

## PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN THE 1992-1995 WAR IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

### SUDJELOVANJE ŽENA U RATU U BOSNI I HERZEGOVINI U RAZDOBLJU 1992.–1995.

Ajnija Omanić<sup>1</sup>, Mevlida Serdarević<sup>2</sup>, Amer Ovčina<sup>3</sup>,  
Hajrunisa Omanić<sup>3</sup>, Jasna Omanić<sup>1</sup>

#### SUMMARY

*Many authors have written about the participation of women in WW2 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, mostly in health care. Participation of Bosnian and Herzegovinian women in the 1992-1995 war was also significant. According to Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina data, there were 5360 recruited women. Some were engaged in logistics and some were fighters.*

*This review presents the characters of the brave women who have inspired current generations.*

**Key words:** 1992-1995 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, women, bravery, acknowledgements.

#### INTRODUCTION

A lot has been written about women heroes, health and social workers, nurses, teachers, and women politicians who participated in the wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The history of World War II bears witness to the

---

<sup>1</sup> Federal Institute of Public Health of Bosnia and Herzegovina

<sup>2</sup> Museum Sarajevo

<sup>3</sup> Sarajevo University Clinical Center

*Address for correspondence:* Prof.dr Ajnija Omanić. Zavod za javno zdravstvo FBiH. Ul. Maršala Tita 9. 71000 Sarajevo. Email: ajnijaomanic@yahoo.com

courage of women teachers, working at different services, and many other professions. Particularly courageous were women health workers Dr Julka Mešterović, Colonel General Roza Papo, MD, Olga Dedijer, MD, Frida Gutman MD, partisan nurse Hanika Altarac dubbed Vuja, and many others.

This paper presents women of various professions who were directly or indirectly involved in the defence of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992-1995, and who marked their time. These women played an important role and contributed greatly in resistance to war. Women obtained various functions during the war, such as education, social work, health care and others.

### WOMEN SOLDIERS

The Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina counted 5360 women deployed to various duties [1].

Significant number of women volunteers joined the Patriotic League and the Army of B&H. In this text we will try to give an overview on their



Fadila Odžaković - Žuta  
(1958.-1992.)



Nurse Sadeta  
Dervišević-Satka

contribution to the defence of the country. One of them, Fadila Odžaković, called “Žuta” (“Yellow” because of her blond hair, born in Goražde on 14 March 1958, died at Mount Zuc, Sarajevo on 20 September 1992) was posthumously awarded the Zlatni ljiljan (Golden Lily) medal for courage in 1993, and decorated with the “Order of the Golden Shield with Swords” in 1994 [2].

Dženita Ljuca joined the Army of B&H as a fine arts student and has been severely disabled

Another volunteer, Šemsa Kiselica, became popular after she posed with a gun for an Army poster [3,6].

Golden Lily was also awarded to the survivors Fadila Bajrić, Zlata Gazibara, Dževada Tartaragić, Aida Zuko, Meliha Dedović, and Ramiza Lozić - Bella.

Ramiza was wounded in 1992 as a member of assault units, participated in the founding of the French hospital (before the war military hospital in Sarajevo, called French hospital because of assistance by French peace keeping troops during the war now carry the name City hospital) and was in the first food convoy to enter besieged Dobrinja [3].



Mevlida Elčić  
(1963.–1993.)



Atifa Karalić  
(1957.–1993.)

Below we mention a few women who posthumously received the Zlatni ljiljan (Golden Lily) medal. Emira Bašić was born in Bosanski Novi on 3 July 1969 and was killed in Sarajevo on 27 November 1993. She was a graduate of the Faculty of Political Science. She showed great skill in first aid.

Mevlida Elčić was born on 29.06.1963. and was killed on Golo Brdo while working as a military nurse. Her sister Samra was also a military nurse and was killed in a battle on Igman mountain.

Nurse Atifa Karalić was born in Novi Šeher, Maglaj on 31 December 1957. She was killed on 3 September 1993 while giving first aid to wounded soldiers near Gornji Vakuf. She was a member of the famous 317<sup>th</sup> Mountain Brigade. Golden Lilies were also awarded to Razija Merić, Indira Pjanić, Nevzeta Sefer and Fatima (Salih) Fako Fatima was born on 30 May 1962 in the village of Izbišna (Foča), and joined the Bosnian Army Green Berets. At the beginning of the war, she was appointed the main chef to the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina. She was killed on duty in front of the Army headquarters, on 20 June 1992 during one of the great shellings of Sarajevo [3].

