MONASH University

‘Woman is not wolf to woman’: Solidarity, struggles and contradictions in digital feminist activism in the Balkans

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Abstract

This doctoral thesis examines emerging modes of feminist digital activism in the Balkans, as a formation within an ever-changing social, political, economic situation. It explores new expressions of feminism among young feminists built in these new spaces for feminist activism, where the notions of solidarity and collective actions are crucial, but which simultaneously allow for individual independent engagement, separate from established organisations and structures. Feminists in the Balkans have been involved in a range of collective actions, such as hashtag activism, sharing personal stories, documenting rape culture, public shaming, creating support networks in online forums and groups, and organizing offline protests. This thesis delves into these engagements, their impacts and repercussions, and the intricacies of digital feminist activism, exploring its affective and emotional dimensions through the cultural, social, and political prism of the specific context of the Balkans.

This thesis specifically explores several key themes: the digital transformation of feminist activism on social media within the context of the distinctive Balkan traditions, patriarchal order, and established gender roles, the ways in which the new gender backlash manifests in digital spaces, the feminist activities and affective states provoked by participation in online activism, the strategies and tactics employed by feminists to combat rising sexism and misogyny, and the opportunities and limitations of private spaces on social media platforms. The analysis is framed through the lens of the predominant culture of violence, as a remnant of the wars and the perpetual instability of the region, particularly the nationalist masculinity formed within this context. The research therefore focuses on online feminist activism, examining how feminist activists navigate complex technological ecosystems to build awareness of and resist misogyny, violence against women, and oppressive experiences.

The findings highlight the pervasive presence of sexism and misogyny online, reflecting a broader culture of violence and ethno-nationalism rooted in the aftermath of past wars, as well as the complex political, social, and cultural realities of post-socialist societies that remain in a constant state of transition. In this context, feminist activism is deeply intertwined with nationalist, political, and social discourses, requiring feminists to navigate these issues with care to avoid delegitimization and stigmatization of their cause. As right-wing ideologies grow stronger and more pervasive, and as social media platforms reshape feminist activism, this challenge intensifies for feminists in the Balkans and around the world. The findings underscore the urgent need to address entrenched traditionalist and patriarchal social norms, both online and offline, while reframing feminist issues and activism in ways that can effectively counter right-wing, anti-gender, and nationalist discourses that threaten to undo the progress that has been achieved.

Declaration

This thesis is an original work of my research and contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, or any use of generative artificial intelligence technologies, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

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[I]n mass actions, women can have power. The more women become conscious of the need for such mass action, the more progress will be achieved. And, to return to the woman who can afford to seek individual liberation, the more she can influence her friends and sisters, the more that consciousness will spread, which in turn, when frustrated by the system, will stimulate mass action. Of course, the more that consciousness spreads, the more men will be aggressive and violent. But then, the more men are aggressive, the more women will need other women to fight back, that is, the more the need for mass action will be clear... And so it must become in the sex struggle. And it will.

Simone de Beauvoir, in Gerassi (1976)

1. INTRODUCTION

Digital communication technologies provide an arena for cultural exchange, collaboration, discussion, sharing experiences and ideas at a faster rate and in a more immediate manner than ever before (Castells, 2000; 2015; Van Dijck, 2013; Tufekci, 2017). Social media platforms were hailed as spaces offering an open public sphere, serving as communication vehicles for networked sociality (Van Dijck, 2013, Gillespie, 2018). However, these online spaces have simultaneously become a new sphere where, under the guise of anonymity, hatred, discrimination, and silencing are facilitated with impunity (Halder and Jaishankar, 2009; Haris and Vitis, 2020; Henry and Powell, 2015; Mantilla, 2013; Shaw, 2014; Megarry, 2014; Jane, 2014; 2016; 2017a; Powell and Henry, 2017; Levey, 2018; Salter, 2018; Vickery and Everbach, 2018; Mendes et al., 2019). With the expansion of digital media, phenomena such as sexism, harassment, and abuse, have been translated onto digital spaces, and assumed new channels of expression (Jane, 2014; 2016; 2017a; Powell and Henry, 2017; Harris and Vitis, 2020). At the same time, new technologies have been praised as a space for 'new formations of feminism', bringing feminism into the spotlight, and offering a new arena for feminist activism and addressing online violence and harassment (Herring et al., 2002; Jane, 2014; 2016; Mendes et al., 2019; Sundén and Paasonen, 2020; Kanai, 2019, 2023).

The overarching goal of my doctoral research is to expand and contribute to the growing field of scholarship examining digital feminist activism, technology-facilitated harassment and violence, and localised feminist collective actions of solidarity. I aim to help lay the groundwork for renewed focus on media and formations of feminism in Southeast Europe. In doing so, I seek to enrich the global corpus of feminist scholarship by offering a distinct 'non-Western' perspective from a region with a complex history, entrenched patriarchal traditions, and deeply rooted gender roles. Building on the work of feminist media scholars (McRobbie, 2009; Rentschler, 2014; Shaw, 2014; Henry and Powell, 2015; Banet-Weiser, 2018; Clark-Parsons, 2018; Kanai, 2017, 2019, 2023; Miltner, 2018; 2019; Mendes, Ringrose and Keller, 2019; Jane, 2014; 2016; Trott, 2023, among many other), I am interested in the gendered politics of online spaces within the specific context of the Balkans, as well as the strategies women and girls use in a situated feminist context online to assert their own space in the

cybersphere, protect themselves from hate speech and harassment, and provide mutual support, through the lens of feminist solidarity (Hemmings, 2012; Keller et al., 2018; Clark-Parsons, 2022).

The main questions that this research seeks to answer are related to the development of digital feminist activism, its forms of expression, impact, and maintenance strategies. More specifically, the research examines: How has feminism in the Balkans developed and transformed with social media within the context of distinctive Balkan traditions, patriarchal order, and established gender norms? What affective states are being provoked by online sexism and misogyny? What are the modes of feminist responses to online misogyny and sexism and the strategies of defence employed by feminists online? How do women in this context create safe spaces online as spaces of resistance and what is their significance for feminist activism?

My interest in the topic of digital feminist activism in the Balkans and my desire to explore its complexities stem from my personal experiences, as well as the experiences of the women around me. Long before I immersed myself in academic research, I worked with local and regional women's organisations, and later with international organisations, primarily implementing projects related to women's empowerment and prevention of gender-based violence. During this time, I often appeared on national media to promote our activities and successes and to discuss various women's rights issues. These media reports and statements were also shared on the social media accounts of the media outlets. The content, combined with the fact that I, as a young woman, was publicly discussing these topics, often triggered numerous comments under the posts, as well as messages in my inbox. The comments and the messages were typically of sexual nature, insulting and demeaning, and I would read them, stunned by their complete disregard for me as a person. They mostly came from men I did not know and had never previously interacted with. The first time it happened, I was left speechless. In the video that was shared, I was discussing women's position in the labour market, presenting well-known facts and widely shared data on women's unemployment and economic inactivity. I never imagined these would be topics that could provoke such a reaction. As I read the comments and messages, I found myself wondering why this was

happening. I rewatched the interview several times, trying to pinpoint something I might have said that triggered these men, who appeared to feel offended in some way.

Too stunned to do anything, I kept quiet. I did not share the video with anyone, I did not promote the important work I was doing. I just waited for it to be buried by other posts. The next time it happened, I did the same thing. My excitement and enthusiasm about social media as spaces offering new possibilities for sharing, educating, awareness-raising, community building, and advocating gradually faded. I became more hesitant, second-guessing every post, often writing then deleting what I had written. I grew reluctant to appear on any media to discuss women's rights and my work. I began to recognise a familiar pattern – one in which patriarchy was quieting my voice since my childhood. I was chased in a corner of the virtual world with a small community of like-minded individuals who had similar experiences in these digital public spaces. However, as I reflected on my struggle to assert myself in digital spaces, my feminist identity grew stronger, as did my interest in the gendered dynamics of communication in the digital sphere, where I began to see the convergence of offline and online realities.

While discussions around sexism, misogyny, harassment and violence have been in the spotlight on a global level since the proliferation of the #MeToo movement in 2017 (Fileborn, 2016; Fileborn and Loney-Howes, 2019; Clark-Parsons, 2019; Chandra and Erlingsdóttir, 2021; Cheema, 2023; Trott, 2023; Baker et al., 2023), the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021 brought to the surface many of the issues in online spaces which previously might have been somewhat overlooked. Among these, prominently, the extent of sexist and misogynistic behaviour online (see e.g., Henry and Powell, 2015; Harris and Vitis, 2020; Swinnen et al., 2022). This has especially been visible in the ex-Yugoslav countries of the Balkans (see e.g., Marinković, 2021; Cvetincanin Knezević, 2021; Dragojlo 2021), a region where the #MeToo wave was delayed, partly triggered by the restrictions imposed during the pandemic.

With the COVID-19 pandemic that captured the whole world in 2020 and 2021, forcing people to the virtual world due to the inaccessibility of the physical world, closed off with restrictions and safety measures, violence against women and girls, as well as domestic violence, increased globally (Graham-Harrison et al., 2020; Sánchez et al., 2020; Rocha et al., 2024). At

the same time, harmful behaviours, sexism, and misogyny online became more visible and pressing. For example, research on online harassment in the United States (Vogels, 2021) revealed that, compared to 2017, a larger number of people experienced more severe forms of harassment, such as stalking, sexual harassment, physical threats, and similar. Even though there is no similar survey or research to provide empirical evidence on women's experiences online during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Balkans, it is not difficult to infer, given the rapid rise in domestic violence cases (UN Women, 2023), that online spaces likely saw a surge in sexist and misogynistic speech, as well as sexual harassment and violence.

Another indicator of the increased prevalence of sexual harassment in online spaces during the pandemic was the discovery of secret online groups on the chat application Telegram. In 2020, in North Macedonia and Serbia, numerous women (and more often young girls) discovered the existence of groups on Telegram where men from the region shared their private photographs, videos and personal information (Cvetincanin Knezević, 2021). Such postings were often accompanied by false claims, objectifying and dehumanizing them, treating them as commodities, to be bought, threatened, stalked, and harassed. After the first group, named 'Public Room' ('Javna soba'), such groups were also exposed in Serbia and throughout the region, under the names 'Balkan Room', 'YU Balkan Room', 'Public Room 2', 'Balkan cubbyhole', 'Balkan Perversions,' and possibly hundreds of others that have remained hidden. The non-consensual sharing and distribution of images presented a new 'highly mediated kind of sexual violence', which is perceived by victims as 'repeated assaults', or 'recurring instances of exposure and shaming facilitated by mediated rhythms and circulation' (Uldbjerg, 2021, p. 1). The strong reactions by feminist throughout the region raised awareness on the issue and instigated discussions for the increase of legal regulation of online spaces and incrimination of these new forms of sexual harassment and violence. The push has resulted with the inclusion of related offences in the criminal codes of the countries where these violations were discovered. Since the initial discovery of the groups in 2020, the earliest groups have been deleted, some of their moderators prosecuted, however new groups are still being found, almost four years later (AFP, 2024).

While my research interest in the politics of online spaces and especially the experiences of women and girls in online spaces was sparked before the pandemic, the events that brought

to the surface the amount of sexist and misogynistic behaviour online has confirmed that it is a question of utmost importance and research focus, and something that needs deeper analysis in order to understand its full cultural, social, and political implications and effects. My focus in the first moment was more driven towards deeper immersion into the various tactics used by harassers aimed at limiting online spaces for women and girls. However, after further consideration and as I started to participate more actively in spaces created by women and girls on social media, my focus changed. What has become more fascinating and could provide me with a deeper insight of the dynamics of gendered participation in social media spaces and its effect on women's and girls' lives, is examining the strategies employed by women and girls online to respond to harassment and the safe spaces they create for mutual support, sharing, and engaging in various activities. Therefore, my research is focused on women's lived experiences in online spaces and the ways such experiences produce movement and action, through an analysis of the gendered affective relationalities in online spaces and the feminist strategies of defence and responses to the sexist environment of online communication in the Balkans. Furthermore, the study also considers the concept of affect and its importance to emerging solidarity and discourses around digital feminist activism. Specifically, it draws on the conceptualisation of affective solidarity necessary for sustainable feminist politics of transformation and building of feminist coalitions (Hemmings, 2012; Whittier, 2021). Additionally, the construct of 'affective publics' (Papacharissi, 2015; 2016) provides the foundation for understanding how feminist discourses can produce communities of support and care while producing politics of resistance to the patriarchal heritage of the Balkan region and creating opportunities for women to mobilise support and solidarity cross-regionally.

I intentionally refer to a specific phrase used by digital feminist activists in the Balkans, 'woman is not wolf to woman', used as one of the most prominent indications of the emphasis on feminist solidarity and collective action. By using the famous phrase commonly attributed to the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, 'Man is wolf to man' ('homo homini lupus est' in Latin), generally understood to refer to the intrinsic cruelty of humans represented through the image of the wolf, as a predatory and ferocious animal, feminists in the Balkans demonstrate their dedication to action in solidarity with each other. By explicitly stating that they are not accepting the common stereotypical patriarchal perception of female friendships

and relationships as superficial and fake, built on competitiveness and malice, they are dismantling the patriarchal norms that position women in opposition to each other (Cawston, 2016). Feminists emphasise this rejection through different means. For example, the online feminist collective I have included in my analysis, on some of their shared images, explicitly crosses out the word 'wolf' substituting it with 'in solidarity' (Women's solidarity), activists use this phrase for feminist training and workshops they hold (Pavićević, 2024), they discuss it in podcasts (Tampon Zona, 2023) and use it in memes (women's business).

This dissertation, therefore, builds on the call scholars have made for greater attention to women's experiences in their interaction with digital feminist activism, and a more ethnographic approach to this issue (Fileborn and Loney-Howes, 2019; Mendes et al., 2019). Concurrently, the research aims to serve as a foundation for addressing the problem of technology-facilitated harassment and violence against women in the Balkans, where a significant gap exists in terms of availability of relevant research and analysis around this issue. With this, it will also contribute to the global inventory of knowledge and to the efforts for establishment of safer and women-friendly online services and spaces.

To approach the issue of harassment and violence against women in online and offline spaces and the actions feminist activists engage with as a response, it is important to acknowledge and elaborate on the context and the specific form of patriarchy that exists in the location where the research was conducted. This contextualisation is fundamental to elucidate the circumstances shaping women's lived experiences in the Balkans. Therefore, this introductory chapter devotes significant attention to the geographical, historical and cultural specificities of the region, followed by an exploration how these specificities have contributed to the formation of distinct types of masculinity and femininity and entrenched gender roles. To set the basis for the research, the introductory chapter also contains a brief overview of the use and significance of digital media in this transnational, post-war, post-socialist, neoliberal context.

Between the ‘West’ and the ‘East’: the historical context of the Balkans

As I was working on my research, I had the opportunity to present excerpts from it at various events and in front of different audiences. I realised the particularity of my own position, and that many people did not know much, or anything at all, about the region and its history. I was thinking about all the specificities that make the Balkans a place that is different from other places and the means to convey them to my readers, so that the experiences of women I am describing and analysing in my research become more comprehensible. Additionally, the predominance of the Western perspective in research and academia, and the fact that I am conducting this research in a Western context, makes this contextualisation indispensable.

Here, I am also incorporating what Donna Haraway has termed ‘situated knowledges’ (1988), that is the creation of knowledge within the intricacies of the local culture and history. Haraway (1988, pp. 588-9) argues for ‘politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating’. Women’s lived experiences are shaped and developed in certain ways that are characteristic for the distinctive historical, political, economic, and cultural context, at the same time building on the intergenerational transmission of memory and history (Hirsch and Smith, 2002). In this sense, localisation and contextualisation are crucial in providing the background upon which gender relations have been developing and transforming, and for the identification of the contextual factors that are deeply embedded in the social milieu that legitimizes a prevalent logic of misogyny (Banet-Weiser and Miltner, 2016). Therefore, to understand the contemporary context of gender relations and feminism in the Balkans, we need to understand a history of entrenched patriarchy, traditionalism, established gender roles that have remained largely unchallenged, and a culture of violence and discrimination as a legacy of wars and conflicts (Einhorn, 1993; Salecl, 1994; Iordanova, 2001; Žarkov, 2003; Volčič, 2005; 2007; Todorova, 2004; 2009; Zaharijević, 2014).

First, it is important to note the positionality of the Balkans as a space between the ‘West’ and the ‘East’, where identity, belonging and history are continuously reworked and reconsidered, being both Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian, European and not European, ‘neither there nor here’ (see, e.g., Bakić-Hayden, 1995; Volčič, 2005; 2007; Todorova, 2009;

Volčič and Simić, 2013). Even though I am using the name Balkans, as it is most often used, as a denominator for the whole region located on the Balkan Peninsula, a further distinction within this region should be made, to distinguish between the countries comprising what is known as Western Balkans, and other East European countries. Within the Western Balkans region, consisting of seven countries, further division can be made between the areas that were under the Ottoman rule for several centuries, namely Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, and Macedonia, and those that were ruled by Astro-Hungaria, like Slovenia and Croatia. The areas historically related to the Ottomans are often characterised with terms that emphasise a more pronounced 'backwardness', such as 'Balkan mentality' or 'Balkan primitivism', as opposed to the nations that were under Hapsburg rule, which have been generally perceived as more civilised and advanced within the global discourse (Bakić-Hayden and Hayden, 1992). These opposing sides reflect 'orientalism', as a particular kind of Western discourse, which frames the division between the 'progressive', 'modern', and 'rational' Europe and the 'stagnant', 'backward', 'traditional' and 'mystical' societies of the Orient (Said, 1979, as cited in Bakić-Hayden and Hayden, 1992). Additionally, the history of the Balkans is further complicated by its non-colonial status, with which it stands outside of the mainstream normative views of civilization formed through colonialism, and outside of the points of interest for postcolonial critique (Todorova, 2009). The Balkans stand in the middle, polluting the binary notion of east and west, western and oriental, as something indefinable, ambiguous, anomalous (Volčič and Simić, 2013). At the same time, it is part of Europe, a part at the periphery, but nevertheless a significant part. What this creates is a very distinct entanglement of identities, positionalities, and divisions which require a specific approach in analysis and discussions.

The second important point of reference that is important for this contextualisation is the communist/socialist history of the former Yugoslav countries, with its distinctive social order, ideologies, and seemingly progressive policies in relation to gender equality. The socialist rule which was established after Second World War and ended at the beginning of the 1990s, undoubtedly shaped the trajectories of development and modernisation of all countries that acquired their independence in that period. What is important about the Yugoslav communism is that it was characterised with an openness and moderateness that distinguished it from other similar regimes (Perica, 2002). At the peak of the socialist rule,

Yugoslavia was seen as one of the most progressive countries in Europe, boasting a rich economy and 'the brightest future in Eastern Europe', with 'literate, well-trained population that travelled frequently abroad' (Engelberg, 1992). Within the socialist regime, the progress of gender equality took place in a rather contradictory manner, with declarations of equality in the public, and conservation of the patriarchal order in the private sphere. This, as will be discussed in more detail further in the analysis, had significant impact on the formations of feminism and women's movement in the region.

The third important historical point of reference for the region is the end of the communist era which 'left behind a legacy of unresolved ethnic tensions and a generation of leaders who saw nationalism as their ticket to political power' (Engelberg, 1992). The six republics (Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Slovenia and Macedonia) and two autonomous provinces (Kosovo and Vojvodina) that were part of Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, or SFRY (formed in 1945 and dissolved in 1992), have undergone similar and simultaneously distinct historical, political, economic, and social processes. The uncertainty in which the populations found themselves after the dissolution of Yugoslavia in terms of economic, political, and social stability, and the lack of a system of commonality and organisation, opened the space for nationalism as 'the most articulate expression of an irrational sense of belonging to a community' (Knezevic, 1997, p. 67), and especially a certain kind of nationalist masculinity. The profound transformation of the Balkan societies from communist regime to neoliberalism required the populations to redefine and restore different political identities. From a common identity in the communist state, the nationalist discourses imposed a return to the identities that predated the communist state, with revocation of ancient history and historical heroes (Bakić-Hayden, 1995; Salecl, 1997). This rise of nationalism in the post-socialist societies was accompanied by 'a religious renaissance', with a marked increase in attendance of religious events and perception of religion as a 'catalyst of the remarkable triumph of democracy over totalitarianism, and hallmark of a new ideal world order' (Perica, 2002, p. VI). The church represented a return to the true Christian values, as a definite rejection of the socialist authority and its intrusion into the private sphere (Salecl, 1994). These processes have developed simultaneously with the wider developments of globalisation and economic liberalism, and the shrinking or disappearance of the public sector and state patriarchy (Kaser, 2008).

For the construction and proliferation of nationalist discourses, there needs to be a discourse of a common enemy, an 'Other' that threatens the habits, rituals, and culture of the nation (Salecl, 1997, Žarkov, 2007). In the dissolution of Yugoslavia, these discourses of the 'Other' very quickly contributed to the enactment of a destruction not seen since the Second World War and the introduction of the term 'ethnic cleansing' to the world (Žarkov, 2007). The term 'ethnic cleansing' was used for the first time in the context of the Yugoslav wars of the 1990 and is defined by the United Nations as 'a purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas' (United Nations Security Council, 1994, p. 33). With the wars that ravaged the region from 1991, the ideology of 'brotherhood and unity', the slogan of the League of Communists, completely dissolved in a very brutal manner. Within the existing predominant 'orientalist' discourse of the Balkans, the war was mainly framed as 'just another phase in everlasting, ancient - even tribal - ethnic tensions' (Batinić, 2001, p. 1). Consequently, Yugoslavia became a 'nation in transition', internationally isolated and truncated nation 'of at least 10 million people with a shaky political future and ruined economy' (Engelberg, 1992).

After the end of the wars, the newly established states that emerged from Yugoslavia, especially those commonly more related to the notion of 'orientalism', found themselves in a never-ending cycle of transition, fragmentation, insecurities, and modernisation (Volčič and Simić, 2013). Above all, they found themselves in a state of aspiration to be included in the broader, more developed European family of the European Union, as a promise of prosperity and development. All countries of the Western Balkans have been in negotiation processes for accession to the European Union since the beginning of the 21st century, which further intensifies the 'orientalisation' of certain parts of the region. Namely, while Slovenia and Croatia joined the EU in 2004 and 2013, respectively, the other ex-Yugoslav countries remained to cultivate their aspirations by implementing the imposed reforms and adopting various solutions for the existing issues, identified by the EU as problematic and stalling their accession. North Macedonia has been a candidate for accession to the EU since 2005, Montenegro since 2010, Serbia since 2012, while Bosnia-Herzegovina was granted candidate status in 2022. In 2018, Macedonia even changed its name to North Macedonia to be able to

remove the blockade imposed by Greece, related to unresolved historical and territorial claims, and continue the negotiation process with the EU (Huszka, 2021). This transitional period of adjustment and progress, which has been taking place since the beginning of the century, has positioned the 'international gaze' as a critical aspect of all social and political processes, among which gender equality has figured prominently. Within this context, to compensate for the civilisational superiority of the Western world, the nationalist masculinity of the frustrated and almost hopeless Balkan populations, has positioned the notion of the 'Other' in the Western 'more civilised' masculinity (Zivkovic, 2006; Darakchi, 2019). What this intensifies is an atmosphere of perpetual conflict, intolerance, local investment in the superiority of a certain model of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005), and an overall unsafe environment for women and other marginalised groups.

Formations of masculinities and femininities in the Balkans

It is now important to identify how the distinct type of patriarchy and the role of tradition and nationalism have influenced the constructions of masculinities and femininities within that context. The discussion here is grounded on the notion that masculinity and femininity are constructs that are specific to historical time and place and that they are categories that are 'continually being forged, contested, reworked and reaffirmed in social institutions and practices as well as a range of ideologies' (Davidoff and Hall, 1987, cited in Segal, 2007, p. 89). Understanding gender relations in a certain context is fundamental to the comprehension of women's struggles and lived experiences in relation to sexism, misogyny, and violence.

Eurasian societies are historically intrinsically patriarchal, with property, residence and descent continued through the male line. For the traditional patriarchy of the Balkans, women were a form of property, and their central duty was giving birth to male children (Kaser, 2008). For example, in the Serbian Civil Code of 1844, in force well into the 20th century, women were equated with children, without any right of inheritance or autonomous decision making (Ramet, 1999; Kaser, 2008). One of the basic postulates of the patriarchal and nationalist ideology of the region is the continuation of the bloodline, which is done only through the

male side. For example, in Serbian nationalist discourses, the Serbian blood is the connective substance for 'Serbdom', flowing from generation to generation and nourishing the native soul through the blood of the (male) heroes fallen defending the motherland (Zivkovic, 2006). In this ideological fantasy of the bloodstream, women are perceived as potential betrayers, while at the same time, they are indispensable for the biological, as well as the cultural reproduction, therefore they need to be controlled and protected from the 'Other' so that the bloodstream can remain unpolluted (Zivkovic, 2006, p. 258). In this manner, the representation of women in the traditional collectivity is reinforced with an additional 'burden of representation', within which they are the bearers of its identity and honour and symbolical transmitters of its traditions, customs, language, and other signifiers that distinguish it from other collectivities (Yuval-Davis, 1993; 1997). Consequently, in order to keep women in an inferior, subjugated position, traditionalist societies establish strict cultural norms regarding women's honour and purity (Yuval-Davis, 1997). On the other hand, masculinity and the male Balkan figure have always been central within the notion of 'Balkan mentality' and 'Balkan primitivism' (Bakić-Hayden and Hayden, 1992; Todorova 2009), pointing to a certain type of virility, strength and dominance, especially for men from those nations that were under Ottoman rule. Analysing writings by Western travellers and authors, Todorova (2009, p. 14) states that '[i]n practically every other description, the standard Balkan male is uncivilised, primitive, crude, cruel, and, without exception, dishevelled'. This image pertains to the notion of Balkan hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005), which persists and is dominant in the region to this day.

The states of ex-Yugoslavia are a case study of the endurance of patriarchal ideology within different social regimes and systems, even within regimes that declaratively had gender equality as one of their foundational values, as was the case with socialism. Gender equality policies and gendered lived experiences were extremely complex and contradictory during the communist era (Kaser, 2008). Yugoslavia started implementing gender equality policies and supporting equality between men and women from the first years of its formation. The Yugoslav family law, adopted in 1946, 'foresaw equality of man and woman in marital union', guaranteeing equal inheritance for men and women (Kaser, 2008, p. 127). Yugoslavia was also the first country in history to incorporate the right to abortion in its constitution (Ignjatovic, 2024), a fact that seemed to be forgotten when in March 2024, the media reported that

France was the first country in history to do this, which once again demonstrated the dominance of the Western discourse. One of the cornerstones of the socialist regime was the recognition and elevation of women for their important role in the establishment of the socialist state (Zaharijević, 2014). However, the politics of the progress during the socialist era, as the subsequent retraditionalisation further demonstrates, was contradictory and ambiguous. Scholars have defined it as 'forced emancipation' and claimed that the adoption of gender equality policies and inclusion of women in the public life was 'insincere' since it was motivated by economic interests and not by sustainable objectives for gender equality (Spehar, 2012). Ultimately, the socialist system failed to address the root causes of gender inequalities (Spehar, 2012; Morokvasić, 1997), and as a result, women's overall position remained unchanged. Additionally, women's participation on the labour market did not absolve them from their 'duties' in the household, with which women assumed a 'double burden', and which allowed the domination of traditional patriarchal values in the private sphere. Violence against women and sexual harassment were considered private matters and were completely absent from the public discourse (Spehar, 2012). Ultimately, the socialist system 'absorbed patriarchy and transferred it to the level of one-party-power monopoly', establishing public patriarchy 'without eliminating crucial forms of traditional private patriarchy' (Kaser, 2008, p. 118). Paradoxically, the apparent decline of patriarchy that was achieved during this era was mainly at women's expense (Kaser, 2008).

With the end of the socialist era emerged a 'strategy of retraditionalisation of women's identities, their social roles, and symbolic representations' (Papić, 1999, p. 154). The 'brotherhood and unity' paradigm was substituted by nationalism and a distinctive form of nationalist masculinity. In post-socialist countries, in times of political and social crisis, nationalist masculinity serves as a resource for people to 'architect a sense of continuity, agency and belonging' (Greenberg, 2006, p. 322). Enloe (2014, p. 93) argues that nationalism typically emerges from 'masculinised memory, masculinised humiliation and masculinised hope'. During this period of economic, political, and social instability emerged the image of the useless and depressed man of this period, whose familiar role of dominance and security has been disrupted. The swiftest way of regaining some of the specifically masculine respect and self-esteem in this crisis of masculinity was by going to war (Nagel, 1998; Zivkovic, 2006). The process of ethnicization produced by the end of socialism and the wars redefined gender

roles based on the traditional, patriarchal, pre-socialist past, where men are protectors and providers and women are reproducers of the nation (Miličević, 2006). The wars exacerbated the significance of the conceptualisation of the hegemonic man and the childbearing woman as the symbols of the survival of the nations (Kaser, 2008, p. 211).

The constructions of masculinities and femininities within the ethno-nationalist discourses contributed to the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war in a systematic and deliberate manner (Žarkov, 2007; Simić, 2017; 2018). Wartime gender and sexual violence has been extensively discussed as ingrained and emphasised by pre-war gender relations (Wimpelmann, 2019). In the context of Yugoslavia, the use of rape as a weapon of war emerged from the desire to humiliate the enemy within a gendered construction which places women as the bearers of honour in the society (Knezevic, 1997; Wimpelmann, 2019). This is related to 'the masculine fantasy of symbolic territory' in which 'women's bodies are the empty space, the blank paper to write down a virtual message to other men's groups' that their possession is corrupted (Slapšak, 2000, p. 136). There is no accurate data on the number of victims of sexual violence during the wars that ravaged the region in the 1990s, however the consequences and repercussions on the ethnic and gender relations remain to be highly relevant (Simić, 2017; 2018). Undeniably, it still contributes to the culture of violence against women that thrives in a social context of post-war transition, political instability, and renewed traditionalization of gender roles. In this manner, the prevalence of gender-based violence can be considered a legacy of the wars (Enloe, 2014; Wimelmann, 2019).

The nationalist masculinity of these post-war societies, aspiring to demonstrate the strength and persistence of the nation, invokes ancient, pre-socialist heroes and gender regimes, with virulent, strong men as leading protagonists (Zivkovic, 2006). As an example, the right-wing nationalist government of North Macedonia in power for ten years, from 2006 until the forceful expulsion in 2016, built around 136 structures in the capital to promote a certain type of Macedonian identity that originates from ancient times. Most visible among these newly built monuments is the fifteen meters high 'Warrior on a Horse', commonly known to represent Alexander the Great, a strong male figure with a spear in the right hand sitting on a horse with its front legs raised. Notably, of thirty-seven monuments placed in the main square of the city, there are only two representing female figures, Mother Theresa and

Olympias, the mother of Alexander the Great (Volchevska, 2021). The transformation of the appearance of the capital of North Macedonia is one of the most prominent examples of the process of rejection of socialism and its values and ideals, among which those of gender equality, and the complete reversal to the traditional values of the patriarchy, where women's spaces and roles are limited to the private sphere. It clearly displays the tendency of the nationalist ideology to use motherhood as the symbol of the biological and cultural reproduction of the nation, where 'woman's task is no longer to build socialism through work, but to regenerate the nation through her role as mother' (Bracewell, 1996, p. 25).

The period of 'transition' of the Western Balkan ex-Yugoslav countries and their aspirations towards the 'developed' Western community of the European Union has brought further complexities for the construction of masculinities and femininities. As mentioned above, this transitional period of adjustment and progress has been taking place since the beginning of the century and has positioned the 'international gaze' as a critical aspect of all social and political processes, among which prominently gender relations 'as a gauge of modernity, democratization and all those qualities that count toward eligibility for inclusion into the (civilized) family of nations' (Zivkovic, 2006, p. 261). International interventions in post-conflict societies further complicate gender relations, by empowering women and providing space and means for women's rights activists in the political, social and economic arena (Wimpelmann, 2019; Darakchi, 2019). The complexities brought by this positioning for feminism and feminist activism during this period will be discussed in more detail in the analysis below.

Discussing the consequences of the wars from this temporal distance, and the post-war period of transition, it is important to note that ex-Yugoslav countries have never faced the trauma of the past and a proper process of reconciliation was never conducted. In that sense, 'the Yugoslav past was *never over* and *done with*… it always continued into the present' (Volčič, 2022, p. 5, italics in original). Furthermore, due to the trauma from the conflicts and the change of regimes, as well as the disillusionment with the neoliberal present, a process of embellishment of the pre-war past took place and a particular type of nostalgia still exists, even in younger generations who have never experienced life in socialism (Burić, 2010). This has also provided a fertile ground for the proliferation of discourses that frame Western

societies as morally depraved, exporting their decadent values and secularizing non-Western societies (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2017; Darakchi, 2019), which fit well within the new wave of anti-feminism and anti-gender discourses, or what has been commonly referred to as 'anti-gender backlash' (Kuhar, 2017; McEwen and Narayanaswamy, 2023). Framed within these discourses, gender mainstreaming is backed by the elites and the international institutions whose aim is to undermine the national sovereignty and infiltrate into the minds of the population and reprogram them (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2017; Zaharijević, 2018; Darakchi, 2019). With this, anti-gender discourses obtain further legitimacy in the protection of the national identity and traditional values.

'Blasphemous, unnatural and perverted theory': The new gender backlash

The term 'anti-gender movement' is mainly used to describe the 'transnational constellation of actors working to preserve the heteropatriarchal sex and gender power hierarchy in all areas of social, political, economic, and cultural life' (McEwen and Narayanaswamy, 2023, p. 4). The anti-gender movement uses the terms 'gender ideology' and 'genderism' as 'an epistemological response to emancipatory claims about sex, gender, and sexuality', and as a political mechanism to supress policy developments related to feminist and queer agendas (Corredor, 2019, p. 614). Anti-gender actors and discourses have mainly emerged as a response to the progress of national and global policies related to access to abortion, transexual and intersex persons' gender-affirming care, introduction of comprehensive sexuality education, as well as the inclusion of gender studies in higher education (McEwen and Narayanaswamy, 2023). Anti-gender campaigns can be considered 'palpable transnational countermovements' while their anti-gender rhetoric is a 'salient counterstrategy to feminist and LGBTQ+ social movements' (Corredor, 2019, p. 614). Within this discourse, the concept of 'gender ideology' has been framed to erode family values, challenge the natural positioning of gender roles, and promote perversion (Hemmings, 2021). In the countries of Eastern Europe, 'gender ideology' is constructed as an import from the West and a neoliberal threat to the sovereignty of the nations (Hodžić and Štulhofer, 2017; Darakchi, 2019; Hemmings, 2021). In this sense, feminists, queer folk, and migrants are

associated with ‘gender ideology’, while ‘maleness, whiteness and heterosexuality are increasingly figured as bound to the local or the deflated national’ and are framed as ‘under threat from progressive elites’ (Hemmings, 2021, p. 31). However, the anti-gender movement itself can also be framed within this construction, since the organisations that are leading the anti-gender movement are mainly based in the Global North, while supporting and funding groups and activities in the Global South and in international arenas (McEwen and Narayanaswamy, 2023). While the space here is not sufficient to elaborate in detail on the anti-gender movements active and influential in the region, which requires a much broader analysis and discussion, it is important to point to the more prominent issues, to allow for further contextualisation of the feminist struggles in the Balkans, where the boundaries between online and offline are essentially obscured.

Similar to other parts of the world, the main actors in the anti-gender movement in the Balkans have been religious institutions, right-wing politicians, and certain civil society organisations, backed by foreign networks and national political entities. Religion and the church have a prominent role in all ex-Yugoslav countries, supporting and enhancing the retraditionalisation of the societies and the proliferation of ethno-nationalism after the fall of socialism (Stojčić and Bobičić, 2022; Anić, 2023; Zaharijević and Antonijević, 2023). In Croatia, the Catholic church was considered as the ‘only opposition to the ruling Communist Party and a space of freedom for many political dissidents […] the guardian of national identity’ (Anić, 2023, p. 74). Within this context, the notion of ‘Christian ethics’ has a significant position when it comes to the issues included in the term ‘gender ideology’, such as right to abortion, sex education, or the sanctity of marriage and family (Anić, 2023). Similar to the Croatian context, the Catholic church in Slovenia strongly supported the anti-gender movement, using debates on marriage equality as an opportunity to reestablish itself as a moral authority (Kuhar, 2017). In North Macedonia, the gender backlash has been supported and strengthened in a significant manner by the Orthodox church and other religious leaders, publicly denouncing gender equality as ‘blasphemous, unnatural and perverted theory’ (Marusic, 2023a), culminating with a public protest that gathered a large number of people, among which academics and other prominent figures in Macedonian society (Cvetković and Velichkovska, 2022). In Serbia, the church acts as a close ally of the populist nationalist and traditionalist political leadership ‘in a theatrical play of democratization and Europeanization’

of the country (Zaharijević and Antonijević, 2023, p. 89), with a more covert, however still strong, role in the anti-gender movement. While Macedonian Orthodox church has been using a more explicit language to condemn gender equality and feminism, the Serbian church has restrained to use milder language, critiquing, for example, gender-sensitive language, but refraining to support gender equality (Marusic, 2023b).

Apart from religious leaders, civil society organisations and associations are the main vehicle of the anti-gender movement, mainly active on social media, with the aim to influence political processes and hinder any progress away from traditionalism and upholding of patriarchal values (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2017; Cvetković and Velichkovska, 2022; Anić, 2023).

The effects of the anti-gender movement are multifaceted and visible through some of the global measures of the progress in gender equality. For example, according to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Gender Index 2024 (Equal Measures 2030), North Macedonia is one of the countries where a significant decline of the index could be observed, which means that in the period 2019-2022 the situation with gender equality regressed considerably. The other countries in the region fare somewhat better, with Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia-Herzegovina noting some progress, however still far from the more progressive societies (Equal Measures 2030). Overall, the aggressive means and the extreme language used by anti-gender actors in the region reinforce a culture of violence and discrimination historically predominant in the region, and digital platforms further contribute to its proliferation and consolidation. The next two parts of this introduction consider these aspects more closely.

The normalisation of violence

As discussed above, one of the remnants of the wars that ravaged the region at the end of the 20th century, are the highly militarised societies where nationalist masculinity is the dominant type of hegemonic masculinity. Balkan societies are marked with an 'impoverished public sphere' and 'nepotism and corruption of pro-patriarchal ethno-nationalist political

elites' where inequalities and social exclusion of gender and ethnic minorities are mainly normalised (Majstorović, 2015, p. 1105). Underlying the social construction of gender relations is what Pierre Bourdieu identifies as 'symbolic violence', with social relations grounded on 'masculine domination and feminine submissiveness' (2001, p. 37). In this sense, Balkan masculinity is not only 'the experience of power', but also 'the experience of entitlement to power' (Kimmel, 2000, p. 241).

While there is no accurate data on the prevalence of different types of violence against women in the region, the most cited approximation is that every third woman has experienced some type of gender-based violence or harassment, while every second has experienced sexual harassment, including harassment via the Internet, and one in four women has experienced intimate partner physical or sexual violence (OSCE, 2019). However, the actual numbers of the prevalence of violence are considered to be higher. According to some reports, one woman is killed nearly every week in the Western Balkans (Chen and Domi, 2024).

Further illustrating the culture of (mainly masculine) violence that is prevalent in the region as a remnant of the wars is the data on civilian firearms holdings, which shows that the countries are among the top 25 countries and territories in the world by estimated rate of civilian firearms holdings (Karp, 2018). However, what is significant in this data is the estimate that in North Macedonia, for example, 30 out of 100 people have a weapon and only eight of them would hold a license for it (Ibid.). With widely available statistical data on crimes showing men as primary perpetrators of firearm-related crimes, the repercussions are evident. In 2022, an interactive map of femicides in Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro and Albania was launched (available on femplatz.org), as a visualisation of the concerning situation and to be used by feminist activists requesting governmental policies and services to protect women from violence. In May 2023, the Balkans had their first school shooting, with a 13-year-old boy in Serbia killing nine children and a guard and injuring six others, making him one of the youngest murderers in history to have killed so many people in a mass shooting. This and other killings that happened during that period prompted wider protests and discussions on the normalisation of violence in the countries of the region (Gadzo, 2023).

