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Media and gender-based violence - Transcript in English

What is the media's role in preventing gender-based violence?

D: Hello and welcome to Konteksti. I am Dafina Halili and in today's episode, we will talk about the portrayal and coverage of gender-based violence by the media. Sebahate Morina's murder once again brought to attention that femicide, women's murder because of their gender, and gender-based violence is preventable. Until now it seems that attempts to eliminate violence against women and girls have been mainly focused on response and offering of services for the survivors of violence and not on addressing the structural cases as fundamental in eliminating violence against women and girls.

Feminist activists and women's rights organizations continually highlight that violence against women is a problem of society as a whole and should be addressed as a global pandemic. In this context, media are a decisive factor in forming an overall awareness of the society about gender-based violence through the way in which they report and how they use language and stories.

To further analyze the content of Kosovar media and its vast potential to help the fight for women's right, today I am talking to Adelina Berisha, a feminist activist from Kosovo Women's Network who for many years has investigated gender-based violence; and Leonida Molliqaj, editor in chief of Qika platform (Center for Information, Critique, and Action), a feminist organization that through actions, reports, and research dedicates its mission to promote equal rights.

D: Adelina, Leonita, hello and welcome to Konteksti.

A: Nice to be here, Dafina.

L: Nice to be here.

D: Before we start, a short summary of facts related to the case of Sebahate Morina, the latest case of femicide in Kosovo.

Sebahate Morina's murder on March 14, in Prishtina, caused vast anger among women's rights activists who stated that the killing of the 42-year-old was not an incident or an isolated action but the culmination of systematic violence toward girls and women in Kosovo. The Police confirmed for the media that violence against Sebahate was reported two times; the second time only 12 days before her murder. Sebahate had reported violence in 2019 and as a result, the Fundamental Court in Gjilan had given her a Protection Order until the end of 2020. On March 3 of this year, after the Protection Order expired, Sebahate's daughter had reported violence toward her mother by her father. But, according to the Kosovo Law Institute (KLI) and

K2.0

Kosovo Women's Network research, the state prosecutor found only one interview with Sebahate sufficient and did not undertake any additional actions to ensure her protection and security. "Sebahate is a victim of her ex-husband, she is a victim of the state of Kosovo", said Ehat Miftaraj, Executive Director of KLI.

On March 18, a group of citizens organized action in Prishtina and held up letters that formed the words: "Not one more". The action included standing in front of the Police, the Persecution, and the Government; Buildings that host the three main responsible institutions that failed to save Sebahate's life. On that night, tens of people gathered in a silent manifestation in front of the government holding flowers and candles to remember Sebahate.

D: Adelina, let's start with you. As an activist of the Network, you have been working in the terrain for years monitoring and following the work of the institutions and in particular that of the institutional chain that is obliged to coordinate and function in time to prevent gender-based violence and to protect the lives of violence survivors. In addition, you are one of the Network's activists who has been in continuous contact with the media, you have even been interviewed by K2.0 often during the years. You have been tasked to follow the reports about the murder of Sebahate Mornia, as you monitored and declared as an activist about the killing of other women such as Valbona Maru, Klara Marku, Donjeta Pajazitaj, Antigona Morina, Zejnepe Berisha, and Dafina Zhubi. Only in the past year, according to the official data, there have been six cases of Femicide.

Has the covering of gender-based violence changed throughout the years? Is there any type of intervention and greater seriousness to engage in this direction? Or have the media continued to worsen the responsible report of gender-based violence?

