee shop before

work, crochet these rabbits with a friend, I work at a florist's once a week where I prepare flowers whenever they have larger orders. I'm on sick leave now so I work in a pastry shop, I bake cakes. Under the table of course. I crack about a thousand eggs in a day of work. Things are slow now, otherwise it would go up to 2,000. You keep a wooden egg in your right hand, then you open cartons, line eggs up and crack them. That way the egg yolk doesn't go into the whites, and you've got to make sure the shells don't fall in. What else have I done? I worked making plastic fishing lures for three months in a garage around here. He promised he'd hire me for real, but he didn't, he was just paying me peanuts, basically. Mushroom picking - I stopped doing it this year. Of all of those under the table jobs the only one I truly like is crocheting, I love making the rabbits.

> *I started doing cookies when I gave birth to my son, first for him, but then people started liking them… I often bake for friends, I give them better prices, and so on… I just don't know how to charge more…*
>
> *I'm a yoga instructor. In my classes people rarely pay their membership – but the most important thing is that they get their exercise and stay healthy…*

Alfaplam

I've got 15 and a half years pensionable working years. I worked in the tobacco factory, then in the Alfaplam factory,

then in an amusement park, I was a waitress and all kinds of things, and I've worked in the care sector for the last 15 years. One nurse helped me; I'd get jobs from her first, then from the agency. The agency doesn't register you, they take 30% of what you make, plus the woman where you work pay them on a monthly basis. I always go for the fixed salary because nobody wants to pay you by the hour. Under the new rules, one hour should be 4 euros, but nobody will give you that. Salaries around here are 250 euros a month max. If you pull 12 hour shifts, it can go up to 400, maybe 450. 24 hours would be a different story but nobody here will give you that. You work for 15 days, then you go home for 15 days. It's super tough, you can't do more than 20 days at a time. I've always had sick people with mobility issues. You've got to change their clothes, cook for them, you've got to do everything. I didn't have it all that bad. I also had my own family. My husband died, my mother died. Then I have this boy I've cared for since he was 8 months old. His mother brought him once for me to watch him for three days - and that was 31 years ago!

The female beast

In Switzerland I did housecleaning for this female beast. I've never met such a vile creature, she's from around here. She ran an agency, but she was keeping us working cash-in-hand. She'd drive us there, leave us in the apartment and pick us up, and we didn't even see the people whose

houses we cleaned. They were all 300 square metre apartments, luxury you wouldn't believe. Only in one house did we see one woman, she was from Denmark. She was very pleasant, she'd always give us coffee and cookies. Once we helped her take a bed out, and she gave us 20 francs extra. If the beast had caught wind of that, she would've killed us. She paid you whatever she saw fit.

The agency

I was cleaning windows, and he sat down and watched me work. And then he goes: "Let me ask you something: are you working through an agency?" I said "No". And then he asks: "Do you want to work for me?" I said "No." "Why not?" "Because you don't pay enough. No agency pays enough." And he goes: "I'll pay you more. I see you are faster than my women at the agency." There I was earning 30 euros a day, and he was offering 25.

Cytostatics

You go around signing contracts with bosses, and then when you go to the bureau to check things out, or when you need something, your pensionable income is nowhere to be found. Two years gone, four years gone. When I was collecting the paperwork to retire, I thought I had about 25 years, and it turned out to be not more than 18 or maybe even 15. I had to go to work in the printhouse even when I was on chemo, and then when I retired, I had to clean homes and work in the print-

house, on the graveyard shift, taping boxes, packaging, assembly line… Six nights a week. Sometimes 12-hour shifts, 6 pm to 6 am, and then I'd go to the hospital to get cytostatics injected. I've been through all sorts of things, work has been a wild ride.

The bar breaks, but man is adaptable. Woman even more so…

First jobs

- I'm trying to recall the first thing I did. At my Grandma's and Grandpa's in Austria… they were building a house and we were doing styrofoam insulation. I'd cut styrofoam blocks and pile 'em up. And I remember making enough to buy a laptop.

- I was in Grade 5 or 6, my sister Ceca was maybe in grade 3 or 4, and we'd go apricot picking with grandma. You eat and pick, pick and eat, and you get some cash for it. My next job was at a gas station, you know, washing windshields. I must have been Grade 8. I made enough money for a seaside vacation, and I could even tag Ceca along.

- I also think it was windshield cleaning at the pump. Must have been in Grade 7.

- In Grade 8 I was washing the dishes at the local coffee shop, and I made enough to buy me a satchel for school.

