



HEROINES

HUMAN STORIES THAT CHANGE PERSPECTIVES

UNFPA, United Nations Population Fund hereby expresses its gratitude to its longstanding partners **Nataša Todorović, Atina – Citizens Association for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings and All Forms of Violence against Women, the Association Rainbow from Šabac**, and, above all, to those women who unselfishly shared their stories with us, notably,

Dragica Sava Jovanović, Dragana Stanković, Milesa Milinković, and those whom we have not named for security reasons.

This year, UNFPA is celebrating its 50th birthday, as well as the 25th anniversary since the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), which brought together over 10,000 delegates from 179 countries in Cairo in 1994. Governments of 179 states recognised reproductive health and rights, as well as women's empowerment and gender equality, as key to sustainable development.

Our birthday wish is to finish the work we started a quarter of a century ago. We want to achieve rights and choices for all so that no one is left behind. We are striving for ZERO maternal deaths, ZERO unmet need for family planning, and ZERO violence against women and girls.



The integral version of this publication is available in both Serbian and English on UNFPA Serbia's website <https://serbia.unfpa.org/en/publications>

Design: MaxNova Creative, Belgrade
Printed copies: 150 in Serbian and 50 in English

Belgrade, 2019

ABOUT HEROINES

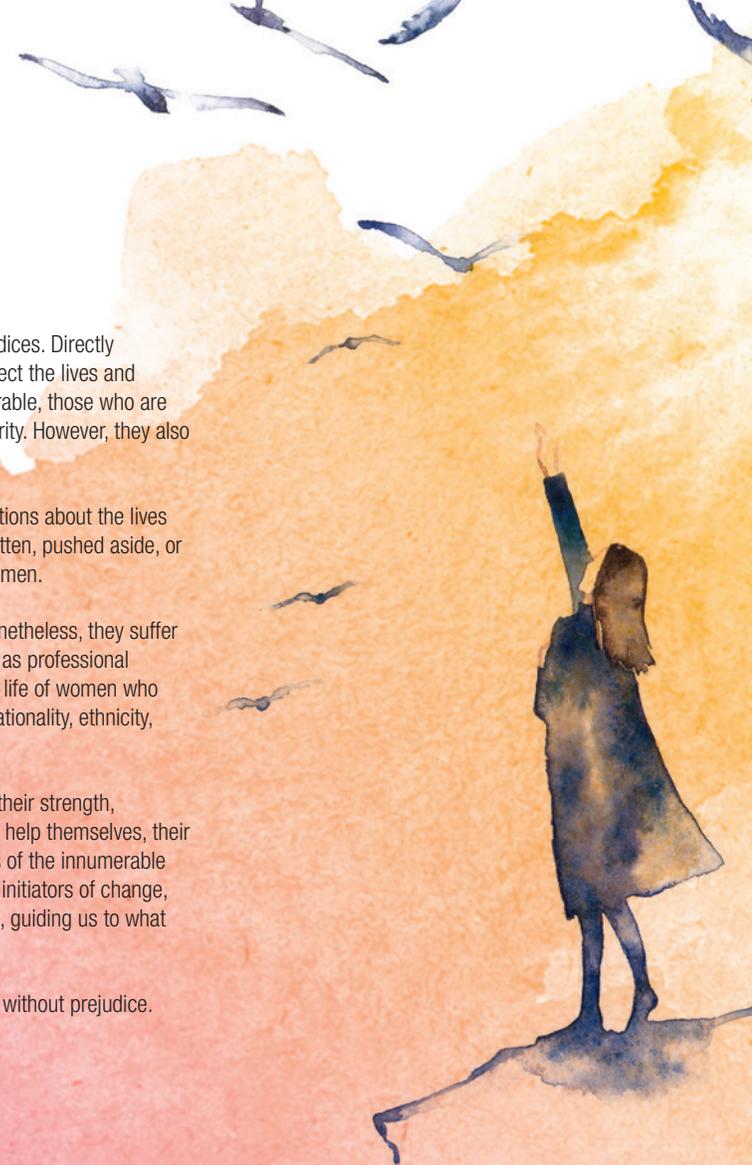
Every individual, every society, holds prejudices. Directly or indirectly, these prejudices above all affect the lives and destinies of those who are the most vulnerable, those who are marginalised, and those who are the minority. However, they also impact the wellbeing of an entire society.

