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Social Work and Domestic Violence in Croatia Through a Gendered Lens: Between Power and Precarity

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the gender-blind perception of the social work profession in Croatia and its relation to domestic violence cases. In the past few years, the media and the public have routinely expressed outrage at social workers for not preventing severe cases of violence against women and children. The shift from state socialism to capitalism in Croatian society has considerably affected the profession of social work and facilitated the defunding and understaffing of the welfare sector. I argue that a more nuanced, gendered approach is needed in demanding prevention work from social work centres (SWC). Most studies on the causes of burnout in social workers have ignored the feminisation of the profession and the gendered implication of their precarious professional position and responsibility to protect and help the most vulnerable members of society. The perceptions of social work by other experts working with cases of domestic violence and social workers themselves are important to comprehend a bigger picture of professional judgment and attributions of blame. In-depth interviews were conducted with experts working with domestic violence, including the police, judges, prosecutors, social workers, feminist NGO coordinators, and women's shelter workers. The feminisation of social work and systemic undervaluing of care work contribute to the easy targeting of social workers while leaving the patriarchal institutionalisation unexplored. For this reason, I conclude that social workers would benefit from class and gender solidary with their clients to fight patriarchal biases.

Key words: social work, domestic abuse, scapegoating, professional judgment, feminism

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1. INTRODUCTION

As a profession in Croatia, social work has undergone significant changes since its first institutionalisation[1] in Yugoslavia in 1952. Communist authorities at the time considered that educated social workers would help resolve social issues, acknowledging that socialist ideology alone could not remedy them (Knežević, Ovsenik and Jerman, 2006). The process of privatisation during the 1990s war and post-war period in Croatia mediated the systemic devaluation and defunding of the social work sector. The privatisation also exacerbated economic differences between those who profited from the systemic changes and the vast majority who did not (Čučković, 1993; Čengić, 1996). Social work was left to deal with the consequences of poverty and joblessness following the transition as well as societal issues during the war and post-war period.

Social work is a highly feminised profession, as most of the "helping" professions are, including nursing and teaching, and is therefore routinely recommended for women, representing the institutionalisation of care work usually performed by and expected of women (Duran, 1988). While their legal responsibilities have expanded, social welfare centres (SWCs) in Croatia have been systemically defunded and understaffed for years (Stubbs and Sertić, 1996; Stubbs and Lendvai-Bainton, 2020). There are too many clients on too few social workers and each case is followed by an overwhelming bureaucracy, which can lead to devastating mistakes or negligence in cases of domestic violence. How the gendered dimension of the profession contributes to this problem is still not sufficiently addressed, as seen also from recent research studies on burnout in social workers (e.g. Družić Ljubotina and Frišćič, 2014; Ilijaš, Štengl and Podobnik, 2021). The focus of this paper is to illuminate the problem of placing the responsibility of preventing and responding to domestic violence solely on the social welfare system through the lens of a feminist perspective. The goal of this article is to argue for a gendered approach to comprehend social workers' current social and political positionality in Croatian society and their responses to domestic violence.

This article is structured as follows: after presenting the theoretical framework and methodology, I start by describing how the position of social workers has changed during the transition from socialism to capitalism. Then I investigate the perceptions of precarity in social work followed by the analysis and critiques of professional practices in cases of domestic violence. I conclude with highlighting the need for social workers' strategic class and gender solidarity to challenge the

[1] A school for the education of social workers was founded in Zagreb in 1952 and it was the first school for social workers both in former Yugoslavia and the whole socialist bloc (Knežević, Ovsenik and Jerman, 2006).

neoliberal, male-dominated stakeholder positions in social work and for a radical reconfiguration of care politics as a vital aspect of a healthy society.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research was conceptualised as an empirical exploration of gender and social work in Croatia with an overarching feminist framework and methodology. The feminist methodology is shaped by feminist theory, politics and ethics grounded in women`s experiences (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002). In this article, feminism is understood as a project to liberate everyone from all forms of oppression, as outlined in the manifesto of feminism for the 99% (Fraser, Bhattacharya and Aruzza, 2019). This is in opposition to the popular belief that feminism is any choice a woman makes, which goes hand in hand with the neoliberal ideology that conflates the idea of freedom with personal choice, no matter what that choice is (Čakardić, 2017). Both social work and feminism have a common interest in reproductive social relationships, including the family, sexuality, social control and social change. Feminist critiques have revealed social work's complicity in sustaining women's inequality by offering individualistic explanations and responses to specific needs and problems (Hudson, 1985). The marginalisation of feminism in social work can be seen as institutional protection against some of the critiques of practice inherent to feminist thought.

Exploration of the contribution of feminism to social work in the UK has revealed that students and practitioners sometimes adopt a simplistic idea of feminist theory for practice, especially in cases of domestic violence (Orme, 2003). This is reflected in the uncritical acceptance of positioning women solely as victims and recipients of social work interventions without agency and further investigation of the causes of oppression and power relations (Orme, 2003). Feminist writings of the 1970s and 1980s influenced social work educators in the US and UK. Coincidently, in the same period, pioneers of social work in the former Yugoslavia were sent to visit the US and Sweden to learn about social services in the West (Freeman, 1990; Zaviršek, 2008). Zaviršek (2008) explained in detail the development of the profession of social work in the former Yugoslavia, established by the communist authorities of that time, and the importance of women founders. I elaborate on her points further in Section 4.

While there is some acknowledgement and consideration of feminist influence on social work in Croatia (Blagojević, 2017; Delić, 2020), the majority of academic literature on contemporary problems in social work relies on gender-blind analysis (Knežević and Butler, 2003; Rajter, 2015; Ilijaš, Štengl and Podobnik, 2021; Milić Babić, Žganec and Berc, 2021). For the analysis in this article, gender is under-

stood as a social construct and the term "women" is used as strategic essentialism (Spivak, 1988) while maintaining that gender identities need to be understood as multiple and contradictory rather than unitary.

