

## **The #MeToo movement has arrived in the Balkans**

### **Conversation transcript in English**

Dafina: Hello and welcome to the new episode of the Konteksti podcast by Kosovo 2.0. I am Dafina Halili and today's episode is about the #MeToo movement, which is now gaining ground and having its moment in the Balkans, with many women raising their voices and coming out to speak publicly about being victims of sexual harassment and abuse.

To speak about these events and to contextualize #MeToo around the world, I have the pleasure to have two feminist activists with me today — Adelina Berisha, manager of the Program Against Gender-Based Violence at Kosovo Women's Network and my colleague Iliriana Banjska, managing editor at Kosovo 2.0. Welcome.

Adelina: Thank you for the invitation Dafina! Iliriana: Thank you!

Dafina: Before giving space to Adelina and Iliriana and their perspectives and reflections, I want to summarize and remind you of some key points that have fueled this broad global movement against sexual abuse and harassment against women. In 2006, American activist Tarana Burke kicked off her activism precisely named #MeToo, which would become globally viral in social media, in order to help African-American women who had experienced sexual violence and raise awareness about the growth of sexual abuse and assault in society. In October 2018, the New York Times published a long investigative article, detailing the stories of sexual assault experienced by many women, including actresses Rose McGowan and Ashley Jade, who had come out with accusations against one of the most powerful men in Hollywood, producer Harvey Weinstein. Immediately after the initial reports of Weinstein's abuse, actress Alyssa Milano posted on Twitter, asking all women who had been sexually harassed or assaulted to comment with #MeToo, so that people would understand the scale of the problem -- within a few minutes, thousands of women responded to her Tweet, which turned into a large global movement overnight. In March 2020, Weinstein was sentenced to 23 years in prison for rape and sexual assault. Meanwhile, hundreds of other women, actresses, athletes, journalists, musicians and women in business, came out with accusations about sexual harassment and abuse against powerful men in film, sports, media, business, showbiz and even politics. The pandemic was the headline of 2020 in the whole world, but many countries were also highlighted by emerging mobilization within the #MeToo movement, like in Turkey and Iran, at it seems that the famous phrase will make headlines anew this year in the Balkans. Last month, Serbian actress openly declared that she was raped by her former professor Miroslav Mika Aleksić, who is also an actor and the director of the drama school where she studied acting. He was soon arrested and meanwhile other women came out with accusations against him. So far, he has been taken to court for eight instances of rape. Thousands of women from all over the region expressed solidarity with Milena Radulović using the slogan “Nisi sama” (You are not alone). This was followed by the creation of an online platform “Nisam Trazila”

(I did not ask for it) established by [?], a former student of the Academy of Performance Art in Sarajevo. "We think that it's time to raise awareness because sexual harassment and misogyny are part of every cell in our society," [?] said to the media. The platform is considered a safe space for women to express all forms of misogyny they deal with in their work and study environments. The group's Facebook page amassed more than 40,000 followers just within a few weeks, and they received over 4,000 anonymous messages regarding sexual violence from around the region.

**Adelina, Iliriana — based on an article published yesterday by Vice titled "We can never speak about a post-MeToo period" [?], which says that #MeToo is actually a continuously developing movement, what does this mean for feminist movements globally?**

Adelina: This means that you correctly mentioned that #MeToo started in 2006. We have had other initiatives, for example Take Back the Night in 1975, which more or less addressed violence against women similarly, street activism and protest, in order to condemn violence against women. So, it started very early, it has now been 30 or 40 years, or maybe even more, but from what I can remember, violence was always battled by feminist activists, sexual violence and other types of violence against women. The fact that it started 30 or 40 years ago and we are still dealing with this issue says that perhaps even in the next 30 or 40 years, we will still continue dealing with this issue. I read somewhere that even the founder of the movement herself, when Weinstein was sentenced, said that this is only the beginning of the movement, and it is a good step but it does not mean that everything is done, but that there is a lot of work yet to be done. The beautiful thing about all of this is that we are in the year 2021, in the 2020s when there is much more access to the internet and to social media, and in a way, women all around the world are mobilizing together and the movement is turning global, which is much better and much more powerful, because — I suppose — this then contributes to the changing of global policies, how violence against women is seen, as well as sexual violence, harassment, assault, etc. On the other hand, if we concentrate on the local level, what has happened in the countries, the situation is worse because not all countries in the world have the same policies and fight violence, harassment and assault in the same way. However, I can say that we in Kosovo feel that we are part of the movement, as well as women in Iran, in Turkey, and this makes this movement very powerful, and I hope that we as women and activists all around the world will be able to make use of the infrastructure that is available to us today, in order to be as united and to raise our voices as much as we can against all injustices committed against us, especially against violence against women and forms of sexual violence. It is very important to know these forms, because we often talk about #MeToo and focus more on sexual harassment, but some of these cases were more severe than that — there were rapes, sexual assault and other. So, it is very important to talk about these other forms of violence that women experience and raise awareness among each other about the rights

we have and that we have to report [these crimes], because maybe this is where the power lies.