A: Thank you first of all for the invitation. Thank you for starting this crucial discussion. Because we as NGOs and Media are quite an important pillar of the society and carry a heavy burden to be as correct as possible in informing the citizens about everything, and with a focus, since this is our profile, related to gender equality or violations of women's rights which happen in our society. To reply to your question, I can say that these past years there is a little improvement, thankfully, in how violence towards women is treated by the media. I cannot say in this aspect that all media treat it as they should but there are a few, for example, you Kosovo 2.0, the articles of Leonida which have been very correct and have taken into consideration all aspects which you mentioned that lead to violence and the violation of women's rights, it's Prishtina Insight which up to some point treats the cases right. However, if we take a look at the portals which publish short stories and ad hoc, maybe I can say there can be space for improvement because often, now we know that there is a great competition among all those hundreds of portals, and each of them attempts to launch the news first and reach more views or clicks. And this has often impacted in having bombastic titles and not respectful toward, for example, the victim, they do not respect the family, or simply articles are written that talk about domestic violence but they are written more for clicks instead of having a purpose of punishing violence

K2.0

toward women and report correctly about violations that may have come from institutions in addressing domestic violence cases.

Often media are sufficient with a simple reporting that domestic violence happened, a murder happened, but what is missing is a deep analysis that follows further what happened, the other steps that the institutions took or did not take. And if this happened I believe that citizens would be better informed, more correctly, where the spaces are in our state in treating violence toward women, and media should focus here more. Not to be sufficient with a simple report which we all get from the police; domestic violence happened, but research more and find out what was or wasn't undertaken, what brought violence about and such. This is something we would like to see more.

On the other hand, we have reports which maybe include all these components, they talk about the violations of the institutions but focus more on the news, they aim that instead impact societal changes. So, these are what we would like to see more by the media and always focus on the victim, to protect the victim, to protect the confidentiality of the other family members, children, when they are involved, should have a very sensitive treatment. But on the other hand, we had spaces when the media, unfortunately, gave space to the perpetrator of violence to excuse themselves, this is a great critique I have for all the media that have such a tendency, not to do this because I remember, you mentioned the case of Gjakova, the late Valbona Marku, when Pjeter Ndrecaj, her husband, in one of our media with a lot of viewership Klan Kosova, had the space to give an excuse which automatically impacted the court to take it as an apology and his sentence was reduced; which was a sentence of life in prison, and to go to trial again.

So, there should be a lot of care in who is given space, how the space is given to the victim, how it is given to the perpetrator, or in the case of the murder, the murderers; because they are murderers. So, we should be very vigilant and very careful because maybe the reasoning was good, to inform the population, but they should think further, on how it can impact the justice system, the victim, the other family members, to see for example a murderer excusing himself, it is most probably a great trauma. So, the media should be very careful in this aspect on how they refer to gender-based violence, violence toward women more specifically.

D: Leonita, how is it being reported in the media? Adelina mentioned that gender-based violence and femicide are having a little more attention and greater media coverage during the past years. In the last case of Sebahate Morina, us media were informed about the different institutional failures who had taken no additional measures to protect her life. But, how sufficient is this, what is missing from the content and treating of femicide and gender-based violence in general?

L: In general, cases of domestic violence, more specifically violence toward women, especially cases of reporting about murders of women, in general, are reported more on a level of news which brings clicks and views for the media, instead of treating it on a tragedy level, let's say of

K2.0

the state; where the state did not manage to protect the victim, and as a consequence women have lost their lives.

There is indeed an improvement in this direction, we have two cases which I would like to mention today. One of them is the latest case of Sebahate Morina, where the following day some of the media have requested from the Kosovo Police to see if she has ever reported cases of domestic violence to the police. This happened because women's rights organizations have earlier reported that in most cases women report cases to the police and they are still victims of femicide.

So, in this case, this has served us, especially the activists who have worked on this case because it gave us information that was more than the report that a woman was killed. Which report usually includes only initials, that unfortunately, police reports use initials as an illustration of the name of the person, the victim, however, in the cases of femicide I think it is important, when we know exactly what happened, to mention the name and the last name. Because this somehow makes the lives of lost women less valuable. In the case of Sebahate, this has been a positive thing we noticed, research was used.

Then we had the case of the Women's Network and the KLI organization who further pushed the research and published a report which proved with facts which were the violations that happened to the late Sebahate. The reason why I am mentioning the report is that this functioned as a chain because after the publication of the report the media were helping to correctly report. So, most of the media who wanted to know more about the case had all of it in a report, that included the names of the prosecutors and all those involved in the case, and the reporting was made easier and everything that they wanted to address more, in this case, was easier.