Furthermore, in this article, the exploration of social work as work primarily done by women in Croatia draws on Marxist feminist and feminist political economy literature, which explores and criticises the naturalisation of care work as women's work inside and outside the home (Frederici, 1975; Ler-Sofronić, 1986). Kristen R. Ghodsee (2018) illustrates how the transition from socialism to capitalism in the former Eastern Bloc worsened women's economic independence and work conditions. While her arguments are not directly tied to the former Yugoslav region, similar points are made by Kostovicova, Bojicic-Dzelilovic and Henry (2020), who explain in detail how the post-war period, coupled with neoliberal policies, has produced new and extreme forms of inequality, especially detrimental to women. Writing from the US perspective, both Goodmark (2013, 2018) and Jaffe (2021) identify the problem of shrinking state social services and individualising the issue of violence by placing the burden of care onto private enterprises and civil society. Goodmark (2018) advocates for domestic violence to be understood as an economic, public health, community, and human rights problem rather than solely a criminal law concern. She maps out in great detail how the criminal justice system harms instead of helping those exposed to abuse and violence in their homes and their communities.

Jaffe's (2021) examples of non-profit employees and the sacrifices they make for their jobs are especially significant in the context of social work and civil society in Croatia. Both sectors share common threads of feminisation, precarity and understaffing, as well as caring responsibility for vulnerable social groups such as abused victims. Jaffe (2021) exposes what is often referred to as the "labour of love" myth by illuminating all harmful work practices, such as working for free in exchange for experience, unpaid overtime, and enduring poor treatment in the name of "doing what you love" or working towards a good cause. The social welfare sector in Croatia often relies on and cooperates with civil society organisations to meet the overwhelming demand for social services, such as psychotherapy or legal aid.

3. METHODOLOGY

This article is a part of the wider doctoral research project on marital rape and the legal and political systems in Croatia. The research explored the effect of socio-legal structures and power dynamics on the perception, prosecution, and penalisation of marital rape in Croatia. Drawing on in-depth interviews with a diverse range of professional stakeholders, first-hand observation of a court trial and a wide range of secondary texts, I focused specifically on how the institutional and professional practices of police officers, prosecutors, judges, and social workers can either enable or curtail access to justice for the victims and survivors of marital rape. During the data collection period, which lasted from 2018 to 2019, I conducted twenty-five semi-structured, key informant interviews with experts working on the issues of domestic violence. They included police officers, judges, prosecutors, social workers, women's shelter staff, feminist NGO coordinators and academics. The research interviews were conceptualised as conversations to learn and increase knowledge about professional practices regarding domestic violence in general, but at the same time, to probe the participants' understanding of the legal, political and social welfare systems in Croatia. Qualitative interviews are a powerful way of producing knowledge about a social situation (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). The interviews were supplemented with secondary sources, such as relevant research studies, NGO reports, legal commentaries, and newspaper articles.

I approached my interview participants through nonprobability purposive sampling and included only those with expertise in the legal and welfare systems related to the issue of domestic violence, such as police officers, social welfare workers, judiciary members, employees of feminist NGOs, academics, and journalists who have been reporting on domestic violence. The strategic purpose of this sample was to include an understudied demographic of experts to understand their professional and personal views on those who encounter the issues of domestic violence and marital rape in the scope of their professional work. Most of my participants were selected through my volunteer and workplace networks. I contacted different professionals directly, via phone and email. For recruitment purposes, I presented myself as a doctoral researcher and explained the area of my research interest.

My positionality as a feminist and LGBTIQ activist in Croatia prompted me to employ a strategic way of presenting my research to some of the participants. Since all of my participants were selected due to their expertise in the issues of domestic violence and marital rape, they understood the importance of the topic regardless of their ideological position. As a rule, I probed their political and personal positionality before disclosing too much of my own. Every research process inevitably involves some degree of secrecy and silence and their meanings are radically

dependent on the context (Ryan-Flood and Gill, 2010). I used strategic silence to protect the data collection process by not allowing certain participants to know too much about my political positions and risk-provoking antagonistic reactions based on our different worldviews. Some of my participants openly proclaimed themselves as feminists or influenced by feminism and acknowledged the importance of feminist NGOs in Croatia. Feminism has a diverse and rich theoretical and practical underpinning, so I did not assume that their idea of feminism would necessarily align with mine. Other participants would not label themselves as feminists but, to varying degrees, did acknowledge the efforts made by feminist NGOs in the advancement of women's rights in cases of violence. Furthermore, based on the practical guide for researchers and activists dealing with violence against women, I understood the importance of acknowledging distressing emotions present in the research process, as well as of supporting my participants in withdrawing from the study if the feelings became too overwhelming (Ellsberg, Carroll and Heise, 2005). While a mixture of emotions was present during all of my interviews, none of the participants asked to withdraw from the study.

All recruited participants were given an information sheet and an informed consent form to comply with the ethics regulations after obtaining institutional ethical approval from the University of Essex. The interview guide was semi-structured with broad questions focusing on four main themes: concrete examples of domestic violence and marital rape in the scope of the participant's work, their opinions and perspective on the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, attitudes about the influence of the Catholic Church, and perspectives on the role of the media representation of domestic violence and marital rape. As explained below, during data analysis, more subthemes were delineated from the original four themes, such as institutional problems in dealing with domestic violence and marital rape cases. The gendered positionality of social workers in Croatia was a subtheme of the theme (and a thesis chapter) of institutional practices of state agents.

To some extent, my interviews can be considered elite since research participants such as judges, state attorneys, police officers and lawyers hold power-laden positions of authority in society. Acknowledging that there is a prevailing power asymmetry in the interview process, elites and experts as interviewees can overcome the asymmetry with their powerful positions (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). The hierarchical position inherent to the research process can be overcome through reflexivity, by exchanging knowledge and collaborating with the research participants. As mentioned above, since the majority of the participants were selected through my volunteer and work networks, some of the participants knew me personally or we had encountered briefly in the scope of my former work. I did find that this familiarity advantaged me in the interview process by creating a

comfortable and relaxed atmosphere sooner than with the participants I had never met before. These interviews can be called “acquaintance interviews” and are characterised by a more conversational style of interaction (Garton and Copland, 2010). They also involve negotiating multiple identities since the researcher and the participant share a history, and adaptation to new roles of the interviewer and the interviewee (Garton and Copland, 2010). The interviews with acquaintances were indeed more conversational and more co-constructive but I found I developed similar interactions with the participants I had never met before. This depended more on their professional role and the place we met.