This collection of life stories narrates situations about the lives and destinies of those who are often forgotten, pushed aside, or living on the edge of existence – about women.

Women are the pillars of every society. Nonetheless, they suffer from discrimination in their private as well as professional lives. Stories told here reveal the everyday life of women who are discriminated against for reasons of nationality, ethnicity, disability, and old age.

The life stories of these women tell about their strength, entrepreneurship, initiative and struggle to help themselves, their families, and their communities regardless of the innumerable hurdles they encounter. These women are initiators of change, and serve as living examples and beacons, guiding us to what can and should be.

Share a story, be part of positive changes, without prejudice.



WOMAN

This is a story about a woman with a disability, who proudly carries all the seasons within her every day. A story about Mileša Milinković.

One of the reasons I am here today, rather than where I grew up, is probably the domestic violence I had been subjected to until my puberty. That life struggle steered me in the right direction because I was consciously refusing to live in such a setting, in such man-woman relationships. I think that shaped me as a woman.

The community I grew up in was close-knit and ignorant, and that prompted me to do things that would dispel prejudices, not just my own, but of society as a whole.

A seminar on empowerment of women with disabilities I attended in 2000 triggered changes and a process in me, my activism for the rights of people with disabilities.

My activism has yielded results. Some of the activities and workshops I conducted in my hometown of Užice stirred some young people, who are now running the Muscular Dystrophy Association. I am very proud of these people because I know that they are now continuing to do important things to improve life in Užice.

'Catch This Day with Me' is a film festival that deals with the lives, activities and achievements of people with disabilities. The project provides young people with disabilities with opportunities to make films and show others how they view life. All the films that I have signed

have won awards, they are effective, people recognise us and what we do, and most importantly, some important things are changing in our society.

Today, in Serbia, we talk about gender equality, emancipation and empowerment of women, the looser division of chores into male and female. We are working on ensuring that being a woman does not mean being oppressed, a victim of violence, or "somebody's" woman. This is why it's very important that women are strong, self-aware, and that they recognise that their value is within them, not in the way others see them, the way a man sees them.

Women with disabilities have also undergone transformation. I am happy to see that today's girls with disabilities are much stronger and more self-conscious, that they have a lot more confidence, and believe in themselves.

There are prejudices about women with disabilities as asexual beings, as women who cannot be good mothers, who are undesirable wives because their disability may impinge their ability to be good housekeepers, to cook and clean.

My wish is that women with disabilities do not face such prejudices, that they can live their lives without any limitations. Because, what does it mean to have a disability? And who is the one that decides what is right, what is normal, what is valid, and what isn't?

Today, when they ask me who I am, I say: "I am a woman, I am a daughter, I am a sister, I am a lover, I am a student, I am an activist, I am a person with disabilities". Being a disabled woman is not the same as being a

woman, or the same as being a man with a disability. Being a disabled woman carries a new dimension, new information, and a different way of fighting and living one's life.



Film 'Woman' (Žena) is available on YouTube
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3BBTAqwRhns>

VIOLENCE DOESN'T STOP BY CHANCE. REPORT IT!

It was all good at the beginning. So good that it was almost unbelievable. Our relationship, and then our marriage, everything worked perfectly.

Everything suddenly started going downhill the moment my (ex) husband's grandmother, who had raised both my husband and his brother, died. I was seven months pregnant at the time. He would often beat me to the ground. I went into premature labour because of the stress. Fortunately, only a few weeks before I was due.