Social media platforms have been used as mediators and facilitators of violence against women, with killings of women livestreamed on social media, men sharing private photos of women and children in secret groups, a high-profile suicide by a young woman being subjected to extreme bullying and harassment (Fuller, 2021), and many other occurrences. Notably, and unsurprisingly, social media platforms still grapple with content moderation, which resulted with the livestreamed killing of a woman to be available online for hours after the act and her daughter being exposed to it (Mastracci, 2023). Social media platforms also facilitate the normalisation of violence, by fostering content that allows for its trivialisation, victim-blaming, and holding women accountable for their harassment and violence (Vickery and Everbach, 2018). The normalisation of violence and the rampant victim-blaming is one of the main contextual aspects that underpin the research and was a constant theme in the discussions conducted during the data collection and analysis.

Affective communities and the conflation of URL and IRL

The social media landscape is perpetually changing, new platforms taking over the space and presence of older ones, with different ways of participation and possibilities for expression for users (boyd and Ellison, 2008; Robards, 2012; Lambert, 2013; Keller, 2019). This is especially visible with young people for whom social media sites are spaces of reflexivity and transition and who are concerned with the 'digital trace' they leave as they shift from one social media platform to another as an intrinsic part of their growing up (Robards, 2012; Lambert, 2013; Keller, 2019). An important aspect of young people's use of different social media platforms is the development of 'unique communication genres' in accordance with the affordances of the platform (Keller, 2019, p. 2). Taking into consideration that this process is perpetual, it was also taking place during the time I was conducting this research, with new social media platforms, such as TikTok, taking the place of Facebook and Twitter (rebranded to X in 2023), especially among younger generations who have either left or never joined Facebook. However, each platform contains its affordances attractive for particular users that lends the platform 'unique cultural significance within a historical or geographic context' (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 120).

Despite these generational shifts in its user base, Facebook remains to be the most used social media platform in the world, with more than three billion monthly active users, among which around 44 per cent female and around 56 per cent male (Zote, 2024; Statista, 2024). The most active users on Facebook are men between the ages of 25 and 34, while it remains to be the most used social media platform for people above 50 years of age (Zote, 2024). According to different data sources and calculations (e.g., Statista or datareportal.com), Facebook and Instagram are the most used social media platforms in the Balkans. However, it is to be noted that Meta, the parent company of Facebook and Instagram, does not publish exact numbers, therefore these calculations rely on Meta's calculations for marketing purposes. Nevertheless, they serve as an indicator for their ubiquity across the world, and for their use among populations of different age groups.

For the study of feminist activism and social movements, Facebook is an indispensable social media platform, due to its reach and scope (Tufekci, 2017). The decision to analyse Facebook as a digital public sphere where women and girls are 'doing feminism in the network' (Rentschler and Thrift, 2015; Keller, 2019), stemmed from the notion that it is the only platform that simultaneously contains the 'public sphere' of the 'Feed', where people can participate in discussions around various topics, and the 'private sphere' of closed and private groups where people can gather in small or larger groups to discuss certain issues, organise activities, or provide mutual support (Tufekci, 2017). Facebook is a complex environment, an 'assemblage of protocols, software, interfaces, media, content, contracts, marketing, public relations, surveillance systems, bureaucracies, shareholders, users and global and local cultures' (Lambert, 2013, p. 1). It is a 'networked publics' constructed through social connections, deeply embedded in people's everyday life (boyd and Ellison, 2008; Lambert, 2013). Facebook is therefore a space that facilitates 'emotional contagion' where people 'catch' emotions from each other (Kramer, 2012). In this manner, Facebook as a platform, facilitates the construction of 'mediated intimacy', where people engage in socialisation, expanding their friendship circles and deepening their already established connections (Chambers, 2013). An important notion to consider here is what Gillespie (2010) calls 'politics of platforms', namely that 'social media platforms are not inherently open, neutral, or egalitarian but instead discursively situated amid the competing interests of users,

companies, advertisers, and policymakers' (Keller, 2019, p. 4). Therefore, analysing feminism and feminist practices on Facebook, and on all other social media platforms for that matter, it needs to be acknowledged that they have been embedded with sexist values in the design, community standards and governance structures from their inception (Trott, 2023).

Social network sites are spaces where 'everyday interactions are articulated, made visible, reflexively critiqued and subsequently managed', offering a new perspective for understanding human behaviour (Robards, 2012, p. 386). Digital media 'thrive on collapsing public and private boundaries thus affording opportunities for expression that may simultaneously empower and compromise individuals,' creating convergence between the realms of the cultural, social, economic, and political (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 94). The 'connective affordances of social media' connect the publics and 'enable expression and information sharing that liberate the individual and collective imaginations' (Ibid., p. 9). Looking at specific social movements around the world, Castells (2015) argues that social movements are emotional movements which effectively start when emotion, most relevant being fear and enthusiasm, is transformed into action. For emotions to circulate and form a social movement, there needs to be an interactive process of communication, which leads to a 'formation of a process of collective action, rooted in outrage, propelled by enthusiasm and motivated by hope' (Castells, 2015, p. 15). Papacharissi (2015, p. 117), building on Berlant's (2011) affect theory, argues that public feelings 'define modalities of belonging that are articulated as strangers connect and attach to each other'.

The contemporary context of social media and the increased visibility, communicability, and accessibility of the digital public sphere has not only allowed for the formation of popular feminism, but also of a response to it with new forms of misogyny and sexism. In this way, popular feminism and popular misogyny are 'deeply entwined … living side by side as warring, constantly moving contexts in an economy of visibility' (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 2). Within this economy of visibility, we live in a new era of gender wars, an era characterized by a significant rise in the visible expression and acceptance of feminism, alongside a similarly large amount of public vitriol and violence directed at women (Ibid.). The need to study 'platform vernaculars' in relation to the use of specific platforms for specific purposes, also stems from the notion that social media platforms, and especially Facebook, are spaces where

antifeminist and anti-gender movements proliferate (Keller, 2015). The new gender backlash, its strength and proliferation, as well as the new regimes under which gender relations are enacted and reproduced, are undoubtedly linked with the proliferation of social media platforms. However, the impact of these movements is not determined by the technology they use but rather by the specific context of interplay of social, cultural, economic and political factors (Papacharissi, 2015).

Notably, it is social media platforms that facilitate the visibility of the organisations that are leading the new gender backlash in the Balkans. One of the tactics of these organisations is repeatedly establishing new associations and initiatives by opening new groups and pages on Facebook, so that it would seem that there are higher number of people who share their ideas (Anić, 2023). For example, in North Macedonia, the most visible negative reactions towards the advancements in gender equality surfaced at the end of 2020, when several groups emerged on Facebook, using terms such as 'gender ideology' and 'gender indoctrination', under the pretence of protection of children and traditional family, and amassing thousands of fans and followers (Cvetković and Velichkovska, 2022). With the affordances of social media, such groups have managed to acquire prominence and power and succeeded in halting several processes of adoption and implementation of policies and laws related to gender equality in the country. The aggressive approach and visibility of these groups have influenced public perceptions on gender equality, and it could be argued that it regressed much of the achieved progress. Most importantly, it significantly affected the already challenging work of feminist activists in the region.

To explain the success of certain social movements, theorists suggest that social change occurs for several reasons, namely the existence of political will by the state, formation of strong collective identity within the movement, and existence of a cause that has been 'framed' successfully (McCaughhey and Ayers, 2003, p. 6). Such formations of collective identities are mobilised through 'online networks of support in ways that discursively render affective publics', defined as 'networked public formations that are mobilized and connected or disconnected through expressions of sentiment' (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 125-6). In that way, affective publics, as an imagined collective, evolves out of the interaction of people, technology and networked practices (Papacharissi, 2015).

Since the driving force of a social movement is to disrupt the status quo and challenge the established power structures, the supporters of such established order and power structures will also mobilise to uphold and protect the system which protects their position of privilege (Corredor, 2019). Therefore, countermovements, such as the anti-gender movement, are also mobilised through emotions and affect, forming what Hemmings (2021) refers to as 'affective fictions' noting that feelings do not need to be 'true' to be powerful (p. 32). What Papacharissi (2015) discusses referring to social movements, also applies to these countermovements, namely, these 'publics' are also mobilised by 'feelings of belonging and solidarity, however fleeting or permanent those feelings may be' (p. 8). However, the emotions that serve as mobilisers for the anti-gender movement are primarily negative, such as blame, rage and pain for the perceived loss of the privileges and power of the dominant heterosexual masculinity (Hemmings, 2021). Mobilised in such way, countermovements, like social movements, include collective action and common purpose, with a significant difference that countermovements organise against a social movement in an effort to defeat it (Corredor, 2019). For example, anti-gender groups on Facebook in North Macedonia, 'Take Responsibility' ('Преземи одговорност' in Macedonian), with more than 9,000 followers at the time of writing, and 'Coalition for protection of children' ('Коалиција за заштита на децата' in Macedonian), with more than 8,000 followers, in their intro have stated that they are working to 'protect children from gender ideology' and regularly share disinformation related to gender and sexuality education as harmful for children, an import from Western corrupt societies that want to destroy the purity of the Balkan nations, and as something that would pollute children's innocence.

Looking at 'networked infrastructures' as spaces that facilitate 'interactions that are aligned with the particular cultural ethos deriving from historical or geographical context' provides us with a perspective which can disclose the intricacies of 'the form of sharing and learning, the nature of creativity and innovation, and the texture of conversation that take shape within the environments formed by networked platforms' (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 121). Considering the similarities of the movements established under different ideologies and beliefs would allow us for a more thorough insight into the functioning and disseminations of these movements and allow for a conceptualisation of appropriate responses. These aspects are

interwoven throughout this analysis whose structure is laid down in the next and final section of this introductory chapter.

Structure of the thesis

The thesis is structured in eight chapters, including introduction and conclusion. The chapters are organised to present the positioning of the research within the wider scholarship related to the intersection of gender and digital communications and all the ideas and findings that emerge from the analysis. The discussion and findings are systematically organised to provide answers for the leading questions for the research and conclude with overarching conclusions reiterating the main challenges and future possibilities of feminist activism in the region.

Following this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 positions the research among the important feminist literature on technology-facilitated harassment and violence, digital cultures, and digital feminist activism, aiming at supplementing and enriching it with this research located in a region that is somewhat neglected and underrepresented within the global repository. With the proliferation of feminist activities online, such as hashtag activism, neoliberal influencer culture, and the simultaneous spread of increased misogyny and sexism (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Banet-Weiser et al., 2020), there is a vast depository of literature examining these contemporary issues. While it would be impossible to include everything, my literature review is focused on the works that were most influential for me to position my research, and which are most closely related to the materials examined in this analysis. This is also the academic literature that has guided me in conducting my research, providing me with different perspectives and angles to tackle the complexities of the research topic and materials.

The detailed methodology for the research is presented in Chapter 3, along with the theoretical framework for the analysis, which is posited among theorisations of the public sphere, gender and technology, and affect and emotions. The theoretical framework is intertwined with the methodology, as affect was also used as a methodological tool in the

analysis of women's lived experiences in online spaces, capturing the intensity of the affective experiences, emphasising the importance of emotions and bodily responses in understanding social phenomena and focusing on how these affective experiences influence both individual actions and collective behaviours. The research was conducted with the employment of feminist methodologies and perspectives. In this chapter, I am also explicating my positionality within the research as insider and outsider, examining how this perspective shaped the research. As researcher and translator, I was able to examine my positionality and benefit from it in various ways. What is discussed in the chapter in more detail is my relationship with my interview participants, which is based on trust and confidence, due to the shared experiences and implied understanding, as well as the difficult task of not only collecting and collating women's stories but also translating their meanings and connotations.

Chapter 4 in the analysis answers the first of the research questions of this thesis and provides an overview of the development of feminist activism in the Balkans, emphasising the importance of feminist history as cultural memory considered through feminist theory. This chapter demonstrates how the present is inextricable from the past and everything that is considered new occurrence is stemming from it. The chapter elaborates in detail how feminist activism in the Balkan region, in many aspects, has had a different development from Western feminism and examines the implications of the historical, social and political context on women's activism, leading to the new forms of feminist organising with the proliferation of digital media.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 present the bulk of my analysis, with findings from the interviews and observation of public and private spaces on social media, providing answers to the remaining three research questions for this thesis. Chapter 5 provides an analysis of affective experiences of women in the public spaces of social media. Here, I differentiate between different affects and emotions I identified in the experiences shared by my interview participants and look at the effects and consequences felt and lived in the interlace of online and offline spaces. The following chapter looks at the strategies feminists employ to respond to sexism and misogyny online and the results of these responses and tactics. Here, I distinguish between several of these strategies and examine how they have been employed, to what extent and with what success. Finally, Chapter 7 provides an overview of women's

spaces as safe spaces on digital media, through observation of three closed groups on Facebook and the dynamics of communication withing them. The findings in these three chapters stem from the semi-structured interviews I conducted with 11 women who self-identify as feminists and who are active on social media, supplemented with various materials from observation of online spaces, and interactions and posts that my interview participants have shared with me.

The final chapter of the document, Chapter 8, presents the conclusions of the analysis, offering a forward-looking perspective on women's participation in the public sphere of online spaces and the future potential for digital feminist activism in the Balkans. While it is difficult to predict how feminist activism online will develop, it remains to be an effective way of women's organising, collective action, and raising awareness. Social media platforms remain to be an efficient tool for feminists in the Balkans, even though their use, reach, and potential are constantly evolving. Young feminists, skilled in navigating digital media within neoliberal contexts, are becoming the face of feminism in the Balkans, gradually replacing established structures of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Their engagement and success in tackling sexism and misogyny open the space for further analysis.

2. SITUATING FEMINIST ACTIVISM IN CONTEXT

The research is situated among significant emerging literature on women's lived experiences in online spaces (Rentschler, 2014; Megarry, 2014; Kanai, 2017; 2019; Keller, 2019; Marwick, 2023), technology-facilitated sexual harassment and violence (Mantilla, 2013; Levey, 2018; Powell and Henry, 2017), digital feminist activism (Fotopoulou, 2016; Mendes et al., 2019; Linabary et al., 2020), and feminist tactics and strategies navigating the hostilities in the digital sphere amplified by anonymity and impunity (Rentschler and Thrift, 2015; Lawrence and Ringrose, 2018; Keller et al., 2018; Sundén and Paasonen, 1998; 2020).

Positioning the research within the existing literature is foregrounded by the notion that the complexities of women's experiences in the public sphere of digital media are closely linked to the contexts in which they are effectuated. As this literature review demonstrates, there is space and need for enrichment of the scholarship on digital feminist activism with distinct, localised experiences and feminist responses and strategies of defence to contextualised sexism and misogyny. This research responds to the call for more research to extrapolate on the 'nuances and complexities inherent in *doing* digital feminist activism', understanding digital feminist activism through the lens of the 'social and cultural processes and their entanglement with technologies' (Mendes et al, 2019, p .6, italics in original). In this literature review, I first discuss the scholarly engagement with misogyny of online spaces, followed by an overview of research on online feminist activism and spaces, and discussion on feminist engagements in consciousness-raising, resistance, and challenging of misogyny and sexism.

Digital spaces as hostile environments for women

The initial enthusiasm and positivity about the potentials of the Internet and the new technologies as liberating and a source of empowerment for women (Haraway, 1987) have been countered with a more grounded conceptualization of the virtual world as 'constrained by the visceral, lived gender relations of the material world' (Wajcman, 2010, p. 148). As Dale Spender (1996, p. xiv) has noted, 'every social issue that we are familiar with in the real world

will now have its counterpart in the virtual one'. Therefore, sexism, harassment, and violence are not new phenomena for women, they have simply been translated onto digital spaces and assumed new channels of expression with the expansion of digital media (Powell and Henry, 2017; Mendes et al., 2019; Harris and Vitis, 2020). Terms used for gendered hate speech online include gendertrolling (Mantilla, 2013), cyber violence (Herring et al., 2002), e-bile (Jane, 2014), gendered cyberhate (Jane, 2017b), cyber trolling (Lumdsen and Morgan, 2018), and other. In its essence, it is an 'anti-female violent expression that circulates to wide audiences on popular media platforms' (Banet-Weiser and Miltner, 2016, pp. 171-2). Social media can be perceived as an extension of the reality of women's lived experiences with sexism in the patriarchal society (Megarry, 2014), while the technological affordances of social media are particularly suitable for the amplification of 'new articulations of aggrieved manhood' (Ging, 2019, p. 638).

Scholars and researchers differentiate among various types of harmful behaviours affecting women on social networking websites, such as cyber harassment, cyber bullying and name calling (Halder and Jaishankar, 2009), doxing (Douglas, 2016), revenge pornography (Powell and Henry, 2017; Henry et al., 2021), image-based sexual abuse (Henry and Powell, 2015; Henry et al., 2021), cyber stalking (Ellison and Akdeniz, 1998), morphing (Halder and Jaishankar 2009), and more recently, deepfake pornography (Hao, 2021; Mahdawi, 2023). The effects and consequences of online sexual harassment and abuse on women's lives can be psychological, social, professional, economical, and political (Jane, 2017b). Women who have been victims of technology-facilitated violence and harassment have had 'feelings of anxiety, shame, shock, fear, and violation', while some report 'mental health problems such as anxiety disorder, depression, panic attacks, agoraphobia, and self-harm' (Jane, 2017a, p. 164). In its most extreme, online sexual harassment and violence can lead to self-harm and suicide.

While sexual harassment covers a whole array of behaviours and acts, the common aspect is that it is used as a form of intimidation, instilling fear of violence in women, and limiting their personal freedoms and participation in public spaces (Pain, 1991; Vera-Gray, 2018). Mantilla (2015) has coined the term 'gendertrolling' to discuss a separate form of harassment targeting women taking place in online spaces. She notes that gendertrolling is 'exponentially more vicious, virulent, aggressive, threatening, pervasive, and enduring than generic trolling'

(Mantilla, 2015, p. 17). In the new public sphere that is the Internet, women are targeted by gendertrolling simply for 'assert[ing] their right to voice their opinions' (p. 28), therefore simply because they are women. Mantilla (2015) further identifies the characteristics of gendertrolling that distinguish it from more generic trolling online. She notes that gendertrolls use vicious and demeaning sexual and gendered language to insult women and demonstrate their power, with insults that are often graphic, including rape and death threats. Furthermore, the harassment is not limited to one platform, and can last for weeks, months, or even years. It can be so frequent and intense to disrupt day-to-day activities. She argues that describing and naming this abuse accurately is 'an essential step in attempting to counter it' (Mantilla, 2015, p. 155).

Powell and Henry (2017) have conducted extensive research investigating technology-facilitated sexual violence in all its multiple forms and usefully provide a framework for understanding digital technologies as an embodied extension of ourselves and not just something that is embedded in our everyday lives. They acknowledge that sexual violence is used to denote 'violence as not simply a physical act involving physical injury but also a psychosocial and structural problem' (p. 4) and argue that technology-facilitated sexual violence produces 'embodied harms' that 'further produce and reproduce social subordination' which restricts equal social and political participation of women and other marginalised groups (p. 12). In this sense, technology-facilitated sexual violence is part of the continuity of violence which is ingrained in women's everyday lives (Kelly, 2011; Powell and Henry, 2017). Powell and Henry (2017) emphasise the need to understand the real harms to the victims that can be inflicted by words, images or physical acts of technology-facilitated sexual violence. Furthermore, they discuss 'image-based sexual abuse' or 'revenge pornography' as a growing problem, and the inadequacy of the terminology to capture the complexity of the 'creation and distribution of sexually explicit, sexual or nude images', since images used for 'revenge pornography' are not created and distributed to seek revenge or for the purpose of pornography. Instead, these images are an additional expression and reinforcement of masculine entitlement and privilege, serving as evidence of masculine dominance and conquest (Powell and Henry, 2017, p. 118). Ultimately, the non-consensual distribution of images is often related to a desire to shame and humiliate (Henry et al., 2021; Uldbjerg, 2021).

Even though online harassment is a global problem, analysis of the issue has mainly been focused on the Western context. Taking this into the consideration, Schoenebeck et al. (2023) have conducted an analysis of views on harm and preferred solutions for addressing online harassment in 14 different countries, both from the Global North and the Global South, and have found that the location has the greatest influence on the perceptions of harm. They found that the local cultural context, as a range of intricate social factors that exhibit some degree of consistency at the national or regional level, has the greatest impact on how people perceive online harassment. This perception is further influenced by national policies and regulations (Schoenebeck et al., 2023). Similarly, Sheikh and Rogers (2023) conducted a scoping review of technology-facilitated sexual violence and abuse in low and middle-income countries and found that the socio-cultural context is crucial, as the key underlying factors fuelling inappropriate behaviour online are 'patriarchal societal norms and gender power dynamics', along with 'anonymity and cultural taboos' (p. 1624). For them, fundamental to responding to technology-facilitated sexual violence is addressing the underlying patriarchal and hegemonic cultures, de-normalisation of violence, and implementation of structural measures (Ibid.).

Various studies attest that increased feminist visibility is commonly accompanied by a rise in attacks and backlash. Within the space of digital technologies, this backlash is referred to as 'networked misogyny' (Banet-Weiser and Miltner, 2016) or 'mediated misogyny' (Vickery and Everbach, 2018; Mendes et al., 2019). Jane (2017a) is discussing how misogyny has 'gone viral' and 'gendered hate speech' online has significant consequences for women who are targeted by it (p. 3-4). She notes that 'gendered cyberhate' has a 'chilling effect in that some women are self-censoring, writing anonymously or under pseudonyms, or withdrawing partly or completely from the internet' (Jane, 2017a, p. 4). Looking at the experiences of women who self-identify as feminists and who engage in discussions around women's issues, this research is grounded on these notions and aims to contribute to the knowledge and awareness around digital feminist activism, discussed in the following section.

Possibilities and challenges in digital feminist organising

Online activism is intertwined with offline movements, protests, and actions. In his discussion around what he has termed 'network society', Castells (2000) argues that transnational, fluid networks are the dominant formations in our societies, replacing previous formations such as communities and associations. Castells (2000) and Giddens (1990), among other prominent sociologists of that period, argued that the notion of 'community', as it existed in the pre-modern times, shifted to 'networked individualism', with a reconfiguration of collective forms of relations to 'me-centred' ones (Pink et al., 2016, p. 106). Castells (2015) contends that the 'ongoing transformation of communication technologies in the digital age extends the reach of communication media to all domains of social life in a network that is at the same time global and local, generic and customised in an ever-changing pattern' (p. 6; see also Castells, 2000). He refers to the use of the Internet as platform of digital communication, a 'mass self-communication', based on 'horizontal networks of interactive communication' (Castells, 2015, p. 7). In this context, social movements are formed in the spaces of communication of the Internet, and they occupy urban space to become movements and create togetherness (Castells, 2015). This implies a creation of a collective identity, as a link between an individual and the group, which is strengthened as participants feel united in working toward shared goals, have defined opponents, and possess a cohesive sense of identity that is embedded within the movement ideologies (McCaughhey and Ayers, 2003). With the proliferation of the Internet, these collective identities and movements have become local and global at the same time, starting in a specific context but then spreading and connecting to Internet networks (Castells, 2015).

Tufekci (2017) uses the term 'digitally networked public sphere' or 'networked public sphere' for the complex modern public sphere where social movements are formed and operate, which is both online and offline, multiple, transnational and global. Discussing 'the power and fragility of networked protest', Tufekci (2017) equalises the abilities of social movements with muscles in terms of capacities, and 'their repertoire of protest', such as rallies and marches, with 'signals' of these capacities (p. xi). For her, digital technologies are critical in all phases of protest, however they are especially significant during the early formation of social

movements. Compared with pre-Internet social movements which had to build their capacities for a long time before they could stage a protest, social movements that are mainly organised online start with their 'big moment in the public spotlight' and then build their capacities for a long-term movement (p. 61). This rapid and dramatical growth of social movements, without having built formal or informal organisations and other collective capacities, leaves them unprepared for the challenges they would face. Tufekci (2017) focuses on three crucial abilities of social movements from the perspective of power: 'narrative capacity, disruptive capacity, and electoral and/or institutional capacity' (p. 192). Digital media have disrupted these dynamics by allowing social movements to share their narratives more broadly without the need for an institutional presence. However, they have also introduced their own challenges. For instance, relying on online platforms for their organising and functioning, these networked movements and protests are initially formed as horizontal or leaderless movements (Freeman, 1972; Tufekci, 2017). However, tensions arise when certain people within the movement start to be distinguished as de-facto spokespersons with large following on social media. In this respect, digital media intensify the tension that exists between 'collective will and individual expression' and between 'expressive moments of rebellion and the longer-term strategies requiring instrumental and tactical shifts' (Tufekci, 2017, p. xxiv).

It is no longer possible to make clear distinctions between online and offline movements and protests (Tufekci, 2017; Mendes and Ringrose, 2019; Marwick, 2023), as it is not possible to distinguish between women's experiences in online spaces and 'in the real world' (Powell and Henry, 2015). There is an overlap in feminist lives from individual action to organised online expressions of activism, to everyday activism in the private sphere and public protests and movements (Blais and Dupuis-Déri, 2022). Online spaces provide immediate communication, thus facilitating feminist organising in reacting, protesting, discussing, consciousness raising, and advocating for systemic changes and implementation of policies, measures, and strategies for protection of women from violence and harassment, both online and offline (Baer, 2016; Megarry, 2020). This is one of the most important affordances of online spaces for feminists today. Online spaces facilitate the formation of what Fotopoulou (2016) refers to as 'digital sisterhood' and Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller (2019) call 'feminist digital counter-public', drawing on Nancy Fraser's (1990) conceptualisation of 'subaltern counterpublics'

where 'members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs' (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). Therefore, online feminist activism and discussions in online spaces are a 'valid and worthwhile form of contemporary consciousness-raising', as a 'specific, and valuable, way of performing identity and activism' (Gleeson and Turner, 2019, p. 54). Digital platforms provide a possibility for 'broadly disseminating feminist ideas, shaping new modes of discourse about gender and sexism, connecting to different constituencies, and allowing creative modes of protest to emerge' (Baer, 2016, p. 18). Ultimately, engaging with digital media transforms the lives of women and girls and generate 'powerful – if sometimes only ephemeral or temporary – connections, solidarities, and investments in social change' (Mendes et al., 2019, p. 5).

There has been an increased interest in digital feminist activism recently, especially around the use of feminist hashtags (Rentschler, 2014; Banet-Weiser and Miltner, 2016; Trott, 2018; Clark-Parsons, 2019; Linabary et al., 2020; Joseph, 2023), and a growing body of research on women's lived experiences in the engagement with feminist activism on digital media platforms (e.g., Fotopoulou, 2016; Keller et al., 2018; Mendes et al., 2019; Mendes and Ringrose, 2019; Trott, 2023; Marwick, 2023). Scholars have explored the various dimensions of how feminist activism, representation, and resistance unfold in digital spaces. Digital technologies opened new opportunities for young feminists to connect towards collective action, facilitating new visibility for feminist activism, challenging and dismantling the pervasiveness of sexism and misogyny (Baer, 2016; Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller, 2019; Trott, 2023). In this sense, social media promote feminist activism, pointing to the rise of 'new protest culture' (Ruth-Cohen, 2021, p. 3).

Among the more comprehensive studies on digital feminist activism, Mendes, Ringrose and Keller (2018), through several case studies and other methods, have analysed how women and girls document their experiences with rape culture online and in what ways they mobilise different digital media technologies to respond to rape culture and to engage in feminist activism. They find that digital media provide a pedagogical space that facilitates learning about feminism, and that digital feminist activism is much more complex and nuanced than one would expect. Their research uncovers how digital feminist activism creates solidarities,

connections and affective communities, highlighting the importance of digital media spaces in providing a space for survivors to share their experiences and find support and solidarity with other survivors. Furthermore, they argue that digital feminist activism ‘changes and shapes the experiences, interactions, expectations, and views’ of their participants’ everyday lives ‘in profound ways’, even if it does not generally result in tangible changes to laws or policies (Mendes et al., 2019, p. 30). Notably, they also point to the fact that digital media serve as spaces that facilitate education and involvement in feminism even for people who might have not been exposed to such content before and who did not have much prior knowledge about it.

In a more recent study, Trott (2023) examines feminist activism in a ‘platform society’ (Van Dijck et al., 2018), alongside anti-feminist misogynistic campaigns and actions to which feminists respond or which they receive in reaction to their feminist activism. Her research examines how digital platforms and technology, in general, both empower and oppress women and marginalized groups, often reinforcing existing capitalist and heteropatriarchal social structures within the digital realm (Trott, 2023). Trott (2023) notes that social media platforms are not just spaces where feminists act to contest sexism and misogyny, but they are also spaces where different types of feminism intersect and sometimes clash competing for visibility and negotiating protest agendas. An important point Trott (2023) makes is that feminism is not a homogenous movement, with different types of feminism and feminist activism that can sometimes lead to clashing. This is crucial to consider within a context where feminism develops under multiple influences and often struggles to break free from deeply rooted patriarchy, with feminists having to compete not only for spaces but also for limited funding to support their efforts. Furthermore, Trott draws on Freeman’s (1972) concept of the 'tyranny of structurelessness' to discuss the horizontal, decentralized structure that feminist activism aims for, in many ways enabled by social and digital technologies, offering opportunities for marginalized and oppressed voices to be heard. However, she notes that, in practice, this structure is overly idealistic, as power dynamics from the offline world—such as competing interests, subordination, colonialism, and the like—are often replicated in digital spaces (Trott, 2023). The final two sections of this literature review situate this study among literature on some of the most visible forms of digital feminist activism, which have the potential to reach wider audiences and participants, through hashtag activism and humour.

#MeToo and beyond

As one of the most prominent examples of feminist activism in online spaces, the #MeToo campaign, with its enormous engagement, has undoubtedly brought into the spotlight the networking possibilities of social media as 'affective vehicles' contributing to the formation of 'intimate feminist entanglements transcending the digital sphere' (Barbala, 2023, p. 4). It represents a pivotal moment in women's activism and one of the most prominent examples of digital feminist activism to date, facilitated by the willingness of the public to challenge oppression through digital channels (Žarkov and Davis, 2018; Mendes et al., 2019). While it has been discussed as a 'hashtag campaign', a 'feminist connective action', a 'hashtag protest', with its longevity and impact, it can best be described as a 'movement' (Trott, 2018; 2023). Undoubtedly, it has also been a prime example of the convergence of the public space with deeply private experiences coming together to enact a collective action for change (Mendes et al., 2019). As Loney-Howes and Fileborn (2019, p. 336) have stated, 'far from becoming just another hashtag, #MeToo seems to have engrained itself in the annals of history', as another chapter in the history of feminist activism trying to raise awareness and keep the issue of sexual violence and harassment on the public agenda.

Even though feminists have been raising their voices against sexual violence and harassment long before 2017, when the #MeToo movement spontaneously commenced, for many people it was surprising to see the ubiquity of the problem and the power of the collective action (Loney-Howes et al., 2021; Joseph, 2023). The #MeToo resurgence of the campaign initially led by Tarana Burke was initiated with one Tweet by the Hollywood actor Alyssa Milano who called women who had experienced sexual violence and harassment to just tweet the two words, to make visible the magnitude of the problem (Fileborn and Loney-Howes, 2019; Joseph, 2023; Stubbs-Richardson et al., 2023). According to some estimates, the hashtag was shared more than 12 million times in the first 24 hours (Khomami, 2017; Fileborn and Loney-Howes, 2019; Loney-Howes et al., 2021) and was active in 85 countries on Twitter and posted 85 million times on Facebook in the first 45 days (Sayej, 2017; Joseph, 2023). The hashtag has been translated into more than 83 languages and has been used in more than 85 countries around the world (Loney-Howes et al., 2021; Joseph, 2023). Ultimately, the power of #MeToo

lies in 'the *collective* act of speaking out against sexual violence' as a 'digitally networked phenomenon which has enabled mass participation, connectivity, and consciousness-raising' (Mendes and Ringrose, 2019, p. 49, italics in original).

Fileborn and Loney-Howes (2019) note that the #MeToo movement was highly successful in generating consequences for some of the perpetrators and raising awareness on the issue of sexual violence. However, one its focal points of critique has been the prevalence of Western, predominantly white, women's voices in the movement (Žarkov and Davis, 2018). The factor of digital exclusion in the movement is notable, that is the unequal access and opportunities for survivors to share their stories online and to receive support and recognition from others (Fileborn and Loney-Howes, 2019). Fileborn and Loney-Howes (2019) contend that movements such as #MeToo risk depicting sexual violence as a universal experience, however 'acquiring a digital mouthpiece does not necessarily mean certain individuals or groups will be seen or heard' (p. 9).

The hashtag has been translated into more than 83 languages and has been used in more than 85 countries around the world (Loney-Howes et al., 2021; Joseph, 2023). This points to the ubiquity of the problem, however it also opens the space for a more diverse scholarship that would provide different perspectives of women's lived experiences in various contexts. For example, scholars have discussed the intricacies of #MeToo in the Chinese contest, where political and social constrains have affected the proliferation of the movement (Zeng, 2019; Ling and Liao, 2020), the link between #NiUnaMenos and #MeToo in the Argentinian context (Garibotti and Hopp, 2019; Carlson, 2021), the structural, social and historical considerations related to the movement in India (Mukherjee et al., 2023), the proliferation of the movement in the highly militarised patriarchal society of Israel (Roth-Cohen, 2022), and many other manifestations of hashtag activism. Within this global discussion, the lack of inclusion of the perspectives of women from the region where this research is situated is notable (see, e.g., Chandra and Erlingsdóttir, 2021; Cheema, 2023; Baker et al., 2023). Parallels and mutual experiences can be drawn between post-socialist countries. For example, Grabowska and Rawluszko (in Chandra and Erlingsdóttir, 2021) discuss the contribution of #MeToo in Poland, looking at the role of religion and the success in mainstreaming the issues of sexual violence against women even though without resulting in any legal proceedings. Of the few academic

sources whose focus is on the Balkan region, Maskalan (2023) analysed the use of the hashtag 'I didn't ask for it' (#nisamtrazila) in five of the seven ex-Yugoslav countries (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, and Montenegro) where, as the author states, 'the movement echoed the loudest' (Maskalan, 2023, p. 187). She concludes that women in the Balkans have made a 'giant step' with the campaign, by connecting and providing mutual support, thus giving meaning to their painful experiences in these countries that are still healing their wounds from the wars (p. 201). Šarić (2022) focused on the #MeToo movement in Croatia, discussing the framing of the campaign through 'mobilising a maternal identity'. By invoking the respectable identity of the mother to mobilise the Croatian society, Šarić (2022) argues that issues of domestic violence and sexual violence 'became a common interest for both feminists and conservative forces', which resulted with less opposition by the conservative forces when compared to the discussions around the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (known as the Istanbul Convention), one of the fundamental regulations in this area (p. 102).

Some of the other critiques for the #MeToo movement include its labelling as essentially a 'witch hunt' (Fileborn and Phillips, 2019), that it has gone too far, leading to criminalisation of men for failing to be 'mind readers' or for simply engaging in acts of flirting and seduction (Fileborn and Loney-Howes, 2019; Fileborn and Phillips, 2019), that it is an easy form of digital engagement, what has been termed as 'slacktivism', 'armchair activism' or 'clicktivism' (Mendes and Ringrose, 2019), or that it fundamentally has not led to any significant social change (Fotopoulou, 2016; Žarkov and Davis, 2018; Fileborn and Phillips, 2019). The last one is a legitimate concern, especially as we are witnessing comebacks of men in positions of power who have been accused of sexual harassment and rape (Fileborn and Phillips, 2019), and as one of the rape convictions of the leading figure around which the movement revolved, the Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein, was overturned in April 2024 (Baker, 2024). Therefore, the #MeToo movement can be considered a 'work in progress', with a need for a discussion that is 'ongoing and broadly inclusive' and focuses on 'the sociopolitical causes of violence' and the possibilities of response and prevention (Loney-Howes and Fileborn, 2019, p. 338). Most importantly, it is also a testament of the transnational impact of digital feminist activism and its potentials.

Feminist humour

Feminist humour has been a significant element of online feminist participation and an effective means of challenging gender norms and patriarchy. Humour plays a significant role in maintaining hierarchy, while also being a means to challenge and subvert the status quo (Bing, 2004). It can be a relevant indicator of the power relations in the society and can be used as a 'starting point [...] to describe the deepening layers of the context - the daily structuring of class, race, gender, sexuality, and violence […] in which […] jokes and stories are embedded and entangled' (Goldstein, 2003, p. 273). It is also a means for 'expressing sentiments that are difficult to communicate publicly or that point to areas of discontent in social life', while it reveals the cracks in the system and the subtle ways in which power is challenged (Goldstein, 2003, p. 5). In its function as a 'coping mechanism', humour can create imagined alternatives to oppressive situations and can serve as a momentary relief for women, offering the comfort of knowing others may share their experiences (Bing, 2004). Laughter as an affective expression can hold plenty of joy and pleasure, but at the same time, it can also provoke considerable anxiety, anger, and sadness (Sundén and Paasonen, 2020).

Sundén and Paasonen (2020) discuss digital feminist activism as feminist countertactics to harmful behaviours online, noting that humour plays a crucial role in shaping where attention is focused on social media, increasingly providing platforms and modes of activist mobilisation and critique. Apart from the general assumption that humour is harmless and functions only to amuse, it has many significant functions and effects. Humour in online spaces has been identified to be disproportionally targeting marginalised groups, such as women, queers, and racial others (Sundén and Paasonen, 2020; Kanai, 2016; Marwick, 2013). At the same time, 'humour may provide a breathing space of sorts where the pressing heaviness of sexual harassment and abuse of power become momentarily lighter to bear' (Sundén and Paasonen, 2020, p. 55). In this sense, laughter can mobilise affective publics and fuel social change.

Humour is closely related to the notion of 'sociality of emotions' (Ahmed, 2004; 2014), where some feelings pass easily from one body to another, are shared within a specific environment, while some feelings are blocked, or their transmission is blocked within a space. In this sense,

humour has a ’sticking’ (Ahmed, 2004; 2014) effect, in some groups enabling collective sensibilities, and reinforcing boundaries in other (Bing, 2004). Goldstein (2003) studies how humour relies heavily on the context and circumstances that might be known only to the people who live them and might be impossible to convey to people outside of that context. In that way, humour is highly localised and contextualised, and context refers ‘not only to the ideational systems within which actors become agents but also to the power relations within which actors are restricted’ (Goldstein, 2003, p. 272). When it comes to social movements, humour and laughter can strengthen the cohesion of a group and can serve as a powerful tool for expressing opposition, celebrating subaltern and minority identities, overcoming fear, challenging the legitimacy of dominant norms and authorities, and sparking rebellion (Blais and Dupuis-Déri, 2022, p. 285).

Most of online humour is operationalised to ‘reinforce and reaffirm notions of gender that are binary and hierarchically opposite’ (Ringrose and Lawrence, 2018, p. 686), normalising misogyny and reinforcing male domination (Marwick, 2013; Sundén and Paasonen, 2020). As such, it is disproportionally directed at women, queers, and racial others (Kanai, 2016; Drakett et al., 2018; Sundén and Paasonen, 2020). In this manner, humour can serve as a disguise of sexism, a mechanism for dissemination and maintenance of gender inequality (Bill and Naus, 1992), and as a ‘tool of social control to ridicule and humiliate anyone that transgresses social norms, such as feminists’ (Blais and Dupuis-Déri, 2022, p. 285). Moreover, one of the most common threats to women who participate in feminist activism online are rape threats masked behind humour and jokes (Drakett, 2018).

The analysis of feminist humour is positioned within the broader discussion based on the sexist notions that still persist today in some form, that women are not funny, pretty women cannot be funny, funny women are manly and not feminine, and so forth, leading to the marginalization of women especially in the public realm of humour (Goldstein, 2003; Bing, 2004; Shifman and Lemish, 2010; Silva et al., 2010; Reilly, 2019). There is a wide literature that analyses the relation of women and humour, dismantling such sexist claims, suggesting that women use humour to refute, subvert, or transform male dominance and challenge sexism and misogyny (Bing, 2004; Bore, 2010; Mizejewski, 2014; Ringrose and Lawrence, 2018). Humour is a way to express defiance and revolt, it is ‘one of the fugitive forms of

insubordination' (Goldstein, 2003, p. 5). Feminist humour comes from a place of inequality, seeking to 'critique, reform, and overturn patriarchal structures of domination', while also challenging antifeminist discourse and lionizing feminist politics and issues' (Reilly, 2019, p. 4). Thus, feminist humour has become another strategy in coping with sexism and harassment, as a 'sword and shield' against gender stereotypes and sexism (Strain et al., 2015). Feminist critique articulated through humour is informative while making people laugh, thus capturing their attention and providing visibility (Mendes et al., 2019; Rentschler and Thrift, 2015; Sundén and Paasonen, 2020). According to Lawrence and Ringrose (2018, p. 211), 'humorous posts play a crucial role in expanding feminist audiences as well as facilitating connectivity, collectivity, and solidarity among feminists'.