The other case is that of Syzana Sekiraqa, where a documentary of Kohavizion brought to attention the life, and sacrifice, and the state of someone accused of her husband's murder, like Syzana, and the injustices that she alleges were done to her by the state's institutions.

It is impossible for the public to have information on all the human rights violations that happen in Kosovo if there were no media that accurately reflect them. For example the case of Syzana, I personally but many more people had no access and did not know about it before, how it was addressed. In that case, you could get some information and further research on the specific case.

What is still missing, and that I agree that there has been some improvement, is treating femicide cases as a societal phenomenon. The news, reports, and texts in the cases of murder and domestic violence are still treated from an individual perspective. So, in this case, something happens, for example to Sebahate, but there is a lack of societal interpretation, why these happen, what it means to have domestic violence. And without having this wide and

K2.0

correct perspective on femicide, very often there are mistakes which Adelina also mentioned, that often the victim is blamed, excusing language is used about the abuser, there is not sufficient pressure toward the institutions. Because I think that the media, especially when we talk about human rights, should not only aim to report but also raise the awareness of the public, in this case about what domestic violence is and how it should be prevented.

A: If I could pitch in here as well, it should be the media's role, now we are functioning in a virtual world mainly. The media and news are using this space more and more. What Leonida also said, the news should not only be informative but emancipating as well. The media should be very vigilant and careful about the comments that follow when such cases are reported. We have often seen that they are tolerated even when they are completely blaming the victim or finding different excuses about the domestic violence, why it happens. This is maybe a consequence of what Leonida said that it doesn't describe what domestic violence is and what the consequences are, but on the other hand, they maybe should be a little more vigilant about the comments that incite hate, that is sexist, that blame the victim, the media should clean them, minimize the space for such a commenter.

D: Leonita, could there be a larger impact from the medial production that happens every day, if the misogyny culture takes a larger space in the daily and weekly cover, becomes part of the portal covers during the day, takes space in the evening debates, and becomes a main title in the national TV main news. Usually, we talk about the news from 19:30 to 20:30 when the viewership is higher. Is it the role of the media to incite public discussions, especially by giving greater space in the main news for these events?

L: Yes, of course. Especially when we talk about gender-based violence we often notice that whenever it is discussed or written about in the media, it's immediately assumed it is physical violence or murder. Gender-based violence includes other forms of violence as well, which are not only not reported here, but when they happen, the language with which they are treated is extremely discriminating and worrying.

D: Like psychological violence...

A: Psychological violence, economic violence,

A: Sexual violence...

L: Online violence, which is a highly frequent issue, it's a global issue, how many activists especially feminist activists are attacked online, or politician women. Meanwhile here, it is not only criticized but the media join the commenters in this violence toward women in the public sphere.

K2.0

I do not want to sound bad, but I think there is a lack of information about how to report on gender issues. I know that journalists have been trained during the years on this topic, however, it is clear that when they write about sexual assault they do not treat it on a level of violence. Or when they write that a woman was cyber attacked, they do not treat it on the level of violence. It is crucial for journalists not to take information as such but to be interested to read and get further informed about these topics. With no awareness from the journalists, who are the ones that produce the news, we cannot have awareness of the public on gender issues.

As for the treatment of gender issues, even though there has been improvement, issues that are related to gender, sexuality, violence, and such issues, there is still very little space in Kosovar media, especially traditional ones, which are taken over by the news that brings viewership that usually relates to politics, corruption. The misfortune is that human rights, women's rights, are seen as in the rubric of 'showbiz' or 'lifestyle'. There is still a tendency to have a hierarchy of problems. Is an international policy more important, or who recognized us, or that a woman was killed in Prishtina today. So, we attempt the whole time to have a hierarchy that is often oppressive toward marginalized categories in Kosovo. The reason why I think it is crucial to have feminist texts or stories is that we have recent examples which have improved this direction. For example, today there are many more feminist girls and women who write and have taken up space in the media which has often shown many problems that were not thought about before.