It is known that the women of the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina founded Women's Association of Fighters with only one mission: to help each other and other women in need during the war. There have been also many individual cases of women who helped their fellow combatants through hard war times. The most famous is Halida Bojadži, the legend of the 1992-1995 war in Bosnia, who had lost two sons at the beginning of aggression. Her younger son had 13 and the older 15 years. She spent the

entire war in the ranks working as a cook, laundress, and a “shoulder to cry on.” Another war veteran is judge Zuhra Brkić from Živinice, who adopted a refugee orphan.

### OTHER ACTIVITIES OF WOMEN

A number of women dedicated themselves to educating children during the war, including Mukadesa Mašić in Dobrinja, Mirjana Mičunović, and Mirsada Hodžić in Sarajevo, to name just a few [2,4-6].

Some women from the surrounded Sarajevo quart Dobrinja, were particularly famous for their work. One of them is Muamera Puška, who would visit the besieged residents of Dobrinja and bring medicines, medical instruments, and various objects Dobrinja hospital needed for treatment). This earned her the name Mother Theresa [2,4].

Carol Mann called the women of Dobrinja Home Front Amazons and said that they saved the Sarajevo suburb [2]. One of them is an architect, who had transformed Dobrinja from a war shattered place into a livable community in 14 months. Her husband was killed by snipers. She remained alone in a building flat with two children and three cats. Other 108 tenants moved out. This woman started a tailor shop and launched fashion shows. She also set up a print shop that printed one cookbook, a photography manual for youngsters, and a manual for tending a small greenhouse. She then opened an architectural office and worked on solutions for the reconstruction of the city [4,7]. Carol Mann further in her book continues saying that the core of civil resistance in Dobrinja were women of the first post World War 2 generation, mostly middle class, educated, speaking at least one foreign language, more often English than French, and aged 35-45 years [4,8].

Women however excelled in other areas too. Arijana Saračević received the best war reporter prize Crystal Eagle by the International Foundation for women at a ceremony held in New York City [9]. Maja Đokić was a successful seventeen year old athlete. She was killed in Sarajevo on 9 April 9 by Karadžić’s shell. Her tragic death connected Sarajevo, California, Washington, Bologna, Athens, and many other cities. The girl’s fate moved humanist Michael Mahoney to establish a fund in her memory. [5,6].

Mirsada Hodžić, Aisa Maca, and Pava Barišić were founders and active members of the parents’ forum “All for All” [7]. The parent’s forum was



Fatima Fako  
(1962.–1992.)



Emira Bašić  
(1969.–1993.)

particularly important in activities whose aim was to get young draftees, their sons, back home to Bosnia and Herzegovina from the Yugoslav People's Army.

#### **ABOUT WOMEN HEALTH PROFESSIONALS IN THE 1992-1995 WAR IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA**

During the 1992-1995 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, some clinical and hospital departments fell short of minimum staff necessary to run them. Women health professionals who remained – physicians, pharmacists, dentists, and nurses - deserve admiration and respect [5]. Nurse Sadeta Dervišević, dubbed Satka, was also referred to as the heroine of Dobrinja because she, her husband Sead Dervišević, and physician Jusuf Hadžir founded the Dobrinja hospital [3,8]. But this was not why she received the Florence Nightingale award. The story began when a patient Branka Petričević did not have the strength to return home after an infusion, and nurse Satka decided to accompany her home across a meadow which was under constant sniper fire.

After a couple of steps sniper a shooting began. Two women were under a constant fier, even though the snipers could see that their targets were women, one of whom wore the white doctor's coat. They found them selves on the ground. Nurse Sadka was wounded in her leg. After a while some people managed to evacuate sister Sadka, but Sadka's leg rendered her 60% disabled for rest of her life. Satka's wounding was documented on

video and aired via satellite exchange. Canadians used this video footage to make a documentary *Your Life for the Lives of Others*. This led to the highest award a nurse can get.