To conclude this chapter, positioning my research within this vast literature examining women's experiences and modes of engagement, my aim is to supplement the global repository with a perspective that shares many of women's struggles discussed here, but also has distinct challenges and difficulties which are conditioned by the social, political, historical and cultural context where women are struggling to have their voices heard and acknowledged. There is an increasing awareness on the dominance of the Western perspective in academia, especially in media and communication studies, and the need for inclusion of more diverse and cosmopolitan perspectives (Badr and Ganter, 2021; Waisbord, 2022, Özkula and Reilly, 2024). Özkula and Reilly (2024) conducted a study on digital activism scholarship and visibility and found that the vast majority of journal articles on digital activism come from the Global North, mainly focusing on case studies in the four large economies of the Anglosphere – Australia, United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States. Therefore, this research aims to fill in these gaps in the global repository on digital feminist activism. As I show with my analysis in later chapters, the work of contextualisation, like other feminist work, aims to lead to a more significant social change in understanding harms and oppression, in the goal of moving towards more gender equal societies.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

The research aims to explore the lived experiences of women who participate in digital feminist activism, by understanding how affect and affective states shape and are shaped in the context of open and closed spaces of digital media. It also aims to provide 'situated' knowledge on women's experiences in the specific context of post-socialist, post-war, neo-liberal, traditionalist, patriarchal, ex-Yugoslav societies in transition.

My research interest was prompted by my personal experience and my desire to examine the various methods women and girls use to fight for their own place in the virtual space of social media, as spaces of the new public sphere, where they employ different strategies to raise their voice among the deafening thuds of Balkan nationalism and machismo and the new (or renewed) anti-feminist and anti-gender movement. This chapter first discusses my research questions and my positionality as a researcher. Then I discuss my ethnographic methods including observation of online spaces and semi-structured interviews. The chapter ends with an overview of the theoretical framework, consisting of theories around the public sphere, women and technology, and affect and emotion.

Research questions

Research questions were set at the beginning of the research to guide and inform the objective of the analysis. The research questions were developed through contemplation of contemporary feminist practices and modes of activism, as well as feminist debates around women's participation in online spaces, taking into consideration the intricate specificities of the location of the Balkan region. The questions were structured to guide the exploration of certain debates and discussions through qualitative research, and at the same time to open the space for further analysis on feminist activism, women's online participation, and feminist resistance in the Balkans. With the progression of the analysis, the research questions were reconsidered and reframed to reflect the focus of the research. Thus, the main guiding research questions I explore and examine in the research are:

- How has feminism in the Balkans developed and transformed with social media within the context of distinctive Balkan traditions, patriarchal order, and established gender norms?
- What are the affective states related to experiences of online sexism and misogyny?
- What are the feminist responses to online misogyny and sexism and the strategies employed by feminists online?
- How do women in this context create safe spaces online as spaces of resistance and what is their significance for feminist activism?

Each question serves as the guidance for different aspects and phases in the research and the analysis and all questions are addressed in chapters 4 to 7, where the findings of the research are presented.

Methodological approach

One of the key characteristics of feminist research is reflexivity which 'forces researchers to place their own histories and experiences inside the cases they explore, the questions they ask, or the people they study' (Mendes et al., 2019, p. 38). In conducting the research, I was guided by discussions on the central contradiction for feminist researchers in their positioning as researchers and activist feminists (Fine, 1994; Jabiri, 2024). Referring to Haraway's (1988) critique of detachment as an 'epistemological fetish', Fine (1994) expresses her preference for engagement in research that is steeped in feminist politics where 'the researcher is clearly positioned (passionate) within the domain of a political question or stance, representing a space within which inquiry is pried open, inviting intellectual surprises to flourish (detachment)' (p. 23). An aspect discussed by Jabiri (2024) was particularly important for me, namely the feeling of 'intellectual insecurity' which is invoked in the identification as 'an outsider within Western academia' (p.82). Problematising the categories and marked distinctions between feminist-scholar and feminist-activist and insider-outsider in academia, Jabiri (2024) advocates for 'other ways of knowing and producing alternative epistemologies and methodologies', as a way of countering Western hegemonic epistemologies (p. 84).

I have conducted this analysis fully conscious of my distinctive role in the collection of the data and the interpretation of the findings, as both insider and outsider, and as researcher and translator. I approached this positioning very carefully and constructed an environment for my research to avoid any limitations that such entanglement of identities could have brought upon the production of my research. As a feminist activist myself, I am conscious of the risks brought by my role as an insider, of imposing my own experiences and being influenced by my own views and inclinations (Fine, 1994; Shaw, 2013). I have worked to avoid the pitfalls of what Fine (1994) describes as 'ventriloqui' or avoiding any positionality in the research, 'treating subjects as objects while calling them subjects' and 'denial of all politics in the very political work of social research' (p. 19). It was impossible for me to have such detachment working on an issue I am very passionate about and with subjects with whom I share a lot of that passion and beliefs. Therefore, I did not assume a position of what Haraway (1988) refers to as 'the God trick', and instead, I engaged in discussions, sharing of stories, critiquing, acknowledging the mutual and deferring positions and beliefs. By doing this, I was careful to avoid the risk of 'insiderness' (Shaw, 2013) by emphasising and being fully conscious of my role as an outsider within the research. I acknowledged that I had never assumed an active role in online activism, therefore many of the experiences shared by the interview participants were new to me. Ultimately, my insider's perspective has allowed me to explore more thoroughly certain issues that arise from my own experience, bringing in my sensitivity as an insider and reflexivity as an outsider, simultaneously examining my affective states and responses to the discussion, which positively impacted my communication with the interview participants, instigated confidence, and allowed them to be more open.

This insider-outsider perspective was useful in gathering and engaging with opinions and positions with which I do not necessarily agree. I was able to carefully navigate the interview process in some of the more delicate situations and gather data relevant for my research. Some of these instances where there might have been exclusionary or harmful positions are described in more detail in the analysis. My aim was to acknowledge the existence of these different positions and present some of them in as much of an objective manner as possible. I tried to keep my impartiality by listening emphatically, without judgement, and with some understanding grounded in my knowledge of the context and the history.

I conducted the research in a transcultural, translingual setting, taking on multiple roles, assuming the responsibility to not only convey the words of the subjects, but also convey the culture and the social context that has shaped their experiences and views (Qun and Carey, 2023). I decided to conduct the interviews in Macedonian (my mother tongue) and Serbian, to allow the interview participants to express themselves freely in their own language, with the expressions and concepts that convey the meanings of their own culture and history. My effort to speak Serbian, which I have never studied, but which was official language in ex-Yugoslavia, and I learned by consuming various media and other content, was another aspect which helped in the establishment of a relationship of trust and confidence with the interview participants. I subsequently translated the interviews in English during the process of transcription. The role of translator I assumed was especially taxing for me, carrying the responsibility of conveying the words of the interview participants and the communicative elements of the observed spaces in an authentic manner. I was aware of the ways in which ‘translation exceeds language’ enabling meaning to pass from one context to another, thus becoming ‘a way to translate *worlds*’ and not just *words* (Hanks and Severi, 2015, p. 10, my emphasis). Especially challenging were the translations of the quotations, in which participants commonly use words that are culturally bound, which require using more words than the original quote, thus in some way changing the voice of the participant (Van Nes et al., 2010). As a translator, I was struggling to achieve the so-called ‘conceptual equivalence’, receiving a discourse from a specific social and cultural context and then disseminating it to readers in another, completely different context (Qun and Carey, 2023, p. 4). Thus, the solutions to many of the translation dilemmas were not in the dictionary, but in ‘an understanding of the way language is tied to local realities, to literary forms and to changing identities’ (Simon, 1996, as cited in Qun and Carey, 2023, p. 4). Especially useful for this part of the research process was the feedback from native English readers who pointed to the more literal translations that did not convey any relevant meaning in English.

Finally, my analysis is also informed by my lived experience in diverse cultural and social environments, such as North Macedonia, the Balkans, Italy, United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States. It has allowed me to develop my cultural awareness and sensitivity, which contribute to my ability to convey meanings and expressions in an authentic manner. At the

same time, I am aware that my multi-cultural life trajectory provides me with a specific worldview that might limit my understanding in certain aspects. I positioned myself as a feminist researcher whose role is to uncover and explore suppressed aspects of social relations, and to recover and document the history of women and their activities, acknowledging feminist 'affective inheritance' (Ahmed 2017, p. 20).

Research methodology

The research methodology employs several qualitative research methods. Online ethnographic observation was employed to capture the communication dynamics in online spaces. Ethnographic approach 'highlights how the Internet, social media, digital worlds, platforms, devices and content more broadly are experienced, and, indeed, are engaged in ways that generate new experiential configurations' (Pink et al., 2016, p. 37). The use of ethnography to explore new media, what Kozinets (2010) has termed 'netnography', within a broader social and cultural context, is essential for understanding the transformative potential of feminist digital activism (Mendes et al., 2019; Roth-Cohen, 2022; Trott, 2023).

The research purposefully includes activities that are visible to the wider public and that gather comments and reactions, and activities that are limited to a certain number of participants in private closed groups. By combining 'visible' and 'hidden' feminist activities online (Mendes et al., 2019), the analysis aims to provide a more comprehensive presentation of online engagements and experiences of women and girls. I conducted digital ethnography by observing selected online spaces, participating in Facebook groups and pages as a member and follower, establishing relationships with other members in groups and potential research participants, closely observing events and discussions, and becoming Facebook friends with my participants. By actively participating in the spaces I observed, I immersed myself into the culture I was studying (Mendes et al., 2019; Trott, 2023). During the digital ethnography, I continuously took field notes, wrote memos, and recorded data in various ways. I took screen shots of posts and threads, saved different content, such as memes and photographs, and stored links to which I returned during the analysis. This collection of content for analysis was

supplemented by the social media scroll-back method (Robards and Lincoln, 2019), which was employed with some of the interview participants, to inform the analysis and offer additional context to the discussion. The scroll-back method was used when interview participants were referring to specific posts on their Facebook profiles which were significant to relay some of their experiences and engagements. During some of the interviews, we would scroll back together and discuss the specific post, which would help the interview participant remember more details around the event. With their consent, I added these artifacts in my collection of content for analysis.

Conducting my ethnography, I acknowledged and reflected upon my positioning within the research and my relationship with my participants. Being open and honest about my personal history with my participants allowed for the creation of a 'communicative space that allows for a meaningful, trustful engagement and dialogue between researcher and researched' (Volčič, 2022, p. 1). Building such relationship of trust and openness was crucial in facilitating mutual understanding and allowing for a communication without judgement (Volčič, 2022). It was important for me to include opinions and positions different from my own, with the aim was to promote collaboration and understanding across differences and to present the reality in (as much as possible) objective manner.

Digital (Pink et al., 2016) or virtual (Hine, 2000) ethnography implies searching for meaningful content in a dynamic virtual world, as a 'space of flows' structured 'around connections rather than location' where 'the field site of ethnography could become a field flow, […] organized around tracing connections rather than about location in a singular bounded site' (Hine, 2000, p. 61). This view of location is based on Massey's (2005) conceptualisation of place as 'event' or a 'constellation of processes' (p. 141). In this way, the researcher might start from one particular place but could be then encouraged to follow the connections that are deemed meaningful and visible (Hine, 2000; Lambert, 2013; Pink et al., 2016). This was the case with my ethnography that took me to different spaces and platforms where my subjects were present and active and the content that was meaningful for my research intertwined. While the starting 'location' for my ethnography was Facebook, as the research progressed and the activity of my participants transferred to other social media platforms, I followed them noting the differences and similarities of their engagement and experiences on these different

platforms. However, Facebook remained the main 'location' for my ethnography, where most of my observation and findings took place.

In my ethnographic observation, I paid attention to the other elements, relationships and communication practices, keeping the 'place of digital media in research relational to other elements and domains of the research topic, site and methods' to be able to 'understand the digital as part of something wider, rather than situating it at the centre' of my work (Pink et al., 2016, p. 11). Another crucial point when conducting digital ethnography is related to complex ethical issues, as the classification of what is public and what is private on the Internet can often be muddied (Lambert, 2013, p. 54). This requires awareness and sensitivity by the researcher on the things that could be observed, recorded, and analysed. Therefore, as described below, various measures were taken prior to, and during, the data collection, analysis, and presentation. This also meant that some of the content that could have been useful for the analysis needed to be excluded from the research.

The study includes an array of textual, visual, and other communicative items, which implied the use of a mixture of methods applied in the interpretative process. Textual analysis was employed to scrutinise online communicative elements to provide understanding of the construction of textual meaning in a specific context. To avoid the risk of analysis that only echoes the perspective of the researcher, which has been recognised as one of the risks of textual analysis, there is a critical reflection and acknowledgement of the perspective and positioning of the researcher within the project. My dual position of insider-outsider both in the spaces of digital media and in the physical location of the research, has provided me with a deeper understanding of the contextual meanings behind communicative practices online. Furthermore, textual analysis was combined with other methods that explore the constraints on the production of the text, such as in-depth interviews and participant observation, to prevent textualization of the world and acknowledging the world that exists outside of the text (Lockyer, 2008).

I engaged in discourse analysis, as a method that is employed to capture power relations in communication, to analyse the collected objects, which were read as texts. Discourse analysis 'examines how language and representation fuse together to produce meaning, with

particular attention paid to how the intersections of representation, meaning, power, identities, and subjectivities all create relationships with each other' (Harp et al., 2018, p. 984). In this manner, insights were provided into the meaning construction and the ideological implications of the analysed textual elements (Lockyer, 2008). Furthermore, to analyse specific images and memes, I employed qualitative content analysis, which involved a consideration of the particular ways visual content produces meaning and the ways in which social media images are 'made meaningful through relationships to other cultural discourses that exist within and beyond social media' (Faulkner et al., 2018, p. 164).

Finally, ethnography was supplemented with the use of affective analysis, to capture the complexities of the affective experiences of women participating in, posting on, and consuming social media (Keller et al., 2018; Mendes et al., 2019). Affect as a tool was used to capture the intensity of emotive experiences of my participants, by which I observed their affective reactions, but I also paid attention to my affective responses, especially in the conveyed experiences with which I could identify. Attention to affect is fairly new and innovative method of analysis, however not insignificant since it is crucial to capture the 'bodily, fleeting, and immaterial' nature of affective states and processes and discussing their social implications (Knudsen and Stage, 2015, p. 2), analysing phenomena that can be simultaneously 'read as somatic, neural, subjective, historical, social and personal' (Wetherell, 2012, p. 11). Since my primary research interest is closely related to affect as a bodily state, the chosen methodology has enabled me to collect materials to examine how such state is being expressed and documented (Knudsen and Stage, 2015). To achieve this, elements of online communication which might have been perceived as banal or unsophisticated have been included in the analysis, such as online comments, notes, accounts of bodily states, and other (Knudsen and Stage, 2015). This helped me in the interpretation of the experiences and communicative practices and events, and in determining their significance, even when participants might have underplayed their impact as a form of self-preservation.

Data collection

The data collection for the research was conducted with two methods: semi-structured interviews and observation of interactions in online spaces on social media, predominantly Facebook, and occasionally Instagram and X (formerly Twitter). These methods were selected due to their potential of exploring the 'invisible grammars of signification of human behaviour in cultural communities' (Knudsen and Stage, 2015, p. 15), as well as the possibility to engage in observing and capturing women's lived experiences in online spaces, and not just the effects of digital feminist activism. University ethics approval was obtained for all aspects of data collection.

Recruiting

With their diversity and openness, social media, and especially Facebook, offer an arena to challenge some of the issues related to social science research, such as the reliance on disproportionately Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic samples (Henrich et al., 2010; Kosinski et al, 2015; Waisbord, 2022; Özkula and Reilly, 2024). The aim of the research was to recruit participants whose voices might not be heard and acknowledged in the vast ocean of social media interactions and in this manner contribute to the enrichment of media and communication studies. This aim was also sustained with the choice of recruiting women whose feminist activism is not an area of professional work or main activity.

I did not have a predefined recruitment strategy and conducted the sampling through the snowball sampling approach. This method is useful for purposive sampling when it is difficult to locate members of the population of interest and it requires that the participants share the characteristics for which they are eligible to participate in the study (Morgan, 2008). It has been noted that this method can introduce biases due to the proclivity of first recruited participants to interact with others that are similar to themselves (Kosinski et. al, 2015). However, in an analysis where similarities among participants are required, this should not be considered a risk. To mitigate the potential risk, the initial interview participants who were

recruited for the research did not know each other and were recruited through different channels. Since I have already participated in online spaces and was a member of feminist groups, the initial interview participants were recruited through personal contacts and in the feminist groups on Facebook where I was a member. In the Facebook groups, I aimed to recruit either identified members who are more active or the moderators who were responsible for the content posted in the group. At the beginning of the research, I contacted the moderators/administrators of the groups to inform them about my research and to obtain their consent to observe the communication in the group. With the establishment of the first contact, I was able to discuss a possible participation in an interview with them. In agreement with the moderators/administrators of the groups, I made a post in the groups to inform all the members of my research, and this motivated some of the members of the group to contact me expressing their interest to participate in the research, having some experiences they wanted to share. Of the women who contacted me in this way, I included two in the analysis, with experiences I considered relevant for the research. The other participants in the interviews were recommended either by my initial participants or by some of the women I contacted who were not able to participate. It is important to note here that there were some women with whom I was in contact for some time, trying to arrange an interview, which in the end was not possible. For one of these women, in my analysis and discussion, I have included an interview that was published online.

Ultimately, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 11 women who self-identify as feminists and who were born and raised in one of the ex-Yugoslav countries, namely North Macedonia, Serbia, and Montenegro. I selected these countries due to their shared history, culture, and proximity, which contribute to the similarities in the attitudes, perceptions, and practices. They are countries with strong Ottoman heritage, which has a significant impact on their perceptions, representations, and development. Furthermore, the populations from these countries share a linguistic proximity which was one of the defining characteristics for the sampling. Besides the location, the main criterium for the recruitment was that the women needed to be active online, posting at least several times per week, and to engage on feminist issues. The second main criterium was that they are not members or employees of any non-governmental organisation active in the region, and their activism can therefore be considered independent and self-motivated. The age of the participants was not one of the

criteria, however all interview participants are women aged 20-42, and can be considered what some scholars define as 'digital natives', that is women who have grown up with digital technologies their whole (or most of their) lives (Prensky, 2001; Megarry, 2020). The aim was to see how these women navigate feminist spaces, form alliances and act in solidarity with other women.

The initial contact with the interview participants was mainly through Facebook Messenger, when I shared the basic information about the research and my aims of conducting the interviews. During that first conversation, the women I contacted would share their email address to which I would send the explanatory statement and the consent form. After sharing the explanatory statement, we usually continued our conversation in Facebook Messenger or they would share their telephone number to continue communicating on another communication platform, such as WhatsApp or Viber. There, we would arrange the date and time for the interview, either in person or on Zoom. If the interview was to be conducted on Zoom, I would send an additional email with the link for the meeting.

With all the steps in the communication and the provision of extensive information about the interview and the research, the risk of 'coercion' and 'undue influence' was mitigated. Additionally, this risk was mitigated through the guarantee of privacy, as well as the possibility of withdrawal at any point of the interview and the research process, which was explicitly shared with all interview participants at the beginning of the interview. Consent was obtained from all interview participants prior to conducting the interviews.

Throughout the recruitment and the various stages of the research, ethical considerations toward the participants and the information available online and shared during the interviews were duly considered and employed. Even though some of the interview participants were open to have their real names used in the research, I decided to change all names in the analysis. I made this decision to prevent any exposure of my interview participants and the people mentioned in various instances of the research, considering the changing social and political context and the public discourses fuelled by the growing backlash on gender equality, and the overall expanding animosity toward all aspects of gender and women's rights. However, some information discussed during the interviews, especially for events that were

covered by the media, is also available online, in published news or interviews. Even though this information is not explicitly identified in the interviews, it may still be traced, which was acknowledged and agreed with the interview participants. I weighed up the benefits and disadvantages of this but decided that it was important to fully discuss their experiences. Furthermore, the research is less 'identifying' than the already existing public event in and of itself. In the moments when more sensitive events and experiences were discussed, interview participants were reminded that they could withdraw or alter their statements at any moment during and after the interview.

Interviews

Preferred method for understanding women's and girls' experiences is the semi-structured interview, as a 'means of privileging, defending, and promoting the voices of research participants' (Mendes et al., 2019, p. 39). Qualitative interviews do not provide us with information about the statistical prevalence of different experiences and opinions, however understanding individual experiences and opinions as parts of a whole allows us to perceive the complexity of an issue (O'Reilly and Parker, 2013; Marwick, 2023). The aim of the interviews in the study was to include feminist voices, obtaining different perspectives on feminism and feminist activism, thus providing an analysis of the dynamics of feminist activism within a specific social, political, cultural and economic context.

For the interviews, I recruited women from the Balkan region who self-identify as feminists and who publicly discuss issues related to women's rights and/or feminism, although I am fully aware that the experiences shared and analysed here may be common for other marginalised and stigmatised groups. That could be the framework for future research. I interviewed 11 women who belong to what I refer to as 'younger generation' of feminists, meaning women who started being active in the movement after the 2000s, that is with the development of digital media. All participants had a high level of education, two of them conducting their PhD at the time of the interviews, three working in academia, and the rest having completed MA studies. The high level of education of the participants might be due to

the snowball sampling method and my own networks from which the sampling initiated. While all participants were members of one or more of the women's groups observed for the research, four of them (Dragana, Vesna, Elena and Tijana) had the role of moderators or administrators. Two of the interview participants (Nikolina and Simona) are writers and publish other works and columns where they discuss women's issues and gender roles in the Balkans. Two of the interview participants (Aneta and Katerina) were more active on Instagram, where they managed their profiles which deal with sexual harassment and solicitation (Aneta) and education and awareness raising on feminist issues, among which more prominently body image and women's health (Katerina). Additionally, two of the participants were living abroad at the time of the interviews, one working as a journalist (Tijana) and one conducting her PhD research (Vesna). Both actively participated in Balkan social media spaces. Even though the modes of engagement and participation on social media was different, all women interviewed for this research had a higher level of visibility online and were therefore subjected to hate speech and harassment at some point of their social media participation.

Digital media offers the possibility for girls and women to explore various modes of feminist engagement. My aim was to scrutinise the lived experiences of women who independently engage with online feminism, collaborate and form alliances online, and participate in feminist spaces, actions and communities. Accordingly, one of the criteria for the selection of the interview participants was to exclude women who are members of or employed in established women's organisations. From my own professional background working in national and regional women's organisations, these engagements are very different for women employed in the field, since they have already recognised networks, and some, if not all, of their engagement online could be dictated by the projects being implemented by the organisation. I was interested purely in the personal, rather than professional experiences.

Interviews were conducted in person and on the internet communication tool, Zoom. The interview guide was written in advance with open-ended questions aimed at collecting information about interview participants' experiences, avoiding leading questions. While the questions in the interview guide served to provide the main direction of the interview, there was the possibility for additional questions and prompts, as applicable for the conversational

manner in which the interviews were conducted. Additionally, a variety of probes were used to elicit further information and build rapport through the researcher's use of active listening skills (Ayres, 2008b). Both nonverbal and verbal active listening strategies were employed during the interviews, both in person and online. Nonverbal strategies included open posture, positioning towards the speaker, nonverbal cues and gestures demonstrating understanding and avoiding judgement, while verbal strategies included paraphrasing, interpreting, summarising, checking perceptions, and other (Ayres, 2008a). Silence was also employed as active listening strategy, to communicate respect and sympathy, while allowing space and safety for the speaker, demonstrating calmness and patience (Ibid.).

During the interviews, participants also reflected on their own identity and positionality. We discussed their beginnings of engagement with feminism and their childhood in a patriarchal society. They reflected on their points of 'feminist snap', or 'breaking points' (Ahmed, 2017) when they realised something was not right and made them consider ways to react to what they identified as sexism and misogyny in their environment. They also deeply reflected on their experiences with sexism and misogyny online, and some of them searched through their archives to find posts, comments, images, and other materials they have saved. These materials have enriched my ethnography and provided more evidence for my research. I have included some of the more explicit descriptions to capture the intensity and harshness of these experiences for the participants.

With this sample, I do not claim to present the situation and experiences of all feminists who belong to the 'younger generation'. I recruited the interview participants and conducted the interviews during a specific period for me, as well as for them. This implies certain positionality informed by our lived experiences at that moment, which has supplemented the research with a specific perspective based on our mutual understanding. As someone who shares many of their beliefs and who has been involved in the feminist movement in the region and wider, I was 'one of them', which facilitated the establishment of a relation of trust and understanding at a much faster rate than in a relationship of researcher-subject. This has also allowed them more freedom to share with me not only the experiences they were asked about but other events and experiences they considered worth sharing to enrich my analysis. Guided by their belief in feminist alliance and comradeship, they invested themselves in the

success of the research, as something that would be beneficial for all of us, as feminists from the Balkans.

Observation

To obtain a holistic understanding of the dynamics of communication in public and constructed private spaces on social media, and the formation of feminist groups and media content production in them, I conducted analysis of various posts, images, and other types of online engagements that were available in the Facebook groups selected for the research, as well as other posts and materials that were shared by the interview participants. For the observation of social media interactions, I chose three closed Facebook groups with clear feminist objectives and affiliations. To conduct the observation, I became member of selected closed and open Facebook groups and fan of several related Facebook pages. I conducted the observation on a regular basis, noting new posts and comments in the groups, taking screenshots, saving posts, and collecting materials in other ways.

After obtaining permission from the administrators/moderators, I was observing three Facebook groups as spaces for women to raise awareness and educate on issues related to feminism, share experiences, give advice, and support each other. Below are the details of each group and the reason why it was chosen for observation.

Group	Members	Location	Activity	Reason for observation
Women's business (ženska posla, in Serbian)	14,641 members as of 20.09.2024 (increase from 14,524 on 20.05.2023)	Serbia - regional	Active (with decreased activity in 2024)	One of the larger Balkan women's groups on Facebook with members from the region. Topics discussed range from women's health, household tips, posting jokes and memes, to discussions on violence and harassment of women.

WOMEN'S SOLIDARITY (ŽENSKA SOLIDARNOST, in Serbian)	399 members as of 20.09.2024 (decrease from 415 on 20.05.2023)	Mainly Serbia, also regional	Active (with decreased activity in 2024)	One of the more active groups during the period of increased feminist activism and protests. Serves as a space for education, discussing feminist issues and organising protests.
Safe wall of chauvinist shame (Безбеден ѕид на шовинистичкиот срам, in Macedonian)	168 members as of 20.09.2024 (no change since 20.05.2023)	North Macedonia	Not active	Group created after the discovery of men's groups on the application Telegram in North Macedonia, to call out sexist and misogynistic behaviour and to serve as a safe space where women could discuss their activism and organised reactions.

All three groups are closed, and all differ in the frequency of engagement of the members. Two are based in Serbia (women's business and WOMEN'S SOLIDARITY) and one is in North Macedonia (Safe wall of chauvinist shame). This choice of the groups was deliberate, to be able to observe different spaces of feminist engagement. Additionally, these are the groups where the women I interviewed participated or which they moderated, therefore the combination of the observation and the interviews offered an even more comprehensive overview of the dynamics of communication in these groups.

Women's business (ženska posla) is the largest of the observed groups and has a more general purpose and use, adapted to wider membership. It has four admins and moderators and is affiliated with a public page with the same name, which has more than 114,000 followers. The name of the group can have different interpretations, meaning 'women's issues', 'women's business', 'women's things', 'women's work' and similar, with a general meaning of 'things or issues that are related to women'. The choice to translate it as 'women's business' was my own, since I considered it to be the closest to convey the meaning. As mentioned above, translation can often obfuscate the nuanced meanings of the words that

are rooted in a specific context, therefore I am aware that some of the translations in the analysis will not have the same effect in English that they would have in the original language.

Women's solidarity (ŽENSKA SOLIDARNOST) was the group that was one of the most active in the period of the pandemic and after, when several cases of sexual violence were disclosed in the region, with strong reactions by feminists. The group has four admins and moderators and was created by a group of young women gathered with the idea of organising collective activities. One of the interview participants was one of the founders of the group and the subsequent collective and the interview has supplemented the analysis of the dynamics of communication in the group in chapter 7.

Safe wall of chauvinist shame (Безбеден ѕид на шовинистичкиот срам) is a group established in North Macedonia with the specific aim of reacting to the newly discovered secret misogynistic men's groups on Telegram. Even though It is not active anymore, it has not been closed. In this way, it could be reactivated if there is any need in the future (Trott, 2023). The group has two admins and moderators, and I interviewed both of them. The complicated process of the establishment of the group which uncovered many of the complexities of the existence of safe feminist spaces on social media platforms was discussed in the interviews and is presented in more detail in chapter 7.

Noting the ability of social media to eliminate physical borders, all groups have members from the countries in the region who speak the same or similar language. Prior to commencing the observation, I messaged the moderators of each group and obtained approval to conduct the observation, in accordance with the established ethical requirements for the research. As mentioned above, some moderators also participated in the interviews, therefore the observation of the groups was conducted with their approval and invitation. In one group (women's business), as instructed by the moderators, I posted an announcement on the public wall explaining the aims and methodology of my research, ensuring the members of confidentiality and privacy, and inviting women to share their experiences with sexism and misogyny. After the public announcement, I received private messages from women who wanted to share their experiences. Some of the messages were used in my research, while

some, even though related to women's experiences with sexism and misogyny, were not relevant for the research and were therefore excluded.

Safety measures have been employed to safeguard data, as required by the ethics approval. The collected data has been protected in such a way to be safeguarded against alteration, unauthorized access, or loss. Additionally, as mentioned above, all identifying characteristics for the materials used in the research and for the interview participants have been removed and all the names have been changed to avoid identification, even when consent for use of name has been granted.

Analysis

As mentioned above, the data was collected through semi-structured interviews, supplemented by other methods of observation and analysis of social media activity, which allowed me to analyse the dynamics of online communication and participation in various online spaces. I observed and analysed social media texts (posts and comments) in a selection of women's groups on Facebook, as one of the most used social media platforms globally and in the region, and as the social media platform that effectively facilitates community-building in open and closed spaces. I also collected materials from other social media platforms, guided by the activity of the interview participants and content shared in the observed groups.

Interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed. Transcription is a crucial process as interpretative work that comes early in the analysis during which the raw material upon which the analysis rests is produced. Therefore, it could be argued, it calls for the same or even more attention, precision and rigor as the other components of the data analysis (Poland, 2008). It should be emphasized that it is not just the product of the transcription that is important, but the process of transcription is valuable as well in building understanding through 'listening, re-listening, viewing and re-viewing' (Lapadat and Lindsay, 1999, p. 82).

To capture the essence of women's lived experiences and to allow my participants the freedom of expression, as explained above, interviews for this research were conducted in Macedonian or Serbian. Therefore, the process of transcription was simultaneous with the process of translation. Both simultaneous processes were conducted by the researcher, which consequently facilitated the interpretative approach of transcription that is needed to make sense of the data (Lapadat and Lindsey, 1999). However, translation is a complex process where the translator not only coveys the meanings of the word but also the whole contextual realms of those meanings (Van Nes, 2010; Qun and Carey, 2023). By conducting the research in a transcultural, translingual setting, I took on multiple roles and assumed the responsibility to not only convey the words of the subjects, but also convey the culture and the social context that has shaped their experiences and views. Faced with the 'chasm of untranslatability', I not only interpreted the 'Other's words and worlds', but I was also in the position of 'an importer who allows the "linguistic Other" to speak in their own voice whilst introducing the discourse of the Other to [the] readers' (Qun and Carey, 2023, p. 4). Therefore, my role has not only been to render an 'account of the Other's discourse' (Ibid.), but to also engage with the cultural realities of the participants and conveying them faithfully, to serve the global scope of my research and my position as an international researcher.

I have endeavoured to select the most representative materials from the observed groups and pages that would illustrate the communication practices and dynamics in the most authentic way. Additionally, I have included materials that were provided or pointed out by my interview participants for analysis. These materials were also in Macedonian and Serbian and underwent the same process of translation and analysis.

Theoretical framework

The main theoretical framework through which I am structuring my research is related to affect and emotions, characterised by circulation and mobility, moving through bodies, objects, and signs, that become 'sticky' or 'saturated' with affect, as sites of personal and social tension (Ahmed, 2004; 2014). In this sense, digital media provide 'affective stickiness'

and 'affective saturation', helping to activate bodies, objects, meanings, senses, and situations (Lasén and David, 2021).

Furthermore, theories about the gendered positioning of technology are crucial for the analysis of communication dynamics in online spaces, that is positioning of technology in the male domain, thus mirroring 'the societies that create it' (O'Donnell and Sweetman, 2018) and reinforcing the exclusion of women and other marginalised communities (Cockburn, 1993; Wajcman, 2010). Such exclusion of women from the world of technology has a significant impact on the design, content, and use of technology, whereas 'the very definition of technology [...] is cast in terms of male activity' (Wajcman, 2010, p. 144).

Finally, I am analysing online spaces as a 'public sphere' (Habermas, 1962), where women's participation has been historically excluded (Pateman, 1988; Fraser, 1990; Massey, 1994; Duncan, 1996), through various aspects and tools of masculine dominance, among which primarily the effects of sexism and misogyny. In such spaces, similar or same patterns of subordination (Massey, 1994) and constitution of 'subaltern counterpublics' (Fraser, 1990) can be observed, as well as one of the basic means of patriarchal control and subordination, that is the real or perceived risks on women's safety (Pain, 1991).

Affect and affective solidarity

Ever since researchers' attention has been turned to analysing affect in the so-called 'affective turn' (Ahmed, 2004; Clough, 2007; Wetherell, 2012; Knudsen and Stage, 2015), the question of how to best capture those affective states of the subjects under analysis has been debated. The greatest challenge in investigating affective 'bodily, fleeting, and immaterial' states and processes is developing an affective methodology that would capture them and explore their 'social consequences' (Knudsen and Stage, 2015, p. 2).

For the purpose of this research, I use affect, emotions, and feelings without viewing them as inherently distinct, taking on Ahmed's (2004) conceptualization considering emotions not as

psychological states, but as social and cultural practices. In this sense, ‘feelings take on their meaning only in relation to a specific sociohistorical context’ (Hochschild, 1975). Furthermore, I use Hemmings’s (2012) concept of ‘affective solidarity’ to explore how affective processes of ‘digital connections and mediation between girls and women may enable new forms of solidarity’ (Keller et al., 2018, p. 25). Affective solidarity relates to the emotional connections formed between individuals and groups who share similar or equal experiences or struggles (Hemmings, 2012). It is a key aspect of digital feminist activism, drawing on a broad range of feelings and creating connections that are necessary for a feminist politics of transformation (Ibid.).

As previously discussed in the introduction, affect is embedded in digital media networks and shapes the way people communicate and interact in online spaces. Networked affect not only includes the expression of individual emotions but also the circulation of emotions within the network, which subsequently impacts the formations of collective actions (Papacharissi, 2015; 2016). In that sense, affect is theorized in terms of ‘the architectures that support it and make it visible’, which include ‘bodies, thoughts, and ideas but also technologies that support the interactions within and around which affect emerges’ (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 20).

Feminist scholarship has worked to dismantle the binary modes of thinking which is predominantly present in Western thought, with dual concepts such as emotion/reason, mind/body, culture/nature, masculine/feminine, which reinforce a hierarchical social order placing women as subordinate to men (Fischer, 1993; Citrin et al., 2004; Ahmed, 2004; Knights and Kerfoot, 2004; Cvetkovich, 2014; Åhäll, 2018). The historical discourse on emotions is traditionally entangled with assumptions in relation to gender, race, and class, where women’s emotions were considered to derive from their closeness to nature and ‘manifest in our unclean bodies, disordered minds and hysterical wombs’ (Taylor and Fullagar, 2021, p. 14). In the same vein, Black and Indigenous populations were perceived as uncivilised, therefore in need of ‘civilising’, to ‘bring their emotions into the “acceptable” range of expression’, while lower classes ‘were considered to possess emotions aligned with their potentially riotous and incipiently degenerate state of being’ (Ibid., p. 14). This Western thinking originating from the Stoics and the Ancient Greeks, centred reason as the basic principle of knowledge, seeking objectivity and truth and logic in the explanations of the

world, undoubtedly facilitating the 'erasure and marginalisation of emotional and bodily modes of knowing, being and doing', while enabling injustices and suppressions of those labelled as 'others' by 'normative (white, heteropatriarchal) perspectives' (Ibid., p. 15). From the 19th century, emotionality and rationality became inextricably associated with femininity and masculinity, placing women as more suited for the emotional labour in the household and men for productive labour (Fischer, 1993).

Feminist authors have argued that the marginalisation of emotions puts knowledge in service of patriarchy, racism, and colonialism (Haraway, 1988; Taylor and Fullagar, 2021). In that perspective, the division between emotions as bodily and personalised and affect as impersonal and mobile, reinforces the binary gendered modes of thought (Åhäll, 2018; Wetherell, 2012; Ahmed, 2014; Hemmings, 2005). Ahmed (2014) further challenges the notion of the 'turn to affect' used by some scholars to problematise the mind-body dualism and demonstrate how reason and passion are interconnected within the production and consumption of affect (Hardt, 2007), emphasizing the long-standing work of feminist scholarship drawing on emotions to capture the correlation between the mind and the body. Furthermore, Ahmed (2004) discusses the framing of feminists who call out established truths as emotional and therefore lacking reason and 'good judgement', and feminism becoming an extension of such emotionality (p. 170). She contends that the 'projection of "emotion" onto the bodies of others not only works to exclude others from the realms of thought and rationality, but also works to conceal the emotional and embodied aspects of thought and reason' (Ahmed, 2004, p. 170).

Analysing affect can be particularly useful in capturing the different processes in digital media spaces, whereas affect provides 'a way of understanding humans as collective and emotional, as well as individual and rational, by presenting these states as confluent rather than opposite' (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 16). Therefore, affect is especially valuable in analysing digital feminist activism and women's experiences online, allowing researchers to draw connections between individual and collective actions and experiences. Theories on affect and emotions constitute the methodological basis for my research, which focuses on personal experiences in online spaces and the ways such personal experiences produce movement and action.

Gender and technology

The relationship between gender and technology underpins the analysis of women's participation in digital media. My approach to the theorisations on gender and technology is through critical theory and feminist critique, drawing mostly on Wajcman's (2004, 2007, 2010) notions of 'technofeminism' and feminist theories of technology. Feminist scholars (Haraway, 1997; Plant, 1998; Wajcman, 2007) have extensively analysed and discussed the binary opposition in science and technology studies, starting with a fatalistic approach by second-wave feminists in conceptualising technology to reproduce patriarchy, to the embrace of digital technologies as liberatory for women in the 1990s, to a more balanced approach which does not view technology as inherently good or bad for women, and instead focuses on 'the mutual shaping of gender and technology' (Wajcman 2007, p. 287).

Technology is created and used in a social context that is embedded with established dynamics of domination and power within a patriarchal order that positions women on a lower level than men, therefore it is likely to reproduce and shape the behaviour of women and men through the power imbalance of patriarchy (Kilbourne and Weeks, 1997). There are several ways in which this happens, among which through the physical design of technology, the control of reproductive technology, and women's use of technology in the paid labour force (Cockburn, 1993; Kilbourne and Weeks, 1997; Wajcman, 2007, 2010). Technological design has benefited men and amplified the patriarchal values, norms, and assumptions by burdening women with the unpaid labour in the household, through the invention of various appliances used in the home that could be managed by one person, instead of the paid labour of servants (Kilbourne and Weeks, 1997). At the same time, powerful tools are too heavy for women to use, while infrastructure in many places designed for men's work does not accommodate women. In this view, technology is conceptualised as a male domain, not only due to the domination of men, but because it incorporates 'symbols, metaphors and values that have masculine connotations' (Wajcman, 2007, p. 289). Radical and socialist feminists, therefore, looked at the ways gender is embedded in technology and the ways in which

technology is developed as a project for masculine domination and power over women and nature (Cockburn, 1993; Wajcman 2007; 2010).

The feminists of the 1990s approached the relationship between gender and technology with a much more positive attitude towards the possibilities of the new technologies in terms of transforming gender and empowering women (Adam, 2005; Wajcman, 2004; 2007; 2010). Cyberfeminists have welcomed with great enthusiasm the technological advances and the emergence of new technologies and their potential for emancipatory and empowering tools (e.g., Haraway, 1997; Plant, 1998). For cyberfeminists, 'digital technologies facilitate the blurring of boundaries between humans and machines, and between male and female, enabling their users to choose their disguises and assume alternative identities' (Wajcman, 2007, p. 291). In this view, digital technologies are especially suited for women, as a liberating and empowering space (Adam, 2005; Wajcman, 2004; 2007; 2010). Haraway (1997), for example, famously stated that she would rather be a 'cyborg' than an 'ecofeminist goddess', embracing the power of technology to create new worlds and new meanings. However, this uncritical approach has been related to technological determinism, or 'the view that technological progress is inevitable and that technology drives society' (Adam, 2005, p. 10), embraced especially by young women who have actively used new media to construct new identities and realities.