- My first job was at a pastry shop in town when I finished Grade 8.

- I first worked on the coast. The day I finished primary school, I came home, grabbed my bag, took the train from Belgrade to Bar, and I went to babysit by the sea.

- When I was a small kid, maybe in Grade 2 or 3, my mom and I would go work in the vineyard for that fellow on top of the hill who was the richest guy in the village. And he was paying me like he would a regular worker! That's the first job I remember.

Furly curly

I started doing people's hair as a hobby. I like to style, to braid hair. I can do all kinds of things with hair… I started doing braids as a kid, first on Barbie dolls, then on myself. I'm totally self-taught. I'd work in hair salons just to have something to do. I learned a few tricks there. I'm working in my mother's firm now. I'm on maternity leave, but I still do people's hair at home.

Purple zone

Up to a certain point, it was fine. It wasn't the only gig I had going, it was fine, comfy and cool. After that though, when I started paying my own bills, living alone, renting a place, it was really hard. You can never make enough. You can't cover even the basic costs, let alone make ends meet. You basically have to choose between paying the power bill or buying something to have in the fridge. That's the turning point. You've got

to figure out if your work that others seem to appreciate stresses you out or makes you feel better. When I started working, I had no idea whether I was in the black, gray or purple zone. It was just an afterthought. After a while I had my own official business as a tailor, 6, 7, 8 years. Doing it with my sister, we joined forces. That's when we struggled the most. The overheads were killing us, income tax, contributions, business fees, all kinds of things. And then the fiscal cash! Lawyers don't have to have it, but a small business like ours did. Of course we had to shut it down. Better keep the money you make to yourself. You don't invest in production or god-knows-what, you invest in survival.

Butter

I can't even dream of butter, that's such *pie in the sky*. Butter is way beyond my pay grade. And then my children ask me: "Mom, how come we'd go on trips to the coast when you worked abroad, and now that you're working full-time, you have your salary, we never get to see the sea?" What can I tell them? Where's that salary of mine? Buried in loans! I had to replace all the windows at home. We went into an overdraft for a year. We were scraping by, that's the word, *scraping*. I couldn't even afford to pay all my bills each month, I had to pick my battles. To take my chances!

The swan

She makes dresses, and I make cakes. It's all under the table. Word of mouth is for me the best advertisement. I worked for two and a half months with some private guy, he'd do cookies and cakes to order. I was registered there. I was promised 240 euros per month, but I was getting 150. He said he'd pay me according to my work. If I worked hard, the pay would be better, and if I innovated, even better. But on payday he said: "You're not working well, your cookies are no good." Once they wanted me to make a birthday cake with the Ugly Duckling theme. I made a swan that was hugging a white duckling, and all around them there were yellow ducklings and reeds. And then the father of that child asked me: "Do you like what you're doing?" And I say: "I do. Each cake is a new challenge for me." And he tells me: "You call this a challenge?!"

Liqueurs

We get the double-distilled base from a man who does a great job, and then we add herbs, and homemade honey. My husband collects the honey, we have 15, maybe 20 hives. Last year we had a drought, so no wild honey. I make liqueurs with strawberry, sour cherry, then there's something called the women's liqueur…it's made with bitter herbs - germander, it's good for the tummy, it also calms you down. You also add yarrow and bedstraw. We go into the hills, where there are no roads or fields; because fields are sprayed with pesticides. I pick straw-

berries, yarrow, germander and wild thyme. Thyme is the best. Thyme liqueur – next time I'll bring some.

> *And where do you do your nails?*
> *I do them at this woman's, she works so hard she doesn't get to lift her head. Of course, all under the table. You have to book two months in advance. When I was doing them myself, I couldn't get the cuticles right; they'd flare up, and when I went cleaning for people they'd get infected, but when I get them done at her place I never have any problems.*

Car wash

I wanted to be a car mechanic. I'd go visit my father in Belgrade, and there was a mechanic's garage right in front of his house, with an automatic car wash. That was the first time in my life I saw an automatic car wash. I was 13, 14 maybe. And I wanted to learn to become a mechanic, but no one would have me. They only took men, no women. I went to ask a car mechanic here, and he said: do you want me to take a rod and beat you with it… Get lost! I had this vision, I wanted to have my own garage with a car wash, so you come to have your car fixed, and you get it back nice and sparkling clean. I just couldn't make it. In Belgrade there were women driving trams, and here they wouldn't let a woman be a car mechanic.