To illustrate the power imbalance among interview participants, the meeting with a social worker in her overcrowded and slightly claustrophobic office in one of the SWCs was very different from meeting a former social welfare minister in an upscale café in the centre of Zagreb. However, I approached all interviews as a collaborative process to foster knowledge and understanding, treating my participants as informants. The fact that some of the participants were known to the researcher could have impacted the immediate process of data collection, the selection of participants and the bias of the sample. In this sense, this way of collecting data can be considered a limitation. However, as Garton and Copland (2010) show, acquaintance interviews allow the co-creation of knowledge which is not possible in a more traditional social science interview. The researcher plays an active role in creating meanings, and the neutrality and non-bias of researchers have been extensively criticised, especially, but not solely, by feminist literature (Harding, 1992; Gubrium and Holstein, 2002; Ryan-Flood and Gill, 2010).

I used hybrid analysis to process the data, combining manual analysis with the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software NVivo. I manually transcribed all twenty-five interviews, which were formatted and entered into NVivo. I then created “codes” or coding themes or subthemes that corresponded to specific extracts of text. The codes generated nodes; a collection of references about a specific theme, place, person or other areas of interest (Edwards-Jones, 2014). I derived eight nodes from my data, each containing approximately ten sub-nodes. Using thematic analysis, I derived broad themes from the coding nodes, categorising and analytically reflecting upon them by examining concepts and meanings (Saldaña, 2016). From these themes, I delineated subthemes, one of which is the topic presented in this article.

The quotes from interview participants included in this paper were carefully selected from 25 in-depth interviews, which were transcribed on dozens of pages of text. The selected quotes support the presented interpretations and explanations, and their main purpose was to show how the findings and interpretations emerged from the collected data. According to Patton (2015), the fundamental goal of add-

ing quotations and extracts to a research report would be to show how the findings and interpretations have been derived from the data. By utilising quotations, the informants' views are captured and portrayed in their own words. Due to the limited scope of this paper, only relevant quotes have been presented and edited for clarity.

Early on in my interviews, I realised that my original idea of having named professionals identifiable with their statements in my dissertation, as long as they permitted me to do so, was implausible. Participants from all professions shared their aggravation and grief with their work life, some of them made politically inflammable comments and criticised the state and the Church in Croatia. As a researcher, it is my ethical duty to protect my participants to the best of my ability, so I decided to anonymise all of them, describing them only by a pseudonym and their profession. For the sake of clarity in the text, I have used randomly selected pseudonyms from an online database of the most common Croatian surnames.

4. SOCIAL CHANGE AND THE POSITION OF SOCIAL WORKERS

Following the liberalisation of everyday life in Yugoslavia in 1948, which also marked the breakup between Yugoslavia and the USSR, the curriculum for the institutionalisation of social work was established in Croatia in the early 1950s with advisory help from American experts (Zaviršek, 2008). This was followed by the establishment of social welfare centres across Yugoslavia in the 1960s.

Interestingly, the majority of students in social work after 1952 were men. The reasons for this vary from institutional – changing the perception of welfare work as tied to charities and the bourgeoisie, to personal – the desirability of professional training, a lack of paid employment for men and attaining "symbolic" mobility with a diploma in the case of men already involved in the social protection field (Zaviršek, 2008). However, the feminisation of social work began in the 1960s with the number of enrolled male students rapidly declining due to the increase in job opportunities for men and the fact that the leadership roles in the social welfare sector were already occupied by men (Zaviršek, 2008). This trend continues in the current times. As we can see from the statistical records of 2020, employees in human health and social work activities were, on average, 78.3% women and 21.7% men (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Even more revealing is the statistical report from the Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, which shows that, among those employed in SWCs across Croatia in 2020, consisting of social workers both with bachelor's and master's degrees, 93.7% were women (MRMSOSP, 2021). These statistics point not just to the high proportion of women

social workers employed in the SWCs but the generally low total number of social workers employed at the SWCs across the country. I return to this point in the next section.

The wartime period of the 1990s, following the dissolution of Yugoslavia, created new increasing demands on social work. To answer these demands, the field of social work developed rapidly during the war and post-war period (Knežević and Butler, 2003). It was not only the system that had changed but the prevailing ideology. The transition from socialism to capitalism mitigated the erosion of a socialist legacy that championed gender equality and workers' rights. Entrepreneurs and private companies became the new focus of state protection. In a neoliberal setting, individualising the problem of violence leads to the displacement of collective responsibility and structural oppression (Stringer, 2014). With the state no longer interested in the collective protection of workers' (especially women's) rights and its prioritisation of austerity policies, the problem of domestic violence is positioned as an individual responsibility. At the same time, the burden of preventing domestic violence is placed solely on the social welfare sector by the media on the occasion of tragic incidents involving either women or children (Rajter, 2015; Stanić, 2021).