To avoid 'technological determinism', Wajcman (2007) views the relationship between technology and gender as a heterogenous process of mutual shaping. Technofeminists perceive technology as 'both a source and a consequence of gender relations' (Wajcman, 2004, p. 7). In this way, they consider both the effects of digital technologies on women and the distinctive meanings they might have for different women. However, this approach has highlighted the dominance of the Western perspective within science and technology studies, as well as within feminist theorisations around gender and technology, and the lack of a global viewpoint. Gajjala (1999), for example, brings to attention the problematic conceptualisation of cyberfeminism as a Western concept and its possibilities and impracticalities. While cyberfeminists strive to appropriate technology and create spaces that would be empowering to women, important aspects to consider is who does such 'empowerment' refer to and 'the complexities of the lived contexts of women in the South' (Gajjala, 1999, p. 619).

Despite all the progress and liberation digital media have brough, it is still a sphere fraught with inequality. Masculine domination has persisted in science and technology studies, and with that in the design and construction of machines, artefacts, and platforms. As science and technology become more prevalent in our lives, we live in a society of technology in which gender power relations are consistently renegotiated (Wajcman, 2007).

The public sphere

My analysis of the dynamics of communication in online spaces rests upon the operationalisation of feminist critique and elaboration of the public-private divide. I consider online spaces of social media platforms in relation to Habermas's (1962) conceptualisation of the bourgeois public sphere where people gather as a public to discuss matters of 'public concern' or 'common interest' (Habermas, 1962, as cited in Fraser, 1990, p. 58), as an ideal and empirical phenomenon (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). This idealised bourgeois public sphere was ideated as a 'masculinist ideological notion', therefore it could be considered either as an 'instrument of domination' or a 'utopian model' (Fraser, 1990, p. 62). Conceptualised in this manner, the public sphere has been extensively problematised and reimagined by feminists and other theorists, taking into consideration the realities of the lived experiences, the exclusion of women and other marginalised groups from the public sphere and their limitation to the private sphere (Pateman, 1988; Fraser, 1990; Massey, 1994; Duncan, 1996), as well as the need to include emotionality, passion, and subjectivity in the consideration of the public sphere, especially within online spaces (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019).

Feminist concerns with the public-private divide stem from the notion that limitation of women's participation in the public serves as a 'crucial means of subordination' (Massey, 1994, p. 179). The confinement of women in the domestic or private sphere has contributed to the perpetuation of special, and therefore social control on women's identity (Massey, 1994; Duncan, 1996). At the same time, women's exclusion from the public sphere has signified their restriction from access to the social, economic and political arena and the

decision-making levels. Thus, the 'gendering of space and place' (Massey, 1994, p. 186) has significant implications on the construction and understanding of gender and gender relations in the societies we live in.

In this aspect, Habermas's conceptualisation of the public sphere is mainly a utopian project which has never been realised in practice. A feminist perspective highlights that while the public sphere was perceived as open and accessible, it was based on or was 'constituted by a number of significant exclusions' (Fraser, 1990, p. 59). Contemporaneously with this exclusionary bourgeois public sphere emerged various 'counterpublics' which provided alternative ways of communication and 'alternative norms of public speech' in a context of 'structural relations of dominance and subordination' (Fraser, 1990, p. 65). Therefore, in feminist conceptualisation of the public sphere, a stratified society consisting of different publics replaces the single public sphere of the bourgeois society discussed by Habermas (1962). Within such stratified society, marginalised groups constitute 'alternative publics' or 'subaltern counterpublics' with 'parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs' (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). These 'subaltern counterpublics', where women and other marginalized social groups can be placed, function on a dual basis – as a forum for activities directed at the general public and as a space for 'withdrawal and regroupment' (Ibid., p. 68). Such spaces allow for widening of the discourse of the dominant group and disseminating discourses that are initially not considered of public interest, such as the issue of domestic violence, brought into the interest of the wider public sphere with the slogan 'the private is political' by second-wave feminists, positioning violence against women as a structural societal issue, extracting it from the private sphere (Fraser, 1990; Baydar, 2012). Thus, matters of public interest are constructed through 'discursive contestation' and this process can be realised at all levels of the society (Fraser, 1990, p. 71).

Another important aspect of the Habermas's public sphere is the idea that the public debate in the public sphere should be objective, impartial, rational, and dispassionate, which has been contested by feminists especially looking at the public sphere of digital media, where emotions circulate in different ways to form grievances and collective actions aimed at social

and political change (Duncan, 1996; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). In this way, 'feminist approaches have alerted us to the power relations underpinning the conditions for public discourse, obscured by the premises of normative ideals rooted in the celebration of rationality and its opposition to emotion' (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019, p.2). Power relations, therefore, determine what is considered 'rational', imposing binary oppositions of historical framing of masculinity and femininity (Duncan, 1996).

To claim their position in the public sphere, feminists, throughout history, have angrily occupied public spaces as collective and political actions, resistance and protesting, starting with suffragists and continuing with more recent feminist movements and protests (Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020). As an embodied and emotive experience, this has required strength and determination, to oppose resistance from patriarchal structures and, in many cases, violence from men and the state (Ibid.). Here, it needs to be noted that, in a traditional patriarchal order, women's groups who accept the ideologies of masculine domination have been allowed to participate in the public sphere with rules established by men (Knezevic, 1997).

Whereas significant progress has been achieved with women's participation in public spaces, it has not occurred without consequences. Namely, women still disproportionally face sexual harassment, exclusion, and discrimination. In this regard, sexual harassment, as a form of intimidation and a threat of sexual violence, is a problem of the public sphere and can be considered as 'one of the foundations of patriarchal control' (Pain, 1991, p. 417) which has a significant effect on gender equality in general. This aspect of women's participation in the public sphere, the 'public space as an arena, and everyday life as the context', have been mainly absent from the wider policy and research agenda on violence against women (Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020, p. 267).

The idealist notion of the public sphere places it between the state and the society, as a space where people gather as citizens, what would be referred to as civil society, discussing things to influence politics and decisions made by the state (Habermas, 1962; Castells, 2008). The digital era has created what Castells (2008) refers to as 'network society' where the public sphere is organised through media communication networks. The proliferation of this

'network society' and globalisation has contributed to the weakening of the national public sphere and the strengthening of a global public sphere which produces and shapes the main issues that concern people's everyday life (Castells, 2008). Within this context, there are certain issues which have become of global concern and serve as a foundation for debating, discussing, and negotiating, such as the globalisation of human rights and various separate issues within this area. Media communication networks and the Internet, 'by enacting a global, horizontal network of communication, provide both an organising tool and a means for debate, dialogue, and collective decision making' (Castells, 2008, p. 86). These networks facilitate the shift from the public sphere based on the notion of territoriality into the new global public sphere.

Among other things, the Internet and digital spaces have allowed for a global feminist understanding and alliance, and recognition of global issues such as sexual harassment and violence through mediated online means of sharing and communication. Women's activism in this new public sphere of social media platforms has also offered an opportunity to record and observe women's experiences of sexual harassment and violence, to understand them better, and to obtain recognition and validation of harms caused in public spaces (Fileborn, 2016; Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020). Additionally, observing the dynamics of online spaces has allowed for a better understanding of the manners in which women change their behaviour to protect themselves and to avoid sexual harassment, which provides a new lens to the old problem, commonly referred to as 'fear of crime paradox', by which women demonstrate much higher levels of fear of crime, even though men are more commonly victims (Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020).

Grounding the research on feminist debates and contestations of the public-private divide, the bourgeois public sphere, and the possibilities offered by the new digital public sphere, my views of digital spaces are shaped by the notion that it is a public sphere in which space and place are gendered, and such gendering reflects and has effect on 'the ways in which gender is constructed and understood' (Massey, 1994, p. 186). At the same time, it is a 'complex web of relations of domination and subordination, of solidarity and cooperation' (Massey, 1992, p. 81). Examining the various aspects and tools of masculine dominance in the public sphere of the Internet, among which primarily the effects of sexism and misogyny, similar or same

patterns of subordination (Massey, 1994) and constitution of 'subaltern counterpublics' (Fraser, 1990) can be observed. Among these tools for heteropatriarchal control and dominance, the real or perceived risk on women's safety (Pain, 1991; Fileborn, 2016; Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020) has significant impact on women's lives and their participation in public spaces.

In the chapters that follow, I have structured my analysis to reflect and interweave this theoretical framework, by looking at women's lived and embodied experiences in the public sphere of digital media, their affective responses and reactions, as well as the various limitations imposed by the intrinsically masculinist and patriarchal environment their activities are based in. Prior to delving into the more specific analysis, I discuss feminism in the Balkans and its historical development, to create 'situated knowledge' (Haraway, 1988), or knowledge that is situated within a specific cultural, geographical, and historical context, moving away from the 'universalist pretensions of mainstream epistemology' (Duncan, 1996, p. 3). With this, the aim is not only to present women's experiences and reactions in online spaces, with all their commonality and differences, but to understand and truly grasp the extent to which different contexts influence women's lived experiences in particular ways.

4. FEMINISM IN THE BALKANS – FROM ANTIFASCIST WOMEN'S FRONT TO MEME PAGES

To understand how new generations of feminist activists are enacting their activism in online and offline spaces, it is crucial to first consider the different stages of development of feminist activism in the Balkans from a historical perspective. As mentioned above, feminism and feminist activism emerging within the historical, social, political, and cultural developments of the Balkans is a specific case for analysis, separated from Western and post-colonial feminist struggles and debates (Batinić, 2001; Žarkov, 2003; Ghodsee, 2004; Hughson, 2017; Majstorović, 2016). The aim of this chapter is to provide the basis for analysis of contemporary feminist activism that emerges as a distinct mixture of activist citizenship of the generations of feminists who have been involved in activism since the time of socialism and a new wave of feminists whose feminism is mainly enacted in online spaces of what some scholars define as the 'fourth wave of feminism' (Munro, 2013; Biana, 2023; Crozier-De Rosa, 2024). I am conscious that the available space here does not allow for a more thorough analysis and elaboration on the intricacies of Balkan feminist struggles and experiences, however I endeavour to elaborate the main points of contention that might be of relevance here. Feminist activism and women's struggle for equal rights are steeped in this historical context and it would be impossible for me to discuss digital feminist activism without considering how that type of activism came to be, and in what environment it has developed.

The discussion in this chapter is also grounded on the notion that the implicit assumption of Western feminism as the main reference point in theory and practice, where Western gender equality has been placed as 'the marker of progress' (Hemmings, 2011, p. 8), has ignored the distinctive experiences of 'third-world women' (Spivak, 1988; Ghodsee, 2004; Hemmings, 2011) or has categorized them as a homogenous group of powerless victims (Mohanty, 1988). Notably, feminism in Yugoslavia emerged from different social, political, and economic context (Batinić, 2001; Ghodsee, 2004) and shared a 'different tradition in terms of suffragism' than Western feminism (Zaharijević, 2014, p. 95).

Balkan feminist histories

It can be argued that the foundations for women's equal participation in public life in the Balkans were first set at the beginning of 20th century and the period of the World Wars, especially the Second World War, when the Women's Antifascist Front (AFŽ) was established, as one of the first massive women's movements. The Women's Antifascist Front brought together around two million women, of which large numbers actively participated in the war as partisans (Morokvasić, 1997). The legacy of AFŽ is indisputable and it has recently been in the focus of rediscovery of feminist histories in the Balkans and the broad heritage from which new generations of feminists can draw, considering its importance and the foundations that these brave women laid for further expansion of feminism under socialism in the following period (Zaharijević, 2014).

Ex-Yugoslav feminism mainly developed under three different citizenship regimes: socialism, the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia and nation-building processes, and post-conflict post-socialist transition (Zaharijević, 2014). To distinguish more clearly between these periods, the first period 1978-1985 is 'the period of feminist discourse', followed by 'the period of feminist activism 1986-1991' and 'the period of feminist opposition to the war' from 1991 onward (Benderly, 1997, as cited in Bagić, 2006). Understandably, these periods overlap and were not lived and experienced everywhere in the same manner, however it serves as a useful indicator, especially in comparison with the developments of Western feminism.

The first period of feminist organising transpired within the socialist regime, when women started realising that the equality paradigm did not actually apply equally, overburdening women who worked equal hours as men while taking the main responsibility for the household and the children (Sharp, 1996; Batinić, 2001; Einhorn, 1993; Morokvasić, 1997; Zaharijević, 2014; Majstorović, 2016; Lóránd, 2018; Bias, 2019). Feminism under socialism was formed as a practice limited in the intimate sphere of the household, where 'the private sphere of the family provided the space of resistance in opposition to the public space of the state' (Sharp, 1996, p. 101). This is one of the essential differences between Western feminism that sought to publicise private matters of women's lives, compared to the

feminism of Eastern European feminists who strengthened the notion of solidarity in the private sphere (Einhorn, 1993; Ramet, 1999; Zaharijević, 2014). Furthermore, while Eastern European feminists were more focused on class as a category of analysis for women's oppression, Western feminists were advocating for equal political and economic incorporation of women within the capitalist system (Ghodsee, 2004). During socialism, feminism and women's organising in ex-Yugoslav countries, mainly taking place in Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia, were 'exceptional and formed the most developed phenomenon among similar attempts in other Eastern European countries' (Spehar, 2012, p. 366). Women's organising during this period culminated in 1978, with the first international feminist conference organised by non-state actors in a socialist country, 'Drug-ca Žena' ('Comrade Woman') (Bagić, 2006; Lóránd, 2018; Bias, 2019), the first women's conference not only in Yugoslavia but in the whole Eastern Europe (Zaharijević, 2014).

The 'second wave' of ex-Yugoslav feminism is considered to have emerged in the second half of the 1980s, when feminist grassroots activism became more prominent, mainly focusing on the issue of violence against women (Žarkov, 2007; Zaharijević, 2014; Lóránd, 2018). This was the period when feminists in ex-Yugoslavia started adopting 'the personal is political' dictum, consolidating the 'New Yugoslav Feminism' with feminist gatherings at the end of the 1980s and establishing SOS helplines for women victims of violence (Lóránd, 2018; Bias, 2019). However, this is also the period of the rise of nationalism and nationalist discourses, when women became the centre of many nationalist debates, and ethnicity started to become an issue for feminists in ex-Yugoslavia (Žarkov, 2003; 2007).

With the dissolution of Yugoslavia, at the beginning of the 1990s, most feminists acknowledged the patriarchal nature of socialism, at the same time becoming political subjects, entangled in the ethnic war and post-conflict nation-building (Zaharijević, 2014). The initial feminist impetus was to stand outside of nationalist discourses, equalling feminism with antinationalism, however the wars and especially the employment of sexual violence and mass rape as weapons of war, created divisions among feminists, instigating heated debates (Morokvasić, 1997; Žarkov, 2007). The period after the wars marks a particular reinstatement of traditional family values (Duhaček, 2015) and a 'strong wave of misogyny' brought into the public discourse, 'deeply connected to the nationalistic political project, and intense

production of "Otherness", in terms of both gender and ethnicity' (Hughson, 2017, p. 5). Faced with self-determination based on ethnicity and the construction of new borders after the wars, feminists divided between two strains of feminism: those who assumed nationalist stance and those who opposed the new nationalist regimes (Batinić, 2001). For the Yugoslav feminists that opposed nationalist and militarist ideologies in the transitional period of nation-building after the war, '[c]hoosing feminism meant disregard for the frontiers, disloyalty to the nation and the state, and rejecting the new, ultimately ethnic foundation of citizenship' (Zaharijević, 2014, p. 97). In this way, feminists in ex-Yugoslavia were transformed in the public discourse, from 'dissidents' during the socialist regime to 'disloyal citizens' in the new nation-state (Zaharijević, 2014). During this period, differences in the perceptions of 'Western' and local feminists also became more prominent, with '[d]ifferent ideological, cultural, and theoretical assumptions, as well as dependence on different sources' (Batinić, 2001, p. 1). During the 'third wave' of Western feminism, the era of 'postfeminism' (McRobbie, 2009; Gill, 2016; Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Crozier-De Rosa, 2024), feminists in ex-Yugoslav countries were dealing with post-socialist retraditionalisation, post-war transition, and masculinised nationalism (Nagel, 1998), and all of the gendered implications that emerge within a highly militarised context.

The main modes of activism for feminists in Yugoslavia and the countries that emerged after the dissolution of Yugoslavia included anti-war protests, constitution of national and transnational networks, as well as consciousness-raising and advocacy activities (Bias, 2019). With the end of the conflicts and the formation of the seven new countries, women started addressing their demands through state institutions during a period of 'institutionalisation of women's issues' (Zaharijević, 2014, p. 97). Most importantly, this is the period of 'NGOisation', or transformation of the social movements in the post-war period into non-governmental organisations (NGOs), their professionalisation and their reliance on donor-financed projects (Bagić, 2006; Bias, 2019). It is a period of what Ghodsee (2004) has named 'feminism-by-design', when Western feminists were employed by multilateral and bilateral aid groups to assist women in former socialist countries 'survive the process of economic transformation' (p. 727). In doing so, they have largely ignored the different historical legacies of socialist feminism, installing a form of 'cultural feminism' which fits into the neoliberal ideological framework of the large Western institutions (Alvarez, 1999; Ghodsee, 2004).

Positioning themselves in a dominant position, Western donors, scholars, and organisations, have been the primary producers of knowledge about the situation of women in post-socialist countries (Ghodsee, 2004). Such dominant position was assumed through a large influx of funding for local NGOs which had a profound impact on the emergence, development and work of feminist organisations in the region (Ghodsee, 2004; Bagić, 2006; Bias, 2019). Dependent mainly on foreign funding, women's NGOs have been guided by the priorities dictated by Western donors and have often been criticised for being closer to these networks than to their local communities (Alvarez, 1999; Gal and Kligman, 2000; Ghodsee, 2004). They have quickly learned to 'produce whatever "language" and "interest" the foreign funders [were] willing to finance' (Gal and Kligman, 2000, p. 96). Furthermore, having to compete for external grants and establishment of partnerships with the donors, has caused divisiveness, competitiveness, closedness and some bitterness among women's NGOs, alienating them instead of bringing them closer in the fight for the common goal (Ghodsee, 2004; Bagić, 2006; Bias, 2019). Throughout the region, some of the largest organisations and networks that were formed in the post-conflict period in the 1990s still function today. Many of them have the same leadership as they did at the beginning of their functioning which provides them with disproportionate visibility and power within the movement (Bias, 2019), while younger generations are there to 'do the work' and support the leadership.

All this has had a significant impact on the perceptions of feminist activism in the region. Namely, feminism in the Balkans is still mainly perceived as an unconditional acceptance of Western values (Sharp, 1996), a 'foreign import' (Batinić, 2001), and therefore in opposition to the mainstream (heterosexual/heterosexist) nationalist discourse (Volčič, 2005). It is also a 'structural factor' that has significant impact on the relations between the different generations of feminists (Bias, 2019). Younger generations of feminists who have worked in some of these NGOs, including myself, are disillusioned by the 'failed solidarity' and 'failed leadership' that has not produced new leaders who could take the role of the senior leaders and modernise the movement (Bias, 2019, p. 4). Shunned in secondary and tertiary positions, they are eager to publicise new or forgotten topics, articulate their ideas, and become leaders instead of just passive listeners (Bias, 2019).

In this sense, digital media have been crucial for providing space for younger generations of feminists either disillusioned or excluded by the established women's organisations. The Internet provides them with a space they are more adept at using and the freedom to articulate and enact their feminism in different ways. It also facilitates connections, building alliances, providing support and sharing. These new formations of feminism, which are also the focus of the research, are discussed in the following sections.

New formations of feminism

Younger generations of women in the Balkans have adopted the use of social media for their feminist organising employing various tactics for online and offline activities and protests. The benefits of the immediacy of social media are visible by the increased visibility of feminist activities and protests and the ease of organising, mainly through Facebook events, groups, and pages. In this way, digital media spaces have proven to be liberatory for younger feminists in the Balkans who are still somewhat in the shadow of the older generations of feminists who mobilised as activists in the 1990s (Bias, 2019). While there is an abundance of research and analyses on women's organising in the period after the wars, there is a significant gap in literature looking at these formations of younger feminists' engagements with the feminist movement in the era of the Internet. This part will provide an overview of some of the young feminists' activities and the modes of organising, while more detailed analysis of women's lived experiences, engagements, and challenges is provided in the following chapters.

It might be worth noting here that the Balkans did not experience the 'modern feminism' (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Banet-Weiser et al., 2020), as discussed in Western scholarship, mainly focused on the neoliberal iterations of 'girlboss' or 'girl power', at the time that it happened in the West. It can be argued that it is only recently that young women from the region have started feminist 'brands', with examples such as Nina Pavićević (@kriticki, translated to 'critically') or Iva Paradjanin (@tamponzona, translated to 'tampon zone'). Nina is a young woman who became popular for her Instagram account where she discusses feminism and issues related to women's rights in a simple and easy to understand manner, which

sometimes does not capture the complexities of some issues. Iva is hosting a podcast discussing women's issues with various guests, and at the same time curates her Instagram account. The two frequently collaborate and have become the new faces of feminism in the region. Both are selling their merchandise, and Nina has recently started organising paid workshops, the first one titled 'Woman is not wolf to woman' (Pavićević, 2024). While both include issues related to harassment and violence against women, the topics they cover are wider, spanning from women's health, body image, mental health, economic empowerment, women in prison, and many other. Until now, feminism in the Balkans has always primarily looked at women's oppression enacted through the 'continuum of violence' (Kelly, 1987; 2011). This has remained to be the main focus of feminist activism, with women's organising in online spaces primarily to protest different iterations of violence against women, as the most pressing issue for women in the region. Thus, dealing with structural issues of violence, discrimination, and inequality, feminists in the Balkans did not have the opportunity to go beyond and advocate for women's empowerment in capitalist terms.

To respond to everyday sexism and misogyny and the injustices women encounter on a daily basis, women engage in collective actions which take place online and offline. In this sense, the internet is not a separate, virtual world, nor a 'mere replica of the offline one that is just a little faster and bigger' (Tufekci, 2017, p. 131), but the two are interlaced and have become inseparable. In digital spaces, women in the Balkans, as women in other parts of the world, use strategic actions such as hashtag activism, sharing personal stories, documenting rape culture, public shaming, support systems in online forums and groups, and other activities (Baer, 2016; Kanai, 2017; Fileborn and Loney-Howes, 2019; Trott, 2018; 2023). While feminists use digital media for organising, forming alliances and engaging in collective actions of sharing stories and experiences, they conduct these activities simultaneously with organising street protests, which provide them with more visibility. In this sense, online activism is inseparable from 'real world' protests and activism. Here, I will mention some of the most notable examples of such organising in the recent years in some of the Western Balkan countries.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a new mode of misogynistic organising took place, facilitated by platforms with very little regulation, such as Telegram, where women's personal

information and intimate images were shared, leaving them humiliated, scared, and with irrevocably damaged reputation (Swinnen et al., 2022; Moore, 2022). This was especially in the focus in the Balkans where such forms of harassment and violence can have much more serious implications, due to the predominant traditional values, conservatism, as well as the fact that these are smaller countries with a mentality of 'everyone knows everyone'. First to disclose the existence of such groups was Ana, a young woman from a small town in North Macedonia, who published a video on Instagram sharing her experience of being the target of this type of sexual harassment, by having her photo stolen from her Instagram account and shared in a private group on Telegram, along with her phone number and other personal information (Stojkovski, 2021). In the video, she discusses how she was subjected to relentless harassment for days, with men writing to her and calling her, and how what those men did by sharing her photo without her consent is abhorrent and needs to be punished (Koleva, 2021). The video is still publicly available, and at the time of writing has around 450,000 views and around 1,750 comments. In this way, Ana politicised her experience by transforming her shame into anger, regaining agency, and subverting control (Uldbjerg, 2021).

Ana's bravery to publicly come out and discuss what had happened to her provoked an outburst of solidarity from other women and girls and she quickly became the face of the movement against this type of abuse and against the discriminatory treatment of women more broadly. The outrage, exacerbated by the inertia of the authorities in addressing the issue, culminated with street protests organised primarily by mobilisation of women in online spaces. Not long after the first reactions in North Macedonia, such misogynistic groups were also discovered in Serbia (Marinković, 2021) and in the wider region, as well as globally. During that period, a joint statement signed by more than 140 women's rights activists and women's organisations from the region was published in solidarity with victims of online harassment and violence, urging the authorities throughout the region to protect women and punish perpetrators (Astra, 2021). More recently, three young women from Serbia who have funded an association they named 'Empowered women' ('Osnažene' in Serbian, a word play between 'empowered' and 'women') at the beginning of 2024, took upon themselves to disclose and dismantle these misogynistic groups on Telegram. They have anonymously infiltrated several of these groups and after observing them for some period, they published a report in June 2024, stating that they estimated around 10,000 messages being sent daily

in the groups monitored in Serbia, of which the largest had around 70,000 members (AFP, 2024). The findings from their report were shared on their profiles on Instagram and TikTok and through appearances in mass media to raise awareness on the issue which has not been solved since the first disclosure in 2021. They have also engaged in street protests to urge the government to react.

In 2022, an event that 'fired up' feminists in Serbia was the published interview with a serial rapist by a pro-government tabloid (Curic, 2022; Kalan, 2023). In the interview, widely shared on social media, the rapist described the crimes he committed, how committing the crimes made him feel liberated, and provided 'advice' to women how to react during an attack, namely, not to oppose it since it would be in vain, but to simply surrender (Curic, 2022; Kalan, 2023). Immediately after the publication of the interview, women started organising to get out on the streets and show their discontent with the treatment of women and women's issues in the media and in the wider society. The protests, which lasted for several weeks, were organised by the collective 'Women's Solidarity'. As stated by one of the organisers and founders of the collective, Jelena Riznić, the protests did not only target the insensitiveness of the media, but also the whole Serbian society, in which women are not believed, blamed for the violence they suffer, not protected by the institutions, and left to live with a sense of fear and insecurity (Curic, 2022). With these protests, the collective, one of the groups observed for this research, which began its activities in 2018 as a Facebook group, transformed into a protest movement, attaining greater visibility throughout the region. The activism and organising of 'Women's Solidarity' is discussed in more detail in Chapter 7.

In August 2023, women in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and in the whole region, were shocked to see the murder of a woman, followed by the killing of three other people and the suicide of the perpetrator, livestreamed on Instagram. Meta, the parent company of Instagram, was slow to react, and the video was available online for two hours, during which it was viewed by more than 15,000 people and gathered around 300 likes (Kurtic, 2023). Bosnian feminists promptly organised and went to the streets to protest, advocating for increased protection of women in situation of domestic violence and quicker and more comprehensive reaction by the authorities. Similarly, in Montenegro, feminists took to the streets after a court sentence of only twelve years was pronounced for a perpetrator who killed his wife by beating her to

death in front of their three minor children (Ivanovic, 2023). Again, activists requested changes to the system that fails to protect women from male violence and justifies and normalises it.

Street protests have always been one of the main modes of engagement of feminist activism through which women have expressed their frustrations, disappointments, anger, and hopes, raising awareness and urging authorities and societies to react. While these protests have historically been organised in physical spaces and were therefore accessible to a certain group of women, digital platforms have allowed for a wider outreach and inclusion. In this sense, digital platforms are significant for providing safe spaces online for building 'feminist solidarity' (Hemmings, 2012) and organising for transnational collective action. Facebook groups, and social media in general, provide a space for members to articulate their experiences, fears, desires, and hopes, opposing the 'hegemonic voice of the public sphere in which they are located' (Gachau, 2020, p. 101).

In the Balkan context, the initiative 'I didn't ask for it' ('Nisam tražila' in Serbian) began with four art students' reactions to rape cases in Serbia, during what became the Balkan #MeToo, when the actress Milena Radulović and several other young women reported the owner of a Belgrade acting school, Mika Aleksić, for rape and sexual harassment (Trešnjo, 2022). The Facebook page has gathered around 37,000 likes from the whole region, while the closed private group with the same name has around 13,000 members. A related Facebook page 'You are not alone' ('Nisi sama' in Serbian) has around 8,300 likes, stating in its intro: 'This page is a place of support to all women and girls… to all victims of sexual violence'. These pages and groups exemplify the central aspects of online feminist activism today, transcending borders and facilitating meaningful connections, linking specific local stories and context with the larger regional and global narratives of inequality (Baer, 2016).

As almost everywhere in the world, feminists in the Balkans engaged in hashtag activism, as an empowering collective action of sharing personal stories and experiences. Following the meteoric rise of the #MeToo campaign in 2017, hashtag activism has been employed as a prominent feminist strategy in the Balkans. In January 2018, feminists in North Macedonia adopted the hashtag #ISpeakUpNow (#СегаКажувам in Macedonian and #TaniTregoj in

Albanian, the second official language in the country), sharing personal stories of experiences with sexual violence and harassment on Facebook and X (Twitter) (Angelov, 2018). It has been the first hashtag campaign in the Balkans related to #MeToo to gain traction (Ibid.). In January 2021, Serbian women mobilized around the hashtag #YouAreNotAlone (#NisiSama in Serbian), which was used in support of Milena Radulović, the actress who publicly accused a prominent Serbian acting teacher of rape and sexual harassment (Trešnjo, 2022). Then, in December 2021, the hashtag #IDidNotReport (#NisamPrijavila in Serbian) started circulating on Twitter and Facebook, to raise awareness on why it is hard to report sexual violence, shifting the rhetoric of victim-blaming which is predominant in the Balkans (Dragojlo, 2021). Almost two days after the initial tweet, there were more than 18,000 tweets with the hashtag (Ibid.). The campaign spilled over in North Macedonia where the hashtag #WhyIDidNotReport (#ЗоштоНеПријавив in Macedonian) was used. Another hashtag employed specifically to provide public support to women who have been subjected to harassment or targeted by misogynistic and sexist speech in North Macedonia is #WeAreWithHer (#СоНеаСме in Macedonian). Even though hashtags can be a very effective strategy to highlight a problem and initiate a discussion around it, women who participate in these types of activities and who consequently become more visible, as this analysis demonstrates, are vulnerable to harassment, humiliation, and ridicule. Hashtags can be overtaken by trolls which could then lead to dissipation and loss of impetus for the campaign. Hashtag activism, with its affordances and limitations, is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

Humour, sarcasm, and satire have increasingly become one of the main tools for women and girls in the Balkans, taking on prejudices women face in the society, challenging sexism and misogyny, and 'empowering women to question the social norms they've been trained to accept' (Pisker, 2019). Humour, in this sense, is an indicator of the power relations in the society, describing the underlying context, expressing emotions that are difficult to communicate and challenging power structures in subtle ways (Goldstein, 2003). The use of memes has been especially productive in nurturing a 'politics of joy and resilience in the face of sexism, rape culture, and its apologists' (Mendes et al., 2019, p. 17). When it comes to social movements, humour and laughter can strengthen the cohesion of a group and can serve as a means for such groups to 'express their opposition, celebrate subaltern and

minority identities, overcome fear, undermine the legitimacy of dominant norms and people in positions of authority, and incite rebellion' (Blais and Dupuis-Déri, 2022, p. 285).

In the countries of ex-Yugoslavia, there are several popular meme pages which are explicitly dealing with feminist issues. 'It's all witches' ('Sve su to vještice' in Serbian) was created in 2016 in the format of a Facebook meme-page by cultural researcher Hana Ćurak who uses gender theory and memes to tackle patriarchal norms and gender roles (Pisker, 2018). The Facebook page has gathered around 57,000 followers. The aim of the page is 'identifying and subverting patriarchal culture'. On a separate webpage dedicated to the profile, it is stated that 'Sve su to vještice' is 'building a counter-archive of Yugoslav feminist history, with the aim of radical intervention into possible feminist futures' by 'using memes to reach audiences otherwise disinterested in feminist legacy'. It is emphasised that the meme-page is a 'resilience mechanism put in place against an identified growing threat of right-wing populism and toxic patriarchal culture spread through online channels'.

Another innovative and creative meme-page is 'Let me tell you, Ljeposava' ('Vala, Ljeposava' in Serbian), created by three young feminists, dramatizing injustices against women in Montenegro and in the region through humorous and sarcastic memes that revive the main characters of a popular 1980s Yugoslavian TV series, 'Djekna has not died yet' ('Djekna jos nije umrla' in Serbian) (Stojadinović, 2021). They created the meme page as a response to a controversial statement by one Montenegrin politician who said that women should not be burdened with complicated political matters (Stojadinović, 2021). By using memes with Yugoslav traditional images of rural women, wearing a head scarf and dressed modestly, accompanying them with sarcastic comments, they point to the knowledge and skills of rural women who were running the households and working equally as men, at the same time pointing to their relevance today. The profile has 17,000 followers on Facebook and 13,000 followers on Instagram and has a separate webpage (ljeposava.me). Below is an example of the memes shared on 'Let me tell you, Ljeposava', depicting Ljeposava with the text 'We used to have AFŽ [Women's Antifascist Front (of Yugoslavia)], while today each of us [women] has a meme page', equating meme creation with women fighting in the Second World War and pointing to the fact that women's fight assumes different modes and arms and is never done.

Figure 1: We used to have AFZ. Vala, Ljeposava

Bosnian feminist Marina Veličković mocks gender stereotypes on her Facebook page 'Completely Irresponsible' ('Krajnje Neuračunljive' in Serbian), which has around 44,000 followers (Pisker, 2019). The content shared on this page are text-memes with a bright pink background and text in white. The bright pink colour is used to attain immediate visibility and as a subversive act to use a stereotypically feminine colour. The text in the profile photo of the Facebook page says: 'Are you maybe having your PMS?', referring to a common stereotype that women act irrationally in the period leading up to their menstruation. Another popular meme says, 'I don't have my PMS, it's you who annoys me', again referring and dismantling the stereotypical view that women act irrationally influenced by their hormones while men are the more reasonable. By using stereotypes and generalisations, the page makes them more visible and, in this way, transforms them and dismantles them.

In their purpose of conveying humorous representations tackling serious social, political, historical, and other issues, reinforcing a 'feeling of community' (Rentschler and Thrift, 2015), or a 'spectatorial girlfriendship' (Kanai, 2016), memes are shared and reshared among all these pages, which underpins the notion of solidarity and common fight against patriarchy, sexism, and misogyny throughout the region. It also demonstrates the transnational character of feminist activism within the region and the common understanding of highly contextualised content of these vernacular practices (Burgess, 2006). In this sense, humorous

posts have a key role in ‘expanding feminist audiences, as well as facilitating connectivity, collectivity, and solidarity among feminists’ (Lawrence and Ringrose, 2018, p. 211).

What is evident from these examples is that young feminist activists are effectively using online spaces to express themselves, build communities, and raise awareness on the issues that concern them and women more broadly. These are ‘new formations of feminism’ that are being ‘reimagined and expanded through the use of new media’ (Mendes et al., 2019). Prior to the expansion of social media platforms, this freedom of expression and community building would have been more difficult to actualise in a context where established women’s organisations have been functioning for years, with their own managing structures and visible feminist figures, recognised in the traditional media (Bias, 2019). This is a crucial aspect when the affordances of social media are discussed. However, these feminist formations in the context of the Balkans differ from the expressions of ‘popular feminism’ (Banet-Weiser, 2018) in the post-feminism era of the West. Young feminists in the Balkans are still mainly dealing with violence, harassment, and the entrenched patriarchal values and roles, while very little space is left for the discussion of ‘empowerment’ and the ‘girlboss’ narrative of liberal feminism. Furthermore, they are increasingly met with divisions among them, working in a context of increasing anti-gender movement, support of nationalism and nationalistic masculinity, and hostility towards ‘Western values’ (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2017; Darakchi, 2019). The following chapters outline the affective possibilities of digital spaces, the experiences of women in them, further analysing their strategies and modes of organising, as well as the challenges they are faced with in the specific context of exploration.

5. GENDERED AFFECTIVE RELATIONALITIES IN ONLINE SPACES

In this chapter, I examine how feelings and affects are lived, experienced, and provoked, producing conditions of possibility within spaces of digital communication (Duncombe, 2019; Papacharissi, 2015; 2016; Mendes et al., 2019), situated in the complex context of the Balkans. My aim is to fully engage with and appreciate the affective nature of social media, taking into consideration social media's capacity to 'both represent emotions and also provoke strong emotional reactions' (Duncombe, 2019, p. 410). Affects made visible through social media are examined as the 'energy that drives, neutralises, or entraps networked publics' (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 7). At the same time, social networks provide affective affordances such as persistence, replicability, scalability, searchability, and perhaps most importantly, shareability (boyd, 2010; Papacharissi, 2015). Furthermore, analysing affect and emotions is particularly useful in grasping the processes in digital cultures through the lenses of feminist action, since affect provides the means to understand people as both collective and emotional, and individual and rational, presenting these as complementary and not as opposite (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 16).

What follows is a qualitative analysis of the main identified affective states experienced by women who self-identify as feminists and who engage in disrupting the established patriarchal practices, using the Internet as a space for feminist expression and building affective relationships within online spaces, that is women who fall under the definition of 'feminist killjoys' (Ahmed, 2017). The data in this chapter mainly draws on the interviews I conducted with feminists active in the Balkans, supplemented with an observation of the affective responses of my interview participants and my affective reactions, as indicators of the intensity of the discussed experiences and events. I have arranged the different emotions in accordance with the experiences and states that the interview participants shared with me and endeavoured to present the affective relationalities in Balkan online spaces in a comprehensive manner.

These affects and emotions 'materialise in everyday moments of stickiness, rupture or jarring' and in this way, shame can serve to immobilise, anger can be a force to galvanise social movements, while grief can create new connections (Taylor and Fullagar, 2021, p. 8). The

analysis uncovered a complicated state of affairs within online spaces of social media in the Balkans, mainly replicating the offline relations and positions in the Balkan societies. In that sense, fear, shame and anger, with all their related and similar emotions, states, and affects, were identified as strongest and most impactful. However, the importance and impact of joy and resilience is not to be neglected in their ability to provide a positive framework for feminist activism and promote and strengthen solidarity. In this sense, emotions and affect are crucial in understanding and articulating the experiences of being a woman in a patriarchal traditionalist society.

My point of departure is the formation of feelings and emotions that propel women into feminism. These are the affective states that are experienced by many women under the cloak of patriarchy, however only some of them gain feminist awareness and decide to engage in the fight against patriarchal oppression. Therefore, I begin this section with an analysis of the emotions and experiences that propelled the interview participants into feminism. Then, I discuss their experiences with their engagement with feminist issues on social media, and the affective states provoked by such engagement. Making the point that online experiences are inseparable from 'real-life' experiences, these are enmeshed and conflated.

I couldn't identify it, but I knew it was there: Feminism born out of anger and exasperation

For feminists, frustration and anger are the first affects that propel them into critical thinking. The experiences and stories shared by the interview participants strongly resonated with Sara Ahmed's conceptualisation of the 'feminist killjoy' (2017), therefore I use it as the foundation for the discussion in this part. Ahmed (2017) states that feminism is born out of frustration. It is something that builds up as we live and structure our lives around patriarchal norms and practices of our societies and cultures, at first remaining unacknowledged, a *feeling* that something is not right, triggering frustration and anger, which then crystalises as we get older to present to us the gendered patterns of societal relations, and the injustices and inequalities which women are facing in all realms of social and private life. Feminism begins with intensity,

‘a sharpness of an impression’, with which we perceive things that do not seem right (Ahmed, 2017, p. 22). It usually starts in our most immediate surroundings, in our family, and our closest circles. We hear things that we know are not right and we raise our voice to correct them. The feminist that corrects the inaccuracies, who identifies and pinpoints the injustices, by patriarchal norms is then perceived as the one causing the argument. She is the disruptor of the ordinary flow of the everyday practices, she is the one that ‘makes things tense’ (Ahmed, 2017, p. 37).

The first question I posed to my interview participants, to start the discussion and gain understanding of their life story and trajectory to feminism, was related to the initial impetus that was eye-opening for them and instigated their interest in feminism. This was important, not just as an introductory part of the interview, but also to bring more clarity about the individual engagement of younger generations of feminists who are not affiliated with organisations or associations. As discussed in Chapter 4, the feminist movement in the Balkans from the 90s was characterised by established non-governmental organisations with well-known leadership, supported by foreign donors, implementing projects dictated by foreign agendas. Therefore, this question was important for an insight into the origins of feminism in these women.