Nurse Avdija Čustović worked in a military hospital on Mount Igman [8] with her husband Izet Čustović, the chief military surgeon and head of the war hospital on Igman. She was wounded there, transferred to a hospital in Hrasnica, and then to Koševo Hospital in Sarajevo. After leaving the hospital she returned to her unit, the 101<sup>st</sup> Mountain Brigade. On 23 February 1996 by government order she received the rank of captain and a wristwatch with a dedication from the Commander General of the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Her husband, Izet Čustović received the Golden Lily.

As one great example of devotion to help others is otolaryngologist, Aida Volić who run a hospital in Suhodol with her colleague Dr Cera for two years. At one point, she was the only doctor in the hospital for three months. She operated on civilian population of the surrounding villages, delivered babies, treated the wounded. Conditions were harsh. During eight hour operations, her nurses, some of whom were self-taught, would give her to drink as she operated while others pedalled a bike to produce electricity needed for lights [8].

There is an interesting case about Aida Volić's ethical approach to patients, even if they were the "enemy". On one occasion she treated a badly wounded HVO (Croatian Council of Defence) soldier Darko, who was left behind at the front line. The story would not be curious if at that point B&H Army and HVO were not on opposite sides. Yet B&H Army soldiers brought Darko to the hospital, and doctor Aida operated on him. Darko was later taken to Sarajevo and then to the United States for further treatment. Doctor Volić took care to inform Darko's family about his wounding and his whereabouts. This story is rare for this region, and little is known about it. Aida Volić and the wounded HVO soldier and his family became friends, giving new hope to peaceful coexistence in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Physician Silva Rizvanbegović became known when she issued a public appeal over the media asking help to get Sarajevo emergency department back to its feet, as it had lost a number of ambulances to thieves or shelling. She died in an ambulance car accompanying her patient [3].

Medical School graduate Suada Dilberović from Dubrovnik was killed in anti-war demonstrations. She went to anti war demonstrations with

words “I want to defend Sarajevo”, but after she was shot just before her death she said “Is this Sarajevo?”. Suada Dilberović was the first war victim of the war in Sarajevo. The bridge where she got killed now is named “The bridge of Suada and Olga”. Olga was the girl who got killed by sniper the same day.

Borborela Homolja was a professor at the Sarajevo University Faculty of Physical Education and Sports who remained in her city throughout the siege of Sarajevo. She is known for her radio broadcast appeal to people to preserve their mental health “Breathe in the air, breathe out love!” [5].

Every day, pharmacist Biljana Vejzagić and her husband Mirza would walk twelve miles and pass Serbian checkpoints - thanks to her first name of Serbian origin - to get to Dobrinja [2].

Sarajevo University Hospital nurses Suvada Svrakić, Fatima Zaimović, and Tatjana Jeremić showed to be outstanding in finding ways to improvise and make sanitation materials when the hospital run out of materials.

Theatre nurse Zlata Paševski of the Sarajevo General Hospital was in the team that invented a make-do fixator.

Pharmacists of the Sarajevo Pharmacies produced, analgesics, antiseptics and other disinfectants to treat the eyes, skin, infectious diarrhoea, and severe injuries. For this they received war awards [8].

## WOMEN'S ASSOCIATIONS

Besides of individual work, women were also active in many associations. Women's associations Sumeja, AJASNA, Mak Bosanka, Sarajke, Biser assisted the defence of the country in a number of ways, besides above mentioned direct support with participation in Army of B&H and medical support, also by providing immediate assistance in food and medicines to those who need them the most, by organizing psychological and social counseling support, organizing symposiums and seminars on relevant issues. For example women's association AJASNA organised a symposium entitled “History of Health and Welfare in Bosnia and Herzegovina” in February 1993. This symposium was focused on preserving historical heritage of medicine in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Association Mak Bosanka organised lectures in various areas of health, education, and culture. The founders were Tatjana Najdhart, Mevlida Serdarević, and Edina Vlašić. This association organized lectures on subjects of health promotion and culture.