4.1 The Loss of Collective Solidarity

The idea that the collective solidarity of the previous system in Yugoslavia has been lost in today's Croatia is stressed by social worker Kašić, who has a long experience working in civil society organisations. Drawing on examples from the social welfare system, she notes how the loss of collective action and social solidarity destabilised the social welfare system the most:

> *During Yugoslavia, each social worker was affiliated with a [elementary] school, forming a small team with a teacher, a general practitioner and a school counsellor. When a child enrolled in the first grade of school, they [the team] would work together to determine social anamnesis, and family dynamics. They would meet each child before it entered the school, and they could determine where we needed to intervene or prevent it. As soon as our sovereign country was established, they removed that, and social work disappeared from schools.*

This point is corroborated by the experienced social worker Kovačević, who has been working in the social welfare sector for more than thirty years:

> *A social worker used to be a known person in the field, you knew who your social worker was just like you knew your general practitioner and your on-call nurse. In comparison to current times, this has been lost.*

The transition period from socialism to capitalism exacerbated the social, political, and economic inequalities facilitated by the wartime reallocation of assets (see Lóránd, 2015; Čepo, 2020) and resources that continued in the post-war period (Kostovicova, Bojicic-Dzelilovic and Henry, 2020). More precisely, as Kostovicova et al. (2020: 6) argue:

> "Abundant evidence in feminist political economy studies shows how post-war economic recovery through neoliberal transition reproduces conditions of poverty such as joblessness and restricts access to social welfare for women and men alike. Under these conditions, women's already marginalised socio-economic position leads to increased vulnerability to male control and violence."

As mentioned above, the social welfare system was systemically defunded during the privatisation process, influencing the everyday working conditions of social workers and their clients. Social welfare responses to domestic violence cannot be understood divorced from the political and economic structure of capitalism, especially in the post-war and post-socialist context. In the past few years in Croatia, social workers have been routinely under attack by the media whenever domestic violence and child abuse cases gained negative public visibility[2]. Martinović, a psychologist and coordinator of a feminist NGO, explained how patriarchal conditions scapegoat SWCs, dominated by women, as opposed to the police, which is dominated by men. Martinović explained further:

> *Enormous responsibilities and expectations exceed their [social workers'] capacities. I am not defending them, and the whole structural organisation of the ministries and [social work] centres is flawed. In terms of education, I have always had the feeling that social workers in general and few [male] social workers are positive beings who are simply being swallowed and clogged by the system where they begin to feel powerless and then they start behaving indifferently. Because they want to reach out and attend educational workshops [on domestic and sexual violence], and you see that there are people who are trying and who want to do something.*

Social worker Kovačević explained to me that, when it came to the reform of the social welfare system, all she had seen were gloss-overs, such as new buildings, new computers, or new cars. Nothing concerning the actual work conducted with clients or hiring sufficient workers and investing in continuous training. In her opin-

[2] Social workers are often the targets of public criticism and media scrutiny for allegedly not doing their jobs. For more information, see Knežević and Butler (2003); Kaker (2009); Rajter (2015); Ilijaš et al.(2021).

ion, continuous training was more accessible and available to the social workers employed in the Ministry rather than those working in the centres.

> *We don't have adequate working conditions, and I do not say that as an excuse but as a fact; we work far above any quotas and we don't have enough employed staff. Money is being spent on things it should not be spent on, it should be spent on hiring enough experts in the centres. Not for hiring social workers in the Ministry of Social Welfare, nor for educating experts from the Ministry, because we are the ones that work directly with people, not the Ministry, who is our supervisor and our founder. The Ministry should be, regardless of being our supervisor, our helper and our educator.*

4.2 Inadequate working conditions

The inadequate working conditions and the lack of staff exacerbate the already existing problems of insufficient availability of various social services and their uneven distribution across Croatia (Knežić and Opaćić, 2021). Social workers in Croatia tend to focus more on administration and closing an appropriate number of cases than on the depth and quality of counselling provided to their clients (Rajter, 2015). Kovačević corroborated this point:

> *I've noticed, especially among young [female] colleagues who come straight from university, this tendency to prioritise administration and paperwork more than getting through to their clients and talking with them.*

Social worker Kašić told me that, because of the strain placed on the social welfare system, social welfare centres collaborate and work with a lot of civil society organisations:

> *Social welfare centres in Zagreb have had long-term cooperation with [civil society] associations that provide counselling services, schools for parents, psychotherapy, etc. Those associations are crucial to the centres, but again there is the problem of NGO funding. At one point they [social welfare centres] rely on the help and the next year you don't have that help anymore.*

The precarious funding of the NGO sector (Puljiz, 2001; Bežovan, 2003) means that funding is often provided for the duration of an approved project but once the project ends, the work is either continued on a volunteer basis or the services are no longer provided. Project tenders often require innovation as one of the main conditions for funding, which poses a problem to NGOs that offer the same,

essential programs every year, such as counselling or free legal aid for victims of domestic violence. This kind of precarious work takes a toll on employees' work-life balance and can result in burnout (Jaffe, 2021). The same is true of social workers. The majority of NGO workers, especially in organisations offering services to victims of domestic abuse, are women. The devaluation of care work done by women is evident in the problem of funding both NGOs and social welfare services.

The non-profit sector tries to alleviate some of the worst effects of inequality in society, but at the same time, it is funded by the same exploitative capitalist system whose issues it is trying to mitigate (Jaffe, 2021). In other words, the non-profit sector is embedded in the capitalist system and often ends up exploiting and overworking its staff in the name of social justice. NGO employees take on care and service work, which resembles the work done by state agents such as social workers, but unlike them, they may not receive a steady (albeit low) income. The influence of economic factors reverberates throughout the system and affects people who need to use social welfare services the most. Kašić's narrative shows more closely why social welfare centres are often unable to provide adequate help to abused women and how their reliance on civil society organisations also depends on the funding provided by the state or international bodies.