For example, Shqipe has researched and reported sexual abuse in a marriage, which was not discussed before as a category, it was discussed as sexual violence but not as sexual violence within the family. Then we had reports about abortion, about the issues of the LGBT community, and many other issues which through research have shown something hidden and untreated before. If this would further develop and we had women journalists, but also men journalists who are interested in gender issues, I believe that it will have its effect because this is how the media function. The public is served something and usually, here it is something wrong and full of stereotypes, and if we change, and I have hope that we will, the public will be more interested in the issues.

D: Prevention is the only way to stop the violence before it happens and this requires political engagement, implementation of laws that promote gender equality, investment in women's rights organizations, and addressing the many forms of discrimination which women face every day. Is it the time to talk more about safety in the street, workplace discrimination, reporting violence at the police, sexism and sexist language manifested in many segments of the society... at least half of what we report about visits at political actors and their declarations. Not doing this - how is it impacting for gender-based violence and femicide not being part of the national discussion topic, but neither the political language. Is it important to continually report on many-level discriminations against women to get better reporting and better awareness on a societal level for gender-based violence?

K2.0

A: Definitely this would help. But I believe this should start earlier. Not when we grow up and become women and start to realize what discrimination is, but from when we are children the society's focus should start there. Changing stereotypes, traditional gender roles that we teach our children - boys and girls - what is expected of them when they grow up. Everything should start to change from there. And of course when we grow and we face discrimination about which we are aware and we understand.

This is not talked about in the media, domestic violence, and gender-based violence are not the same as violence that happens in the street let's say between two men. You said it well, it is based on gender inequality which is replicating for years, among generations, and with no changes here there will be no prevention of domestic violence.

But on the other hand, reaching societal change requires more time. That is what laws are there for, as affirmative measures to ensure us that our rights as citizens will be respected if we are men or women. In this aspect, of course, we have a lot of work to do because we are always proud that we have a legal curriculum that protects us, but this does not happen in reality. This now sounds like a cliché, but this is the reality that is mentioned in round tables of different actors, we are always stuck in law implementation.

All these injustices that happen to women from childhood as girls, we should talk about it. For example, if a family has a boy and a girl, and can only send one of them to get educated, Kosovar families would send the boy instead of the girl. An uneducated woman is more likely to be a victim of violence than a girl who has the opportunity to decide about her life.

When you meet family members of murdered women, the reason why they never told anyone, is because of this. Maybe they rebelled when they grew up and fell in love with a man that the family did not support, so they never told anyone about the violence because they felt guilty, they think they brought that upon themselves because they did not listen to their family. This all should be taken into account by the media when they report about cases of violence, but even more so by the institutions who have a responsibility to protect the victims. They should understand this dynamic why women withdraw their reports, change their declarations, what pressures they could have by their partners, their community, the society.

There have been many cases when the police told them, you want to ruin the family for a slap. Or in the last case, by the persecutor, that the danger did not seem high so they did not correctly assess danger because they do not have this information. Those women are discriminated against and violated, they are taught to feel unimportant from youth, and often they do not know their rights or what to seek. The institutions are obliged to tell each woman what their rights are and what they should ask for.

D: I will go back to Social Media and to the comments that are not deleted or controlled, which you both mentioned. Leonita, you did an action with QIKA on international women's day, with

K2.0

the overturned table in front of the government, asking for an overturning of the order, highlighting and addressing the economic dependence and unpaid labor as cooking, cleaning, and taking care of children. As a burden even heavier for women during the pandemic. QIKA also reacted during the following days toward the sexist comments, often filled with hate speech. There were even comments that called for sexual violence. Was this a surprise for QIKA?

L: Initially, the idea for the action was to create a disturbance, so the purpose was reached because we know that in this case, we have pressed the buttons we wanted to. We wanted to tell you that this should not only be done by women. And when you attack someone's comfort and privileges, in this case, men, there will of course be reactions. So they were not unforeseeable, but maybe the form and the manner in which people reacted was something to study.