Iliriana: I think that the greatest victory of the #MeToo movement is shedding light on this solidarity that we can create between women. What life and political rhetoric has brought us to leads us to the understanding that we and women in America are very different, because we are not developed, we do not have the policies that we need and we think that we have many differences with each other, but I think that the #MeToo movement showed this, even though our policies are different, or that our socio-political and economic lives are very different — still, we have the same issue that we deal with, meaning that our struggle should also be the same. This is what #MeToo really put to the fore, and I think that it is very empowering.

**Dafina: Aside from accountability about sexual crimes, sexual violence and harassment, has the #MeToo movement been able to demand accountability also for other forms of sexism and misogyny? That in fact have historically remained undealt with or unaddressed appropriately.**

Iliriana: I think that to some extent, yes, because along with the #MeToo movement — which addresses sexual harassment and violence, in some places the conversation was also about what leads to sexual assault or harassment, and that is where the commonly used phrase in the region "I did not ask for it" comes from. "I did not ask for it" addresses the issue of who is guilty, which in turn addresses the heavily pronounced misogyny in our culture, because when we talk about "I did not ask for it," you are still in the phase of challenging who is guilty, am I guilty because of my behavior, dress, appearance, and this is the foundation of the whole discussion, and I think that #MeToo added this to the discussion and discourse.

Adelina: Apart from this, I think that the fact itself that it affected the whole world and Hollywood women were initially supported, and then this pressure contributed to the court verdict that sentenced him to 23 years in prison and helped address the case properly, this shows that there was a shift in how cases are handled. This movement and this activism helped with that because I do not doubt that even before Harvey Weinstein, actresses or other women reported sexual harassment or assault, but they did not have this attention, and often women were the ones who -- what Iliriana mentioned -- were seen as guilty much more often than the powerful men who used all of their power, be it financial, political, etc., in order to protect themselves and not be charged for what they did. I think that this also gives a message that when we are all together and when there is so much attention, even from justice institutions in a place like the U.S., the symbol of democracy and human rights, it influenced [things], and I think it would also affect the Balkan mentality so that institutions then give more attention to punishments, because as Iliriana said, harassment doesn't just

happen like that, it is directly connected to misogyny and if judges also educate themselves about this, how men exploit their power to cause assault and harassment, I hope that...

Iliriana: This point is especially important, because misogyny has power at its foundation, without power, misogyny does not exist, and I think that all of these cases that happened in Hollywood were testament to this, all of them were men who had had power for many years and had a lot of power, let's not forget, not only were they billionaires, they also were at the helm of many businesses, they had the power to make decisions... they had quite a lot of power...

Adelina: I remember now the case of R. Kelly, who was charged for [abusing] minors a long time ago, I was a kid back then when the case became public, but as far as I know nothing happened and it died down. There are cases like this [that involve] artists...

Dafina: Polanski, Cosby... they were two...

Adelina: They ended without any kind of closure for the victims, and this change is very important, that...

Dafina: It's very interesting what you said, that power is very important here -- the misogyny that is associated with power. And within that we also have to talk about structures of power, because when we talk about power, we are not necessarily talking about someone who is financially [wealthy] or has a high social standing, but also they show very clearly who is at a higher position and who is at a more vulnerable position, like the cases of between professors and students, or directors and actresses, cases of businessmen and employees, and it seems that through #MeToo, different structures of power have been discussed and dealt with like never before.

Iliriana: Definitely. And except for that, they have conveyed the message to other women who perhaps do not have the media focus, who live an ordinary life and nobody knows them...

Dafina: [Not like] famous actresses.

Iliriana: Like famous actresses... they conveyed the message that if I can confront Harvey Weinstein and win the case, you can too. How much this holds true, I don't know, because...

Adelina: If we look at Kosovo's case, now I don't know if it's fortunate or unfortunate, we do not have cases of very public figures who came out and accused someone. Now I'm not sure... I hope that no woman here who is a public figure was harassed and thus there are no reports, I hope. But in cases when women and girls who are not public figures and that

people don't know were involved, except us as activists that we have made an effort to support them -- in the small individual cases that were made public -- we don't have [any particular] support from society. This is unfortunate, but it is how it is. Now, I'm saying again whether we should wait for a momentum, for sexual assault to happen to a public figure, so that she would come out and get attention, or... I hope that it would have been better... I hope it does not happen to anyone to experience harassment, but so that we have the attention and interest...