Kašić also told me about the first organised strike of social workers, which took place in Zagreb in April 2019 after the media and public outrage provoked by a case of domestic violence on the island of Pag, where a father threw four of his children out of a window. The SWC in Pag was heavily criticised in the media for not preventing the violence. Kašić told me:

> *It happened again that everyone shifted responsibility, from the neighbours, the police, the kindergarten, the school, and passers-by, and they always somehow focus on the SWC as the main culprit, which is ok, supervision was performed and determined that there were some irregularities in their work [of the social workers assigned to the case]. What was pointed out by this strike is the number of clients that an average social worker has, which is up to three hundred, and that number should be fifty for one social worker to be able to work normally. In the case of three hundred clients, a social worker has only six minutes of work for each of them, which is very little, what can you do in six minutes, and the bureaucracy that accompanies each case is extensive.*

From a feminist point of view, a holistic understanding of domestic violence prevention (Goodmark 2018) would necessarily depend on the cooperation of various social actors, such as the local community, general practitioners, kindergartens and schools. The responsibility for violence prevention cannot be placed solely

on one system and on one profession. This particular case also highlights larger issues of lacking internal support for the SWCs outside of larger urban areas. Kašić also explained to me that opportunities for training and supervision are limited for service providers outside of Zagreb. The lack of supervision in care work can have drastic consequences. In the Pag case, supervision occurred only after the incident and found irregularities in the work of the social welfare centre. Supervision and team support are also protective factors against stress and burnout in social workers (Lloyd, King and Chenoweth, 2002). Stress and burnout can be dangerous not just to social workers' and service providers' health, but can lead to superficial casework or omissions in recommendations, which can endanger individuals and families at risk of domestic violence.

5. PERCEPTIONS OF PRECARITY

Social worker Kašić conveyed that there is no time for counselling work or developing communication skills because SWCs are understaffed. The abovementioned statistics available from the Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy corroborate this point about the insufficient number of social workers and other professional associates employed in SWCs across Croatia. Kašić also noted that laws change frequently without any ground-level analysis needed for their implementation.

> *There is no horizontal approach to law drafting, only vertical. A lot of laws have been drafted because of EU demands without any subsequent analysis on the ground level.*

Various legal reforms concerning the human rights of women have been introduced in Croatia superficially following the process of EU accession, but no analysis or research was conducted on either a practical or theoretical level to follow up on the implementation process (Radačić, 2009). More precisely, international policymakers, such as the EU and the UN, remain obsessed with short-term success stories (Čepo, 2020). What is left out, however, is the continued existence of "deeply ingrained systems of impunity that undermine women's access to justice" (Impunity Watch, 2019: 26). Frustrations with the bottom-down approach to law-making among low-level state agents such as social workers can have detrimental consequences for their work practices. Besides, Kašić's perceptions of law drafting can be seen through the lens of the legal consciousness (Silbey, 2015) of social workers who implement the laws while having no say in their drafting.

Kašić elaborated on the systemic issues that take a toll on social workers:

Because of the [social welfare] system's overload, social workers in their first year of work experience burnout and deterioration of emotional and professional health, and with time, a lack of professional responsibility. They start to lack the capacity to work with people and this is a full-time job where the pay is low, so they get used to working with lower motivation and working superficially, and not going deeper into the cases, which, I think, is very dangerous and this is when dangerous situations can happen. Elsewhere in the world, it is recommended for those in the helping professions to change their workplace position every five years. At our [Croatian] SWCs, in the departments of marriage and family, people have been working there for more than 30 years, I don't know how they are even alive.

5.1 Perceptions of Work-Related Stress and Burnout

Social work has been identified as a profession with a high risk of stress and burnout (Soderfeldt, Soderfeldt and Warg, 1995; Lloyd et al., 2002; Kaker, 2009). There are many definitions of burnout (Soderfeldt, Soderfeldt and Warg, 1995) but, in simple terms, it is a state of emotional, physical and psychological exhaustion related to work. As outlined above, problems concerning social work as a profession in Croatia are both institutional and personal, because understaffing and underfunding exacerbate stress and burnout. Kovačević stressed how the state, as the employer of social workers, should also take care of their occupational health:

Social workers are more and more suffering from depression and stress-related illnesses; we have pain medication and Xanax proliferating like candy in [social welfare] centres. If they [the state] want professionalism on the European level then they need to provide adequate working conditions with general medical examinations, psychotherapies, and more frequent supervision. We cannot be given nothing while being expected [to do] everything.

Kovačević also spoke about her own experience of being held captive by a violent client in her office and explained how there is no form of protection for social workers either in the centres or out in the field. Dealing with increasingly aggressive clients was identified as one of the major sources of professional stress in the research study conducted by Ilijaš et al. (2021). Even though their study acknowledges that the majority of participants were women, which reflects the majority of women among social workers, this gendered aspect was not seen as relevant to

warrant deeper exploration concerning professional stress. Keeping in mind that women in Croatia make up the majority of unemployed and those working in underpaid sectors (Ljubičić, 2021), gender can be seen as a very significant contributing factor to professional stress. There is no subsequent analysis of the double roles most social workers occupy as women and as social workers under the current economic system in Croatia. Competitive labour markets devalue care work, done primarily by women, but at the same time, they thrive on women's unpaid labour at home, which enables the social reproduction of male workers (Ghodsee, 2018). Social workers as women perform both paid and unpaid care work in the workplace and at home. The perception of social work is necessarily gendered but this gendering often remains hidden.

Bačić, a journalist, commented on the public perception of social work:

I think our social welfare system is very inert. They do work but the question is under which conditions and whether our social workers have too much area to cover. I am not defending them, but these are hard conditions to work in. And it is very easy to blame, but when something happens, and we look to blame we should also inquire under which conditions those people [social workers] worked.

Bačić's remarks correspond with the 2003 study conducted on a convenience sample of the student population on the perceptions of social work in Croatia, which concluded that the profession of social work was generally well understood and that the negative markers concerning the scope of the work remained low on the scale (Knežević and Butler, 2003).

However, a more recent analysis of media articles on social workers regarding media-exposed cases of child abuse has shown that the most common narrative is that of "inappropriate behaviour of social workers" (Stanić, 2021). In this narrative, the media and the public criticise social workers for not providing adequate child protection and consider them insufficiently professional. In response to this narrative, the narratives "social workers as victims of an inadequate system", "social welfare system in crisis" and "positive attitude towards social workers" appear (Stanić, 2021). Within them, social workers and professional organisations inform the public about the shortcomings and difficulties within the social welfare system that make it difficult for social workers to work, which can lead to violations of clients' rights. They also call on the authorities to take the necessary reforms which may be superficially and politically motivated. Both narratives, including the undertaken analysis, ignore the gendered dimension of social work.