Both I and my child suffered from the stress I was going through. My doctor explained that a small tumour had formed between the child's ear tube and neck muscles, approximately during the seventh month of pregnancy. They removed it after the delivery. So, I had failed to protect my child even before it was born, no matter how hard I'd tried.

I endured it all, under the influence of the community I live in. I listened to my co-workers: "You need to make up with him, you do have a child together." So I lived like that, from one day to another, both at work and at home. When my mother saw me with a bruise, I'd say I hit myself. I never wanted to confess, or tell anyone. Although there were people who heard my cries and screams from the

apartment, nobody ever dared to call the police. Because he's a cop.

It turns out that I was to blame for everything, because that's what people say and think. It's always the woman's fault because she provoked him, she "wagged her tail", she triggered her husband's wrath, so he has the right to strike her, to slap her and beat her because she deserves it. When a woman comes to the police station to report violence, the rumour goes: "You have no idea what she's really like, she's..." These people, the police officers spreading such rumours, they are the law in this country. They are the ones fulfilling their duty to protect the victim when law and order are disrupted. And they do comply with procedure, they show up at the scene, they take statements, but, in the halls of the station, they pin the blame on the woman. It's always the woman's fault. There are all kinds of women, as there are all kinds of men. As we say 'there is no tree without a branch, or a human without a flaw'.

The final straw was when he held a gun to my temple and started counting down. I was cowering in the kitchen corner, like a miserable wretch, blood on the walls, after he'd beaten me, after we'd scuffled, while I tried to save myself until he took the gun. When I looked at him at one

STOP





point, I saw bestiality in his eyes. A monster. I had never seen this, even in movies. He takes the pistol, cocks and uncocks it, hands it to me, and says: "You think I'm going to kill you? No, I will not kill you. Put the gun behind your back." I do as he says. And then he says: "Your prints are on it now." And I'm standing in the corner, a wretch, wondering: "Will I live to see tomorrow, will this bullet pass through and end everything? Better than ending up a cripple, having my kids watch me being fed on a straw and push me in a wheelchair. Then, that night, my lip drooped to the left, and I started having fits, fainting under excessive stress at work, in court, and once my car veered off the road.

He was convicted to six months in prison for this torture with the gun.

Then we divorced officially in court, by mutual consent, he could see the child, be with him, everything was ok. One morning, about half a year after the divorce, he entered the police station where we both worked and, according to the expert's report, fired six bullets, one of which got stuck in the pistol, while one hit our co-worker in the foot, wounding two of his toes. Another co-worker managed to prevent him from firing directly at me. I would have been accused of wanting to shoot him later in court, if it hadn't been for this co-worker's testimony.

I often hear appeals on TV encouraging people to report violence if they hear something in their neighbourhood. And I think to myself "Who will call?!" Everyone is thinking "It's their private life." And then, when it happens, everyone is entitled to interfere, to comment, to judge, always condemning the wrong side. The judiciary is one

thing, but when people pass their judgement it is different. A court judgment does not hurt as much as a human word. The community I live in passed their judgement against me. But now I know that they are wrong because I am a very successful woman and a successful mother. I can see this when I look at my children. My daughter finished sixth grade with flying colours, and my son starts primary school in autumn. They're well-behaved and we live happily with my parents.

But, I'm no longer the person I used to be. I used to be smiling and cheerful. My only struggle now is to control these epileptic seizures so that my children don't have to watch me writhing, thrashing and drooling. I still see my psychiatrist and take my medications, but that therapy cannot help me get in my car and drive over to see a friend. No victim can get rid of that fear. We feel victimised again, every time we hear about another victim. Society and the state do not provide us with the necessary security.

My ex-husband has been sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment for attempted murder, a criminal offence. I lived through three years of hell with attorneys, with the prosecutor, hiding in a safe house. Fortunately, I got a lawyer through a women's association, because I wouldn't have been able to afford one otherwise. I received the final verdict only last year, in 2018.