The interview participants discussed how their ‘feminist snap’ or ‘breaking point’ (Ahmed, 2017) was materialised out of frustration and recognition of the injustices around them. For most of them, this feeling could not be identified or named at first, however as they grew older, learning and uncovering the power relations of the patriarchy, it crystallised into frustration, followed by anger and rage, that propelled them further into action. This breakthrough occurred through the educational process, formations of friendships and relationships, or the media, especially social media, as sites of sharing and awareness raising.

Most of the women interviewed for this research experienced their first moments of patriarchal injustice within their families. Simona, who grew up in a Macedonian patriarchal family in the 80s and 90s, stated that she was always aware of the unjust division of roles first in her family and then in the society. However, she was unable to define it for a long time, or she did not have any education, or the words, to verbalise that feeling. This was until she took

one unit related to feminism during her university education, when, as she recounted, it all crystallised for her. She was able to clearly delineate the gendered division of roles and responsibilities in the household between her mother and father, or between her and her brother, and then in the environment where she was living and forming relationships.

Aneta grew up in a traditional family in Montenegro, where son preference is a widely reported issue, resulting with selective abortion and skewing the sex ratio of the country (Messori, 2018; Kiščenko, 2021; Heil and Scepanovic, 2021). She recounted the uneasy feeling she would get whenever she would hear somebody in her family discussing their desire for a son. She remembered hearing about a male relative who had committed suicide because they had four girls and no boys, with the perception that he was not 'man enough to produce a male child'. In this view, manhood is proven by being able to continue the bloodline through the male side, and the man who is not able to do that represents failed masculinity within the nationalist discourse of the Balkan patriarchy (Zivkovic, 2006). Aneta further remembered how one of her female relatives wanted to have an abortion when she found out she would have a girl but was stopped by her husband. She felt sadness and anger for these injustices, and knew there was something very wrong with the society she was living in that would perceive girls and women as having less value than boys and men.

Some of the women I interviewed said that it was their personal intimate relationships with men that gave them that 'feminist snap' (Ahmed, 2017). While Aneta was hearing stories about son preference throughout her childhood and adolescence, it was not until she started having intimate relationships with men that she would start noticing more the gender expectations and roles that emerge in an intimate relationship within a society with discriminatory practices and beliefs about women. Nikolina also recalled her first serious relationship as something that made her realise that she was not equal with her boyfriend. She was born in a typical mixed class family of the 80s Yugoslav society in a town in Western Serbia, which, as she described it, has some proudness of being more modern than the rest of the country and has a more pronounced local patriotism. She had chosen architecture as her field of study, obtaining a double degree. However, she described how she was aware that she had chosen to enrol in a technical field with very few women. She remembered her frustration when she and her boyfriend at the time were finishing university and entering the

labour market, working together in the early 2000s, and even though she was an excellent student and he was average, whenever they would do something together, he would be treated as an architect, while she would only be his girlfriend. These experiences made her reconsider her choice of career and change it, which was very hard for her:

> *I remember that when I graduated, I realized that I didn't want to do that job and that it's a type of sexism that I can't stand, even a little bit. Unfortunately, I gave up something that I loved the most*.

That was the moment when Nikolina had her first encounters with feminist theory but would not call herself a feminist until some years later, because, as she said, she did not consider herself 'worthy of it'. For her, it was important that her personal life and her political life were on the same level, so that she would not get '*into some ideas that [she] would not live by*'.

As would be expected for societies that are characterised by a pervasive 'rape culture' (Rentschler, 2014; Powell and Henry, 2017; Keller et al., 2018; Mendes et al., 2019; Fileborn and Loney-Howes, 2019) with normalisation of violence against women and predominant victim-blaming, some of the participants were propelled into feminism by noticing the pervasiveness of violence around them. Elena was very glad that this was the first question of the interview, because the story of how she became a feminist, as she said, is very related to where she is from. Growing up in a small town in Serbia, where traditionalism and patriarchy are felt more intensely than in big cities, she recounted how there was no violence in her own family, but she grew up in an environment where '*a woman was victimised in almost every second house'.* One of the earliest memories from her childhood was seeing the neighbour beating his wife, which, as she said, was her '*first encounter with men's violence as a phenomenon*'. It gave rise to an awareness of the more precarious position women have in the unequal and unjust society. Growing up with that awareness, and with all the experiences of sexual harassment she was facing on a daily basis, coming into puberty and after, she felt her femininity as almost being a burden, something she needed to hide not to provoke men's attention, and avoid making herself vulnerable. As she said:

> *I tried to look like a boy, so that I would avoid catcalls, looks, physical encounters, and all those awful things.*

Katerina, who has an MA in gender studies and shares educational content on her feminist profile on Instagram, shared some of Elena's sentiments related to the more conservative and traditionalist environment of smaller towns and villages. Her first encounter with sexism and misogyny was also in her childhood, when she spent some time living with her mother in a small village in Serbia. That is when she also had her first experience with the prejudice related to the distinctive, more traditionalised, position of rural women. Her mother as a single woman living alone with her daughter was the focus of interest and gossip of the village, as an 'unorthodox' way of life, without a man to be 'in charge' of the household and provide protection for them. Katerina vividly remembered the feeling of the stares and comments they would get:

> *The sole idea that there are two women by themselves in a rural environment was very anti-patriarchal, so there were stories… It was clear to me from a very young age how this world works and that it's not exactly on my side.*

When she was in her 20s, Katerina had an even more traumatising experience with violence which further solidified her perception of the precarious position of women in the patriarchal society. She recounted how she was in a violent relationship that escalated into an attempt of murder, further continuing with her re-victimisation in the criminal justice system that failed to provide her the support and help she needed. The fear she felt at the beginning translated into frustration and anger towards a society that ultimately fails to support victims of violence, which propelled her to consider not only the ways of discussing violence against women and women's issues, but also to act as an advocate for systemic changes. This is why she dedicates a lot of her time to creating educational and consciousness-raising content on her Instagram profile.

Some of the participants grew up in families with less pronounced gender roles and traditionalism, or with strong female role models. This was the case for Vesna, who grew up in a small town in Macedonia in the 90s and early 2000s, and who had her grandmother as a

role model for a strong woman that would not succumb to societal rules and norms. She recounted how on one side of the family, her grandparents are poor village people, however her grandmother is the biggest matriarch she has ever met. As evidence for the strength and stubbornness of her grandmother, Vesna explained that she did not renounce her inheritance in favour of her brothers, as something that is expected from women in Macedonia and in the Balkans, since the family lineage continues on the male side. Vesna considered herself lucky that her mother was more aware of these injustices and influenced her '*to become a bigger feminist than her'.* She recounted how it was easy for her to call herself a feminist since she had not encountered a negative definition of feminism. With her mother's and her grandmother's influence, the first concept of feminism she became aware of was focusing on equality between men and women. Her feminism, therefore, as she stated, emerged very organically and spontaneously.

Almost all participants discussed how, as they increasingly engaged with feminism, they became more and more aware of their own positionality in the patriarchal societies they were growing up in and their role in upholding 'masculine domination' (Bourdieu, 2001). For example, as she was discovering feminism, gradually revealing the injustices she was surrounded by in the Montenegrin traditionalist patriarchal society, hearing stories about selective abortions and preference for boys as bearers of the family lineage, Aneta became aware that, for a long time, she had been complicit to her own subordination and upholding the patriarchy. She started uncovering her own internalised misogyny expressed in youth by, for example, being proud of having more male than female friends and supporting stereotypical views that undermine women and girls and their relationships. This is not something new or out of the ordinary. Simone de Beauvoir discussed women's complicity at length in 'The Second Sex' (1949/2011) as a 'commonplace feature of female existence' (Knowles, 2019, p. 243). In societies like those of ex-Yugoslav countries, with complex positionalities of masculinity and femininity within traditionalist and nationalist discourses, women's complacency can simply be explained to exist 'in virtue of the pressures of the unjust social setting forcing women into complicit ways of life by giving them no other option than to be complicit in their role as Other and the unfreedom it entails' (Knowles, 2019, p. 258). I noticed a certain proudness in my participants when they discussed acquiring this awareness of their complacency and being able to avoid it. It resembled what Beauvoir calls 'inner

metamorphosis' (1949/2011, cited in Knowles, 2019) when discussing women's liberation from embracing their unfreedom (Knowles, 2019).

The purpose of prefacing this part discussing emotions and affects with my participants' recollections of their first encounters with feminism and the injustices of the patriarchal society, is to provide an additional contextualisation that would allow and facilitate a better understanding of the dynamics of online spaces in the Balkans and the affective states in these spaces of women who self-identify as feminists. The particularity of the Balkan culture and history came up frequently in the interviews, as something that needs to be considered when discussing the development of negative affective states and acts as an instigator for action for the 'feminist killjoy' (Ahmed, 2017). While the discussion on women's participation in online spaces has many similarities in different contexts on a global level, as mentioned previously, in my discussion on the Balkan mentality, history, and masculinity, there is something specific about the region that enhances such negative affective relationalities in online spaces. Some of the participants mentioned the experiences of the civil war in the 90s and the rise and strengthening of nationalism as main contributors to the proliferation of hate speech and the instigators of violent behaviour spreading throughout Balkan societies. Some of them, especially those who lived in areas that were more affected by the wars, remembered some instances of it. For example, for Nikolina, the memory of her family hosting a family of refugees was a fundamental part of her memories. Katerina, who has done some research on the topic, acknowledged that nationalism and the experiences from the 90s civil wars is something that is very specific for our region, which contributes to the proliferation of hate speech and violent patterns of behaviour on a larger level.

It was important to acknowledge and analyse the affective formation of feminist identity in my interview participants to be able to continue the analysis with their feminist activism in digital spaces. The 'feminist snap' (Ahmed, 2017) discussed here found its expression in the public sphere of social media which has allowed these women to find different ways to enact their feminist activism. While their participation in digital spaces was propelled and related to this 'feminist snap', their public engagement with feminist issues has inevitably led to increased exposure to sexist and misogynistic speech which further amplifies their affective experiences and reactions. The following sections discuss some of the most prominent

emotional and affective states and the reactions they have produced. They intend to provide a comprehensive representation of the effects of online interactions for women who engage with feminism.

Feminist rage and frustration in online spaces

When you expose a problem you pose a problem.
(Ahmed, 2017, p. 37)

Of all negative affects, anger is 'the least likely to remain under the skin of the one who feels it' and is the affect whose primary function is 'to make bad matters worse' by further increasing the likelihood of escalation and angry response (Sedgwick and Frank, 1995, p. 197). Within the feminist movement, anger becomes intelligible and legitimate, its employment is even required, as social movements make 'bad' feelings acceptable, useful, 'rational', and visible (Hochschild, 1975). The 'rebel', in not feeling as she should and as socially acceptable, 'reveals what emotional ways we conventionally take for granted' (Hochschild, 1975, p. 299).

Historically, women have been associated with the suppression of anger, facing various repercussions if they step out of the established norms of docile, powerless femininity, and express their anger (Citrin et al., 2004). Women who speak about feminism and women's issues are positioned in the role of a 'rebel' (Hochschild, 1975), or 'feminist killjoy' (Ahmed, 2017; Blais and Dupuis-Déri, 2022). The 'feminist killjoy' is a disruptor, a 'sensationalist figure […] as if the point of making her point is to cause trouble, to get in the way of the happiness of others, because of her own unhappiness' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 37). Such distinctiveness places women who identify as feminists and who disrupt the established power relations in online spaces in a precarious position, being targeted in a more specific manner, and being subjected to even harsher harassment and violence (Mantilla, 2015). However, when injustices and inequalities crystallise, it is difficult to stay indifferent. 'Feminist killjoys' entangle themselves in discussions and debates, assuming the role of 'truth-bearers', responsible of opening the eyes of everyone around them to the systems of discrimination and subjugation (Ahmed,

2017). This leads to (oftentimes futile) debates, comments, and discussions, that most of the time leaves them deflated and even more frustrated. Feminists then need to negotiate whether to enter a conflict, taking stock of the circumstances and the 'expected costs of their actions, with regard to their emotions, their relationships and their material conditions' (Blais and Dupuis-Déri, 2022, p. 284).

With the proliferation of the #MeToo movement and the increased visibility and awareness around the ubiquitousness of sexual violence, feminist resistance and activism has mainly been articulated through the affective expression of anger, frustration, and rage (Sundén and Paasonen, 2020; Coffey and Kanai, 2021). There has been an upsurge of writings on the expression of women's anger (see e.g., Chemaly, 2018; Traister, 2018; West, 2019), bringing attention and awareness on the power of anger as a moving force and the hazards of suppression of this affective state. Feminists have conceptualised anger both as a burden and as a power (Kaplan et al, 2021). For Chemaly, Kaplan and Mitra (2020, p. 761), anger is 'a really rational response' to the injustices women have been exposed to. Anger can take many forms and, most importantly, it can be a unifying force bringing feminists together (Kaplan et al, 2021). Anger and rage can be productive affects in the sense that they produce feminist solidarities in the fight against a 'common enemy', instigating further feminist action in different forms, involving 'considerable capacity to set bodies in motion' (Sundén and Paasonen, 2020, p. 3), and mobilising 'political subjectivities by producing affective frames that shape politics' (Kuo, 2019, p. 174). As Audre Lorde (1981) argues:

> Anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification, for it is in the painful process of this translation that we identify who are our allies with whom we have grave differences, and who are our genuine enemies (p. 8).

Participating in online spaces, especially social media, as spaces and channels for feminist activism and response to online violence and harassment, all interview participants acknowledged that the initial period of their participation online would be marked with their engagement in various debates and discussions, hoping to prove their point, change people's opinions, or raise awareness on various feminist issues. However, it did not take long for them

to realise that it was a 'Sisyphean struggle', a continuous effort without any tangible result. Their testimonials resounded Ahmed's (2017) description of how the 'feminist killjoy' starts to 'feel wound up, recognizing with frustration that [she is] being wound up by someone who is winding [her] up', so that when she speaks, 'she seems wound up' (p. 37).

This sentiment was shared by Aneta, a visual artist from Serbia who used to be very active on social media, discussing, posting, and promoting her work. She recounted how there was 'no option' for her to ignore when someone would write something as a provocation, or trolling. She was aware that, at the beginning, she had not built a defensive mechanism to protect herself and did not know how to ignore such provocations. For her, this was a period of frustration and anger, discussing and trying to reason with people whose only motivation was to provoke her anger and who did not actually want to engage in discussion. She was naïve to think that she could change someone's opinion by discussing online. Eventually, she realised that her efforts had not produced any result, and only brough hostility and threats of violence that would provoke her resignation in her efforts to use social media platforms in a productive manner. The 'trolling' Aneta referred to is not the type that, for example, Mantilla (2017) or Jane (2014) refer to, but a more insidious form of the 'winding up' discussed by Ahmed (2017).

Simona, who is a university professor and writer from North Macedonia, also referred to this tactic of online trolls, stating it is their aim to provoke feminists into states of anger and frustration on social media and thus present them as irrational or 'hysterical'. The discussion would then lose its initial focus, and the anger and frustration of the feminist would become the new focus. As Simona explained, these trolls win their battles by provoking in debates and making their interlocutor, the feminist, angry. She also noticed that they have become more efficient in it, by using words and expressions used by feminists: *'Like a classic manipulator, they use our words against us'.* She further explained:

> *It's a well-known way of relativization, to involve you in a discussion, with a totally wrong premise, while we are taught to respond to them democratically and explain things… No! That person purposely provokes you so that you end up arguing about something that is completely false*.

Most of these people, she identified as people with a 'right-wing agenda' or 'right-wing bots' who hide their identity and affiliation and target feminists and people with more liberal views. This is in line with the tactics of the anti-gender movement of the conservative and religious forces in the region, and globally, which heavily rely on social media to share their claims and concerns and mobilise citizens (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2017).

Dragana, a university professor and artist from North Macedonia, who used to spend a lot of time on social media, moderating several groups and regularly posting, discussing and debating, expanded on this tactic of bad faith debating with the aim to undermine what feminists post about online. She pointed out how some people use discussions on feminist issues to enhance their visibility and image of authority online. Namely, by appearing interested and not opposed to gender equality and feminism, they instigate endless discussions with the expectation that feminists need to explain, defend, rationalise their position, without showing any frustration or anger, to appear more fascinating and convincing in the public spaces of the social media. She called this '*a more general anti-feminist fuckery',* that is *'men who would like YOU to explain to them whatever it is they don't know'.* It is a well-known tactic employed by trolls and anti-feminists online, who appear interested in the topic, but their only aim is to divert the discussion, or, as Dragana heatedly explained:

> *You post something and you should explain centuries of feminism and all the literature to him in one comment, instead of him sitting, googling, reading, understanding... because they just want to feel important with this… In the end, it falls on you to justify what you are saying.*

The explanations never end, the trolls never seem to come to an understanding. The solution could be either getting angry or giving up, which might then make it look like the troll has won since the feminist could not answer the questions of the endless debate. This is one of the tactics men employ to silence and exclude women: dismissing or trivialising their contributions, 'intellectualizing the discussion away from its original focus', erupting into anger, or co-opting the discussion (Herring et al., 1995, p. 68; Harris and Vitis, 2020).

While anger is the affect that produces most movement, it also exhausts the bodies it moves into action, sustaining it is 'laborious and tiresome' (Sundén and Paasonen 2020: 43). Interview participants continually expressed how tired they were of the battles they were fighting and the anger and frustration they were feeling. All women I recruited for the interviews expressed their awareness of their position and the fights they have been fighting due to their openness to discuss topics related to women's struggles in the Balkan societies. After an intense period of exposure to discussions, hate speech, harassment, and other various expressions of 'networked misogyny' (Banet-Weiser and Miltner, 2016), some of the participants felt resignation, acknowledging the relentlessness of the feminist struggle, the overbearing negativity of the online spaces, and the need for personal peace and positive emotional states. For example, Simona shared that she felt as if sometimes people would provoke her on purpose, whether to gain more visibility through her own visibility achieved with her work as a writer, or to entertain themselves, and that she felt emotionally drained by such provocations. To cope with this, she realised that she could just make a post, bring up a topic for discussion, and leave others to discuss and 'deal with it'. This gave her the option to interfere occasionally without being at the centre of discussion, which lifted a lot of the burden from her of what she considered a very 'toxic' behaviour.

Furthermore, Simona noticed that women, to avoid confrontation with men, would often get into discussion and conflict with other women. She thought that this was because in discussion with women, there was no fear of aggression in the manner and levels that would come from men. She had noticed this in the comments on Facebook, more specifically in comments following posts about sexual violence or news about cases of rape. While the most disgusting comments would usually be from men, women would frequently notice and view most critically the comments made by other women. She felt resignation and frustration seeing this as a strategy to redirect the discussion to revolve around women's behaviour, missing to address the real problem at the core of the discussion, that is men's violence against women. She explained:

> *It's not different from reality – men are aggressive, while women argue between themselves because if they try to argue with men, they will get insulted by them, so it's much more intimidating… It all comes to women's fear of men.*

This section delineated some of the strategies used by the general public, and more often men, to elicit reactions from feminists in online spaces. The first affective reactions are related to anger and frustration, associated with the need for confirmation of feminist truths and the failures in this endeavour. What has proven to be a 'Sisyphean struggle', has also brought feminists to seek alternative modes of engagement in public discussions in digital spaces. In this sense, besides tiredness and resignation, anger also produces movement. It has also propelled my participants into different actions, such as naming and shaming, calling out, organising collective actions, and other activities which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Choosing the bear: Women's fear in public spaces

I don't go walking in nature alone not from fear of bears, but of men.
(Interview participant)

A brief street interview posted on Tik Tok in April 2024 (Screenshot, 2024) and widely shared to other social media, quickly becoming viral, sparked a global discussion on women's feeling of safety in public spaces (McNeal, 2024; Sugiura, 2024). The simple question posed to random women on the street whether they would choose to be alone in the woods with a bear or with a man very effectively captured the feeling of omnipresent threat of men's violence in women's lives and their perpetual state of vigilance to respond to the various expressions of male dominance in public spaces. The majority of interviewed women and women who discussed the question in various posts and thousands of comments on social media provided some sobering explanations and justifications why they would choose the bear (McNeal, 2024; McKeich, 2024; Sugiura, 2024).

Women's fear of crime has been a constant subject of analysis, considering the fact that women consistently report lower levels of victimisation compared to men (Pain, 1991; Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020). However, women's fear of crime differs significantly from men's. Namely, while men are generally more afraid of property crime, women fear for their

personal safety, especially sexual crime (Pain, 1991). Thus, instilling fear in women through the threat of sexual violence has been one of the foundational aspects of patriarchy and patriarchal control (Pain, 1991; Fileborn, 2016; Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020). Sexual harassment in public spaces greatly contributes to this phenomenon, serving as the 'spatial expression of patriarchy, functioning to reinforce and reproduce women's exclusion from public life' (Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020, p. 268). While men might be concerned with protecting their property and person from crime, women need to take various precautions and measures which also limit their personal freedom and pushes them towards dependence on men and maintaining traditional gender roles (Pain, 1991). Due to fear and perception of risks of violence and harassment, women change and adjust their behaviour in public spaces, which scholars refer to as 'safety work' (Kelly, 2011; Vera-Gray, 2018; Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020). This 'safety work' is hidden and perceived as a part of the experience of being a woman, not seen as something women do but something women are, placing the onus on their behaviour in public spaces in discussions around sexual harassment and violence (Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020). When this 'work' becomes visible, 'the impact of men's practices on women and girls comes to be understood not only in terms of their safety, but also their freedom' (Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020, p. 266; Vera-Gray, 2018). Women undertake various actions to avoid danger or to minimise the risk when in a situation of danger, which is mainly expressed in the changes women make when they move in public spaces, trading their freedom for the feeling of safety (Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020).

Such awareness of danger and threat of violence, what Kelly (2011) refers to as the 'continuum of violence', equally accompanies women's participation in online spaces, and fear, anxiety, unease, angst, and discomfort are some of the emotions and affects that are inextricably linked to women's experiences online, as well. The modifications to their behaviour women make to protect themselves, limiting their freedom and amplifying their dependence on men's protection, is replicated in online public spaces. Depending on the location and context, the anxiety of online harassment transforming to offline violence, as a sense of danger or threat (Citrin et al., 2004) could be amplified by proximity, traditionalism, class, race, nationalism, and many other factors. Contextualisation in this case is very important, since, as discussed above, the Balkans have their own particularities related to many of these factors. Namely, proximity plays an important role, due to the smaller

populations or the tightknit communities and neighbourhoods, remnants from the socialist period. This contributes to the amplified sense of fear and anxiety in women in the Balkans who use social media, that the threats of violence online could easily transfer offline, especially when they use their real name and photograph. Furthermore, there is a lack of recognition and inclusion of digital violence in the legislation, or the inclusion and recognition lack enactment, which leads to the sense of helplessness in women and their fear of further stigmatisation and exclusion. In my research, I differentiated between women's experiences with online sexual violence and harassment and sexist and misogynistic hate speech that did not imply violence (Mendes et al., 2019).

After I made a post with information about the research in one of the women's groups I was observing, there were several women who wrote me private messages, unsure whether their experiences could be considered as online sexual harassment and included in the research. One of them was Biljana who told me about her experience with stalking and harassment that lasted for nine years. She recounted how, when she was seventeen years old, she started occasionally chatting with someone on Facebook, which continued for some time, but stopped when she got into a relationship. However, the man would not stop writing to her and she had to block him. Shortly after, she started receiving messages on Facebook from unknown profiles with insults towards her which also transferred to Instagram when she opened an account there. She quickly realised that it was the man she was chatting with when she was seventeen, harassing her for nine years, and felt fear knowing that the man was obsessed with her without ever having met her, so she went to the police to report him. The police informed her that they could not do anything since there were no threats of murder or injury in his messages and they advised her to delete all her social media for some time, to avoid contact with him. She did not want to do that, so she gathered more evidence and went to a higher instance in the police. At the time of our discussion, the case was still unresolved, however Biljana felt some accomplishment that it was taken by the authorities giving her some reassurance that they would act upon it. When I asked her if it has influenced or limited her presence on social media in any way, she responded that she was much more conscious, but that she also wanted to demonstrate her resilience by posting more provocative photos, so that '*he could see them and think, there she is, nothing has changed, my insults have not affected her*'. In this way, the fear Biljana felt was transformed in anger, fortified by the

police's passivity and inability to protect her. She decided to act defiantly and not allow intimidation to limit her presence online.

Andrea, the youngest participant in the research, also mentioned stalking as a crucial method of intimidation she experienced along with the sexual harassment and extreme hate speech she was subjected to for some period when she was a university student. She recounted how she feared for her life when she would be in a public space, and she would receive messages from people with details of where she was and what she was wearing. In this way, there was a conflation between online and offline, with Andrea's feelings of fear formed and embodied in online spaces (Powell and Henry, 2017). The only aim of those messages was to incite fear in her and limit her freedom of movement in public spaces. It was also a demonstration of the 'masculine domination' (Bourdieu, 2001) of those public spaces.

Affective states of tension, insecurity, anxiety and fear were a constant thread in the discussions with the interview participants. Fear that online harassment could become more severe, that the violence and harassment experienced in online spaces could be transferred to offline spaces of the 'real world' and that harassers could employ methods to inflict other attacks and invoke other affective states, such as shame. Visibility is undoubtedly related to increased sense of anxiety and feelings of incoming threats and risks. As Ahmed (2004) summarizes in her discussion on fear, 'vulnerability involves a particular kind of bodily relation to the world, in which openness itself is read as a site of potential danger, and as demanding evasive action', while at the same time '[t]he more we don't know what or who it is we fear the more the world becomes fearsome' (Ahmed 2004: 69).

As discussed above, the various historical, social, and political developments in the region have contributed towards an emergence and strengthening of a right-wing nationalist sentiment, entangled with tradition and religion, that is withheld by very vocal, powerful, and aggressive groups, that have the economic and political power to influence social events and political decisions, and stigmatise certain groups. This further complicates the position of feminists who are politically active and vocal on social media, putting them in a precarious position as targets of increased nationalistic and misogynistic attacks (Fichman and McClelland, 2021). Due to the delicate political, economic, and historical context of the

Balkans, and the rampant nationalism, women who might express or might be perceived as expressing any political affiliation or ideological opinion inescapably become targets of sexual harassment and violence on social media.

Elena, who had been politically active with the largest left-wing political party in Macedonia since her adolescence, recalled the uncomfortable feeling she got after a fragment of a statement she gave to the media on some topic related to violence against women was shared in a right-wing group on Facebook, together with her profile photo and name. She quickly became the main topic of discussion in the group, with comments and questions about her personal life and her appearance. She did not directly identify fear as an emotion, but a felling of uneasiness, potential risk, a sense of vulnerability for being visible in the public space:

> *I had this very uncomfortable feeling… I wasn't afraid, but it was uncomfortable… there was my name and photo, and the comments how I look, what they would do to me, whether I have a boyfriend… it's always a question for feminists… there were some really disturbing comments*…

She decided not to react and hoped that it would fizzle away, which eventually did happen. She was aware that by commenting or responding in any way, she would only provoke much more serious and harsher reactions. In her decision to stay quiet, she also considered the society she lived in, characterised by a culture of violence, impunity of perpetrators, and victim-blaming.

Nikolina, who had renounced her dream profession in architecture to work in marketing and write feminist columns and books, recounted how she was targeted with threats of violence after she made some 'stupid' joke during her participation in a discussion on a talk show on a Serbian national television. The joke was so insignificant that she did not remember what it was about, and she was completely unaware that it could provoke such response. Not long after the show was aired, a friend told her that there was '*a call for lynching*' against her in one of the right-wing groups on Facebook, among other social media spaces. She recalled how her friend tried to defend her, which put them in a position to be targeted. She did not know what to do to protect her friend and herself. She was fearful since the joke '*provoked*

the anti-vaxxers, […] together with right-wing activists, extremists, men's rights activists…'. They were sharing her photos, discussing 'how ugly she was', how they would like to beat her up. She recounted one of the arguments that struck her, which was that '*feminists, together with the West, bring vaccines to sterilize the Serbian population'.* This links to the overall nationalistic hatred and resentment towards the West and Western values, and towards feminism which is perceived as an import from the West (Zivkovic, 2006; Darakchi, 2019). She reported the case to the police, however they were unable to help and protect her. Similar to Elena, she had to endure the attacks and wait until they slowly dissipated. At the time, she did not consider the possible consequences on her mental health and her sense of security.

There was a moment, sometime after the initial threats, when she was overtaken by fear as she had a sudden realisation of her vulnerability due to her exposure and visibility. She recounted how one winter day, she got in a taxi, and just started scrolling on her phone. Suddenly, she looked around her and realised she had no idea where she was. She remembered that she did not even look at the taxi driver or the car when she entered. She explained the sudden feeling of fear that overtook her, not only due to her exposure as a public person, but considering the intrinsically violent environment she lived in:

> *Then I felt fear. I felt fear from my exposure, fear from knowing how easy it is to get to someone… We live in a country where journalists have been killed, politicians have been killed, where it's not safe for someone who openly and publicly speaks with their own name and surname.*

She became very aware of this feeling of uneasiness and fear of safety that had overtaken her life and decided to seek help because she did not want to live in fear. She was very aware of her visibility and her vulnerability due to her exposure, and she did not want that feeling to limit her freedom.

That visibility and vulnerability was something Nikolina continued discussing in depth, as something that she had significantly contemplated when assessing the 'pros and cons' of her feminist activism. She recognised and acknowledged the threats women in the Balkans face due to the entanglement of such identifying characteristics that divide the society on a larger

scale. An important characteristic of online spaces to be considered here is the possibility of anonymous participation in them facilitating impunity (Lumdsen and Morgan, 2018; Harris and Vitis, 2020) which many of these 'trolls' and groups use when harassing women online. Nikolina spoke about her feeling of uneasiness having her photo and name in public and her coping strategy of withdrawal from public life and social interactions, which could be defined as her 'safety work' (Kelly, 2011; Vera-Gray, 2018; Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020). She specifically referred to her fear of men's violence. She told me how she noticed that she had withdrawn and changed. Her exposure brought her to isolation and withdrawal from public life. The notion that people know who she was, brought her a feeling of uneasiness and constant threat:

> *When someone asks me if I am [name], I don't know if it's some right-wing activist who wants to spit on me and kill me, or it's someone who likes what I do, what I have written, and so on… I am not afraid of women on social media, no woman has materialized her threats, ever… it hasn't happened… but men, whether they protect someone, whether they stand for some opinion, they are inclined to transfer the conflict in the real world. Their threats are always from real life, as if there is no limitation for them*.

This notion of authenticity that leads to vulnerability was also mentioned by other participants. Katerina, who primarily uses her Instagram profile to share educational content and raise awareness on women's issues, discussed how even when it puts them in a precarious position, women try to be as authentic as possible on social media, especially women who are interested in raising awareness on feminist issues. This authenticity is required in consciousness-raising and advocating for women's rights, while on the opposite side of that authenticity are anonymous men. As Katerina stated:

> *These are men who have no problem opening 161 fake profiles from which they send nonsense, and purposely use to harass women with whom they do not agree, maybe for political reasons, or they are simply incels, or men rights activists… they will harass with anonymity*.

In this way, men may use the anonymity provided on social media and write various harassing comments, since there is nothing that would prevent them from writing something they would normally not say in person (Barak, 2005; Harris and Vitis, 2020).

The most traumatic experiences when it comes to online violence and hate speech were shared by Andrea and Tijana. Both stated that these experiences left them with life-long trauma. For Andrea, the youngest participant in the research, this experience occurred when she was a student in Belgrade. In 2020, she participated at student protests organised to oppose the relocation of the students from the student housing due to the pandemic. She explained that it was also a period when she started being interested in politics, expressing her opinions on various issues, most often related to women's and LGBTQ+ rights. While she tried to be authentic on social media, and participated with her name and photograph, she quickly noticed that, as a young woman, she was an easy target for insults and threats from profiles that were anonymous. However, it was after her participation at one big protest that Andrea was directly targeted with hate speech that affected her sense of safety and security. While the attacks were not provoked by her vocal support of feminism, they were extremely gendered, targeting her as a young woman in a traditionalist, nationalist, patriarchal society, where women are silenced, and protests are often 'hijacked' by political agendas. Andrea recounted how the organisers were trying to keep the protest at an apolitical level, when she noticed some men who were waving a nationalistic flag. Flags carry a lot of symbolic weight in the region, as nationalist symbols, especially in Serbia, due to the Serbian refusal to recognise the autonomy of Kosovo. With this awareness, she asked the men to remove it, not to distract from the focus of the student protest. She discussed with the person waving the flag for a couple of minutes, the person did not want to remove it, so they simply shook hands, and the protest continued. However, the next day she discovered that a short five-seconds clip of her discussing with the man was posted in some right-wing groups and pages where her profile was also shared. This was the beginning of a period of harassment, doxing, threats, and subjection to public 'lynching', accompanied with various insults about her sexuality, her appearance, and her origins, among other things.

For an explanation of such a strong reaction, it is important to consider the symbolism of the flag within the nationalist discourse of the ex-Yugoslav states. Namely, the flag is considered

to be the symbol of Serbian identity, embodying Serb nationhood in the face of contamination and sin of Western influence (Krstić et al., 2020). This symbolism in combination with a young woman who seemingly disregarded the nationalist importance of the flag formed a tide of extremely violent hate speech directed at Andrea. She had kept some screenshots of the messages she received, with the aim of reporting them to the police, as well as to have some evidence if anything happened to her, since she feared for her life. The messages were extremely violent and sexual, for example: '*In the middle of Serbia someone to say put down the flag. Anyone who is a patriot in this country should tear up her mouth with their dick and the brain of that shitty whore*'; '*She is such a whore and slut! God forbid that some of these monsters rape her child one day so I would like to see what she would say! And I say it again, God forbid, so it's not what I wish for her*'; '*Someone will break your spine I can see that [smiley face]*'; '*So, whore? Do you know how many of these people will fuck you up if they see you in person?';* and many more. After a period of incessant barrage of messages with threats and insults, the harassment gradually dispersed and she decided not to report it, so that she could leave it in the past and keep her peace.

What is noticeable in the messages Andrea received are the explicit threats of offline violence and rape, of her getting beaten up in the street, or being raped. As mentioned above, for women in the Balkans, these are very valid and real threats, due to the possibility to easily find people, as well as due to the lack of effective protection that could be provided by the police. Furthermore, knowing that these right-wing nationalistic groups have acted upon their threats in the past, with attacks of the Pride Parade (see Williams, 2010; Krstić et al., 2020; Taylor, 2022), obstructions of other protests, and clear demonstration of force and lack of accountability, the fear that Andrea felt at the time was overwhelming and traumatising. She also kept some of the messages that could be considered more supportive, however these messages did not provide her with any reassurance or sense of security. Feeling alone and without anyone that could provide her support and safety, she withdrew from social media, questioning her identity and her personal imprint in the spaces she occupied. One feminist organisation offered her to pay for her therapy, since she, as a student, did not have the means for it, but she did not feel that she needed to go, and thought that the money could go to someone that might need it more. However, her state with the post-traumatic stress worsened and she decided that it would be best if she started therapy, which she had not

stopped since. She said that it has been very beneficial for her. It not only empowered her, but it was also a space where she could examine some of her views related to feminism. Besides therapy, she considered her absence from social media to be the greatest factor for her recovery:

> *Maybe the biggest factor was that I withdrew from social media. I mean, I still have [social media], but I don't use them actively. I don't need to deal with all those trolls, violent people...*

Tijana was the other interview participant who recounted a traumatising experience which left her with fear and anxiety, and which made her ask for police protection, after she received numerous messages of threats of sexual violence and rape. She worked as a journalist in North Macedonia, commenting on the political situation of the country and foreign affairs, therefore she was also moderately known to the public, especially to those that follow these topics. She explained that at the end of 2020, when she was very active on X (Twitter), she posted a tweet about a new game, somewhat recklessly stating that the gaming community is '*toxic and sexist and homophobic',* referring to 'Gamergate' and similar incidents of sexism and misogyny in the gaming community (see e.g., O'Donnell, 2022; Vergel et al., 2024). This provoked an influx of messages with hatred, insults, and threats. She said she was receiving messages constantly:

> *It was all the time, and immediately it's "rape", "blood", "semen" … It was endless, it was at least one month, it was endless… I was receiving messages constantly, I installed some applications [to filter content], but no use... It was very creepy*…

She remembered that she felt an overwhelming sense of fear, unable to do anything to cope with what was happening to her:

> *I remember that I couldn't move from my bed, it was so much, I haven't received so much hatred in my life, and I have received many hateful things… But this…*

She decided to go to the police, to ask for protection, since there was not much she could do to protect herself from the very specific threats she was receiving. Considering how explicit the messages were, the police took it seriously and provided some temporary protection. As a single woman, she remembered that she felt genuine fear:

> *When I went to the police, I was scared… They provided protection, which was temporary, they also took it seriously… The threats were very specific, they are phrased to scare you… I can't say that I wasn't afraid… I live alone, I don't have a bodyguard, no one to protect me…*

She had kept some of the more disturbing messages and posts targeting her in that period of two months of relentless attacks on Facebook and X (Twitter), which she shared with me and which I have tried to translate in the most authentic way, so that they convey the intended meaning. The most disturbing message for her was: '*If your purpose was to provoke anger because you can't attract sympathy, you've succeeded. My advice, if the lights in your entrance switch off, just kneel and pray. Have a nice day*'. Even though the message does not have any explicit words or threats, it refers to her vulnerability as a single woman who, if caught in the dark, when the lights are out, would only be able to 'kneel and pray', since there would not be anything else she could do to protect herself. For her, it instilled perpetual anxiety in her, making her constantly look behind her for fear of being followed, avoiding being alone in her entrance, and checking her doors. Her 'safety work' (Kelly, 2011; Vera-Gray, 2018; Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020) became her constant preoccupation. Among the other messages and tweets directed at her, she shared one with an image depicting victims of the holocaust accompanied with the words: '*I think it's time for a new haircut for you*', implying physical violence and gendered dehumanisation.

As discussed by the participants, and as visible from the stories and examples provided, feminists are subjected to various forms of harassment and threats of violence that incite feelings of fear, anxiety, uneasiness, disturbance, and trauma. The experiences shared by the interview participants range from subtle to extreme. However, regardless of how explicit or overt the message of threat is, it inevitably impacts women's feeling of safety and security online and offline. This is further exacerbated by the visibility of some of the participants, who

in order to be successful in their awareness raising and fighting for women's rights, need to be authentic and participate in online spaces with their true identity, which additionally puts them in a precarious position, especially when social media platforms enable the creation of fake profiles which are specifically used for harassment. In the context of the Balkans, the complicated political situation and rampant ethno-nationalism further exacerbate the situation for feminists who might express their views on broader political and social issues (Fichman and McClelland, 2021).

As a final point related to fear, I refer to what Nikolina said deeply affected her when thinking about her vulnerability - the realisation that men who write horrible things to women online, perpetrators of online sexual harassment and violence, are ordinary citizens who we encounter around us, sometimes people with families and children:

> *Looking at what was happening online, it has distorted my vision of the world. When I am at a birthday party, at some gathering, I look at people and think that these are the people who go under anonymous profiles and write disgusting things. These are the people… he has a photo with a child and writes to me 'I want you to be my master'. These are the people around us. It has scared me on a secondary level. Not in a sense that I am afraid of them in reality, but I am scared that there are so many of them*.

This notion that men who harass women in online spaces are 'ordinary citizens', with friends and families, and very often with children, points to the ubiquity of violence, especially with the possibility of being perpetrated anonymously in online spaces. It is something that was further unpacked by some of the participants when they discussed the strategies they employ to protect themselves and to respond to sexist and misogynistic behaviour. There are some specific examples around this issue examined in chapter 6 in the discussion on naming and shaming.

Policing femininity: Shame and humiliation

> Shame is like an atomic particle: we often know where it is only by the trace it leaves.
> (Lewis, 1995, p. 119)

Shame is one of the fundamental human emotions, one of the primary affects, an inextricable characteristic of human socialisation and communication (Lewis, 1995; Sedgwick and Frank, 1995; Citrin et al., 2004). Drawing on Tomkins (2008) and his conceptualisation of affects from a psychological perspective, Sedgwick and Frank (1995, p. 134) define shame as an 'innate auxiliary affect and a specific inhibitor of continuing interest and enjoyment'. Shame affects all aspects of our lives, internal and external, controlling our psychic course and guiding us to other affective states such as depression, anger, rage, pride, and other (Lewis, 1995). Shame is related to excruciating visibility where the person experiencing it 'feels himself naked, defeated, alienated, lacking in dignity or worth' (Sedgwick and Frank, 1995, p. 133). It is the affect of 'indignity, of defeat, of transgression, and of alienation … it strikes deepest into the heart of man [sic] … felt as an inner torment, a sickness of the soul' (Ibid.). The experience of shame directly violates a person's dignity and their vulnerability. The attention to the self induced by shame generates the 'torment of self-consciousness' (Ibid., p. 136).