From the discourses presented above, social workers find themselves in the precarious position of being understaffed, underpaid, and overworked. They are often first in the firing line when the media assigns blame for prominent cases of domestic violence. The implications of the feminisation and undervaluation of the profession are largely ignored by the media and the stakeholders. However, social workers also have a power-laden role, as their reports greatly matter in cases of domestic violence, divorce proceedings and custody hearings. I elaborate further on these points in the section below.

6. INDIVIDUALISING AND JUSTIFYING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Even though social work is a profession dominated by women, its organisational and hierarchical structure and managerial approach tend to perpetrate wider social processes of male domination (Hudson, 1985). Social workers can reinforce patriarchal and traditional attitudes towards gender roles and expectations in the family as well as downplay the structural dimensions of domestic violence. UK's Women's Aid organisation, a leading United Kingdom charity working to end domestic abuse against women and children, grew out of dissatisfaction with social services' treatment of battered women (Hudson, 1985). Similarly, the first Croatian Helpline (Telefon Trešnjevka) was founded in 1988 by feminist activists dissatisfied with the lack of state services and legislation protecting battered and raped women (Mamula et al., 2010). It is important to note that, before the 1990s, legislation relating to domestic abuse and marital rape was almost non-existent, so there was no legal basis for processing cases of domestic violence. The perceived passivity of the social welfare centre concerning domestic abuse can be seen as an extension of the prevailing attitudes of that time that domestic abuse was a private problem. Sadly, some of these attitudes still pervade. Pavlović, a former shelter worker, explained her professional experience with SWCs:

> *SWCs tend to view abuse as the individual problem of a woman, if she did not report it early, if she did not testify about it, [they even think] it could be a form of manipulation, she wants to keep the child [in divorce proceedings] so she makes it up and accuses him of something he did not do. But my professional experience is the opposite: most women keep it a secret, downplay, minimise, and talk about a very small portion [of violence], either consciously or subconsciously.*

Pavlović also explained the pressure that SWCs place on abused women to organise meetings for their children with their abusive partners. Abused women are

also often threatened with the removal of children for failing to protect them from witnessing domestic violence. Sometimes social workers propose mediation in divorce proceedings even though mediation is dissuaded by the Family Act in cases when, according to the assessment of the expert team of the SWC, equal participation of spouses in the mediation process is not possible due to domestic violence. Pavlović elaborates how she often found that social workers were very lenient towards abusers unless violence against children was present:

> *She* [a social worker] *said to my client: "Madam, you need to take the child to see the father, he loves his child so much, a child should not be separated from his father for a long time, you need to put your issues on the side."*

6.1 Inadequate Responses to Domestic Abuse

Blažević, a former police officer, recalls a domestic violence case where a husband threatened his wife with a knife and she managed to escape their apartment with their children. The SWC was involved when she filed for divorce and custody of the children.

> *The social welfare centre told him, the abuser, her new address! I called the police and the centre; they did not issue any protective measures. The children were afraid of him because he used to beat them as well. So now, while the whole process is going on, he remains in the apartment that she is the owner of!*

Blažević concluded that the institutions are unreliable and untrustworthy since the social worker disclosed the victim's location to her abusive husband. Prosecutor Tomić expressed her anger towards the SWCs*:*

> *I am especially furious with the social welfare centres, they usually don't know anything, and the system is so disorganised they do not know about each other's cases or decisions!*

What prosecutor Tomić has identified is a prevailing problem with the lack of interconnectivity of various systems and of interdepartmental cooperation at the state level. However, her statement can also be seen as stemming from a power-laden position of a prosecutor in the male-dominated judicial profession. Placing the burden of responsibility to prevent cases of domestic abuse, child maltreatment and contentious divorce proceedings on social workers is unrealistic. While both Pavlović and Blažević identify specific grievances in individual cases, this is the picture of social workers' inadequate responses that is most commonly put forward by

the media. On the other hand, social workers are very vocal about not having any time for prevention work with the overwhelming workload and the lack of ongoing training. Over-relying on the legal and social welfare system to resolve and prevent domestic abuse ignores the need to address the root causes of exploitation and violence. Social worker Paul Kivel advocates for community building to strengthen the communities' capacities to respond to violence instead of simply dropping services into the community (Kivel, 2009). Community building is hard, it is easier to demand that legal and social welfare systems resolve social problems. Even when, time after time, it has been proven that both systems are incapable of offering what victims of domestic violence truly need: "long-term economic stability, fundamental changes in men who abuse their partners, and a society that rejects domestic violence" (Goodmark, 2013:177).

Social workers occupy a conspicuous juxtaposition as victims of a negligent, overloaded system, and as decision-makers who have the power to further victimise their clients, especially particularly vulnerable groups such as victims of domestic violence, with their negligence or detrimental reports. Psychologist Rendulić, who works directly with victims of domestic and sexual violence in a feminist NGO, stated that the crux of their work as NGO workers is to help women make sense of the legal and administrative information provided by various institutions because the system itself is disconnected. She stressed that sometimes the information about their cases is confusing and not understandable to a layperson: "If the information these women get is unclear or not understandable it is the same as having no information at all." Rendulić's NGO helps its clients to interpret legal and social welfare reports, verdicts and evidence. Rendulić also conveyed that, in her experience, many women victims of domestic violence had issues with their mental health, which was often taken as a discrediting factor of their victim status by low-level bureaucrats. Rendulić reported that in the scope of her work she witnessed situations where low-level state agents such as police officers and social workers made fun of the victims because of their behaviour which was a consequence of their poor mental health caused by violence and trauma.