My daughter trains karate and she is very good at it. She won third place at the world championship and second place at the European championship. I am very proud of her and happy that she is successful because no man will be able to harm her.

DIFFERENT

I am a woman, a Roma woman, who has been engaged in Roma activism for the past three years. But, first and foremost, I am the daughter of a single mother, a disabled, Roma woman. Life has always been difficult, rife with prejudices. Nevertheless, I feel accomplished as a wife and a mother. I have been happily married for 12 years, and we have two daughters. I wish that prejudices against Roma disappear in the following 100 years if not earlier.

It's a hard life for Roma, especially Roma women, living in destitution. I confront discrimination and prejudices every day. Ultimately, we are all just Gypsies, even when there is no reason for such an opinion. That's why it's so hard.

We have had situations in school where the parents transfer their prejudices to their children, telling them not to hang out with Roma children, although these children are good students and well-behaved. It shows how widespread the following views are in society: "How can a Gypsy child be better at reading and writing than other children?" Even the good is not good enough. "And how come they dress so well?" In such situations, I focused on supporting the child, I'd say, "Just keep on studying and hang out with those who want to hang out with you." After some time, the parents realise that they were mistaken and apologise, and the children continue to hang out together. But it leaves a scar.

I have been running the Roma Educational Inclusion Centre in Šabac since 2016. I was developing a local action plan

for the Roma and insisted on the allocation of a specific budget for its implementation. However, they included us in the Strategy together with the other marginalised groups. I thought ok, as long as something's being done. But it's all been just a 'dead letter' since 2015. Then, in 2017, we got funds for a small project to mark International Romani Day. Then, in 2018, we applied for 700,000 dinars, but we were granted only 50,000 dinars. But we're not giving up and we have implemented several successful projects and workshops in the local community focusing on child and youth education and raising awareness about the importance of education.

Still, much more needs to be done. I tried to launch a programme with street children, to get them to go to school. I asked the Social Welfare Centre and the police for cooperation. But they do not have the time, they're understaffed. As for sexual education, we used to comply with old customs, young girls married as virgins. Now, in modern days, their mothers say: "It doesn't matter, you don't have to be a virgin on your wedding day," but then we have young girls getting pregnant. We'd face problems if we came to a village with doctors to talk to young people about sexual education, prevention, protection. All the schools should be doing that.

I don't judge others based on their faith, skin colour or sexual orientation, but based on the kind of people they are.



“GOOD” OR “HAPPY” GIRL?

Women and girls should be aware that they do not have to agree to such a life and that they can free themselves from unfair cultural restrictions and family rules rendering them totally dependent. Be brave and choose the life you want. Take action!

I grew up in Syria, in a close-knit community bound by strict rules. I was not allowed any contact with men, or to look them in the eye. That is forbidden, a sin. They taught me to be obedient and modest, and that means looking down, not talking, doing what I'm told. I was a good student, and my parents let me to go to university. My father was constantly checking how I acted at school and controlled everything he could. When I missed a class, he beat me and said he would kill me. In the Muslim community, when you want to kill a woman because she dishonoured the family, all the leaders gather and render such a decision, which they always say is justified, because a woman deserved it. Luckily for

me, they decided I should live, because absence from a single class still wasn't a good enough reason for murder. My father had to put down his knife for a while, but he forbade me to continue my education. Under punishment, I spent my time in the countryside with my family, looking for a job, in constant fear that they would kill me. My father was telling my brother: "Kill her if she's in your way, no one is allowed to ask why you did it because everyone knows she is bad." In the meantime, I found a young man whom I fell in love with, but I did not dare be with him, because such decisions are made by the family and the community, not by me. So, I was perpetually struggling between being a "good" or a "happy" girl! One day, I finally made my choice and set on a journey never to return. I'm still on that journey. What I want to say to women is to follow their path, because that is their life, not their father's, or their brother's! Only theirs and they are important!

Stories from *Violence against women and girls among refugee and migrant population in Serbia*, research by ATINA with support from UNFPA Serbia.