Mathematics

I must be like the tenth generation in my family cleaning houses in Belgrade. Both my mom and my grandmother worked in Belgrade. Maybe I would have done something else if I'd had access to education. My childhood dream was to teach mathematics at university. I adored maths and participated in all kinds of competitions. When I was at the end of primary school, my folks said that me studying maths further wouldn't work but I could study to become a clerk, and work in sales. I told them I didn't want that. I'm a Capricorn, so it had to be my way or the highway. Of course, it ended up being the highway. I signed up for a course for seamstresses although I hated sewing, just to prove to them that when I say something and I set out to do something, I get it done. I paid for all of it myself, finished the course and brought the paper home. I was hoping they'd say: "Now that you've done this, you can go on to do what you always wanted to do." Instead, they said: "Good for you, you have a certificate, you've learned your trade, you need no more schooling." And that was the end of it.

Which of those off-the-books services do you use? Massages seem to be in fashion, but I don't use any of those now.

I work in the factory because I have to, but I do nails because I like to.

Someone says, it's no big deal, just a couple of stitches… And I say, well yes, but those are two very, very long, painful stitches.

I could carve chickens when I was 9. And I knew how to cook…

I made jam with 25 kilos of apricots earlier today. I was done by 8:15 in the morning.

All I keep hearing is: hush, hush, it could be worse. Hush, it could be worse.

Do you remember when they went crazy and started reporting people for moonlighting?

You have to be a lawyer to survive in this country.

My middle daughter got married in a village. She's baking cookies and cakes for money, and she says: I need a lot of cash to start something but if I were to pay taxes each month, I wouldn't make enough to last me even half a month.

Do you sometimes go to visit him?

> *Well, there's no need, he comes here. When he comes here, he sees everyone, and when I go there, I see only him.*

Her husband is also abroad.

Anniversary award

Even after working at the radio for 20 years, I never got my 10-year award because we simply didn't know about it. I didn't get anything for 20 years either because the station was privatized.

> *I went through enough over these last 30 years to cover 300 years. But I'm trying to move on.*

Ginger bread man

I need between 5 minutes and 2 hours for one ginger bread man. I paint them to order. I go to that New Year's fair in Belgrade, where I work… Each cookie in a batch of 25 are supposed to be the same; the first one turns out great, the second one OK, the third one maybe passable, the fourth one - get me out of here! By the 25th I thought I was going bananas. I'm not a factory.

Slovak skirts

The other grandma was a smuggler. She had six children, it was no small affair to feed them all. She'd go to Italy back then. To buy things. And then she'd sew it all into those Slovak skirts, sausages and all kinds of stuff. She'd make, like, these little sacks. And she'd take all that to Belgrade. I think it was after World War II. Mostly food. But also canvas and fabric.

> *We're lucky to be close to Belgrade; not too close, not too far…*

Granny

- Granny is still working. Yesterday she sold 5 kilos of green beans.

-These days I'm planting seeds in the garden. One kilometre and a half and back. Three kilometres. Every second or third day. On Friday it was my turn to pick green beans. On Saturday I went to the fish market. I had parsley, dill, and green beans. I had 15 kilos altogether. Vesna gave me a ride. I sold it all and made some small change. I also knit socks, with 9 kilos of wool. I knit it all and sell it. Little baby socks, hats, mittens, vests, anything really… Before the surgery I could do two pairs of socks a day, working from early morning to late at night. And now I struggle to make a single pair. Now I sell men's socks for 10 euro…

- Granny also does Christmas table decorations, she started doing them wholesale, and sells them all. She cuts yule logs, and makes Christmas wreaths. Before St. John's she goes flower picking, then she makes wreaths, and crafts them nicely. She has to get up at 2 am to make them, they've got to be fresh.

- If I make them the evening before, they wilt. Christmas decorations sell like candy. I have these little bowls, they're red and pretty, and I put a nice ribbon on top. I also sell noodles and nut strudels at the market. I have my regular customers.

- Granny has ideas, that's for sure. She was also making soap. And then she would plant houseleek in these little pots. She'd pick lavender, dry it, and she'd make those little sacks and stuff them. She's good! She also pickles cabbage for the autumn. She sells some, and that covers what she spent to make it for herself. She also picks rosehip and sells it. She goes where no one else goes anymore to pick. And when they are in season, she picks elderflowers and makes juice. And then people say she has no work experience…

- If I were working in a company, I wouldn't have a single day of sick leave. I work every day.

-You also make brooms, Granny.