> *We* [victim service providers] *have seen a lot of inadequate reactions from state officials to some truly uncomfortable behaviours of our clients. We don't need our clients to be ideal victims, they have lived through all kinds of things and they behave in all kinds of ways, which is completely fine. That cannot be an excuse for officials who encounter victims, they need to know better, and sometimes I have seen them make fun of the victims. Some police officials and social workers in the SWCs used to mock them [the victims].*

By belittling and erasing the harm that abused and raped women experienced, state officials and service providers further dissuade victims from engaging with the legal system or contribute to their withdrawal during the process. A woman's status as a legitimate or illegitimate victim depends not only on the type of violence she experienced but also on the way she presents herself. Women who appear visibly distressed or act in a way state officials deem inappropriate will be taken less seriously, which obstructs their process of seeking justice (Neumann, 2017).

6.2 Problematising the Separation of Women's and Children's Rights

Social worker Lukić explained how, in her professional experience, victims of domestic abuse sometimes express the need to reconcile with the abuser and overlook the abuse. She stressed that this is a bad thing when underage children are involved since "…they are not to blame and they are not obliged to put up with the abuse." Her statement above can be interpreted as blaming both parents for exposing the children to violence. It places the responsibility of protecting children on abused women without naming the perpetrator and identifying the victim, which is a gender-blind approach to domestic violence. Those working with abused children and women sometimes adhere to mother-blaming frameworks, which leaves the cultural construction of motherhood unexplored (Miller, 2001). Separating children's services and services for abused women enables children's service providers to separate domestic violence and the right of the child to have access to both parents. Women's Aid emphasised in their 2014 report that a child's contact with a known abuser puts both women and children at risk (Women's Aid, 2014). Insisting on child contact during and after a contentious divorce can also be seen as a conservative outlook on the necessity of a nuclear, heteronormative family for the healthy upbringing of children. There were several cases in which both women and children were known to be killed by the abuser during unsupervised court-ordered contact (Women's Aid, 2014). However, media pressure relating to high-profile cases, which places the blame on social workers, can lead to the politicisation of child abuse by demanding that inspections be carried out, which causes the system to become rigid, risk-avoiding and oriented towards punishing both professionals and SWC's clients (Lonne and Parton, 2014). This, in turn, may result in more frequent child removal due to public pressure (Lonne and Parton, 2014).

Furthermore, both the legal and welfare systems lack solutions for women who do not want to leave their abusive partners. To leave the abusive relationship is imperative in both systems, which highlights the ignorance regarding the complexity of abusive relationships. The public remains preoccupied with the question of

"Why doesn't she leave?", while the literature on domestic violence provides a list of reasons why women don't leave rather than providing practical solutions to women who want the abuse to end (Goodmark, 2013). Even when women do leave, they are often faced with more abuse and are more likely to be murdered by their partners (Miller, 2001; Ellsberg, Carroll and Heise, 2005). Furthermore, the issue of children who are fully dependent on their parents is a contentious one in domestic violence cases. State agents such as social workers have the option to recommend the removal of children from the family in which domestic abuse is present, which is then considered as punishment for women victims of violence. The system does not offer a solution to stop the abuse – the responses of the social welfare system can be seen just as punitive as those offered by the legal system. Both systems fail to stop the abuse because state-driven solutions always rely on punitiveness instead of rehabilitation (Goodmark, 2009).

6.3 Institutionalisation of Male Subjectivity as Victim-Blaming Framework

Even though the police can be just as complicit in detrimental attitudes towards victims of domestic violence (Ljubin, 2006; Neumann, 2017), they are rarely subject to a vast amount of criticism in the same way as social workers. In both professions, there is an institutionalisation of male subjectivity, which influences police officers and social workers regardless of their gender. Rendulić, a feminist NGO psychologist, commented on the scapegoating of social workers:

> *We get so easily riled up against those who hold the least social power because we need to have an outlet for our righteous anger. Therefore, we are furious with social workers who have the least amount of power in this segment of our society. No one is furious with prosecutors, and they cause far more damage. No one is furious with the judiciary or the police. It is not a coincidence that the social welfare system is populated largely by women.*

Discussing gendered hierarchies of the Nicaraguan police and their negative attitudes towards women victims of abuse, Neumann (2017: 1120) points out: "In their quest for legitimacy and status, these female officers arguably seek to differentiate themselves from less privileged women (those seeking help) to preserve their relative power and symbolic position." The same explanation could apply to social workers who, regardless of their shared positionality with their clients, occasionally express patriarchal attitudes. As mentioned above, the institutionalisation of male subjectivity and the uncritical acceptance of patriarchal values can also influence work decisions regardless of the profession.

Focusing solely on domestic abuse at an individual level neglects the political-economical level, which situates acts of abuse in the historical context of a society organised around social inequality. Macroeconomic politics, deindustrialisation and neoliberal economic policies are all linked to domestic violence (Goodmark, 2018). Without the recognition of power relations and power distribution, the prevalent attitudes internalised by both men and women, social workers and other state agents remain simultaneously gender-blind and patriarchal. Furthermore, this recognition cannot appear in a vacuum. In Croatia, there is no institutionalisation of gender studies and/or feminist theories as an autonomous discipline. There are only a few modules and courses in social sciences and humanities in higher education. Feminist knowledge remains marginalised within the practical care work of NGOs or informal educational programmes (Potkonjak *et al.*, 2008). However, to state that social workers and other state agents in Croatia only need some feminist education to challenge the patriarchal attitudes would be misleading and oversimplifying. A neoliberal state is organised around the principles of increased economic growth and reducing the control and provisions ensured by the state. Private companies, civil organisations and individuals are therefore encouraged to take responsibility for the services the state no longer provides (Goodmark, 2018). These conditions create additional strains on caring professions which are not acknowledged in the mainstream media, causing numerous failings of the social welfare system to meaningfully address and prevent violence and tragedies.