Dafina: In spite of that, when the #MeToo debate grew and occupied every media outlet -- in Kosovo too -- there were posts on Facebook [inaudible].

Adelina: It started some time in 2014, initially with Take Back the Night. It was an initiative that we started as part of meetings that the Women's Network held with young feminist activists. So, after meeting different communities, [it was agreed] that one of the main problems that women face is sexual harassment and assault. In December 2014, there was first a social media campaign, we made some posts if you remember, they were quite similar to the ones from #MeToo: "I did not ask for it," "educate your son, don't stop your daughter from going out," I don't remember exactly what we posted at the time, but in 2014 we first started in social media, then we held a street protest, it was very interesting because it was at night, it was the first time where something like that was held in the dark, because we know that darkness is directly connected to... women feel much more at risk and are attacked [much more often] during the night, especially in terms of sexual harassment and assault. We started with this campaign in Kosovo, it was followed by some other initiatives, of course there were changes in legislation, but I am focusing more on activism, I know that afterwards Girls Coding Kosovo created an app for reporting sexual harassment directly, then we also got together for #MeToo with [social media] statuses and social media...

Iliriana: Also Marshojmë S'festojmë in 2017...

Adelina: We had calls...

Iliriana: We integrated calls...

Adelina: Of course we expect to have even more activism and louder voices...

Iliriana: I think this is possibly the most important point of the whole debate: what needs to happen for a movement to take off successfully, like the one in Belgrade and the region.

Dafina: Could the the recent events in the region, the large mobilization of women in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Croatia and Montenegro, because the Nisam Trazila platform

gets anonymous messages from women in the countries that I mentioned, could this have any effect or accelerate [the creation of a movement] in Kosovo?

Iliriana: I'm not sure about Kosovo, I still haven't seen anything, I'm following the group and I do not see names that sound Kosovar or Albanian from Kosovo... I don't know, I haven't seen [them] and I don't know what needs to happen for [us] to join. We've had sexual harassment and assault cases in the public that were open, but they did not fuel a movement like this time, and I think that this happens precisely because, even in the case of Belgrade, they were public figures, people who we see as untouchable, as "cultured", [and we say] wow, if it also happens there, imagine what happens in the village. The cultural perception...

Dafina: So that means, if you are a public figure, it is easier to find support in the broader social circle, than someone who is unknown in a rural area, but also from a bigger city.

Iliriana: That is definitely a factor. You have a name for yourself...

Adelina: Maybe you also have the support of the your colleagues, other actresses, singers, because this also happened in the U.S.

Iliriana: The media too -- let's not forget that the media also plays a role...

Adelina: I believe that... going back to the issue of power: a woman who has achieved more and is a public figure, she maybe feels more powerful to report [her case] as compared to an ordinary woman who does not have a background and baggage like that, and it is more difficult for... we are aware of a case that we also supported publicly through protests and actions. Of course, it did not draw as much attention as it should, but I know that in that when we went to protest, [together with] the initiatives from that UP [University of Prishtina] for addressing sexual harassment, we were 20 activists and the UP is a serious institution, it has fame and reputation and people know it, they get their education there, but they did not see it as necessary to go out and fight for the creation of some policies that would make life easier for students there. The reason this does not happen... we often talk about why there is no mobilization, even in cases when women are killed...

Iliriana: When you look at it, the 2018 case when the vice rector said that girls are responsible for the harassment [they experience], imagine what kind of institutional culture they have... of course girls will not come out [to speak], [they believe that] if you dress a certain way or behave a certain way, you are then asking for it yourself, and I think maybe that's why nothing has happened at the UP yet.

Adelina: If you remember the 2015 study we did with the [Women's] Network, over 70% of the citizens ask for it [sexual harassment] by dressing provocatively, so there is this

conviction among us that women are always the ones who incite harassment, but of course this is not true, this is a typical case of victim blaming, and the unfortunate thing is that... going back to the studies that we did, even officials of various institutions are the ones who blame victims for sexual harassment, so there is this stance [that is held] not only by the vice rector and by... but also by the other because maybe we could have forced the vice rector to resign, or react, or -- in a way -- educate her on the fact that what she said was very wrong with a protest, but when it comes delivering justice for a case that you reported in institutions and the people there have this conviction, it is even more dangerous and harmful for us as citizens of Kosovo and for every victim that turns to an institution to ask for help.

Dafina: In spite of this, Iliriana, in the case of the former vice rector that you mentioned, it sparked an initiative to create a regulation within the UP that would address sexual harassment at the university for the first time. In fact, Adelina, you were...

Adelina: They were... ORCA started organizing protests and some other civil society organizations joined afterwards, most of which were women's organizations. The other unfortunate thing is that the war against these phenomena is mostly waged by women's organizations, men on the other hand feel like they have not responsibility in this regard, when in fact most of the responsibility should fall with them...