For example, when we were reading comments, especially on the media, less on QIKA's address, the language was not only offensive toward the activists that were part of the action, or the organization, but the freedom to threaten someone, a public figure, in this case, two women who symbolically threw a table, was strange. The threats, in general, were related to the fact that "you want to convince our wives or our sisters that they should throw tables at the house". It was a fear from the idea that we weaken their power. The other one was threats for sexual violence. And this is not the first time it happens for QIKA. Usually, women who hold public responsibility, or women who are activists, anytime they speak or seem to be outside of the standard of how a quiet and polite woman should be, it presses something on men, which is irritating and they need to press it back.

On that day, 8 March, many of the politicians, men, and women, were talking about equality, about how we should change society, how there should be more women in the workplace, to get women out of their houses. Same things, only the language changed, and the action of the overthrowing was different.

So the same language was not used toward the politicians, men, and women, who promoted gender equality because they did not see it as a real attack. So the moment they saw something that really disturbed their daily life, which is housework, they felt violated and the need to threaten. The idea that we are threatened with sexual assault, seemed, to me personally, very interesting. Because we noticed through the language of the commenters a need to humiliate through sexual violence. Because nothing was objectifying in the action, or anything sexual, to give you that right. It was the idea that "I will shut you up through physical violence or sexual assault".

This seemed like a great show of misogyny which sees the woman as an object which you can adjust or fold only through sexual acts. This is worrying, we reacted not because we were

K2.0

worried or hurt by the comments of men, but because we wanted to tell what the action caused and what it showed is the real state of our society.

D: I think that we at K2.0 but other media as well, should treat cyber violence toward activists, journalists, and women in politics more. Especially with the creation of different online platforms, different statistics, reports, research, not only here but around the world, show how threatened all women in the public sphere are by such attacks.

Adelina, for the end. The use of language and choice of words used to create communication, narration, and ideas about how we think about gender, gender roles, and as such gender-based violence. In this context, should there be a rule in the editorial policies and newsrooms, for domestic violence to be first referred to as gender-based violence, and when this violence culminates in murder to be referred to as femicide. To make it clear that violence toward women is not personal but political, and as such is a responsibility of the entire society. Should we start from the way how and what words we chose to use to report gender-based violence?

A: Always, the topic is very important about a society's direction as a whole not only in reporting gender-based violence but in general for a society the language is very important, how we talk about different problems. It is something we realized from experience, we realized we need to have very sensitive language when we report cases of violence but this is a requirement of the legislation as well. Now that the Istanbul Convention is part of our constitution, we are obliged by all awareness campaigns, including media articles, to be very careful how they talk about the victim and the entire case of violence.

There are standard acting procedures for the media, how to report violence toward women. These are documents that are being developed around the world, they will be in Kosovo as well. How to address and how to treat gender-based violence. For us as a feminist organization, a women's organization, we have started to use femicide in our dictionary, as a term for women murder.

This is something recently being used in our region as well, as a term. And I hope that we will manage to raise awareness among journalists and the entire society that the killing of women is political, the state is responsible, femicide should be a burden of the state. We mentioned a few cases which, for the lack of functioning of the state, the state institutions, lead to femicide.

Thus, it is important to change starting from the language to bring along change in the society not to tolerate violence, to punish it, and not be tolerant toward anyone who uses hate or violence-inciting language, or committing violent acts which today are maybe tolerated. From our research, we often understand that, for example when we ask parents: Is it violence to slap children if they caused trouble? They say "No it is discipline". This shows how we see these phenomena and how we should change the terminology and the language, to bring along a change in treating violence, and hopefully its prevention.

K2.0

D: Adelina, Leonita, thank you a lot. Your contribution and points of view are very important for all of us involved in media and journalism.

A: Thank you for the opportunity to talk about this topic today.

L: Thank you, Dafina.

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