IF WE WEREN'T STRONG AND BRAVE, WE WOULDN'T HAVE SURVIVED

I grew up in a family that never cared about me. In early childhood, I contracted a disease resulting in permanent physical impairments and the constant pain I still suffer. When I would go to the doctor for my examination, he would sexually abuse me, touch me in intimate places. I never told my parents about it, because I knew they would blame me. When I was 15, my family forced me to marry a man from a neighbouring country. At first I thought he was different, and that it might not be so bad, but I was wrong. It all began with him forcing me to drink alcohol, and engage in sexual behaviour I was uncomfortable with. I realised that I could not tolerate it any longer, and I stood up to him. That is when my hell began. He constantly insulted and humiliated me because of my illness, forced me to watch pornography and to pose naked, although I did not want to. He would then send my nude photographs to his friends who would rape and abuse me in the house, in front of him. When he got bored of that, he forced me to have sexual intercourse with women with whom he was having sex in front of me, and whom I had to serve.

At one point, he decided to go to Europe and left me at home, pregnant. I knew that I would be better off without him, even though I was alone and pregnant. I lived in fear because women who are alone face many problems. Three years later, my brother-in-law, who already had two wives and who was much older, said that I had to move in with them to preserve the family honour. That is when I realised that I had to leave my country and flee, that it was the only way to save myself. After a long journey, I arrived in Serbia with my child and with faith that we will find peace. Sometimes I think everything that happened to me was not so terrible, and that I should forget it all, but I am haunted by the images. I realised that I needed new images of me, a strong and powerful me! That's why I am gladly helping refugee women in Serbia, while I'm waiting for a final solution. My message to all those working with women like me, violence survivors, is that we are strong and brave, and that we wouldn't have survived if we weren't. All we need is your support to find our strength after so much time and after our long journey.

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A WINNER



When I was growing up, female children were not sent to school. My mother died when I was four years old. After primary school, my father handed me over to the Social Welfare Centre. I was devastated.

My son Blagoje (Blessed), his father, who is not a Roma, and I live together, in a civil partnership, and we are happy. We fell in love and our child was born out of love. There was no discrimination at all.

My arthritis started when I got pregnant, and they had to perform a C-section. I breastfed my baby for seven months and didn't want to take any medications, any painkillers. My disability, kyphosis of the spine, developed after I gave birth and they had to put in a cementless prosthesis. I was granted a disability pension. I have a wonderful doctor. He is a radiologist and a cardiologist. He has been treating me since I was 20 and throughout my pregnancy.

Never in my life have I felt discriminated against. I smile wherever I go, I am kind and everything is fine. I tried to teach the girls I talk with to be kind, to have manners. Because unkindness breeds unkindness.

We must think about the future of the children, not just give birth to them. Children should go to school, but they can still work, in addition to the welfare, it's the strawberry, fruit picking season, or they can do other jobs. I am trying to convey this message through my Association Mišara. I work well with the city administration on social issues, with the Ecumenical Foundation, with the Akt Foundation and the TRAG Foundation.

We have been assigned a new policeman, tasked with looking after our settlement. He's a great guy, a wonderful guy. He does his job, he doesn't take bribes. He passes through, visits us regularly. Somebody stole my corn mill and he found it in another village. His predecessor took bribes. He had a couple of outsiders, colluded with them, covered up their thefts and shared the spoils.

When I was a child, husbands used to beat their wives. Women were like slaves, they had to keep their mouths shut and do as they were told.

Today, I tell them: "Women, you have rights. Your husband cannot beat you, or abuse you, or harass you or your children. And the girls have to continue going to school." We cannot have 14 or 15 year old children marrying. If I'd been able to make it despite my disability, so can they. I tell each of them: "You have to fight. You have your life and you do not need anyone. You do not need your husband when you have your opinion." That's what I think. No good comes from being on the street.