From a psychological point of view, Lewis (1995) differentiates four specific features of shame that distinguish it from other emotional states: first is the 'desire to hide or to disappear… [as] an overpowering component of the experience', second is 'intense pain, discomfort, and anger', then 'the feeling that one is no good, inadequate, unworthy', and the fourth is 'the fusion of subject and object... [s]hame disrupts ongoing activity as the self focuses completely on itself, and the result is confusion: inability to think clearly, inability to talk, and inability to act' (p. 34).

Further, shame can be considered from the aspect of violation of social norms, and it can be an indicator of how social norms are fixed, maintained, challenged and transformed, it shows what and who is and is not appropriate (Lasén and David, 2021). In this sense, shame could be associated with the belief that, by deviating from the norm, the person is marked as a

person of lesser worth, while in women it could be considered as a mark of powerlessness (Bartky, 1990). With the development of digital media, the ways in which behaviour is constrained by the enforcement of social norms has significantly changed, it can be described as 'a form of social control', with occurrences such as online shaming (Henry and Powell, 2015; Uldbjerg, 2021), cyber harassment (Klonick, 2016), image-based sexual abuse (Henry et al., 2021; Flynn and Henry, 2021), coercive or non-consensual sexting (Powell and Henry, 2017), and other behaviours.

Online shaming can also have positive aspects, acting as a force for positive change and enforcing rules of civility in online communities (Laidlaw, 2017). Naming and shaming is one of the tools used to address wrongdoings that might be outside the reach of the law (Ibid.). This aspect will be discussed in Chapter 6, among the strategies used by feminist to respond to online harassment. In this part, I examine shame as a form of abuse aiming to cause, among other things, 'social withdrawal, depression, and anxiety', where perpetrators are mainly anonymous, and 'the reach of shaming immediate, worldwide and memorialised in Google search results' (Laidlaw, 2017, p. 3). In this manner, shaming in online spaces is public humiliation.

Discussing their different experiences on social media, the interview participants recounted episodes when they felt embarrassment, shame, humiliation, guilt, and regret. Shame is usually associated with guilt and embarrassment, however shame is external and socially enforced, while guilt and embarrassment are internal feelings (Klonick, 2016). While shame is produced by the individual and their interpretation of a situation, in guilt or regret, 'individuals evaluate their behaviour as failure but focus on the specific features of the self or on the self's action that led to the failure' (Lewis, 1995, pp. 75-6). Shame is one of those feelings that lingers for a long time, while guilt is based on personal responsibility and can be rectified by reparations or apology (Locke, 2007).

Historically, shame has been associated more with women and youth, mainly used as a disciplinary tool (Locke, 2007). Shame as an emotion is experienced more by women and is one of the mechanisms that upholds male supremacy and women's vulnerability in the patriarchal society (Citrin et al., 2004; Mann, 2018). New technologies have facilitated new

forms of social shaming with an unprecedented power, reaching global levels and diverse audiences, at vast speeds, often with impunity (Henry and Powell, 2015; Powell and Henry, 2017; Flynn and Henry, 2021). Notions such as 'slut-shaming', 'revenge porn', or 'image-based sexual abuse' are closely related to women's experiences online, inciting different feelings of shame, embarrassment, humiliation, guilt, and anger (Henry and Powell, 2015; Henry et al., 2021). In this sense, shaming has become a common online practice as a way of denunciation and discipline, creating unexpected or unwanted visibility (Lasén and David, 2021). Slut-shaming is a 'tactic for policing the boundaries of acceptable, appropriately gendered, racialized, and sexualised femininity' (Sundén and Paasonen, 2020, p. 20). Therefore, there is disproportionally large number of insults that refer to women's sexuality, as something that needs to be regulated and disciplined. Nikolina, who has written about this in one of her columns, elaborated:

> *Female sexuality, women and casual sex, that's something everyone comments on and there is a disproportionally large number of insults. Even for issues related to LGBT rights, there is some reservation like 'ok, I don't care what they do between their walls', but not for this. For this, there are insults from the start: 'you cow', 'you slut', 'who do you think you are'!*

In this manner, women's bodies are objectified within online sexist and misogynistic discourses (Nussbaum, 2010; Henry and Powell, 2015). Objectification, according to Nussbaum (2010), implies 'conferring on the object a spoiled, or stigmatised, identity, a compromised status', it is a 'variety of shame punishment' (p. 68). Its aim is ultimately power and control over the objectified, which is accelerated by the immediacy, speed, and possibilities of representation of the internet (Nussbaum, 2010).

One distinct form of online abuse and harassment related to shame and humiliation that has become especially widespread during the pandemic, is the so-called 'collector culture', or posting, collating, and trading intimate photos of women, most often along with their personal information (Moore, 2022). Groups where men share images, videos, and personal information of women without their consent have been a global phenomenon, across different platforms, social media sites, community forums, and other online spaces (Ibid.). In

2021, as mentioned above, there was a proliferation of such groups on Telegram in the Balkans, with the first one discovered in North Macedonia with the title 'Public Room' ('Javna soba' in Macedonian). The group had more than 7,000 members (Cveticanin Knezević, 2021; Gagovska, 2021). Women in 'Public Room' and the other groups that are still being discovered almost four years after that first one, are commodified, objectified, shamed, and humiliated, which is then aggravated by the widespread culture of victim-blaming by the general public and the institutions, and the unethical media coverage (Gagovska, 2021; Cveticanin Knezević, 2021; Milivojević, 2023). The psychological impact of such sexual harassment can be devastating, with feelings of deep shame, humiliation, guilt, powerlessness, which often result with isolation, withdrawal, depression, and other serious mental health issues (Uldbjerg, 2021; Cveticanin Knezević, 2021; Milivojević, 2023). Ana, the young woman from a small town in North Macedonia who first spoke publicly about the problem in a video shared on Instagram (Koleva, 2021), was subjected to relentless bullying and harassment during an extended period of time while the issue was discussed in the public. Her story was discussed above, in chapter 4, as a story of empowerment and feminist awakening.

Another woman who contacted me after I posted an announcement about my research in one of the groups, was Jovana. She told me that what happened to her is very relevant for the research as an example of shaming and humiliation on social media, and that by sharing her story she wanted to contribute to raising awareness on the issue of revenge pornography and slut-shaming. She told me that she used to be very active on social media, communicating and forging new friendships. Among other social media platforms, she tried using Omegle, which was a free online chat platform where people were randomly paired for an anonymous and immediate communication. The platform was closed in 2023, due to numerous claims of child sexual abuse, harassment, and violence (Liang and Tidy, 2023). At the time, sometime before the pandemic, Jovana found the platform to be an interesting and unusual way to meet new people, and she had some good experiences on it. There were times when the discussion on the platform would veer more into the intimate, and she said that there were men who she also met outside of the platform. However, her enjoyment and openness to this new way of meeting people were very quickly shattered, when she was subjected to public humiliation and ridicule. One man with whom she communicated online and later met in person, without her knowledge, recorded their online conversations and later filmed himself

with the recording of her, discussing horrible things about her, expressing sexist, ageist, and overtly misogynistic views, slut-shaming her, portraying her as an older woman who engaged in sexual activity with younger men, and boasting being the one to have disclosed it, gathering views and popularity. The video quickly became viral, it even found its way as a topic among the contestants of a popular reality show on a national television. As a consequence, Jovana said she felt extremely embarrassed and humiliated, and did not know how to respond or what to do at that moment. For a period of time, she withdrew from social life and especially from social media and waited for it to pass. She said that the feeling of humiliation has stayed with her, that she still does not feel entirely confident in her communication with other people, and that a constant feeling that she might be recognised and ridiculed accompanies her in all social interactions. In this way, shaming and humiliation are successfully employed as a tactic to silence and restrict women from participation in public spaces.

The disciplining nature of shaming is especially visible in relation to women who are more visible and who disrupt online spaces and practices. Vesna, whose profile photograph and name were shared in a right-wing group after her appearance on one media outlet, as a political activist, noted that women are usually self-censoring on social media. She explained that every time she participates in a discussion online and gets into some debate, she has to calculate what could be the potential price that she would pay for it, namely that any information from the personal life could and would be used against a woman who is active on social media, as a tool for shaming and humiliation. She remembered that when her photos were shared, they were used to ridicule her appearance, questioning her health and sexuality, things that she would be especially careful not to discuss or reveal online. She remembered that, at the time, she had changed her hairstyle from long hair to short, and she remembered a tweet with her photographs from her Facebook profile with long and short hair, and the question: *'What happened to her, is she sick or a lesbian?'.* In this instance, body shaming was used as a form of cyber-trolling, where the female body is scrutinised through the presence of the 'male gaze' (Lumdsen and Morgan, 2018). Vesna was aware that when a woman is active on social media, '*the attacks very often become ad hominem and it's very unpleasant*'. She experienced objectification where her subjectivity was denied, being treated as something whose feelings need not be taken into account (Nussbaum, 2010).

Tijana, who has lived abroad for a long time working as a journalist reporting on foreign policy, told me about her experience with another type of harassment with the intention of shaming and humiliation. Her harassment had the purpose of instrumentality, or being treated as a tool for the objectifier's purposes (Nussbaum, 2010). She recounted how one day she started receiving phone calls and messages asking her about her 'services'. Confused, she asked one of the men who contacted her what they referred to and she found out that there was an ad on a porn site with her information. She found the site and the ad and saw that the photo that was used was not hers, it was a photo of a naked woman with a blurred face, however next to her, there were Tijana's name, telephone number and e-mail address. At that moment, she did not know what to do, and the first thing that she could think of was calling the police. At the same time, she started blocking everything, so that she would stop receiving messages and calls. She did not receive any support from the police until she discovered that she was not the only woman targeted by this man she did not know. Talking to a colleague, she found out that she was also targeted, and together they discovered that there were many of them targeted by the same man who put their information in fake ads. While the man was ultimately arrested and received some lenient punishment, Tijana believes that the police took action only because there were many women targeted by the same man:

> *The police found him, but I think it was because there was so many of us, I think that was the difference.*

This demonstrates how the individual experiences of women are often disregarded as insignificant, and how collective action, when possible, can be beneficial in bringing attention to an issue and instigating action from the authorities.

Simona, another woman who is known for her commentaries about various issues in North Macedonia, as a writer and columnist, recounted her experience with shaming and humiliation that happened during the hashtag campaign #ISpeakUpNow, when her post about her experience with sexual harassment was used by a famous journalist, an older man with large following, to be used for mockery and sexist and misogynistic humour. The journalist often posts commentaries on social and political issues with explicit language and what some people consider to be humorous content. During the hashtag campaign, used by

Macedonian women to share experiences of sexual harassment and violence in the vein of the #MeToo movement, he created a parody of Simona's testimonial, undermining the seriousness of her experience, the whole campaign, and ultimately the problem of sexual harassment and violence overall.

In her post, Simona recounted an event when she was in hospital and the anaesthesiologist made a sexist comment to her, calling her 'young meat', as a humorous way to objectify a younger person, especially a woman, which made her feel uncomfortable and vulnerable in that position:

> *I'm 22 and lying stark naked on an operating table in the Clinical Centre. I don't know why I had to be completely naked for that surgery. To this day I still don't understand why. The anaesthesiologist comes into the room and stands behind me. "Wo-hoo, young meat!" - he exclaims before he injects the spinal anaesthesia. The room is full of doctors and nurses, but they all keep silent. #ISpeakUpNow*

Simona recounted how the journalist's goal was to make fun of her and her post. It was very disturbing to her, since it was a parody of her status, and she perceived it as very intentional. She had saved a screenshot of the post which she shared with me. The title of the post is '*Fucking with anaesthesia*' which clearly indicates to Simona's post. In his story of mockery, the journalist refers to himself as 'an old fox', as an opposite to the 'young meat' mentioned in her post. The text of his post reads:

> *I am lying naked on the operating table in the Clinical Centre. An anaesthesiologist approaches me and tells me: what a beautiful old ox, if it weren't for the pimples on your ass, I would fuck you right now! I jumped off the table, caught a taxi "Riva", went home, took a shower and here I am back at the clinic to fuck*!

For this post, he received more than hundred reactions, mainly smiley emojis, and some comments telling him that the joke is very funny. Therefore, the post which clearly parodies a very serious issue, obtains the desired reaction by the public, with laughter and praise for his talent for telling stories, at the same time shaming women who share true stories and

undermining the importance of the campaign. It needs to be noted, however, that there were strong reactions to his post by other women who stood in solidarity with Simona, pointing to the pervasiveness of misogyny demonstrated by such mockery of a disturbing personal experience with sexual harassment.

Katerina, who advocates for systemic changes though her feminist Instagram profile, discussed regulation of these shaming and humiliation mechanisms enacted on the Internet through policies and strategies. The increased attention to these issues obtained through feminist activism has brought some changes which are still in early stages of implementation for their effectiveness to be assessed. However, any significant change would have to include a systematic shift of power and male dominance in public spaces. As Katerina noted, as long as there is widespread acceptance of violence and harassment of women and girls in the society, there will be impunity for perpetrators and lack of regulation. In this sense, she expressed her disappointment in the society we live in, where violence against women can be perceived as a matter to joke about. As one of the instances where she felt most defeated, she recalled receiving a message from a 11 or 12-year-old boy, who wanted to make a joke by presenting himself as a woman experiencing violence. She explained that she would often receive messages from women who need help and support to deal with situations of violence and harassment, however there were also instances when she received messages by 'trolls' who would try to make fun of her activism and humiliate her in some manner. Even though she said that she is not usually bothered by this, the instance when a young boy was the 'troll' really affected her and made her aware of the deeply sexist and misogynistic society we live in, where boys are taught and encouraged to degrade girls and women and to perceive gender-based violence as a normal occurrence. In her words:

> *Specifically in the digital space, I was most affected when some boy, 11-12 years old, thought that it might be funny to present himself as a woman experiencing violence – that's what has affected me most. Death threats, rape threats - no, that's something that I have been told in my face... Because that person does not look at violence against women as a problem… That has affected me because it shows how we, as a society, look at potential femicide, and how we educate new generations to look at potential femicide*.

Here Katerina refers to the pervasiveness of the culture of violence, where young boys are growing up within discourses of sexism and misogyny and ethno-nationalism. These young men are not only socialised in this way within their domestic and social circles, but also on globalised digital media platforms where they encounter and are immersed in spaces like the 'manosphere' with influencers who reify hegemonic masculinity and normalise misogyny, teaching them different harmful behaviours, among which, most prominently, women's objectification (Haslop et al., 2024; Ging, 2019). Even though the negative feelings and affects dominated the discussions with the interview participants, there were also instances of positive emotions, such as joy and fulfilment, discussed in relation to feminist solidarity and collectivity. These will be analysed in the next section of this chapter.

Finding joy and fulfilment through community-building and solidarity

There is a large disparity between the identified and discussed positive affects compared to the negative ones. This opens the question whether positive affective states are 'taken for granted', or they are being ignored since they do not incite dramatic actions like negative affective states, or simply '[o]ur feminist archive is […] an archive of unhappiness even though the threads of unhappiness do not weave our stories together' (Ahmed, 2010, p. 43). Nevertheless, positive affects are important, especially acting as a stimulus in building alliances and engaging in collective actions, with hopes of bringing about changes and building more just societies. Audre Lorde (1984) wrote that when joy, 'whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual', is shared, it 'forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference' (p. 56). Segal (2018) links 'radical happiness' to the pleasure of collective joy, 'a transformative sense of being part of a political movement within which the future can be imagined otherwise' (Sundén and Paasonen, 2020, p. 168). The sense of joy and happiness, in this way, is born from the 'shared experience of taking action' (Ibid.).

Some of the positive affective states identified by the interview participants from their participation and experiences in online spaces, were joy, excitement, and fulfilment, contributing to courage, and resilience. They identified some aspects that bring them joy in their social media engagement. For Elena, who is one of the founders of a feminist collective that started from a feminist group on Facebook, it was the collective action and the possibility to move and change things together. For her, being in a group made her feel as if she was doing something meaningful, at the same time making it easier to cope with online harassment and violence. As she stated:

> *It creates a feeling that I am doing something, that I am not just angry in my own four walls, but that I share it with other women. […] Even though we were just a Facebook group, it was much easier to go through everything, comments, attacks… when we would react to something, it was because we were together*.

For Nikolina, it was the inclusivity of online spaces that brought her enjoyment and happiness in her participation and engagement as a feminist with a certain visibility. For her, Facebook and other social media erase all barriers between people and knowledge:

> *… a girl from [a small village], with one click, can find me and talk with me about anything. I can also find another woman from another country with one click and immediately connect… it is a limitless source for sharing information.*

Moreover, the positive side of social media, that also brought joy to her, was the possibility of inclusion of people who are otherwise marginalized or excluded from society in different ways. She found immense happiness in being able to work with people with disabilities and discover how social media could help them learn, network, and be informed. She acknowledged that even though when we talk about social media, we mostly frame it in a negative manner, they are also a space of inclusion where differences can become invisible, where people with disabilities, generally excluded from public life, can '*have that sense of a forum, be connected, participate in discussions equally'.* In that way, online spaces allow for the disability to become invisible. Nikolina realised that social media are very important for learning, networking, and informing when it comes to these marginalised groups. She shared

that she considered herself a person with disability in some way, as a very timid person and an introvert who has difficulties participating in large gatherings and communicating with different people face-to-face. For her, if it were not for social media, she would not be able to embrace her feminist activism. She can be an activist through social media. It has provided that public space for her to meet people, learn, and share experiences with many people online. As she explained:

> *It's also important to tell you that in real life, I am a very timid person. I often view myself as a person with disability because I would never meet someone in person, I am very introverted. The Internet allows me not only to meet people, but to become well-known. I have a completely different life online. I have a divided life – on the internet I am an activist. If activism was not possible online, I would never be in the street*.

This is an important aspect when discussing the affordances of social media spaces, their openness and inclusiveness, from which women and other marginalised groups could benefit, finding ways to navigate and strategies to respond to their negative aspects of sexism and misogyny.

For Andrea, the youngest participant from Serbia, when she started using social media, it was mainly a space where she could be educated on different issues. Building her knowledge and network, she recognised the potential of these spaces to not only get education, but to spread awareness and educate others on the acceptance of different gender identities. With this, she was also building strategies for acceptance of her own gender identity, which she was increasingly exploring and understanding. Idealistically, she viewed social media as a space for forming alliances for mutual fight against patriarchy and capitalism. She was driven by her experience as a queer woman who was hiding her own sexual identity due to the judgemental and patriarchal environment. She explained that she felt the need to educate people so that they would accept her and other people who were more oppressed than her. Therefore, she tried to raise awareness and educate people by sharing content and posting on topics related to feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, left-wing politics, and other related topics. At the same time, dealing with such contentious topics for the conservative traditional society she lived in, she found herself in the middle of conflicts that have arisen among feminists with different

approaches to feminism and LGBTQ+ issues, among other things. Within these conflicts, she regarded her position as a 'peacemaker' who would try and unite everyone, *'so that we could fight patriarchy and capitalism all together'.* Coming from an already vulnerable position, Andrea ultimately was not equipped to deal with these larger controversial issues and realised that it would be most beneficial for her to cater to the circles where she found her community, and to build her strength within those alliances. The sense of freedom, solidarity, mutual action, closeness, and common goal is what has been identified to incite positive affects for feminists participating in social media. These affective states are those that maintain their motivation to keep fighting for their place in online spaces.

Despite its ubiquitousness, scholars and philosophers have struggled to define courage. The philosophical view of courage is that it is a 'virtue and a responsibility for fulfilling one's obligations to higher ideals and a common good' (Marvasti, 2018, p. 73), which is 'highly context-dependent and situationally variable' (p. 85). Facing real threats that provoke fear and anxiousness, feminists also find themselves in affective states of courage and resolution, when frustration turns into resilience, and fear turns into defiance. I am positioning this state in the realm of positive affects, mostly due to its progressiveness and forward-looking prospect. It offers a perspective within which feminism survives and thrives, regardless of whether in groups or individually.

Katerina, who has built a large network in Serbia and in the region due to her activism, told me about one feminist activist who was hacked and barred of all her presence online. I read an interview with her published on a Serbian web-platform, where she described the experience as a 'digital murder' (Marinović, 2022). Reflecting on the case, Katerina discussed how it was not perceived as violence even by feminist groups, stating that *'we are not aware that limiting access, that that's violence'.* The woman was first hacked on Facebook, her profile overtaken and used for sharing child pornography. As a response, Meta, Facebook's and Instagram's parent company, deleted her Facebook and Instagram accounts. Her work in marketing and design was based on social media platforms, therefore this impacted not only her ability to be present online, but significantly impacted her financial situation. As Katerina explained, '*when her access was taken away, she was subjected to some form of financial violence, but it was not recognized as such'.* Katerina said that the woman asked different

people and organisations for help, but no one saw the problem in its reality, and no one was able to help her. Finding this story appealing and potentially important for my research, I contacted the woman, explaining the aims of the research and inviting her for an interview. There were several attempts to organise it, but due to her numerous engagements during that period, ultimately my efforts were unsuccessful. Therefore, I include an excerpt from the published interview with her (Marinović, 2022), to convey her expression of entangled emotions of frustration, disappointment, resilience, and resolve:

> *That's when I realized that I'm not afraid of the state, but of people who publicly advocate for what they don't live behind the scenes at all. That's when I realized why female solidarity has been an ideal like the Christian ideal for centuries - it is discussed, sung, written about, but very little is practiced in life. I think it crushed me, but also made me even stronger and more determined to live my feminism, to the end. Until the real and every subsequent digital death!*

While her statement might seem contradictory, and not in line with my discussion here, I still consider it to be evidence of feminist resilience and strength, which does not always need to be practiced in collective action. Even though she has expressed her disappointment with women's organisations who were not able to understand her and help her, she was still able to gather the courage and resilience and fight for her place in digital media spaces. However, even in this case, feminist solidarity was still possible, with women like Katerina, who demonstrated her support and has been telling her story as an example of defiance and individual fight with the patriarchal system.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have endeavoured to examine the various affects, feelings and emotions experienced by women who identify as feminists online, that produce movement and action, or lead to other affective states. These affective states and embodied sensations are important when we analyse how feminists make decisions whether to ignore something or

engage with it, and to understand the 'physical "costs" of digital feminist practice' (Coffey and Kanai, 2021, p. 2). In this sense, shame can produce immobilisation, anger can galvanise social movements, while grief can create new connections (Taylor and Fullagar, 2021).

It is noticeable that more space in my analysis is dedicated to affective states that are commonly categorised as negative. This is in line with the global state of affairs, with women who participate in online spaces commonly reporting feelings ranging from irritation, sadness, anxiety, loneliness, vulnerability, to the more extreme distress, pain, shock, fear, terror, devastation, violation (Jane, 2014; Mendes et al., 2019). However, here 'negative' does not always assume its first definition, in many aspects serving as an instigator of action, a feminist flame, facilitating the movement of affect (Ahmed, 2004; 2014) and the dissemination of feminist empowerment and stimulus. Anger, for example, can be especially productive, inciting a 'feminist fire' (Coffey and Kanai, 2021) and propelling feminists into collective action.

Overall, the negative affective states and embodied sensations, such as fear, anger and shame, are considerably more pronounced and have a greater impact on shaping bodily experiences of women who engage with feminism. However, the action these negative affective states produce does not always need to be considered negative. Furthermore, positive affective states like joy and excitement also play a significant role in motivation and instigation of collective action. The movement and actions these affective states and embodied sensations produce are discussed in the next chapter.

The findings in this chapter point to the wider discussion on the ubiquity of sexism and misogyny online, as an expression of the broader context of gender relations enacted and experienced in different parts of the world. In the Balkans, these are enmeshed with the wider culture of violence and ethno-nationalism, as remnants of the wars, and the complicated political, social, and cultural situation of the post-socialist societies, perpetually in transition (Volčič and Simić, 2013). Feminist activism is thus inseparable from nationalist, political and social discourses and feminists need to navigate these issues very carefully, otherwise risking delegitimization and labelling of their cause and activism (Fichman and McClelland, 2021). As right-wing discourses become stronger and more ubiquitous, this becomes an even more

fraught reality for feminists in the Balkans, as well as globally. This demonstrates the need for addressing traditionalist and patriarchal social norms and patterns, both in online and offline spaces, and careful framing of feminist issues and feminist activism to address the pronounced traditionalist, right-wing, anti-gender, nationalist discourses that have become dominant and which contribute to the backsliding of the achieved progress.

Finally, the findings and testimonials from this chapter contribute to the discussions and debates of feminist efforts globally for improved regulation of social media platforms and improved and more effective protection for women and other marginalised groups in digital spaces. This examination is completed with an analysis of the strategies feminists employ to respond to their experiences online and the movements these affective states and embodied sensations provoke, which are presented in the next chapter.

6. ONLINE FEMINIST STRATEGIES OF DEFENCE

To respond to the pervasive sexism and misogyny discussed in the previous chapters, women and girls implement appropriate tactics, such as using humour and laughter (Pisker, 2018; 2019; Sundén and Paasonen, 2020; Rentschler and Thrift, 2015; Strain et al., 2015), counterspeech (Stroud and Cox, 2018), sharing personal stories (Mendes et al., 2019; Gachau, 2020), documenting rape culture (Keller et al., 2018), 'bitching', 'gazing back', and expressing anger (Bailey, 2003; Coffey and Kanai, 2021), hashtag activism (Clark-Parsons, 2019; Keller et al., 2018; Mendes et al., 2019; Fileborn and Loney-Howes, 2019), public shaming (Jane, 2016), regulation and control in online forums and groups (Herring et al., 2002; Coffey and Kanai, 2021), and other. These complex strategies of coping with online harassment and abuse are implemented by feminists with the aim of preserving online presence and participation in online spaces instead of simply abandoning them (Mendes et al., 2019). While there is substantial research on the ways feminists are using social media, there is much less analysis on the reasons driving them to respond to misogyny and sexism in these different ways and the practices and manners in which they form such responses and tactics (Keller et al., 2018; Sundén and Paasonen, 2018; 2020). However, these forms of feminist responses and reactions should be examined carefully, primarily to provide an overview of the situation, and not to be presented as a solution to online harassment and violence, which needs to be addressed in a systematic manner.

The analysis of the data collected for the research uncovered several strategies and tactics women in the Balkans adopt as response to sexism and misogyny and as defence against sexual harassment and violence in online spaces. I have systematised the strategies identified in the data collected from the interviews and observation of Facebook groups into several categories, that is ignoring and blocking, naming and shaming, hashtag activism, use of humour and memes, finishing with the possibilities for online organizing, building alliances and engaging in group actions, both online and offline. Each of these is analysed through the experiences and testimonials of the women I interviewed and the interactions in the spaces I observed.

‘It can’t be my individual responsibility’: Abandoning as self-preservation

As also noted with the analysis in the previous chapters, the pervasiveness of sexism, misogyny, harassment, and abuse, reinforced with the inherently masculinist structures of social media and online spaces in general, have detrimental effects on the sense of security, mental health, and overall wellbeing of feminists online, limiting women’s online participation and in some cases making these platforms completely inaccessible. In this sense, withdrawal from social media as a strategy of defence was mentioned by almost all interview participants. It is one of the main aims of the persistence of online abuse and misogyny, to wear people down and drive them to self-censor and limit their own participation in digital media spaces (Trott, 2023; Jane 2017a). Even though it is a means of self-preservation, it can also be perceived as a form of resignation, acceptance of the patriarchal social order of limiting women to the private sphere, leaving online spaces deprived of the important female/feminist voices, and with that of their diversity, integrity, and significance.

For example, Dragana, who used to be very active on social media, posting on her own profile and moderating several groups for feminists in North Macedonia, recounted how, at the end of the pandemic, she felt exhausted from the ‘dreary atmosphere’ with all the news about the pandemic, along with the useless discussions and trolling, and decided to distance herself from social media, at least for some period. During that period, she also became pregnant, so that served as another motivator for her to keep her own peace. She explained:

> *When you realize, in some moments, that the fights are useless, and additionally, I don’t know how to call it, the dreary atmosphere with information about the pandemic, it propelled me literally to wish not to follow any news, any normal standard media, not to be present on social media, to keep my mental health.*

This is again an indicator of the inextricable link and mutual dependence of online and offline spaces, and the almost impossible endeavour to separate them and analyse them as separate entities. Embodied experiences online are formed and informed by the broader events and occurrences that affect us in different ways (Powell and Henry, 2017). For Dragana, the weight

of the everyday focus on death and illness and the importance of preserving her pregnancy, were the crucial determinants for her distancing from social media interactions.

Some interview participants shared their stories of relentless harassment they had endured when they had no other choice but to completely abandon online spaces. And even with that, for some of them the harassment did not stop, since it had spread throughout the Internet and in their community. Even though during the time that I was conducting the research and writing my thesis there have been some advancements in this area, with some countries adopting measures and legal solutions to tackle this problem, it is still a significant issue that requires solutions on different levels. One participant, Tijana, summed it as a collective issue that needs to be tackled in a systematic manner, echoing the general finding that online spaces lack appropriate systems of protection and safety that would support women and facilitate their online presence and participation. She concluded:

> *There's no system that can protect you. So, women close their profiles, don't discuss controversial topics… If there is one woman that would try [to do it], they would swarm her immediately… We withdraw from online spaces because there is no system that would allow us to be present. It can't be my individual responsibility*.

Elena, who is at the forefront of a feminist collective, on the other hand, was convinced that withdrawing from online public spaces should never be an option for feminists. For her, that would ultimately mean defeat. It would mean leaving the spaces that feminists have historically fought to occupy at the same extent as men. In many ways, for her, that would mean abandoning the feminist cause. As she explained:

> *Feminists should find some ways to protect ourselves, our mental health, and our boundaries, but not to leave the space to them, since we had to fight for physical spaces, we must do the same here.*

For her, enduring the harsh reality of online interaction of misogyny and sexism requires self-care in terms of protection of mental health, as well as acting in solidarity. She acknowledged that it is easier if feminists act together as a group.

Following on Elena's words and acknowledging the feminist struggle to break out from the private sphere, where they have historically been confined, to the public sphere of public debate, discussions and decision-making, the following sections provide a more specific overview of the strategies and tactics feminists in the Balkans employ to maintain their presence online and to respond to sexual harassment and violence, and sexism and misogyny, occurring contemporaneously in online and offline spaces.

Avoiding conflict: Ignoring and blocking

Online communication offers the possibility for an abrupt discontinuation of communication. Ignoring and blocking is the first tactic feminists and women in general employ in online spaces to put a stop to harassment, or to distance themselves from unwanted and/or conflictual communication. In this sense, it is the responsibility of social media platforms to provide effective ways of blocking and stopping or limiting unwanted communication. For most of them, it is the first measure implemented to provide some type of support mainly to women and other marginalised communities online. Ignoring and blocking is also one of the first suggestions women get when dealing with sexism and misogyny online, which is within the wider discourse of victim-blaming, shifting the responsibility to women to change their behaviour, and trivialising the problem as something that could be resolved with a simple click (Mendes et al., 2019).

Dragana, discussing how she decided to disengage with communication on social media platforms during the pandemic, pointed out that she used to get into endless discussions that would turn out to be useless at the end. She realised that '*conflict or possibility of conflict*' makes her uncomfortable and anxious and decided to protect her mental health by avoiding interfering in people's discussions that were taking place on her profile, about something that she posted, or elsewhere. She decided that she would write what she wanted to write, then let people comment, and just observe the discussion. By avoiding interfering into the discussions, she effectively avoided getting into conflict. By distancing herself from conflictual

situations and provocations, she not only protected her mental health and peace, but at the same time, she contributed for de-escalation of the situation, by not providing a response. She emphasised that, in the past, she used to be much more reactive and fiercely defend her position. However, she learned to choose carefully the battles worth fighting and preserve her mental and physical health.

Nikolina and Tijana also emphasised how feminists are already tired of discussing and being targeted with sexist and misogynistic hate speech. Like Dragana, they both stated how a couple of years ago, they would waste their time discussing and arguing but have since learned that the discussions are just a 'waste of energy' and to no avail. Nikolina pointed to the aspect of safety, as a big problem in online discussions and conflicts, and how blocking helps with the preservation of the sense of personal safety and security. At the same time, she said that she ignores posts by people who have more conservative views, avoiding being attacked by them as a group. As she explained:

> *They all argue among themselves, while us feminists have them all blocked, so we don't see it [laughs]. We don't argue anymore with anyone, we just block. We just talk among ourselves. It was years ago that we would try and explain something to someone*. […] *Safety is a big problem, so blocking is good for that* […] V*ery often, I skip people who I know are right-wing, I have blocked them or muted them, I don't discuss on their profiles because there are their supporters. It would be as if I throw myself into fire, they could destroy me.*

Here, Nikolina acknowledged the effect of so-called 'swarming' that the right wing is especially successful in employing in online spaces, as a networked harassing behaviour which is organised and coordinated (Marwick and Caplan, 2018). Confronted with a large group of people commenting, women might feel disempowered and helpless, as well as threatened of becoming a victim of doxing (Douglas, 2016) or another form of harassment or violence. As a defence mechanism for this, with the lack of a more systematic protection, women and girls use the limited protection social media platforms offer, which is the block button. What Nikolina said was key for her was '*that demarcation line, knowing whether [she] could change, or not change something*'. If she estimated that she could not change anything, that there is

no one she could turn to for support, she would simply decide not to waste her energy on it, '*because the life of activist is difficult anyway'.*

On the other hand, similar to Elena's opinion above, Tijana acknowledged that by ignoring and avoiding discussions, there is less women's voices in public spaces, at the same time recognizing the limitations of individual action and the need for a collective one. She recounted how she used to discuss and argue a lot in the public spaces of Facebook and X (Twitter). She had her profiles open so that people could join the discussion even if they were not among her friends on Facebook or followers on X (Twitter). However, she got tired and had put her social media profiles on private, deciding not to waste her energy anymore. As she explained:

> *I am aware that it is one female voice less in the public space. But I will not change the world by myself. We can get organized… but everyone saves their own energy. You know what will happen, and you have other things in your life, so you leave it.*

Here, she alluded to the important discussion around collective action, which is the foundation of the feminist movement, acknowledging that it is very difficult to fight the patriarchal system, especially one that is entrenched with strong traditional values and gender norms, as an individual.

Ignoring and blocking, as strategies of defence for feminists, most often have less intensity and provoke lesser reaction from those that have been blocked or ignored. In the following sections, I continue with the analysis of feminist strategies of defence and response to sexism and misogyny that might have higher impact and provoke more intense reactions, therefore have larger implications or incite larger discussions online and offline.

Seeking justice: Naming and shaming

As discussed in the previous chapter, online shaming can have different effects in different contexts and situations. Whilst it involves public embarrassment and sometimes humiliation of those whose acts are held up for scrutiny, it can act as a force for positive change, enforcing rules of civility in online communities, and addressing wrongdoings that might be outside the reach of law (Laidlaw, 2017). Naming and shaming allow engaging directly with perpetrators of harassment or violence in the public fora. This tactic has been defined as 'feminist digilantism' and besides public naming and shaming, it also includes actions such as contacting family members of the abuser, most often their mothers, to alert them of the activities of the abusers (Jane, 2017c; Trott, 2023). As a tactic, it can be very effective as a consciousness raising 'digilantism', since it 'has the potential to humanise key actors (including the attackers, the targets, and the onlookers) in what might otherwise be dismissed as disembodied, machine-based discourse' (Jane, 2017c, p. 3). With this tactic, the victim takes the control, guiding the narrative of her experience with harassment or violence, which often translates into empowerment and facilitates a sense of justice (Powell, 2015; Jane, 2016; Harris and Vitis, 2020). At the same time, it carries more reactive force, and as such, more risk for both the person doing the naming and shaming and the target perpetrator of harassment or violence, and raises more ethical questions (Jane, 2017c). 'Digital vigilantism' is also problematised in its perceived lawlessness, the Internet being a space where justice is taken into one's hands without any legal authority (Trottier, 2017). It can also put activists at more risk of escalation of violence and is thus less common than anonymous or de-identified accounts (Powell, 2015; Sundén and Paasonen, 2020).

For one interview participant, Simona, who is a writer and activist, occasionally publishing columns in different media outlets in North Macedonia, the instance when she felt compelled to engage in naming and shaming was one of her most significant experiences of dealing with sexism and harassment online. She recounted how, during a turbulent political period in North Macedonia, when she was more vocal and visible with her political and feminist activism, she had written a column discussing the political situation in the country which was published in one of the most read newspapers in the country. Following the publication of

the column, as she expected, she received numerous comments and messages in her inbox attacking her for her political and feminist views. Among all the messages, one man stood out to her. She noticed that he had written to her before, but this time the message was very explicit and demeaning. While his first messages were comments as jokes or telling her she was beautiful, this time he just wrote '*You need sperm in your mouth*', followed by '*for magnesium'.* What struck her was the abrupt change of the tone in these messages and that on the profile of the man, it was very visible that he had a family and was leading an ordinary life. Moreover, she noticed she had many mutual friends on Facebook with him. This is what ultimately triggered her to publicly name and shame this man specifically, with the intent to set an example and show what women are dealing with on a regular basis. She published a screenshot of the messages without hiding the name of the person and added her comment, noting that women are constantly targeted with threats of sexual violence if they express their views, or without any reason. The post is still on her profile, and we retrieved it by scrolling back on her Facebook profile. Her comment, posted with the screenshot of the messages, states:

> *It is not the first time I receive messages like this, I am not the only one – most women I know are targeted with this type of speech in private messages and are subjected to threats of sexual violence, due to their political views, or for no reason at all. In fact, my female friends and acquaintances, especially those who are socially active, have a whole arsenal of this type of messages. So, here is a wonderful example of a reaction to my column published yesterday from a certain Mr. Vladimir, with whom I have many mutual Facebook friends*.

Further in the comments below the post she had added the previous 'correspondence' where he had just written sporadically '*you are beautiful'* to her*.* The post received more than 70 comments and more than 300 likes. In the comments, people expressed their support for her act of naming and shaming him publicly, and there were other women sharing their experiences with this type of male behaviour, when a man would write something nice and then, when he would not receive any response, he would become aggressive and write horrible things. This type of behaviour is so common that it is very much normalised, as Simona also acknowledged during our interview.

With this act, Simona felt more empowerment to drive the narrative around the sexual harassment she was receiving, however she had also put herself in a vulnerable position, as she was prepared to get some reaction to what she had done. She recounted that, after posting the screenshot with her comment, she received phone calls from different people who knew him, asking her to remove it. Ultimately, what made her change her mind and delete the post was the phone call from his wife, explaining that they have a daughter who would be devastated to see the post. Simona remembered that the woman was crying, telling her that he is a violent man. Shaken by the wife's admission and pleads, and in the name of feminist solidarity, Simona decided to remove the post:

> *I had to delete the post. I told her what happened, I said that I would remove the post for their daughter.*

However, the case did not end with that. The next day, Simona received an anonymous phone call from a man who claimed that he was calling from the Ministry of Interior. She immediately suspected that it was the same man and recorded the phone call. During the interview, she played the recording for me. In the call, the man tries to intimidate her, claiming that she had been reported to the police for disclosing personal information of another person. Simona responded that she did not do such thing and asked him to identify himself, with self-confidence in her voice, as someone who knows the law that requires all official persons to identify themselves in communication with citizens. At that point, he seemed confused and unprepared for such a communication and wanted to end the call, but still seemed determined to intimidate her, telling her that she needed to go to the prosecution. She repeatedly asked him for his name and position, which he refused to disclose. They continued with this back and forth for some time, and then Simona acted as if she agreed with him just to end the conversation. She knew that it was the same man calling her, trying to intimidate her, which provoked her anger and prompted her to put the post back again, this time additionally tagging him. She described what made her do it:

> *He called me to threaten me because he thought that I was withdrawing. In his mind, that's what it meant. When he called me, he thought he could intimidate me because*

> *I am a woman. I immediately put it back with his tag, which he didn't even know how to remove [laughs]*.