Iliriana: Male civil society activists that are not directly connected to women's rights...

Adelina: Yes... and one of the demands, besides the dismissal of the vice rector, was to start initiatives for the creation of a regulation that would prevent sexual harassment at the University of Prishtina. And this was also because it was seen that, according to the many meetings that activists held, that there is also sexual harassment at the UP, not only between students but also between hierarchies, between professors and students, also by female professors. The group started working on creating and drafting a regulation, it was not an easy process, not the composition per se because there was a team of experts for whom it was easy to compose the regulation, but then the problems started [when we had to figure] who would have to be responsible for enforcing the regulation, creating reporting mechanisms, analyzing these reports, what would happen after the reports within the UP. I might not be informed and be wrong, but as far as I know, this is what happened, who would address the complaints by students or maybe by the staff. And this is the bad thing in Kosovo -- things start, but if there is not someone who is legally obligated, things sort of remain up in the air. A similar thing happened with the Ec Shlirë application in 2016, Kosovo did not have sexual harassment in its penal code. When we asked data from the police, there was no reported case of sexual harassment, not because it didn't happen, but they were distributed in other articles and the police did not know how to call that violation: it either classified it as harassment, which is a bit more general, or it put it as sexual assault, which is also something else.

Iliriana: The other issue is who would take responsibility to go forward... maybe the movement itself tries to touch upon everything at the same time, domestic violence, harassment, women at work, and we don't know where to grab onto and we often do not take it past the finish line...

Adelina: [Regarding] the application, we wanted the police to deal with it, it is online, it is possible for them just to take it, and since there was this gap in the legal infrastructure, they would see that harassment happens. The application is not used by the police and on the other hand, we have various countries in the world who have seen it and asked if they could use the application because it is very good and it would make work easier for us. But, again, I do not know if it is a general problem, the fact that we do not have enough awareness to utilize modern tools, or just the lack of interest for dealing with sexual harassment and the forms of violence that are specific to women.

Iliriana: I think that there are different reasons, including the practical side as well as this, which I think is a bit more social and the way that the movement was developed in Kosovo is because problems never stop, to say it simply, and there is still a small number of activists who we know and continuously work with these issues in order to deal with all issues from A to Z, and maybe something could happen here...

Adelina: Maybe some kind of mobilization... maybe because we are feminist activists, of course we worry about gender equality, improving women's lives, but if something happens that affects our state, for example corruption, we do not say "oh it is not up to us because we do not deal with corruption."

Dafina: Exactly.

Adelina: We unite with these movements too. Again, maybe because we're education through feminism to know that corruption also affects women's lives...

Dafina: Social justice for everyone.

Adelina: For everyone. However, we also have organizations who are led by men and fight for human rights, Iliriana said it very well earlier, but we do not see them being very active when it comes to uniting with us, or they deal with political parties, but we do not see them joining us here, because if you work with political parties you're going to be working with the women in these parties, you have to have a sense of why these women are not able to develop themselves and meet with us feminists to understand how we can make things better.



Dafina: Before we finish, why is it important for the #MeToo movement for the women's rights movement.

Adelina: Firstly, it is very important for the victims so that there is justice for them, even if it happened 20 or 30 years ago, the trauma that they experience -- that is what all the scientists say -- the trauma they experience if they had to deal with sexual assault or harassment lasts a lifetime, they do not end. For the victims it's very important to have this justice, individually for them, but also the message is very important, although there might have been a delay, justice was served and these crimes are not forgotten and they [the perpetrators] need to be punished for what happened.

Iliriana: Apart from this, it is important because this is a sign that we understand what sexual assault or harassment or rape means for victims. Studies show that victims of sexual assault need time until they understand that they were sexually assaulted or harassed because in most cases what happens during the process is that victims are first "prepared" by rapists to bring her to a point where they believe that it's their fault and they asked for it, and they need a lot of time to understand and now the judicial system is understanding the nature of the act-- or rather of the crime. It means that we are getting a better understanding what it means for the victims and how it happens, and this is much more important than anything else. And it gives society a sign that yes, we trust you, and if you decide to find the courage and power to come out in a society that still judges you if something like this happened to you, we will trust you and we will continue seeking justice for you. If there is anything good that came from this, according to me, this is the best.

Adelina: Let's not forget that not all victims were adults -- in the Belgrade case, the victim was a minor, so at the time, as a 17 year old, you can be manipulated and think that it's nothing, like Iliriana said, and time is needed to mature, grow and understand that what you experienced is against the law, it is a crime. So, it is very important.

Dafina: Adelina and Iliriana, thank you a lot for being with me today, thank you also for your activism. Dear listeners and audience of Kosovo 2.0, we hope to have you again in our next episodes! Thank you a lot.