The Mišara Association was launched three years ago. We have done a lot with the Ecumenical Foundation and an organisation from Chicago, ELKA. We renovated many houses damaged by the floods. Some got livestock, some a car, some got goods to make ends meet. We also made 17 septic tanks. I help my neighbours fill their welfare applications. I would like to have a room where I could hold meetings with children. I don't have a big enough room for all the children when we're handing out Christmas presents.

I do not see myself as a sick person, but as a winner. I would like to be able to contribute more to poor families through my association. It fulfils me.

YOU LOSE YOUR NAME. YOU BECOME A SICK OLD LADY

I am lying in a hospital bed. I can hear and I can see, but I cannot move and I cannot answer the questions they ask me. Doctors and nurses shuffle by my bed, relatives come to visit but I am sleepy and tired and I can't move... I know I am a drain on their finances - diapers, medications, bandages, but what can I change? I don't want them spending their money on me...Lunchtime is the worst. The food server puts the plate on my nightstand... I'm a bit hungry, but I'm too weak to reach for the plate, too weak to move... If only someone were here to help me eat, just a little soup would suffice. The server returns and I hear her yelling: "Oh, so you haven't eaten anything? What a spoiled princess you are!" I hear her take away the plate with my untouched lunch and she is gone. It doesn't matter I suppose, I wasn't that hungry anyway... My son will come to visit me later, if he can get off from work, and he will bring me something to eat. I just hope they will let him get off during the visiting hours.

I won't be sleepy then, I will tell him I am hungry. I just need some hot soup to get my strength back.

I am lying in bed and I hear them talking about me. "Yes, she's quite old, she's lived for quite a few years" and I'm thinking "Well, don't talk like that in front of me, I can hear everything, step outside, show some discretion". I lie in my bed and think about how hard it is when you are powerless and weak. You lose your name. You just become "some sick old lady". You used to be much more than a sick old lady. I lie there thinking "if only I could wash my hair". I used to go to the hairdresser's every week. Now, they haven't washed my hair for 15 days. I used to work in this hospital. I was a nurse. These are my co-workers. But I am not their co-worker anymore. I am just an older patient lying here, awaiting my destiny.



LOOK, THE OLD HAG IS SWIMMING

I always loved swimming. In the sea or the pool - my dad taught me to swim when I was eight. It relaxes me, makes me feel active. It is a part of who I am.

I won my first swimming medal when I was 11. Then another one and then several others. Medal or no medal, swimming has always been my true love. I put on my swimming cap, I dive into the pool and I am overcome with joy. At those moments, I know it is something I will be doing until the end of my life. But several days ago something happened that hurt me and made me wonder if I may be mistaken, if, perhaps, the time has come for me to quit swimming.

I was swimming in a pool, many people were around me, including two boys. They were about 11 - the same age I was when I won my first medal. Their laughter caught my attention, but then I saw them pointing me out to their friends, saying "look, the old hag is swimming!" God, as if I were an alien. I felt ashamed of doing what I loved, something I should never be ashamed of.

Oh, yes, I forgot to tell you my age. I am 77. But I swim the same as when I was 11, 21, 41 or 61. Why do young people, and occasionally not so young people, sometimes think that swimming in a pool is unbecoming of older women? Perhaps they think we're too old to swim or that we don't know how to swim. That we have never learned how to swim or that we have forgotten after all these years? Is this their ignorance speaking, or is it the mentality, negative perceptions of ageing and of old age? Don't they understand that ageing does not have to be negative? That, on the contrary, it is an advantage, in many cases?

I am watching those children and thinking: I used to be like them once, I used to be 11, mischievous and full of life. And I'm still the same, except I'm 77 not 11 now. But still, whenever I dive into the pool or the sea - life is wonderful, and I'm enjoying it although I'm 77. I may be wearing this funny cap on my head, but I'm still enjoying myself, so let them laugh and be astonished by the old hag swimming! Swimming is not the privilege of youth, I'll teach them that, they'll understand, someone has to lecture them on the importance of physical activity.





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