Association Sarajke was established by Bakir Nakas, MD, director of the General Hospital in Sarajevo and Jasna Hasić, lawyer in the Ministry of Health. It gathered women volunteers who cleaned and carried water, took care of patients, changed them, fed them and washed. They would be coming to the hospital on foot. As a small ironic memento of their commitment, Sarajevo General Hospital has raised a bicycle monument, bicycle being practically unavailable and yet the only desirable individual type of transport back then.

## CONCLUSION

Women of Bosnia and Herzegovina organised themselves to help the people and their war-torn country. For their bravery and humanity they received military decorations, and international recognition. This article however does not mention an army of anonymous brave women who have left an indelible mark defending their country and taking care of those in need in the face of a brutal aggression, whose main goal was to destroy and disable primarily civilian population, including women, children, and the elderly.

## SOURCES AND REFERENCES

1. Turković B. Sjećanja pripadnice armije RBiH od žrtve do heroine. Amazonke zaboravljene u miru. Dnevni avaz 2009 May 09. 05. pp. 8-9, Sarajevo.
2. Mann C. Kućne amazonke. Sarajevo: Svjetolst d.d. 2006.
3. Sumeja magazin za ženu i porodicu N° 8-5 2002, N° 23-2007, N° 32. Tuzla: UGM, 2009.
4. Youssef H. Bolnica Dobrinja. Sarajevo: Spaho E, 2009.
5. Smajkić A. i saradnici Zdravstveno-socijalne posljedice agresije na Bosnu i Hercegovinu. Sarajevo: Zavod za zdravstvenu zaštitu R/F BiH. 1996.
6. Bajrić A. Sutra je najdalja budućnost. Večernje novine 1992 aug. Sarajevo.
7. Halilbegović N. Mama, moram im dati glavu. Stradanje vojnika-regruta u bivšoj JNA i njihovo spašavanje. Sarajevo: Halkomeks, 2002.
8. Omanić A. et al. Zdravstvo u okruženom/opsjednutom Sarajevu. Dokumentacioni materijal istraživačkog projekta. Medicinski fakultet Univerziteta u Sarajevu, Ministarstvo zdravstva Kantona Sarajevo.
9. Mehmedić H. Corridor, list koji zbližava ljude, N° 3, 15. May 1995. Sarajevo, p. 3.
10. Mehmedić H. Corridor, list koji zbližava ljude. N° 1, Dec. 1993. Sarajevo p. 17.
11. Papo R. Partizanske bolničarke. Zajednica br. 240, str. 2, Sarajevo 1979.

## SAŽETAK

O sudjelovanju žena u ratovima na području Bosne i Hercegovine i izvanj nje pisali su mnogi autori. To su bile žene zdravstveni radnici. Tako se u Drugome svjetskom ratu spominju dr. Olga Dedijer, dr. Irina Knežević, dr. Rosa Papo, dr. Julka Meštović, dr. Frida Gutman, partizanska sestra Vuja (Hanika Altrac) i druge.

I sudjelovanje žena u Bosni i Hercegovini tijekom rata 1992.–1995. bilo je brojčano i značajno. Prema izvornim podacima, u Armiji BiH bilo je 5.360 angažiranih žena na raznim funkcijama, od uslužnih djelatnosti do poznatih borkinja. Tako se na borbenom plakatu dugo vremena nalazila slika Šemse Kiselica. Zbog njihove hrabrosti u obavljanju zadataka nazivali su ih „Amazonkama“. Fadila Odžaković – Žuta dobila je Medalju za hrabrost, a dobitnice najvećeg ratnog priznanja „Zlatni ljiljan“ su Fadila Bajrić, Zlata Gazibera, Dževada Tataragić i Aida Zuko. „Zlatnim ljiljanom“ posthumno su odlikovane Emira Bašić, Mevlida Elčić, Komelija Jurić, Atifa Karalić, Razija Merić, Indira Pjanić i Nevzeta Sefer, a Fadila Odžaković – Žuta i Edina Čamdžić odlikovane su i Ordenom zlatnog grba s mačevima, odnosno medaljom za hrabrost.

Satka Dervišević dobila je Internacionalno priznanje za sestrinsku brigu, nagradu Florance Nightingale, a Advija Čustović čin majora za sudjelovanje u obrani zemlje.

**Ključne riječi:** rat u BiH 1992.–1995., Armija BiH, žene, hrabrost, priznanja