After that, Simona decided to report the case to the police. However, she was told that she could only report him for the harassment, since she recorded him without his knowledge, so the recording could not serve as a proof. Online sexual harassment was not recognised as a criminal offence in the Macedonian legal system at the time, so her report was rejected. Nevertheless, she had a sense of accomplishment for raising awareness on the issue of online sexual harassment in a way that might be considered radical for Balkan societies. In the meantime, the harasser had made a post where he wrote that she removed her post because she regretted writing it and was to pay a fine for it. Angered again, she made another post explaining her decision to bring back the post on her wall, to which she added the hashtag #ISpeakUpNow (#СегаКажувам in Macedonian), which was the main hashtag used in North Macedonia for women to share stories and experiences with sexual harassment and violence. In the second Facebook post, shared two days after the initial post, she stated:

> *Yesterday I removed the post about the sexual harasser because I was feeling empathy for his family. I made a mistake because today I received even more disturbing and threatening phone call from a hidden number, and now [the name of the harasser] published a slander that I have regretted it and that I will pay a fine... I am bringing back the post and tomorrow I will report it [to the police].*
> *Probably, if I was younger and if I didn't have experience with this issue, I would be very afraid and I would withdraw. I encourage girls not to put up with such forms of harassment, to seek help from women's and human rights organisations, and to report abusers. #ISpeakUpNow*

The post received around 50 comments and more than 700 likes. In the comments, people demonstrated their support with some of them stating that it was a mistake that she removed the initial post, since '*it had sent the wrong signal to his little brain… and he abused [her] kindness'.* In the comments, one person shared a screenshot of a post created by the man, where he stated that Simona had inflicted irreparable harm to him and his family by posting things that are not true, and that Simona was begging him to forgive her '*with tears in her*

eyes'. Previously, to defend himself, he had posted that someone hacked his profile and that it was not him writing to Simona. There was also some discussion whether Simona should feel any empathy towards his family, to which she responded that his family are double victims to his behaviour. She further stated that she was very sorry that she had to do what she did and put the family through an additional nightmare, and that, in her opinion, the man has a family which he does not deserve. In her explanation of the case, it could be perceived that she was put in a lose-lose situation with limited means to redress it. She could either protect herself and bring attention to the case or protect the man's family. She chose the former, which she considered to have a more productive result for the wider audience, bringing attention to the problem through the strategy of naming and shaming.

Another point of contemplation of this case study is what Nikolina, in her account of being overcome with fear in a public space due to her exposure and visibility, emphasised as being most frightening to her. Namely, that these men who engage in online abuse and harassment are men who are around us, as she plainly stated, '*ordinary men with friends and families'.* They are the men moving around us, working with us, and interacting with us. With Simona, we discussed how difficult it is to comprehend this idea, since the image of the abuser in the imaginary is always someone who is unknown, evil, and isolated.

By using the hashtag, besides naming and shaming, Simona ensured a wider circulation of her post and larger visibility, with which she engaged in another strategy of defence against online sexual harassment and violence, hashtag activism, which is discussed in the following section. With hashtag campaigns, where women share their experiences, inevitably there is the aspect of naming and shaming, which is one of the main characterisations of the #MeToo campaign and to other strategies acting as justice mechanisms (Fileborn, 2016; Fileborn and Loney-Howes, 2019).

Exposing the problem: Hashtag activism

The #MeToo campaign, with its enormous engagement, undoubtedly marked a distinct period in feminist activism, guiding a return to the slogan of second-wave feminism 'the personal is political', and bringing into the spotlight the networking possibilities of social media as 'affective vehicles' contributing to the formation of 'intimate feminist entanglements transcending the digital sphere' (Barbala, 2023, p. 4). Storytelling is a critical part of hashtag activism, 'putting things in motion through the repetition and circulation of certain narratives' (Sundén and Paasonen, 2020, p. 51). Such collective action through sharing of personal stories and experiences is empowering. Due to that sense of community, women feel more empowered to share their stories, and seek some feeling of justice (Harris and Vitis, 2020; Fileborn and Loney-Howes, 2019). As Tijana, one interview participant who regularly contributed to hashtag campaigns in the Balkans, emphasised: '*At that moment, it's good to know that you are not alone'.*

It is now common practice in the Balkans that protests, reactions, and other feminist activities begin with hashtag activism. It would be difficult to find a feminist activist, especially those from the younger generations, who has not participated in such online form of activism. Therefore, hashtag activism was a prominent point of discussion during the interviews I conducted with feminist activists from the Balkans. All interview participants have engaged in hashtag activism. The manner of their engagement in this type of activism is multifaceted, whether by sharing their personal stories, publicly displaying their support with likes, or by resharing other women's stories and testimonials demonstrating support. They discussed the connections and attachments (Papacharissi, 2015; 2016) created by the commonality of their experiences shared in the public sphere as a form of protest, the feelings and affective states related to sharing their identification as feminists and sharing personal stories online, as well as the frustrations and resignation when faced with the slow tempo of social transformation (Sundén and Paasonen, 2020). They pointed out the affordances hashtag activism provides, as well as some of the limitations and obstacles when it comes to such collective activities. They all confirmed that hashtag activism is very important as an effective tool for raising awareness, and they all acknowledged that there are some very important issues with

hashtag activism that might limit its impact. Identifying the limitations and affordances of hashtag activism in a specific context, provides the possibility to discuss how identified limitations and barriers could be rectified to afford the use of social media as a public space where people come together as a public, discussing matters of common interest and where women have equal access (Fraser, 1990). With a perspective of temporal and locational distance, in this section I am exploring how these adaptations and affective employments have contributed towards exposing a historical problem of sexism and misogyny in the region, as well as the limitations and possibilities for further engagements.

The first hashtag used to raise awareness on the issue of sexual harassment and violence to gain traction in the Balkans, following the global rise of the #MeToo campaign, was the hashtag #ISpeakUpNow (#СегаКажувам in Macedonian) adopted by feminists in North Macedonia who shared personal experiences with sexual harassment and violence on Facebook and X (Twitter) at the beginning of 2018 (Angelov, 2018; Grgić, 2018). However, what is now considered to be the 'real' #MeToo of the Balkans was the hashtag #YouAreNotAlone (#NisiSama in Serbian) in 2021, after a famous Serbian actress, Milena Radulović, went public with allegations of abuse and rape against a prominent drama teacher, followed by other women who have been victims of sexual violence and harassment by the same person. The abuse happened when Milena was a minor and attending classes in the drama school owned by the drama teacher (Jasnić, 2021, Stojanovic, 2023). The fact that the actress had the courage to publicly share her experience and name the perpetrator instigated a wave of support by other women who used the hashtag to demonstrate their support for her bravery and bring attention to the epidemic of sexual violence in the region which remains largely unreported. She explained that what motivated her most to report the rape was when she found out there were other women who had also been subjected to sexual violence by the teacher and that she would feel guilty if she kept quiet and allow him to continue with the abuse (Stojanovic, 2023). The fact that the abuse happened repeatedly, and that she waited several years to report it, instigated an avalanche of comments about the reasons why she had waited such a long time to report the crime, accompanied with rampant victim-blaming, typical of the rape culture of the Balkan societies. Shortly after Milena's story became public, another Serbian actress, Danijela Štajnfeld, revealed that she was raped by a celebrated Serbian actor, Branislav Lečić, in 2012, after which she abruptly left the country

and relocated to the US, having developed serious mental health issues (Buckley, 2021; Georgievski, 2021). When Danijela first talked about her experience in her documentary film premiered one year prior, she did not name the person who assaulted her, which triggered an avalanche of attacks and victim-blaming by the media and the public (Buckley, 2021). Eventually, during the momentum started by Milena Radulović, she also disclosed the full identity of her abuser and the details of the sexual assault.

During this period, another case of violence was disclosed to the public in Serbia, when one woman posted the case of her sister on X (Twitter), sharing how she had been subjected to horrendous physical violence by her rapper ex-boyfriend for almost two years, which brought her to an attempt of suicide and hospitalization (Dragojlo, 2021). She shared her post with the hashtag #IDidNotReport (#NisamPrijavila in Serbian) and instigated an avalanche of posts by women throughout the region sharing their experiences and reasons why they did not report the sexual violence they had experienced. Almost two days after the initial tweet, there were more than 18,000 tweets with the hashtag (Dragojlo, 2021). Some of the tweets read: '#IDidNotReport because I did not understand'; '#IDidNotReport because of the enormous amount of shame, questioning whether it's violence or not, whether I am the one that is responsible, and repressing it to the point of forgetting. But mostly because I couldn't imagine that anyone would think or believe that I hadn't asked for it myself'; '#IDidNotReport because he was my boyfriend and that doesn't count' (Stevanović and Ristev, 2021). The hashtag used in North Macedonia in this campaign was #WhyIDidNotReport (#ЗоштоНеПријавив in Macedonian). The campaign once again brought to the surface the widespread rape culture in these societies, as a culture in which 'sexual violence against women is implicitly and explicitly condoned, excused, tolerated and normalized' (Powell, 2015, p. 575).

Despite its popularity and promises, and despite their active engagement, the interview participants questioned the effectiveness of hashtag activism to accomplish real structural change, emphasising its fleeting nature, as well as the risk of misrepresentation, infiltration, and derailing of the conversation. Regardless of its immediate effect, hashtag activism has its limitation, in the way that affective publics 'serve as conduits for connection, but they do not facilitate the negotiation of collective identity' that is necessary for achieving social change (Papacharissi, 2016, p. 314). The power of these affective connections is of a much more

‘liminal, transient nature’ and their speed is not compatible with the much slower tempo of social transformation (Papacharissi, 2016; Sundén and Paasonen, 2020). Social media platforms ‘amplify voice and visibility’, at the same time amplifying our expectations ‘that just because a story about a movement unfolded and spread quickly through social media, it should be followed by immediate political, legislative, systemic change’, while a substantive change takes time and happens gradually in order to have a more lasting impact (Papacharissi, 2016, p. 321). To tackle this problem, Papacharissi (2016) proposes that we understand social media ‘as structures of feeling, as soft structure of storytelling’, so that we could ‘examine them as soft structures of meaning-making practices that may be revolutionary’ (p. 321).

Almost all interview participants noted this limitation of the hashtag campaigns they contributed to - the burst of force and intensity and the quick extinguishing of such flame. As one interview participant, Vesna, noted:

> *It’s a good way of instigating debate, but the problem is that there is no follow up. It happens in one momentum, it dies, and there is nothing after that… there is no concrete change after that… There is no follow up, keeping that momentum until there comes a change that is more long-term*.

Dragana also identified this as a problem with hashtag activism, stating that ‘*it has expiration date… there is literally an amplitude and afterwards a fall and dying’.* Referring to the campaign #ISpeakUpNow in North Macedonia and its hijacking after its peak, with mocking and irony, she concluded:

> *Everything that happened after the peak was inverted situation… kidnapping of the hashtag and either use of the hashtag to perpetuate misogyny… as a joke or for daily-political posts… for example, “my girlfriend grabbed my ass…”, making fun of it with an inverted situation.*

Discussing the effect of the campaign, she noted how during a short period of time there was interest by the media and the institutions, however as the initial impetus dies, there is less real engagement and more mockery with the hashtag:

> *This is the effect in our country – there is expansion, a point it gets to in a very short period of time, there is also feedback from the media, which is short-term, there were also institutions that promised to do something about the problem, which remained to be only declaratively – and as the amplitude falls, there are less real posts, and more mockery with the hashtag.*

One notable example of this type of hijacking of the hashtag was discussed above, in the discussion about shame and humiliation, when a prominent male journalist used Simona's testimony of sexual harassment to mock her experience and undermine the hashtag, and with that, the whole issue with sexual harassment and violence in the Macedonian society.

Furthermore, it has been well documented that the visibility of individual stories instigates increased harassment and trolling of women who share their personal experiences online, exacerbating even more the existing culture of misogyny and sexism (Mendes et al., 2019; Harris and Vitis, 2020). Taking into consideration these risks associated with hashtag feminist activism, an important part of women's participation and activism online are affective hashtags that are used as means of support and expressions of solidarity. The analysis of the employment of these hashtags provides another perspective of feminist participation in public spaces and the strategies employed to raise awareness on certain issues or to saturate online spaces with one common message of support.

The hashtag #WeAreWithHer (#СоНеаСме in Macedonian) emerged in North Macedonia in 2019 and has been used sporadically as a collective action of showing support to women who have been publicly attacked by misogynistic and sexist hate speech online or in the mass media. The hashtag was created by a group of women who informally gather mainly in online spaces to discuss and react to different issues and events. Simona, who is a member of the group, explained that there was a private group on Facebook and a Facebook chat where they would decide to take action when there was some event involving a woman being publicly attacked. She explained that they agreed to use the same wording in all posts, and they would first coordinate on the post wording. Namely, they had conceptualised #WeAreWithHer as a collective action where they would write the text of the post in their private group and then

all of them would share the same post with the same text. In this way, they would avoid individual targeting, misrepresentations, and taking the focus away from the woman the post has been shared in support of. The hashtag was first used in May 2020, at the beginning of the pandemic, when one woman who is also a feminist, posted a status where she criticised the reactions of restaurant owners and musicians about the ban on holding events and organising weddings, stating that these events are not essential and there is no need to have them during a global pandemic. In the post, she merely expressed her opinion and did not use any derogatory language. For this status, she was targeted with extreme hate speech, an intense wave of threats of violence and comments about her person, her behaviour and her appearance. This prompted the group of feminists to use the hashtag and show their support for her by drafting a post and sharing the same post at the same time, accompanied by screenshots of some of the comments and posts with sexist hate speech. The post read:

> *For a couple of days now, [name] has been a victim of extreme hate speech, which to a large extent includes misogynistic and homophobic comments but goes as far as threats of rape and murder, all because she shared her opinion on the organisation of weddings during a pandemic. This period we are going through is difficult for everyone, however it can't be an excuse to attack, insult and threaten in a brutal manner. Hate speech often leads to acts of hate and this is why we condemn in the strongest terms those who harass online in any way. We unconditionally support [name] and all women who during this period have been subjected to gender-based hate speech on social media. #WeAreWithHer*

Following this first use, the hashtag was used for the support of other women targeted in distinctive ways. For example, it was used as a reaction to the degrading comments and sexist hate speech directed at the Minister of Defence of North Macedonia at the time, Slavjanka Petrovska, related mainly to her physical appearance. The post in support of Slavjanka read:

> *We stand in solidarity with Slavjanka Petrovska because no woman should be targeted with gender-based hate speech. This time we see again what happens when a woman has a public profession and conducts her work professionally. As long as the public sees women only through the prism of sexism, we will neither see more women in decision-*

making positions, nor will the objectification of women in all fields of their existence be eradicated. #WeAreWithHer

The minister publicly expressed her gratitude for the support expressed through the use of the hashtag. In a public statement, she said it had alleviated a lot of the burden she felt at the time from receiving hateful comments and messages, making her feel that she is not alone standing as a target for sexist hate speech online.

The hashtag was also used in support of one young woman who shared on social media that she was victim of violence by her father and was subsequently targeted by sexist humour and derogatory comments on Facebook and X (Twitter). It was also used as a reaction to the Islamophobic harassment targeting a hijab-wearing Muslim activist. Overall, the hashtag was used in support of women parliamentarians, politicians, journalists, and other women who have found themselves in the public eye. In August 2020, the group published a kind of 'manifesto', which was shared on their social media profiles and was also published on some of the media portals, explaining the purpose of the hashtag and the manner of their activism, stating, among other things:

The integrity of women in the public sphere is increasingly under attack both locally and globally. The lack of a system of accountability, as well as the relativization of gender-based hate speech, creates conditions for the spread of intolerance and an atmosphere of lynching. "Criticism" or judgement of women present and active in the public sphere is almost always on a personal basis, in the form of hate speech often based on comments with sexual connotations and gender stereotypes and prejudices, unlike criticism directed at men which is not associated with or referring to their gender. This is particularly pronounced in our context… In a situation like this, the first thing we all need to do is to show solidarity and build new feminist communities that will fight both in institutions, but also anywhere hate speech is identified in the form of sexist and misogynistic insults. One form we thought such solidarity could take is publicly identifying and calling out those who insult and harass women, especially those who are part of public and political life. This is why we decided through this kind of joint and continuous action, […] to publicly react anytime a woman is attacked and

insulted based on her gender and gender identity and to loudly point out that such behaviour is unacceptable.

Their manifesto emphasizes the importance of mutual action and solidarity among women in the fight against sexism and sexist and misogynistic hate speech in the media. This strategy has proven to be an effective way of collective action online in different ways. Posting the same content has helped avoiding individual attacks and co-optation, since what is in focus is the post and not the person posting. Furthermore, writing the post as a group, there is no possibility for use of different terminology which might lead to misunderstandings. Finally, by posting the same text they ensure visibility and taking over the space of the platform, so that it is guaranteed that their message will be seen by the majority of the audience. When we talked, Simona noted that there were less and less instances of public expressions of sexism and misogyny targeting women, which she thought was related to their activism. As she summarised, with some glee in her voice:

We think that it has something to do with our activity. When 150 women share the same thing at the same time, it becomes a corrective to the society, people become more aware. I think we had some effect, since we did it for a long time.

While hashtag activism has some limitations and problems, it has been an effective way for feminists in the Balkans to build alliances, engage in mutual activities, and strengthen the notion of feminist solidarity. Women across the region have been adopting different strategies of employment of this type of activism, some of which have proven to be more successful, insofar their success could be measured. Furthermore, feminists from the Balkans demonstrate the strength of trans-national feminist activism, with feminists from different countries discussing and raising awareness on issues that are common, such as the prevailing culture and normalisation of gender-based violence, machoism, and lack of safety for women, throughout the region. The next section will look at humour as a tool to address these issues, which has become particularly effective in the Balkans.

Laughing in the face of misogyny: Humour

Another effective strategy used by women and girls in the Balkans to ridicule expressions of sexism and misogyny, challenge the status quo, bring to the light topics that might be difficult to discuss otherwise, or raise awareness on certain issues that require more visibility, is the use of humour and satire. By using humour, memes, and satire in calling out patriarchy and men's violence, feminists take 'delight in exposing misogynist, victim blaming ideas through humour' (Rentschler, 2015, p. 354). While humour has many positive attributes, such as creation of solidarity within groups, challenging power relations and hierarchies, and entertainment (Bing, 2004; Drakett et al., 2018), when used to ridicule sexism and misogyny, humour can also incite harsher misogynistic reactions and responses aimed at women and girls online (Mendes et al., 2019). This is precisely what was pointed out by Dragana, who noted that humour can be an effective way of dealing with sexism and misogyny online, calling out men who engage in sexist and derogatory speech, but it requires much more personal investment to be able to sustain the harsher attacks afterwards:

> *What I know frustrates men very much is when you start making fun of them. You humiliate them, catching their weaknesses, how stupid is what they wrote, not literally to insult them, but implicitly to point out that this person is an idiot… But that also requires energy and nerves, which now I have limited supply of…*

In this way, she used humour as a tool for empowerment (Jane, 2022) and confrontation aimed at bringing attention to the issue and present the men who engage with it in a humiliating manner. It subverts the positions of power and challenges the established norms upholding stereotypical and discriminatory norms and views (Bing, 2004). Consequently, this would provoke further comments and insults which then Dragana would have to deal with subsequently.

Aneta, who is a visual artist, found a rather successful way to transform her experiences with sexism and misogyny online and ridicule the men who harass women by sending sexual private messages on social media, or what has been termed as 'sexual solicitation' (Powell

and Henry, 2017). She recounted how, trying to promote her art works and increase her reach on social media, she reached the 'wrong audience' and unexpectedly started receiving hundreds of sexual messages from men she did not know. After some time, and after she moved to another country, she decided to use the messages she received, share them with the public, and therefore subvert their meaning, transforming them into sarcastic representations of sexual harassment of women, ridiculing the men who perpetrate such harassment on social media. In this manner, to act against sexism and misogyny, she used 'counterspeech' or 'speech designed to remedy the harms of others' use of speech' (Stroud and Cox, 2018, p. 196). She opened a profile on Instagram called 'moji_seenovi' (translated to 'my_seens', as messages that were left on 'seen', but also as a play of words, since the pronunciation of 'seenovi' in Serbian and Macedonian translates to 'sons', with which she also implies the symbolic privileged position of men in the Balkan family, and as 'sons of the nation').

Aneta explained that she started publishing the messages she received through Facebook messenger, and very soon other women and girls started sending her similar messages they had received, to be shared and published. Before publishing, she would hide the names of the girls and blur the photos. She also blurred the explicit images, or 'dick picks', and she also blurred parts of explicit words, as a precaution, not to get deleted or banned from the platform due to its 'community standards'. While the messages are not funny or amusing by themselves, the commentary or caption added by Aneta adds the humorous in the posts, counting on the shared sensibility and experiences of her public, to be able to perceive and understand the joke. The captions Aneta uses are short, clear, and contextualised. In this way, the 'counterspeech' (Stroud and Cox, 2018) used by Aneta remedies the harm of sexist speech by adding humour to it. For example, for the following message:

> 'I could write a trilogy how that fiery red hair looks dangerously good on you and those killer eyes that are in perfect combination with it. P.S. Killer because they kill every resistance to look at anything else but them',

Aneta added the caption 'Clumsy Tolkien', making fun of the verbose writing of the man, who instead of sending a simple message to the woman and express his desire to get to know her,

as something that would be normally done, chose to write a long and 'poetic' message to get her attention. Aneta here uses Tolkien as an example of someone who writes long and complicated stories but adds the adjective 'clumsy' to emphasise how unsuccessful the author of the message is in his attempt to be a 'Tolkien'.

Another example of this type of 'counterspeech' is used with the message:

> 'First of all, a huge apology that I am doing this, but it was now or never. Taking into consideration that Covid 19 attacks the respiratory system, this expression is for sure not ok while there is a pandemic, but I must tell you that you take my breath away with your beauty',

to which Aneta added the caption 'Life on the edge', pointing to the ridiculousness of the message. It alludes to the exaggeration used in the message as a way to get the receiver's attention and the intention to appear intelligent, self-grandiose, and special. By referring to a 'life on the edge', Aneta, with irony, points to these characteristics.

Discussing the aim of the profile, Aneta explained that she wanted to bring attention to serious issues by ridicule and humour, without diminishing the value and seriousness of issues such as sexual harassment and violence. She said that 'moji_seenovi' is looking at things from a humorous side. She further elaborated that she did not think that if we joke about some things, they become less relevant:

> *Humour is also contextual and temporal, so there is time when we can joke about things and when we speak seriously… On the page, I joke but I also ridicule…*

Humour has the power as a means of establishing a feeling of group solidarity, but its power can also be divisive and reinforce boundaries within groups that do not share the same aims and affects (Bing, 2004). To illustrate this, I am exploring the example provided by Dragana, who in her feminist activism, engaged more with sexist humour and its subversion. Recognising the damaging effects of sexist humour, and its power in reinforcing sexist and stereotypical notions, acting as a form of symbolic violence (Bill and Naus, 1992; Dreckett et

al., 2018), Dragana recounted that for a long time she used to collect samples of sexist jokes posted on Facebook that reinforce stereotypical representations of women and/or queer people on the basis of various characteristics, such as age, appearance, or sexuality. She had noticed that such jokes were predominantly, but not solely, posted by '*middle aged men, boomers, 55-75 years of age… most active with stupid jokes'*. For some time, and in the role of a 'feminist killjoy' (Ahmed, 2017), Dragana would regularly comment under the jokes that would appear on her 'feed' that they are stupid and not funny. Her comment would be perceived as a provocation by the person who had posted the joke, as a call for them to explain it since it would be impossible for the joke to not be funny to someone. Therefore, they would start arguing with her, as if she had '*insulted them and their humorous personality*', even though they were not the authors of the jokes. The manner in which they would argue with her, it would seem as if they were '*really hurt*' that it was not funny to her, and they would discuss and explain to her how she did not understand the joke, making it seem as if there was something wrong with her understanding of humour and jokes. In this way, 'the feminist woman is at fault if she doesn't laugh at a man's antifeminist "joke" because she's not living up to the sexist norm of laughing and finding a man's expression of humour charming and attractive' (Blais and Dupuis-Déri, 2022, p. 285).

Talking about her motivation for collecting these jokes, Dragana explained that she started doing it as a form of resistance, hoping to publish them someday, to raise awareness on the harmful effects and serious consequences of such humour on the perceptions and constructions of gender and gender roles in our societies. She thought that the best way to present the issue would be through examples, so that it would be easier for people to see the banality of these 'jokes':

> *Besides the point being to laugh together, I think it's important to document these things. It's important to talk about how bad that humour is, and we can talk about it only with examples. You can't say that jokes about blondes are bad without giving one example and saying why. It's especially important to put such humour in a context, to say who tells it and who disseminates it.*

She pointed to the fact that these sexist jokes are ultimately one of the means of keeping the power relations in the society, and that we always need to be aware who has the right to make such jokes and laugh at them in a patriarchal, traditionalist society:

> *Let's not forget one thing – we live a society that is far from being above the patriarchal hierarchies, we all know who is dominant - it's adult men, they are at the top, and they are the ones that perpetuate this humour. With that, they leave space for repercussions from such humour in real life, with real women. So, that's why it's important to say who these people are, not naming them, but what categories of people perpetuate this humour and what are the harms of it*.

To incite 'affective solidarity' and act towards her aim of raising awareness, she shared the archive with fellow feminists in a small hidden group called 'Feminist police'. The other members of the group joined her in posting screenshots of sexist and misogynistic humour, all laughing together. It was a small collective of women who also engaged in hashtag activism and acted as a support system for each other, therefore they shared the same sensibilities and had a common understanding of humour and the possibilities of its subversion.

Taken with enthusiasm about the possibilities of action with her archive of sexist jokes and the interpretations humour offers, Dragana then shared her archive in a larger feminist group. However, her archive and intent did not receive the same enthusiasm as in the smaller group. What became relevant here was the complexity of humour and its dependency on contextualization, and the shared sensibility of the audience (Bing, 2004; Sundén and Paasonen, 2020). Namely, the dynamics of the small group consisting of friends with similar views on feminism and women's oppression, and similar sense of humour, was different from the dynamics of the larger group with a more diverse audience. Moreover, the larger group was created with a different aim, to discuss the newly discovered misogynistic groups on Telegram where men secretly shared photographs and personal information of women and girls. In such context and with such audience, her intention was not properly translated. She remembered that after she posted her collection of sexist and misogynistic jokes, '*there was the situation that no one found it funny'* and that she felt she *'looked a bit like a psychopath*'. What propelled her to share her archive was the feeling of solidarity, community, and

common fight, but she encountered silence, misunderstanding, and rejection. She recalled her disappointment when she realised that her hopes that the wider membership of the larger group, with more diversity regarding age and gender, would make something 'bigger' of these jokes, taking them and transforming them as an efficient tool for consciousness-raising, were futile. She emphasised that her idea was not to shame the people who had posted the jokes, therefore she had hidden their identities. Her motivation was purely building feminist solidarity through humour and calling out sexism and misogyny:

> *I really felt as if it was a space where I saw hope in the youth, and that what we have been doing until then was not in vain... In my head, I thought that the archive of jokes, as they are stupid and stereotypical, it would find its place here, in a sense that we would hate on the jokes together, as well as their anonymous authors, whose names I hid, I didn't put them publicly to be seen who wrote what... So, I posted those, and I can't remember now of one concrete comment, but the atmosphere in the comments was predominantly like 'she is a bit crazy, what did she collect, she's a bit psycho'... It wasn't directly said, the subtext I read was that. In any case, I didn't get the sense that people liked it and that we would mutually laugh about it, how stupid the jokes were*.

Noting the complexity of humour and laughter, as enormous topics that could be analysed from various perspectives, here I have tried to examine some of the ways humour is used by feminists in the Balkans and some of the effects and consequences from such use. In the following section, I continue my analysis on a more specific aspect of humour, examining memes, as a particular means of communication, conveying messages tackling sexism, misogyny, politics, the society, and other issues in an immediate and contextualised manner.

Humour in context: Memes

Even though memes were mentioned as a response to sexism and misogyny only by two interview participants, they are a notable feature in two of the three observed women's groups. The interview participants, in general, did not negate the power of memes to instigate

reaction, however they acknowledged the ambiguity in the message and the possibility for individualised interpretation. Namely, memes are texts and as such are subject to interpretation by various users who put them into use in different ways (Miltner, 2018). Thus, the participants were not certain that memes were an appropriate tool for them and their activism which was mostly concerned with issues of violence against women.

Memes are a distinct form of communication practice for distribution of humour, jokes, representations, rumours, critique, and other content, which have become a ubiquitous digital media practice (Miltner, 2018; 2019). Shifman (2014, pp. 7-8) defines memes as a 'group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, […] created with awareness of each other, and […] circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users'. For Wiggins (2019, p. 11), memes are 'remixed, iterated message that can be rapidly diffused by members of participatory digital culture for the purpose of satire, parody, critique, or other discursive activity'. According to Milner (2013, p. 2357), they are 'multimodal artifacts remixed by countless participants, employing popular culture for public commentary'. Even though memes might seem as 'trivial and mundane artifacts', they embody vernacular creativity (Burgess, 2006) and serve as a mirror to society, 'reflecting and refracting the anxieties and preoccupations of a variety of social groups across a series of national contexts' (Miltner, 2018, p. 412-3).

Memes can serve as a tool for construction of feminist networks for critique and response, mobilising through derisive laughter, and energising current feminisms (Rentschler and Thrift, 2015). They can be an effective outlet for feminists to voice their anger and frustration (Miltner, 2018; Dreckett et al., 2018). As such, memes are used as reactions to current events, with their characteristic of currency, engaging irony as a feminist tool for activism. The use of memes has been especially productive in nurturing a 'politics of joy and resilience in the face of sexism, rape culture, and its apologists' (Mendes et al., 2019, p. 17). Furthermore, feminist memes create a particular 'feeling of community' (Rentschler and Thrift, 2015), or what Kanai (2016) has defined as 'spectatorial girlfriendship' brought by shared feminist knowledge and experiences in reading practices. Feminist activists appropriate digital media to create 'new discursive spaces from which feminist critiques of sexism and misogyny [...] could be articulated in ways that are both informative and hilarious' (Rentschler and Thrift, 2015, p. 4).

One interview participant who regularly posted memes and found them to be an effective way to express her anger and disapproval of patriarchy and sexism was Tijana. She mainly posted memes referring to the specificities of gender roles, nationalism, Balkan history, patriarchy, and politics. For example, in the 'I can fix him' meme below, the meaning is contextualised through the knowledge of the history of the region. It plays with the notion of the Balkan region as divided and 'problematic', connecting it with the stereotypical view of women as nurturing, caring, and willing to accept 'problematic' men with the aim to help them and 'fix' them. However, since the region is 'unfixable', men are also 'unfixable'.

Figure 2: I can fix him. Private account

Even though the meme is contextualised, it also relies on a common gender stereotype, which makes it intelligible for different audiences. Knowing a little bit of history about the wars that ravaged the region, and the persisting intolerance and animosity based on ethnic and other differences, one could easily understand the meaning of the meme. Namely, that despite various efforts for reconciliation and recognition of the uselessness of such animosity between the populations which have more similarities than differences, there is very little hope for harmony and peaceful cohabitation. It is not by chance that English language has

adopted the verb 'to balkanise' to mean 'to divide a region into smaller regions which are aggressive or unfriendly towards each other' (Oxford Dictionary, n.d.). This connotation related to a stereotypical representation of men, as conflictual and promiscuous, provides the meaning for the meme.

Other examples of memes shared by Tijana are those directed towards 'real/imagined so-called well-intentioned, malevolent, or aggressive males online' (Reilly, 2019, p. 6). These memes aim to ridicule men's behaviour, playing with stereotypical representations of masculinity and men's overly emotional reactions when being 'called out' for problematic behaviour. This type of masculinity is related to what popular culture has termed 'broflake' or 'commonly seen stereotype of the quintessentially conservative, heterosexual, white male, who despite all his privileges and advantages in life, is easily sensitive to any criticism or mockery', someone who 'takes everything personally, even when it's not about him specifically', representing those with a 'fragile male ego' (Urban Dictionary, n.d.). These memes shared by Tijana are mainly in English and are not specifically contextualised for the Balkan region, however their significance equally applies, which demonstrates the similarities of women's experiences in different contexts.

Figure 3: His dick fell off. Private account

Figure 4: I just want to express my racist or sexist views. Private account

One topic that was important to discuss in relation to memes and humour was content moderation by social media platforms. As a 'complex sociotechnical undertaking' (Gillespie, 2018, p. 197), content moderation has been extensively discussed by scholars, activists, mass media, and politicians. While platforms regularly present themselves as merely mediators of content, they play down the ways in which they intervene in deciding what content is deleted, moderated, or shared, but also what is made more visible through their algorithms (Gillespie, 2018). The processes of content moderation have been deemed discriminatory, subjective and not clear enough (Gillespie, 2018; Nurik, 2019). Tijana was particularly concerned with this aspect of participation on social media platforms. She stated that she posts many memes, however she needs to be careful since she once got into '*Facebook jail*', a period of a couple of weeks during which she had restricted access to her Facebook account for posting a meme which referred to men being overly sensitive. She first thought that someone had reported her, but then she realised that it was Facebook's algorithm. The meme she shared was '*a stupid meme… very harmless… it was a man who hurt himself and was crying… it was very stupid, there was no insult, no violence',* however it got removed by Facebook. She said she did not know what the reason for the removal and her 'punishment' was, but she suspected that it was the bias of the social media platform, and their selective approach when it comes to content sharing. Facebook's stance on content moderation has been criticised for the perpetration of implicit censorship by women and other marginalised groups (Nurik, 2019).

What Tijana discussed here is very much related to the ‘men are scum/trash’ issue, when Facebook got into heated debates about its policy to consider the phrases ‘tier-one hate speech’ (Samson, 2019; Nurik, 2019). After being in ‘Facebook jail’, Tijana was more careful with the memes she was posting, even though she noted that one could never be certain that what is shared would not be deleted by the platform.

Simona was another interview participant who shared memes and one of her favourite meme pages was ‘Sparrow speaks’ (‘Dzivdzan zbori’ in Serbian and Macedonian), which is an image macro, a captioned image consisting of a picture and a witty message or a catchphrase (Know Your Meme, n.d.), featuring a sparrow in a men’s jacket, holding a coffee cup in one hand and a saucer in the other. There is also a Facebook page with the same title with more than 112,000 followers, as well as Instagram profile with 14,000 followers, where posts are in Serbian. The meme is inspired by a profile on X (Twitter), @podjiodsebe (‘start with yourself’), which shares short ‘wisdoms’ stereotypical for the Balkan region. The image macro is used to create memes in all the languages in the region, shared on different social media platforms.

Figure 5: I don’t see men’s and women’s rights. Private account

One such meme, shared by Simona on her feed, visible above, is accompanied by the text 'I don't see male-female rights, I only see human rights' in Macedonian. It presents a very stereotypical saying from people who are gender-blind without any interest or awareness about gender inequality or the marginalisation and discrimination of women and other groups, but who engage in discussions around these issues and like to appear knowledgeable, open, and liberal. Even though it could be perceived as harmless, the phrase undermines the importance of discussing issues related to gender equality and the rights of marginalised groups. It is also one of such phrases used by deflectors to which it might be difficult to respond since it is not explicitly negative, and its negative connotation will only be perceived by people belonging to marginalised communities. The image of the sparrow with its jacket and coffee cup fits as a humorous representation of these people and the text is therefore legible for the audience in a sarcastic manner.

This brief analysis of the use of memes as a tool for consciousness-raising and feminist joy and community building, with shared contextualised understanding, demonstrated how women's experiences have many commonalities in different contexts, and memes, as a creative tool of expression, allow adjustment and further contextualisation to appeal to the specific audiences in various locations and settings. This discussion is expanded further below, in chapter 7, in the analysis of the communication patterns in the observed closed women's groups on Facebook. The final part of the analysis in this chapter is related to solidarity as a defence strategy, which figured prominently in the interviews and in the observed online spaces, with the acknowledgement that to achieve any more substantial change, there needs to be a collective engagement and support.

Solidarity as a form of resistance

Online spaces provide possibilities of immediate communication, thus facilitating feminist organising in reacting, protesting, discussing, awareness raising, and advocating for systemic changes and implementation of policies, measures, and strategies for protection of women and improvement of the situation with harassment and violence, both online and offline. This

is one of the most important affordances of online spaces for feminists today. One of the main aspects of building these spaces for feminist digital activism is shared feminist solidarity as affective solidarity or ethic of care, necessary for sustainable feminist politics of transformation and building of feminist coalitions (Hemmings, 2012; Whittier, 2021).

For feminist activists in the Balkans, solidarity is the connective tissue for their activism. Acknowledging the patriarchal feature of placing women in positions of competitiveness and opposition to each other (Cawston, 2016), the use of the word 'solidarity' by Balkan feminists is noticeable. As mentioned above, they emphasise the importance of solidarity through the appropriation of the phrase 'man is wolf to man', commonly attributed to the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, generally assumed to refer to the cruelty of humankind, represented through the image of the ferocious and predatory wolf. Balkan feminist activists have rephrased it into 'woman is not wolf to woman' with the intention to dismantle the patriarchal stereotypes pitting women against each other and the stereotypical perception related to female friendships as superficial and fake, emphasising a feeling of solidarity that has the potential to provide empowerment and strength even in the most difficult times. Such empowerment for feminists in the Balkans is through collective action, support, sharing, and exaltation of female friendships and relationships.

One interview participant, Simona, discussed this aspect of feminist community building and solidarity in more depth. She is a member of several women's groups, one of which is a group of around 100 feminists who participate in hashtag activism with hashtags of solidarity for women who are subjected to gendered hate speech #WeAreWithHer, discussed in more detail above. Simona discussed how this group is a space for discussion, but it is also '*an opportunity to learn from each other*'. Since the hashtag is used with posts that have the same wording, in the group, they coordinate on the structure of the post, the most effective wording, time of publishing, and all aspects of using hashtag activism. By discussing these aspects, they are also learning from each other. In this way, the group, as an indispensable space of intimacy and confidentiality, has been an important space as a learning environment and an environment of feminist solidarity. As Simona explained:

I think we learned a lot from each other there [in the group] on what is hate speech, in what situations we should react, how we should react, we see from each other how to deal with commenters… I think it's wonderful. It's an example of solidarity network where we all learn from each other.

Simona emphasised that there has never been any conflict in the group, even though there are around 100 women who actively participate. Part of their learning process has also been the aspect of respectful communication and conflict mitigation. In Simona's words:

When you learn what solidarity is, you simply don't do it, you address everyone with respect, so you can't argue with anyone, no one would insult you. There are many different profiles of people, but we function well together. I really like that group. There is also no spamming, when there is something to discuss, we discuss it, and that's it.

The harmony and understanding in this group might also be due to its specific aims and the already established relations of friendship among the group members. This and other aspects of feminist solidarity, as the foundation on which feminist activism is built, are further discussed in the next chapter, where I look closely at closed private groups on Facebook as spaces where it is constituted and maintained. With my analysis, I endeavour to identify the affordances and limitations of these spaces in connecting women in solidarity and community building.

Conclusion

Following up on the analysis of lived experiences of feminists with sexism, misogyny, harassment, and violence in digital spaces, this chapter looked at the strategies feminists engage to respond to such lived experiences. The aim here was to identify the most used strategies and evaluate their effectiveness by analysing the results and the aftermath shared by the interview participants.

While hashtag activism has been one of the most prominent consciousness-raising strategies which feminists have used to raise awareness on the pervasiveness of rape culture and victim-blaming in the region, the interview participants provided various examples of other strategies they have applied to callout abusers, protect themselves, and mobilise support for different issues. As expected, ignoring, reporting and blocking were the defence strategies mentioned by all interview participants. It is the easiest and quickest way of dealing with sexist and misogynistic speech and harassment online. However, these also produce least effect when it comes to raising awareness.

More direct ways of dealing with misogynists and abusers are naming and shaming and humour, satire and memes. Cases when interview participants engaged with these strategies required time and emotional investments from them, in dealing with the consequences and the reaction of the persons brought from what could be considered anonymity to the spotlight. These strategies also require strength and self-confidence by the women, as well as their reliance on a wider support. While this is attainable for women who are in a position of privilege, having the means, education, network, and visibility, it is hardly a strategy that could be considered by women who are in a less privileged position.

Furthermore, humour and memes have been identified as productive and effective strategies of dealing with sexism and misogyny online, not only due to their ability to present an issue in a more immediate and palatable manner, but also because women often feel joy and some excitement when they engage with it. Humour also serves as a ‘proof’ of intellect and skill, which often places women in a position of advantage when dealing with certain groups of men, however it also produces harsher reactions due to the men’s perceived inferiority.

Finally, what was identified by all participants as most effective in dealing with harmful behaviours online was collective action and enactment of solidarity among women. For the women who engage with feminism online, being together, experiencing things together and fighting together was what provided the highest motivation for them to continue with their activism and what ultimately made sense of their feminist activism.