- Let me tell you what I did yesterday…In fact it's easier to tell you what I didn't do! In the morning I went to the garden for the green beans, then when I came back, I cleaned the wooden stove, and when I had cleaned the stove, I also cleaned the chimney. And then I wiped that chandelier up there. And the hallway, I did it all. I hung the curtains and cleaned the window. All in a day's work…

- Grandma is the best at all these under the table jobs.

That's how we women do it…

Adventure

I always say - things are as good as they can be. Actually, things aren't good but people say, as long as you have bread and something to put on the table, things are good. Those are the rules we live by, at least as far as I know, and I work with educated people, and that's it… As long as you have enough to eat and pay the bills, it's good.

What do you think? How much longer can you keep working?

Bike

I don't have much of a story to tell… I was a single mum, and homemaker, I didn't work anywhere. First my mother got sick, so I had to look after her. After her death I stayed with my father who worked at the co-op. I wanted to educate my son, to bring him up right. When he was just about to start high school, my father also got really sick. He had Parkinson's, so I had to take care of him as well. One thing after the other, these health issues. I had no help from the state, and my child's father wasn't sending any money either. And I wouldn't ask for anything. I had a little something from my father. Not much, but we had a little. Until he got sick, my father would say: "We're going to be fine." It was hard, there were times when I would cry at night. But I had to do what I had to do, so I endured. We pulled it off. I had a

little something, some land from my parents, and I sold it. I made do with that money until my son found a job. Later, I could have perhaps applied for social benefits, but I didn't. I thought maybe someone else needed it more. I can say I had it fine after that. I had these day jobs, digging in the fields. That was even better. Digging! Nature! You can just let loose. They give you breakfast and lunch, you make some money and you have company. There's no digging now because they're spraying. I like to get up early in the morning, get all that done, and then in the evening I turn on the lamp, take a bath, tune in to the TV just for a little bit, and then I read a book. That's so relaxing. I'm fine.

Do you collect a pension?
No, no.
Will you have a pension?
No, nothing, not a penny. I have a son… I hope he'll help out.

Old age

I tell you how much my mother-in-law worked, it's jaw-dropping stuff. She's 83 now, and she worked until Covid… which means until she was 79. She worked in people's houses every day. She was unstoppable. Sometimes I work five days a week, sometimes four. But, for example, let's say 3 weeks back, I worked for 3 weeks non-stop. It's not too hard, you just need a little break, at least a day. Week by week, time flies by.

I'm a care worker, I nurse the elderly and the sick… And I like to make the old folks happy. I always send them a little note. For example, if I go somewhere, like Kruševac, Novi Sad or something like that, I send them postcards.

Minimum wage

- How much is minimum wage?

    - Minimum wage is 400 euros but no one gets that much in Vranje.

- I think they should be legally obliged to pay you at least minimum wage.

    - Service workers work for minimum wage, but here they are not paid that much.

- They pay 300, maybe 320 euros.

    - How come they pay less than the minimum?

- I think they give the legal minimum only in Belgrade, nowhere else… But even then, they make it so that minimum wage includes salary and contributions.

    - Under new rules, you can retire at 62 years and 6 months old. They brought it down. Two more years and I'll retire… Unless they raise it again next year.

- They will raise it…

We can't eat walls

- I tried to go through the bureau to get welfare as a single parent, and I had to get a bunch of papers…

- Did you manage?

- Never…

- Me neither…

- They said I wasn't in dire need. They were like: you have a house, you have a place to live. And I told her: "Lady, we can't eat walls. I have to feed my children…"

- Exactly! And then I look around and see all kinds of people collecting welfare…

- There's also that rule that you get no benefits if you have land.

- Right, the land up on the mountain; that's useless, you can't even sell it to anyone.

- I personally know families who have more than enough money, and they collect welfare. Which means, there's enough for some but not for those who really need it… It's absurd, really absurd, makes no sense at all…

Grit your teeth and carry on, they say… If I gritted my teeth, they'd fall out…

State job

You work from 6am to 2pm, but you can leisurely come to work at 6:30, you get out at 12:20, maybe 12:30. Everybody does it. And it's common knowledge. You can work as much or as little as you like, you don't have to break a sweat or anything. You can sip your coffee for an hour if you feel like it, lie on the bench for a while. You have some leeway. And that keeps you there, there is no pressure. You can be relaxed, you just don't make any money. What they pay you for a month doesn't keep you going longer than two weeks. Twice a year they give you extra pay, at Easter and before New Year. At first it was 200 euros, and then they raised it to 250. That's why people keep working there, but most do other things on the side. They make up for that lousy salary by coming late, leaving early, stealing food from the cafeteria, and working poorly.