7. CONCLUSION

Social work as a profession has undergone significant changes since its first institutionalisation in Yugoslavia. The consequences of the transition and post-war period have had great significance for the position of women in society, including its political and economic implications. The post-war period was marked by poverty, unemployment and the devastation of the social networks, entwined with a nationalist agenda that favoured traditional gender norms coupled with rising religiousness. The consequences of the transition period are felt to this day, in devaluing the commons,[3] favouring private enterprises and systemic defunding of what are seen as non-profitable sectors, such as the social welfare system and civil society organisations. However different they may be, both the social welfare system and civil society often provide care and social services and both face similar problems of underfunding and feminisation, even though they do diverge in terms of employment security. While more feminist-orientated theories would be welcome in

[3] The commons or the common goods are publicly owned cultural and natural resources available to all members of society. See Frederici (2004) and Christine and Wendy (2018).

the education of social workers, education alone would not solve institutional and structural problems. As mentioned above, what is needed is community building that would address male violence at its roots. Institutional responses to domestic violence alone cannot change patriarchal attitudes that draw their power from the wider societal condonation of violence and misogynist attitudes towards women.

Social workers hold relative authoritative power in cases of domestic abuse since they are the ones writing recommendations to the court, enforcing court measures and being in direct contact with both perpetrators and survivors of violence. Their current workload and responsibilities surpass staff capacities in SWCs across the country. Domestic violence cannot be solely placed under the purview of the social welfare system since the aetiology of its origins points to various social influences that include primary socialisation and wider societal norms. Furthermore, other experts such as lawyers, judges and general practitioners have more social power and reputation than social workers and should shoulder the responsibility of their professions to tackle the issue of domestic violence. Working in a largely feminised profession, social workers as women encounter many women clients but this positionality lacks public acknowledgement and deeper examination in current studies conducted on social work. Following the tragedy in Đakovo, where a client murdered a social worker and a lawyer, social workers were granted the status of officials to offer them higher levels of protection against attacks in their work. This legal measure does not solve the problem of existing working conditions of social workers which leave them vulnerable and exposed to violence.

In this paper, I argued that current studies and journalists' criticism lack the investigative rigour and ideological framework that would problematise the positionality of social workers as women exposed to violence in the scope of their professional work while dealing with women exposed to violence in their homes. The patriarchal conditioning of violence is left unexplored while social workers in the field encounter violence, which is simultaneously neglected and normalised in the same way as domestic abuse. As this paper points out, both social workers themselves and other experts working on the issue of domestic violence are aware of the problems with insufficient staff capacities and institutional constraints placed on social welfare centres. While not in the same position, both social workers and victims of abuse would benefit from shared class consciousness as women operating in a patriarchal, neoliberal system that oppresses care providers and their clients. More studies are needed in Croatia that place gender and economic inequality at the forefront of research on legal and social welfare systems.

This paper highlighted how social workers' practices can reflect dominant patriarchal attitudes towards victims of domestic violence, or how they can provide support and solidarity in advocating for victims' rights. Currently, what is needed is

the prospect of radicalising social work through solidarity and encouraging social workers to identify with feminist and workers' movements in Croatia. The recommendation regarding the importance of interdisciplinary work is nothing new but there is a pressing need to acknowledge the responsibility of all societal actors in preventing and addressing domestic violence. The current political climate, the multiple positions social workers occupy as women and as state agents, and the institutional constraints they face all constitute barriers to solidarity. Social work, as well as other forms of institutional care work, remains a low-paid profession compared to the management positions in private companies and other profit-orientated vocations in capitalism, and it inconspicuously remains largely represented by women. To advocate for social change, we need to acknowledge wider society's complicity in creating and normalising opportunities for violence by devaluing care work and supporting the economic system that puts profit over people. The liberation of care work needs to be connected with the wider societal struggle for liberation from all forms of violence as well as the fight for fair wages and adequate working conditions.

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The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Selected analytic materials (Selected excerpts from interviews in Croatian coded as "Problems with the System") are available in the online Supplement on the URL: https://hrcak.srce.hr/ojs/index.php/rzs/libraryFiles/downloadPublic/282

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Socijalni rad i obiteljsko nasilje u Hrvatskoj kroz orođeni pogled: između moći i prekarijata

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SAŽETAK

Ovaj članak ispituje rodno 'slijepu' percepciju profesije socijalnog rada u Hrvatskoj i njezin odnos prema slučajevima obiteljskog nasilja. Posljednjih nekoliko godina redovito nailazimo na bijes i zgražanje u medijima i od strane javnosti prema socijalnim radnicima/cama jer nisu spriječili teške slučajeve nasilja nad ženama i djecom. Pomak od državnog socijalizma ka kapitalizmu u hrvatskom društvu znatno je utjecao na profesiju socijalnog rada i pridonio sve manjem ulaganju sredstava i zapošljavanju radnika/ica u sektoru socijalne skrbi. Članak zagovara nijansiraniji, rodno usmjeren pristup u zahtijevanju preventivnog rada od centara za socijalnu skrb (CZSS). Većina studija o uzrocima izgaranja socijalnih radnika/ica zanemarila je feminizaciju profesije i rodne implikacije njihova prekarnoga profesionalnog položaja te odgovornost da zaštite i pomognu najranjivijim članovima društva. Percepcija socijalnog rada od strane drugih stručnjaka/inja koji rade na slučajevima obiteljskog nasilja i samih socijalnih radnika/ica važna je za razumijevanje načina na koje se donose profesionalne odluke i pripisivanje krivnje. Provedeni su dubinski intervjui sa stručnjacima/kinjama koji se bave obiteljskim nasiljem, uključujući policiju, suce/kinje, tužitelje/ice, socijalne radnike/ice, koordinatorice feminističkih nevladinih organizacija i djelatnice skloništa za žene. Feminizacija socijalnog rada i sustavno obezvređivanje sustava socijalne skrbi pridonosi pozicioniranju socijalnih radnika/ica kao "lakih meta", dok se patrijarhalna institucionalizacija istodobno ostavlja neistraženom. U zaključku se zagovara klasna i rodna solidarnost socijalnih radnika/ica sa svojim klijentima/icama u borbi protiv patrijarhalnih predrasuda.

Ključne riječi: socijalni rad, obiteljsko nasilje, pripisivanje krivnje, profesionalna prosudba, feminizam