> *And the constant: "Stop complaining, it could be worse".*
> *But maybe it could be better.*

The Bulgarian

I'm totally cool with the law, always have been… I've never had legal trouble. But I've done all sorts of things except maybe keeping dancing bears, too bad I never had a chance to try that. I had a puny salary, and so I'd sell all kinds of things under the table. I'd go to Bulgaria

with another woman who was a long-time smuggler. We'd buy stuff at the market to resell it later. Once I bought bras and underwear, and I was like - what am I going to do with these? And then I figured it out! I put all 20 bras on, and a leather jacket. And then I'm at the border. Holy mother of God! And she stuffed her bag full of clothes. Customs officers start checking, and I could barely breathe. But they didn't even look at the bags, they tore the whole car apart, they thought we were smuggling drugs.

I break the law, I'm not a legalist

I'm literally better off being under the state's radar than giving them 45% in tax… If I want to be left with something, literally to just pay bills and have something to eat, I've got to make myself invisible to the state. People pay me to write their essays. I know what it means. I mean, I'm breaking the law. But I'm really not a legalist. Laws are there to be broken. When I go to the pharmacy, I don't have to ask any questions. She asks me: do you know how to use it? I tell her: Honey, I'm the wrong person to ask, I wrote five master's theses in pharmacology! And then I'm supposed to believe in something. That's why I think I have issues with trust. I see all the time what people can get away with. And then I have no trust in anything.

Brain tumour

- My mom is terrified all the time and she has that attitude, like, just be quiet, don't make waves, you'll get through life… except I don't know what that means. You'll get through life or life will pass you by…

    - I have 12.5 years of pensionable income. That's when I worked for Staklo Banat. And then I did all kinds of odd jobs… All under the table… I worked through the youth agency…

- I was also 40 when I went through the youth agency.

    - I took care of a young man with a brain tumour. 10 hours a day, plus Saturdays. And when he didn't feel well, his mother would call me and ask me to come back, so I'd come back. I was making 200 euros a month in the beginning, and later 380.

- I did birthdays - 12 hours a day – on minimum wage… Alone with 50 screaming kids… And one half-hour break. While my boss was pumping her lips.

    - I'd make burgers, pork scratchings, whatever.

- I clean apartments. I have two or three, plus one office. It's all under the table and they all complain how expensive it is. It's interesting, those lawyers I work for, they pay me 8 euros.

    - Per hour?

- Oh no - for two, three hours.

    - How much is it per hour?

- 2 to 3 euros, I think.

- In Belgrade you make 2 euros an hour working in coffee shops.

- If my eyesight were better, I'd work in coffee shops. I used to, 2-3 years ago. Worked in a rock club, loved it. I was making 12 euros per day, plus tips.

- The same in the bakery, you get your money and you have some bread to eat because they pay you on the spot.

- I worked at the EXIT festival. I've been doing EXIT for years.

- And you - you're an artist? Art pays your bills?

- Hardly.

- And you smoke?

- Yep, that's the vice I can't shake off. I don't like it when your addiction owns you, but…

- But you feel like you're not alone…

- But I am alone…

Would you say you're happy now?
What do you mean?
Well, are you happy with your life?

Women's Affairs

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With special thanks
to our gatherings participants:
Nada, Muradija, Jovanka, Agnesa, Duda, Sandra, Sanja, Ajsela,
Una, Marina, Ceca, Atifa, Maja, Ruška, Juca, Bahta, Vesna,
Hajruša, Zorica, Verica, Ana, Maja, Dušanka, Fatima, Srđana,
Sandra, Bisera and Snežana
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Proofreading:
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Photos:
Ana adamović, Jelena Mijić
Collaboration, support and design:
škart
Production:
Kiosk

Print: Standard 2
Number of copies: 500

Belgrade, summer 2024

The text **Women's Affairs** was created as a result of research and a series of conversations organised throughout Serbia within the international project

Figure It Out:
The Art of Living Through System Failures

which involves partners from Croatia, France, Greece, Malta and Serbia. Project coordinator is the organisation Drugo More (The Other Sea) from Croatia.

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or European Education and Culture Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Co-funded by
the European Union

Project is supported by:
Foundation for Arts Initiatives and
Reconstruction Women's Fund

RECONSTRUCTION
WOMEN'S FUND