Within the discussion in this chapter, an important aspect of women's participation on social media platforms and their engagement with different strategies in the fight against sexism and misogyny are the policies and processes of content moderation by social media platforms. While content moderation is a necessity and a central task of social media platforms, there have been critical debates and criticism towards social media platforms about the ways these policies and processes are implemented (Gillespie, 2018; Nurik, 2019). Implicit censorship, enforced by subjective content moderation often guided by implicit biases and discriminatory beliefs reflecting the dominant social order, has been enabling 'sexist speech and illocutionary disablement to flourish, disempowering women and silencing them' (Nurik, 2019, p. 2885). Being in 'Facebook jail' and consequently self-regulating by being careful about the content they post was thus mentioned by some interview participants as an important part of their participation in online spaces. In many aspects, it has caused feelings of frustration and disappointment, as well as an increased awareness of the intrinsically patriarchal character of these platforms, replicating the wider social order, beliefs, and values. This and other affordances and limitations of digital spaces are discussed in the next chapter, focusing on women's spaces online and the possibilities of safety and freedom in them.

7. SAFE(R) SPACES FOR WOMEN ONLINE

Following the discussion on women's affective experiences online, the analysis of feminist tactics in online spaces, and building solidarity as a form of resistance, it is now appropriate to look at the practical ways in which women organise and function as a collective. This chapter focuses on the formations, structures, and aims of 'safe spaces' online, as spaces where women share experiences, provide advice, build community through jokes and laughter, and organise for different activities. The affordances and benefits for women are analysed, as well as the disruptions and conflicts within such spaces, and the problematics of the notion of safety related to regulation and surveillance. This chapter mostly draws on data collected through my observation of feminist groups and pages on Facebook, complemented with some of the interviews, especially those conducted with women who acted as admins or moderators of Facebook groups.

The formation of what Fotopoulou (2016) refers to as 'digital sisterhood', and Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller (2019) call 'feminist digital counter-public', drawing on Nancy Fraser's (1990) conceptualisation of 'subaltern counterpublics' is especially relevant for the analysis in this part. The networking possibilities of social media as 'affective vehicles' contribute to the formation of 'intimate feminist entanglements' that transcend the digital sphere (Barbala, 2023) and blur the distinction between online and offline feminist activism. I view these spaces through the concept of 'mediated intimacy' (Chambers, 2013), facilitating socialisation and personal connections of groups and individuals. In this way, the affective processes of mediation and digital connection between women and girls participating in these spaces 'enable new forms of solidarity' and facilitate a redrawing of the 'boundaries between themselves and others' (Keller et al., 2018, p. 23-5).

Safe spaces here mean 'small-scale settings within a community or movement that are removed from the direct control of dominant groups, are voluntarily participated in, and generate the cultural challenge that precedes or accompanies political mobilization' (Polletta, 1999, p. 1). Therefore, women's groups as safe spaces in the digital sphere are spaces that allow 'doing feminism in the network', as 'spaces of feminist critique and community building' (Rentschler and Thrift, 2015). In many aspects of their formation and functioning, they

substitute the consciousness-raising groups, as sites for conversation, informal gatherings for women where they were able to uncover and reveal the 'depths of their intimate wounds' and where they 'gained the strength to challenge patriarchal forces at work and at home' (hooks, 2000, p. 8). Groups have various features and depending on the aim and need for privacy of the users, they can be open or closed, with different levels of protection. Highest levels of privacy and protection are provided when groups are private, or 'secret' and members can only join by recommendation.

Focusing on the notion of safety within these spaces, I use the framing of safe spaces online conceptualised by Clark-Parsons (2018) around three major dimensions of safety: 'what and whom the group provides *safety from*, who the group provides *safety for*, and what the group provides the *safety to* do' (pp. 2133-39, italics in original). Facebook groups, in their role as 'safe spaces' in the digital sphere should provide safety from harassment, violence, sexism, and misogyny for women or other marginalised persons to freely engage in discussions around various issues (Clark-Parsons, 2018; Lewis et al., 2015). While Clark-Parsons (2018, pp. 2141-2) concludes that no space can be truly defined as 'safe space' for all participants and at all times, and that feminists should instead strive for 'safer' spaces online, Lewis et al. (2015, p. 9) have found that 'in the conditions of safety provided by a feminist women-only space, women experienced cognitive and emotional freedom that enabled exploration of their potential as human beings'. These notions are underpinning the exploration of Balkan feminist groups on Facebook in this chapter.

The focus of analysis in this chapter are three different closed feminist women's groups on Facebook:

- Women's business (ženska posla in Serbian) – with around 14,700 members
- WOMEN'S SOLIDARITY (ŽENSKA SOLIDARNOST in Serbian) – with around 400 members
- Safe wall of chauvinist shame (Безбеден ѕид на шовинистичкиот срам in Macedonian) – with 168 members, currently inactive

All three groups have different aims, membership and discussion rules. I start the discussion by introducing each group in detail, providing information on these identifying characteristics for each. The difference in the membership and the aims of the groups will provide a broader perspective on the functioning of these groups, as well as the affordances and the limitations that might arise due to different factors. Each group differs in content and style, with one of the groups (women's business) dedicated to more open discussion with emphasis on seeking and giving advice and participation in feminist humour via memes, one (Women's Solidarity) explicitly dedicated to building alliances in activism against violence and discriminatory practices, and the third (Safe wall of chauvinist shame) aimed at calling out sexist and misogynistic behaviour.

While all three groups have strict rules of membership and participation, they differ in the acceptance and inclusion of members, with the third group having the strictest rules based on recommendation from existing members. The motives for and repercussions from such functioning are discussed below. I show how the aim of each group correspondingly determines the dynamic of communication, looking at the problematics of inclusion and exclusion related to ideological beliefs and values of the group. I examine the tension between 'free' discussion and the need for strict and clear rules to be imposed and enacted for the groups to be considered 'safe spaces' where women could engage in discussion and sharing freely. Analysis indicates that more general groups with significantly different membership formed with the main purpose of support and advice are those that are more functional and successful in mobilising members in active participation than groups with more specific aim and restricted membership. Within this analysis, I then discuss how different participants experienced their participation in each group, the rules and boundaries of the groups, and their reported ambivalence about participation, whilst also examining the benefits of belonging in these spaces.

Advice, support, humour: Women's business

With more than 14,700 members, 'women's business' ('ženska posla' in Serbian) is the largest of the groups observed for this research. It is a closed group connected to a public page with the same title, which has 113,000 'likes' and 114,000 'followers'. It is a women's group, however it does not have the policy of accepting only women as members. As a large feminist group, 'women's business' makes it clear that the topics discussed in the group concern women and their needs. There is a meme that is shared in the group, presented below, which serves as a visual representation of the group. In it, there is an older image of a woman spreading her arms, being elevated by a crowd of other women during a protest in London. The text added in the upper part of the meme reads: '*Recommendation for doctor, tailor, psychologist, baker, fucker…*', while in the lower part, there is the name of the group in capital letters – 'WOMEN'S BUSINESS'. With this symbolic representation, the group clearly positions itself as a group for women, where women seek and give help and support each other by sharing experiences and advice on various issues.

Figure 6: Recommendation for doctor, tailor, psychologist, baker, fucker… women's business

In the description, the group admins have stated that the group serves to share everything that has been sent to their inbox, from the public page, which they had not seen on time, and which should have been shared. In this content to be shared, they include: '*calls for*

humanitarian actions, educational workshops, adoption of animals (and people), your memes, jokes, your bad memes, OUR bad memes, etc.'. They also emphasise that, at the beginning, each post would be approved by an admin, and if everything goes well in the future, everyone in the group would be able to post freely. In the end, they invite members to use the space to '*ask, discuss, educate, think, exchange (careful with bodily fluids!!!), give, help*'. This description is also posted as the first post in the group, dated 17 October 2017, together with 13 rules of conduct, or '*rules of decency'.* With this, the admins of 'women's business' make it clear that the group is intended to be light-hearted, including jokes and fun, among other more serious matters. However, they also emphasise that the admins ultimately decide what is being posted and they have the highest authority in the group, able to take the right to speech to members, if deemed necessary. Among these '13 rules of decency', they include:

> *1. No advertising and posting LIKE MY PICTURE without asking in inbox. It applies to comments, yours and of others.*
> *2. We will find malicious trolls and hug them to the point of exhaustion.*
> *[…]*
> *5. If you post other people's memes, be sure to cite the source.*
> *6. The admin team reserves the right to not approve a post. You can complain but know that the group is autocratic. Fuck it.*
> *[…]*
> *8. Try not to report posts and people to Facebook but contact us to deal with it. We will delete, we will ban, if needed. Maybe someone just made a stupid joke, so don't jump to conclusions. Dark humour is allowed. We are all here to have fun.*
> *9. In case of continued unnecessary trolling, commenting on posts where this happens will be disabled.*
> *[…]*
> *11. Women, the fact that the group is called women's business does not mean that men are automatically of a lower race. If they harass you, harass them too. We do not need to emphasize this rule, which has been valid since kindergarten. When exaggerated, we're taking away the right to speech.*
> *12. Extending Rule #8: don't report posts. If you don't like the posts or you are offended by them, then maybe this isn't the group for you. Everything published has already*

been seen and approved by the admins. Use the report to admin option only for comments with brutal insults in them, we are not able to always follow all comments. 13. Preference is given to jokes created by you. We avoid posting memes in English from other pages … because there is no point, we can all see it on those pages. The idea is for you to make your own memes, so a picture + your description in the comment/picture/whatever. The same goes for gifs, videos.

One of the main activities in the group is posting memes that have been created by the members. Namely, moderators often post a meme followed by posting just the image and inviting others to add text and make other memes, with the call '*meme-away'.* Besides posting memes, the group serves as a space where women ask for advice and recommendations for various issues and services. What is also notable in these rules is the emphasis on the inclusion of men, however with the notion that an appropriate reaction will be enacted by the admins if there is any harassment that the women themselves would not be able to deal with. Even though they share these rules and state that they could impose restrictions at any time, the admins want to allow liberty for the members to share, discuss, and joke freely in the group, with as little oversight and intrusions by them or the platform as possible. To note here is the emphasis on not reporting to Facebook, but to the admins, to create independence from the official platform governance and the problems of Facebook's content moderation, often perceived as unclear, subjective, and discriminatory (Nurik, 2019). This is also in line with the guidelines provided by Facebook, that has a separate educational section for administrators of Facebook groups, with advice on how to manage a group, how to manage conflict, how to grow the group, how to establish rules, and many other aspects of community building and content circulation (Facebook, n.d.). However, this implies that the burden of voluntary labour of moderating and disciplining within the large membership of the group falls on the admins (Cirucci, 2018; Kanai and McCrane, 2021).

In line with the rules that are visible in the group's 'featured discussions' section, they have also used a humorous meme to present that the group has strict moderation, emphasising that everyone in the group needs to follow the rules, otherwise the admins might take control to create order in the group. The text in the first image states 'Marijana when you enter the group: Welcome to our feminist salon, this is a safe space we all understand each other here',

while the second image states 'The same Marijana five minutes later: PLACES ARE MARKED, YOU SEE THE RULES, IS THERE ANYTHING THAT IS NOT CLEAR HERE, YOU WILL ACT NICELY OTHERWISE I WILL F*CK YOU UP'.

Figure 7: Marijana when you enter the group. women's business

The upper text is accompanied with an image of a woman standing in what seems like a foyer with large stairs, smiling and assuming a welcoming position, whereas in the lower part, the image accompanying the text is a chihuahua assuming a threatening position, showing its teeth. The image of the chihuahua is used to make the meme humorous, at the same time clearly stating that, to be functional, the group needs to have clear rules that will be enforced by administrators and moderators. In this way, the meme is playful and funny, especially with the inclusion of the image of the angry chihuahua, at the same time clearly presenting the dynamics of the group and the authority of the administrators. It sends the message that the group is welcoming, however, there are certain rules that need to be respected by all members and people who do not obey the rules risk expulsion from the group. In this way, the group reinforces the notion that community management on social media is informed by what Schneider (2022) has named 'implicit feudalism' in which the control of the group is

vested on one or a small group of individuals, and expulsion is the highest manifestation of authority.

Sometime after these initial posts stating the rules of the group, in March 2019, they have made a 'public announcement' post to clarify how they decide what posts to approve. They state that the posts that are approved in the group are not expressing the opinions of the admins or of the whole group, but are made visible '*for people to see, discuss, share, etc.'.* They emphasise that the group is intended as '*an improvised forum',* so that everything that is posted could be discussed in a civilised manner. Furthermore, they state that they do not avoid controversial views, on the contrary they consider them worth discussing, so that '*the posts are not there only to be affirmed, but they are also there for exchange of opinions'.* This politics and statement are to emphasise that the group is a diverse community where discussions around different issues are not only tolerated but also encouraged. With this, they purposely aim to avoid the creation of 'feminist filter bubbles' (Kanai and McGrane, 2021), as spaces where the constrains of the conceptualisation of the space as 'safe' limits the topics for discussion and exchange of ideas.

In November 2020, the admins of the group shared another post related to the rules of the group, asking the members to respect them, otherwise, they emphasise, '*we will ban you without saying goodbye, and we don't accept any appeals, because this group strives to be a safe internet zone ("safe space") and its members not to feel threatened*'. This is followed by a few additional rules and clarifications:

> *1. Screenshotting and public sharing (in stories, on pages) of posts and comments from our group is not allowed. If you send it to your husband/partner, and he posts it on his page and leaves all the full names, surnames and pictures, you will be banned [from the group] because it came from you – an example from life, so to speak. It has happened. The group is closed for a reason, so if you really want to share something outside of it, hide the names of people and the group.*
> *2. If someone from the group harasses you via message, please contact the admin team. The person who does this will be kicked out of the group. Harassment is anything that causes any discomfort, including "I'm going to kill myself talk to me" message in*

your inbox. Emotional manipulations are certainly not okay, and we will not support [that type of behaviour], we don't even need to say it that sexual harassment will not be tolerated.

[…]

It happened that in the last couple of days, two posts from the group have found their way onto someone's miserable hundred-person pages and IG profiles. Nothing terrible yet, but certainly unacceptable. As grandma would say: I'll find out who's ringing and you'll be fucked, you motherfucking asshole.

These additional rules show that even though they are striving to foster a free and safe community, they need to protect themselves and the members from various intrusions, such as sharing content from the group in other groups and public spaces, which not only undermines the safety and confidentiality of the group, but also puts people at risk of harassment. As will be further discussed below, this is a common occurrence for closed groups, especially those that have a larger number of members.

Furthermore, in January 2021 they posted an additional post elaborating on the rule that bans sharing of people's names and photographs in posts, followed by another post in August 2021, explaining which comments are considered inappropriate and what is categorised as constructive discussion. Here, they list 10 points related to appropriate commenting, such as relevance of the comment, tone of the comment, belittling of the experiences of others, disparaging comments, etc. The final point of the post refers to the diversity and sensitivity of the content shared in the group, emphasising again that some posts might be controversial for some people, but the group's main purpose is respectful discussion and exchange of opinions, stating:

This is a group that educates, provokes attitudes and opinions, posts memes and jokes about tricky topics – if you are constantly bothered by the narrative and the content is not for you, you don't have to spoil the experience for others.

Among other content, the majority of posts in the group are related to health advice or doctor recommendation, especially recommendations around pregnancy and motherhood.

Additionally, there are posts warning members about people that harass or that might be dangerous, or stalkers, promotional posts about events, sharing of interesting and useful materials, and other types of posts. To facilitate searching of posts, the admins have introduced 'topics', so that users could see if what they want to ask or post has been previously discussed. The topics include recommendations, beauty advice, 'it happened' for posts with stories about different experiences, memes, psychotherapy and humanitarian actions.

Memes are some of the most commented and shared posts in the group. The admins invite members to create their own memes by posting a template and initial memes created by them and then inviting the members to post their own in the comments. For example, the screenshot below shows one of these posts, where the admin has created several memes and calls on the members to do it as well, by declaring: 'WE HAVEN'T DONE MEMES IN A LONG TIME. You have the template in the comments, so share yours below'.

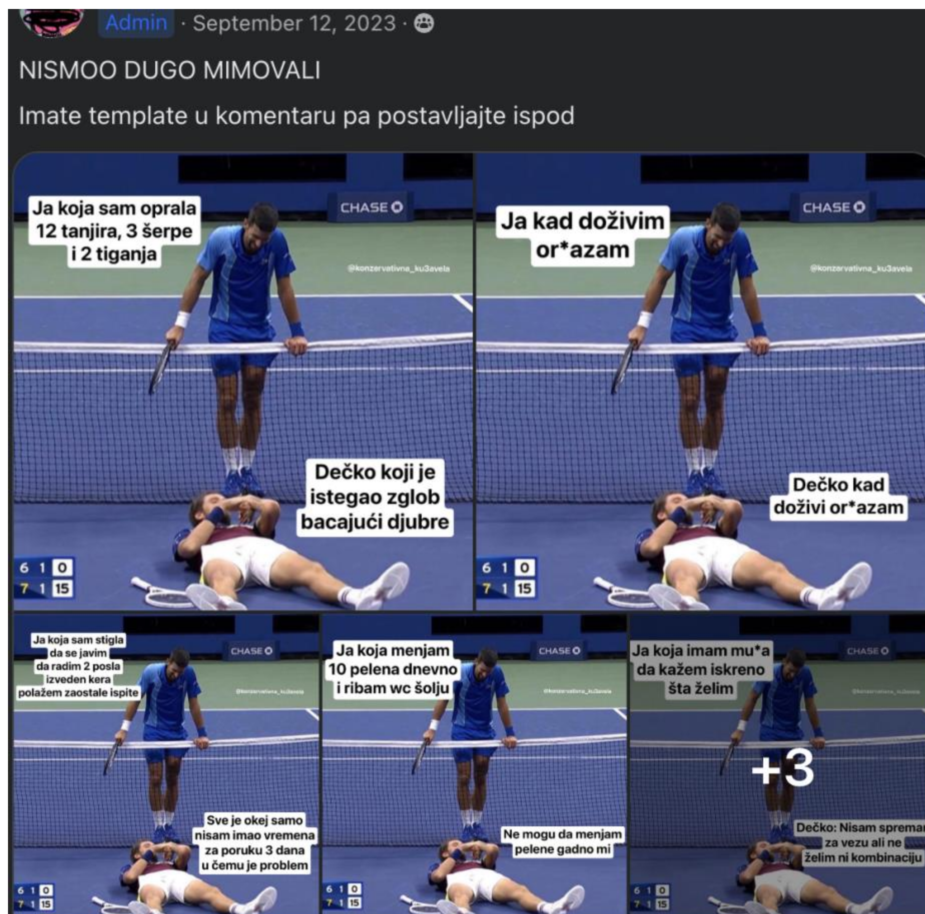

Figure 8: We haven't memed in a while. Women's business

As is often the case, the memes tackle gender stereotypes and traditional gender roles in the Balkans. By presenting two opposing positions of the tennis players, the meme is suitable to present contrasting examples in relation to gender stereotypes. The text in the shared memes with the template above have the text: 'Me who has washed 12 plates, 3 pots and 2 saucepans' for the tennis player who is standing, versus 'Boyfriend who sprained his wrist while taking the garbage out' for the player stretched on the floor; 'Me when I experience or*asm' for the tennis player standing, and 'My boyfriend when he experiences or*asm' for the one laying down; 'Me who has managed to do two jobs, take out the dog for a walk, pass the remaining exams' for the player standing, and 'It's all ok, I just didn't have the time to send you a message these 3 days, I don't know what the problem is' for the one laying down; 'Me who changes 10 diapers daily and clean up the toilet bowl' for the one standing, and 'I can't change diapers, it's disgusting' for the one laying down. All these use contrasting examples that tackle stereotypical behaviours in heterosexual relationships. They are used to demonstrate the heterosexual disparity in effort, particularly men's stereotypical incompetence and exhaustion after doing something that requires little effort, comparing it with women's ability to tackle several tasks simultaneously.

Another 'meme-away' post is the one presented below, showing the written text 'It doesn't matter if you are Muslim, Serb, or Croat, what's important is that – [added] you hate Jordan Peterson.'

Figure 9: It doesn't matter if you are Muslim, Serb or Croat. Women's business

This meme is highly contextualised for the Balkan region, touching on the historical disagreements between these populations, on the basis of religion and ethnicity. The added text mentions Jordan Peterson as a misogynist figure that is often detested in feminist circles. With this, the message of the poster is to show how feminist issues, or opposing anti-gender and anti-feminist figures is more important than anything else. It is something that could serve as a unifying force regardless of nationality or religion, which are the primary points of division in the Balkans. This initial meme is followed by others that have added different text, such as 'It doesn't matter if you are Muslim, Serb, or Croat, what's important is that – you differentiate religion from nationality'; 'It doesn't matter if you are Muslim, Serb, or Croat, what's important is that – you don't start every sentence with "All women…"'; 'It doesn't matter if you are Muslim, Serb, or Croat, what's important is that – you hate Andrew Tate'. These all refer to the same notion of divisions in the Balkans that could be rectified with one common feminist stance or belief.

Other posts in the group relate to a plethora of other topics and issues, such as seeking advice for choosing a gynaecologist, sharing experience with a psychologist, sharing educational content, sharing information about events, and other topics. Members can also post anonymously, depending on the sensitivity of the issue. Even though 'women's business' is a large group with members that are not only women but also men and LGBT+ persons, the moderators and admins of the group have imposed strict rules to be followed when it comes to participation, posting, and commenting in the group. With this, they have effectively created a space where women feel free to share their experiences, help and support each other, and laugh together. This inevitably comes with some implications for the investment of effort and time by the admins, as well as for the positioning of the group, which will be further discussed below.

Collective action: Women's solidarity

'Women's solidarity' ('Ženska solidarnost' in Serbian) is a feminist collective that commenced its activities in 2018 as a Facebook group and consequently transformed into a protest movement. Their slogan is 'Woman is not wolf to woman' which, as discussed above, dismantles a popular saying related to the traditionally perceived competitiveness and unfriendliness among women, reinforced by patriarchy. The cover photo of the Facebook page, shown below, states exactly that, with written 'Woman to woman' followed by crossed out 'wolf' and instead added 'in solidarity'.

Figure 10: Woman to woman – in solidarity. Women's solidarity

Besides the Facebook page, they have a website (www.zenskasolidarnost.org) with some information about the collective and a larger part with educational materials and blog posts, as well as accounts on X, Instagram and YouTube, each curated with the type of content appropriate for the platform. The collective uses multiple platforms with different aims. For example, as Elena, one of my interview participants and one of the founders of the collective, explained, the Facebook group serves as a space for organising and mobilising women who use Facebook as the main social network, primarily middle-aged women. In comparison, the Instagram page and the profile on X (formerly Twitter) is focused predominantly on younger women who are primary users of these platforms. The content shared on different platforms and the manner of communication is adapted in accordance with these aims.

Elena also provided me with more insight into the growth of the group, the motivations, and the organisation. She explained that the group of young feminists first started gathering in

the closed private group on Facebook, which was created in 2018 as a '*space where women shared whatever they wanted related to women's issues'.* Their first public reaction was in 2020, when they released a statement regarding what they perceived as 'demonisation' of women's right to abortion. On their website, it is stated that their first public reaction as a collective was to the inaccurately shared number of abortions in Serbia, asking the Institute of Public Health to share the correct data. This was the moment when they realised that, in order to have their voices heard and make a change, they needed to act as a collective. As Elena explained:

> *That's when we went out publicly, and soon after that we decided that if we wanted to react, we needed to create a collective, so that women who wanted to be active could come together.*

One of the co-founders of the collective, Jelena Riznić, has also shared her experience as a victim of stalking since 2019 in the media, stating that feminism saved her, giving her a purpose when she felt desperate and exhausted (Gajic and Tizard, 2024). She shared her story publicly to call for increased protection for women by the authorities, which blends with and in some ways reinforces her activism in the collective. She, and the other founders of the collective, have been outspoken about the inertness of the institutions, the widespread tolerance and normalisation of violence against women, and the rampant victim-blaming.

As also stated on their website, they felt empowered and decided to create a platform through which they would communicate with a larger group of women and officially opened their website and social media on 1 February 2021. Since then, they have organised different protests and have issued various public reactions. They organised a protest against trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation, series of protests against violence against women and the relativisation of rape in the media, and a protest against femicide. Furthermore, they have organised lectures and discussions on the topic of prostitution, abortion and femicide, discussions on sexual harassment at universities, and other events. The Facebook group remained a space where they would share various educational, awareness raising, and more rarely entertaining materials with women who joined their collective. For that purpose, they

have created a shared folder with materials of feminist theory and literature which is available to all members of the group.

The posts published in the group range from educational, for example, on women's health, or prominent women in history, to consciousness-raising on the 'myths of sex work', violence against women, femicides, and other topics. There are also calls for protests and invitations for various public discussions, trainings, and other educational events. One of the most recent activities they engaged in was collecting testimonies and experiences of women on sexual harassment at universities, followed by a protest, which resulted in impeding the appointment of a person against whom numerous women made claims of sexual harassment in the position of dean at one public university.

The main message of the collective is 'Solidarity is our strength', solidifying the driving force and objective of their activities which are based on beliefs that individuals can engage with others as a group and 'bring about radical, visionary change, standing and acting together' (Sweetman, 2013, p. 217). On their webpage, it is stated:

> *We are an informal feminist collective working on education on the position of women in the society. We react to societal practices and policies that are detrimental to women with statements, actions, and protests*.

They further emphasise that their work is explicitly on a voluntary basis and that they do not accept funding from big donors, instead building their women's movement through independent funding, '*keeping in mind only the welfare of women'.* This is where they differ from most of the other feminist organisations in the region who largely depend on foreign donors to be able to sustain themselves and their work. As mentioned above, this dependence of foreign donations is also decisive for the direction of the activities, since they must be in line with the donor's priorities (Bias, 2019).

The decision to be independent and not rely on foreign donations is also related to their ideology by which they guide their work. Namely, the collective is mainly comprised of young women in their twenties who identify as radical feminists and their main focus of work and

activism, as stated on their webpage, is drawing attention to male violence against women and advocating for the '*eradication of prostitution, pornography, surrogacy and sexual roles'.* This position has certainly alienated them from many of the other feminist groups and organisations that function in the region and has garnered some criticism and created conflicts for them. This important aspect is discussed in more detail below.

The collective gained more visibility when they organised a series of protests against the relativisation of rape in the media in 2022. The protests were organised after one Serbian tabloid newspaper published an interview with a rapist who was just released from prison, having served a 15-year sentence for numerous rapes and assaults on women (Kalan, 2023). In the interview, the rapist, among other things, gave advice to women what to do in case they find themselves in a situation of risk of rape or sexual assault and stated that if he decided to rape someone, he would certainly do it, since it was liberating for him (Kalan, 2023). After the interview was published, there was a strong reaction by feminists in Serbia, with support from the region, and 'Women's solidarity' took the initiative to take the protests to the streets and publicly express the revolt of women in relation to sexism and misogyny in the media and the widespread rape culture in the society. Being at the forefront of these protests, they gained visibility and more followers and members on social media.

Gaining more visibility and consequently more followers and members after the successful organisation of the protests, at the beginning of October 2022, they needed to reiterate their position and the purpose of the group, as well as their ideological beliefs. They published a post on Facebook where they introduced the rules for participation in the group, namely that everything posted in the group should stay in the group, since women often share personal experiences, in addition to discussions on theory and various texts. Here, they also emphasise their position as strictly guided by the need to fight violence against women and other practices they consider harmful for women, as well as the need for women's autonomous spaces, such as the private group. They state:

> *Dear all, we are glad that the call for protest was successful, the pact definitely started from this group. Since there will be new members here, we want to introduce you to a few rules. First of all, we are a feminist collective and our principles and values are not*

a secret: everything that is bad for women, we fight against it, we don't glorify violent practices. We consider gender as an oppressive practice, not as an identity, therefore we are in a gender critical position. So, we are against all forms of violence against women: prostitution, surrogacy, pornography, male violence. The focus of our ideological position is physicality and emphasizing the importance of women's autonomous spaces (this group strives to be one of the safe virtual spaces for women). For the group to function, the basic rule is that what is written in the group, stays in the group. In addition to discussions on theory, texts, women often share personal experiences (if some of the new members want to share something, you have the option to do it anonymously or to contact one of the admins).

In this post they clearly state they assume a 'gender critical' position, and that they consider gender 'as an oppressive practice, not as an identity'. With this, the women of 'Women's solidarity' clearly position themselves regarding some of the most debated and contested notions and categories within contemporary feminism. Namely, the division in the feminist movement in the Balkans has recently gained increased attention and importance (Bilić, 2022; Pan, 2023; Radoman, 2023). As discussed below in more detail, these views and opinions have garnered criticism about the collective being exclusionary and not truly feminist, alienating some people and adding to the atmosphere of exclusion and intolerance.

More recently, their activity on Facebook has gradually diminished, as Elena stated, due to the '*other social networks that are quicker'.* However, Elena emphasized that Facebook and the closed group there are very important for them as a collective and that she considers Facebook to be the best platform for discussion and organising, where '*women with similar opinions can gather, so there can be a nice discussion, in a sense that it's productive*'. Apart from the complexities and controversies of their activism, 'Women's solidarity', as a collective functioning independently, serves as an example of young women's organising facilitated by digital media. It demonstrates the effective use of social media for feminist organising and functioning, achieving wide transnational visibility in speaking back to particular misogynistic policies and reporting, for a period of time.

Collecting, collating and commenting: Safe wall of chauvinist shame

'Safe wall of chauvinist shame' is a Macedonian closed private group with strict privacy and safety measures and very limited membership. The group was created in the midst of public protests and wide discussions and debates in mass media and on social media regarding the newly discovered groups and chats on the application Telegram, where men shared personal information and photographs of girls and women. Faced with the reality that, due to the novelty of the issue and the lack of legal framework to address it, there was no effective way for women to protect themselves and bring the perpetrators to justice, these safe spaces were created to serve as a kind of respite for women. The group serves as space where women share evidence of sexism and misogyny they encounter online and in their personal life, allowing them to comment, share their responses, and support each other. Notably, it is a group that fosters intersectionality, with members who identify themselves as sex workers, activists, trans activists, and other. Due to its closedness and strict rules for membership, there is a sense of safety that allows participants to be open about their identities. The group admins have listed only one rule, which is 'Respect of privacy', stating:

> *The aim of this group is to ensure that victims of sexual harassment and violence are safe and free to express themselves, even if it is shocking or offensive*.

However, this group is actually the second version of the group created with this purpose. The difference is that they have added the word 'safe' in the name of the group and that is has much more restricted membership. The moderators of the first group, overtaken by enthusiasm and optimism in creating a space to discuss a burning issue, put very little protections in place, allowing the group to grow exponentially very quickly. However, without proper rules and protections, the group very quickly descended into chaos, with people arguing with each other and content leaking outside of the group. Due to the lack of control on the membership, the group was also infiltrated by 'trolls', whose only aim was to hijack and disrupt the discussion and ridicule the group and its members (Lumdsen and Morgan, 2018). Therefore, the moderators decided to delete the group with all its content and create a new, much smaller group, with much more restrictions when it comes to the admission of members. To become a member of the new group, a person needs to be 'recommended' by

an existing member with explanation to the moderators who they are. They also added the word 'safe' in the title of the new group, so that it would be clear that these measures are in place and members would not need to worry that what has happened in the previous group might repeat in the new one.

The first post in the group 'Safe wall of chauvinist shame' dates to 1 February 2021, when the group was created, and it is an explanation of the strict rules of the group and the connection and differences with the first group. It is also an invitation for everyone in the group to 'vent', posting and commenting, without fear that they could be harassed, as had been the case in the first group. The post is also pinned in the group description:

> *Considering the number of moles in the previous group, we decided that it is better to make a new safe group, with stricter filtering of members, where women and all victims of chauvinist violence can express themselves and vent without the risk of being labelled, insulted and shamed. The goal is the same as for the previous group: we post chauvinistic public comments, but we will be careful when posting private messages to protect the person's privacy.*

The second post in the group clearly reassures the member that the newly created group is safer than the previous one and that the members do not need to worry that contents would leak outside of the group and create distressing situations. The admin additionally apologises to the women who were harassed in private messages and blames herself that the situation escalated to that point:

> *Screenshots from the previous group have surfaced on Twitter, we're all pissed off and upset about the attacks that have been going on these days. Some girls were also harassed in private messages. First, I want to apologize to everyone who has gone through something like this. I am most angry with myself that you were put in such a situation. The previous group was created without much thinking about the consequences and thus without clear rules for group administration and settings. It shouldn't have happened. We are anyway sufficiently unsafe and exposed to daily*

humiliations, so I apologize personally to all of you who suffered any harassment due to the previous group. If you need any support or help, contact me in private message. I want to reassure you all that this group here is completely safe, secret, and with strict screening of members.

A couple of days after the initial post, the admin made another post to say thank you to the members for respecting the rules and to apologise that the approval of members might be slow, due to the need for additional checking of every new recommended member. Again, she emphasises that all measures are in place so that what happened in the first group does not repeat and that they need to be careful not only with men who might be 'trolls' but also with 'pick-me girls' who she thinks were responsible for the leaked content from the first group. The post reads:

Dear friends and allies, first of all, I want to thank you all for your activity and for respecting the rules. I hope this will remain to be a safe space as it is now. I see that you are inviting members, which is great. I apologise that I have to write you private messages and act as a policeman [smiley face] but we have to make sure that the chaos from the previous group will not repeat… This group is safe for women, allies, LGBT+ people, you name it… We are more careful with straight men, which I think is understandable, but we also want to be careful with pick-me girls, as we saw in the previous group, those were the ones that made the most harm [sad face]. Anyway, for now everything is good, so THANK YOU!

The content shared in the group is varied. Women share their opinions on different issues, such as sex work, sexual harassment, sexism in the media, victim blaming, and other topics of concern. Additionally, there are posts about the case 'Public room', the name of the first discovered Telegram group, which was the initial impetus for the group, and new groups discovered on Telegram. There are also posts warning the members about someone or a public place where there might be some threat of sexual harassment or violence. Finally, there are posts related to defining or localising various terms related to women's discrimination and gender roles, by proposing translation of English words that might not

have a suitable word in Macedonian, for example ‘gaslighting’, ‘mansplaining’, ‘manspreading’, and other similar words.

In its essence, the group has kept its initial aim, as in the first group, that is calling out men and women who post sexist and misogynistic comments and images. These are often explicitly violent. For example, one post is a screenshot of a comment made on X (Twitter) stating ‘Rape comes from heaven’, which is a sexist variation of an old saying with Turkish origin, commonly used in the Balkans, glorifying physical punishment of children, ‘Beating comes from heaven’. Another post presents a disturbing image of a young blonde girl’s head being held by a man’s large hand close to his naked hip, with the comment ‘When you buy yourself a new ball and you brag about it to your friends’. The member who posted the image to the group has added the comment: ‘It’s incredible how much chauvinism is hidden behind “humour” in “humorous” groups on Facebook’. Another example of the content shared in the group is a screenshot from a sexist Facebook post by a Macedonian journalist where he stated: ‘There are so many ugly and disgusting feminists in the world that when a pretty girl tells me she is a feminist – I just don’t believe her. Actually, when I think more about it, a pretty woman can be a feminist only if she wants to follow trends’. The discussion in the comments under the post revolve around the character of the man, who is known to the women in the group, where they conclude that such statement would be expected from a person like him, a middle-aged traditionalist and chauvinist from the Balkans.

The most intense activity in the group was during the first three months of its existence. It has sustained some form of discussion and activity until August 2021, after which women have been posting sporadically, and the last post is from 10 May 2022. The strict and diligent screening of members and the privacy and safety of the group have allowed for a space without conflict and chaos, a space where women and other members would feel safe to openly criticise sexism and misogyny and people who promote it, but at the same time it has closed off the opportunity for debate and discussion with people who might have some differing opinions and views. In this manner, the group has created a ‘feminist filter bubble’ (Kanai and McGrane, 2021) where agreeing opinions and statements echoed each other until there was no more need for confirmation and validation. Therefore, activity in the group has slowly faded, to the point that in 2024, there are no new posts. However, it is worth noting

that the group was most active during the COVID-19 pandemic, which might also be one of the reasons why it has not sustained the same level of activity. Nevertheless, it serves as a good example for a safe space online with very strict regulations and membership.

Having provided some information about the observed groups for this analysis, I continue the discussion with some of the commonalities and differences I have noted from the observation of these online spaces for women and the interviews I conducted with women who participate in these spaces, noting the limitations and complexities of fostering safe spaces online. Ultimately, these 'safer spaces' (Clark-Parsons, 2018) are necessary for feminist organising and building women's solidarity and support, however they are extremely difficult to sustain, requiring an immense amount of voluntary labour by moderators and admins, clearly delineated rules and mutual understanding and shared sensitivities of the members.

Affordances and limitations of women's spaces online

Similar to consciousness-raising feminist spaces of second-wave feminism (hooks, 2000), feminist groups on Facebook mainly serve as spaces for women to share their experiences, learn from each other, and develop a sense of community, solidarity, and collective identity (Pruchniewska, 2019). My analysis and the various discussions and observations I conducted throughout this research, demonstrated that these spaces are crucial for feminist political activism and dissemination of feminist ideas. These are spaces where feminist solidarity is being build and sustained and common action planned and enacted in online and offline spaces.

Groups and online spaces, in general, where women with similar interests and experiences gather, are also spaces where 'emotional convergence' occurs, both between individuals and in groups (Anderson and Keltner, 2004). Such convergence of emotions allows coordination of attention, thoughts, and behaviours, improved understanding between individuals, as well as closeness and comfort (Ibid.). Furthermore, some of these new consciousness-raising groups in the digital sphere are more than just spaces where women gather to discuss issues

related to sexism, they also serve to re-politicise young people and familiarise them with feminism and the feminist cause through digital activism (Blevins, 2018; Pruchniewska, 2019). In this way, groups on Facebook provide private spaces where women can gather to organise protests and other actions, share resources, disseminate information, and discuss different issues related to their activism (Trott, 2023).

Digital media facilitate the formation of spaces where women with similar interests, goals, and experiences can gather and discuss, plan, and advocate for various issues. Even when there is absence of debate and discussion in these spaces, expressed mostly in the comments section, there is still listening and learning taking place (Coffey and Kanai, 2021). Furthermore, due to the affordances of digital platforms to allow for things to exist beyond their actual use and engagement, the groups that are created with some specific purpose, even when they are no longer active, are still there and can easily be reactivated for some future related or unrelated campaign or activity (Trott, 2023).

The interview participants mainly acknowledged the benefits of being a member of a group with a mutual goal and understanding around feminist sensitivities. For many of them, the experience of expressing their feminist ideas on social media and being harassed for it, was a 'unifying and galvanizing experience' (Blevins, 2018, p. 94) and they perceived the group as a safe space where the risk of men's violence is removed (Lewis et al., 2015). For example, Elena, who is one of the co-founders of the feminist collective 'Women's solidarity', acknowledged the importance of support provided by the group in cases of critique, sexist attacks, or disagreements. She stated that '*it's much easier when you are in a collective… even when you are subjected to attacks, or critique, it's much easier*'. Just having the space for sharing was sufficient for her to feel some form of empowerment:

> *Even if you don't agree with some women, it's much easier when you have somewhere to share it. It creates a feeling that I am doing something, that I am not just angry in my four walls, but that I share it with other women…*

She also acknowledged that being together in a group made it possible for them to react to certain issues and to organise protests, stating: *'When we would react to something, it was*

because we were together'. Significant aspect of the formation of these spaces and the communication and collaboration practices within them is that the groups that have members who are more emotionally similar, have better cohesion and are more coordinated, with a sense of mutual work towards a common goal (Anderson and Keltner, 2004).

At the same time, groups are subjected to various disruptions, in the form of male harassment, or cybertrolling (Balka, 1993; Herring et al., 2002), intergroup and interpersonal conflict, as well as the notion of male surveillance practices on social media (Megarry, 2018). Disruptions can have the effect of strengthening the sense of community of the online group, as well as to create conflict and completely derail the discussion among the group members (Herring et al., 2002; Kanai, 2023). Expressions of anger and frustration in feminist spaces online can lead to conflictual situations with 'cancelling', 'dogpiling' and banning and removal of members by the administrators (Coffey and Kanai, 2021).

Tijana talked about her experience as a moderator of the group that was formed as a space to discuss and raise awareness on the proliferation of sexism and misogyny with the newly discovered groups on Telegram, where men shared photographs and personal information of women and girls. As discussed above, the first group of 'Safe wall of chauvinist shame', in the quest for an open and democratic space, did not have the necessary protections in place, quickly descending into chaos. Without the rules and controls, the moderators were not able to track and sanction the content that was discussed and shared in the group. As Tijana explained, when they created the group, it was only two or three moderators, and as the group grew, there were too many administrators and members, becoming very chaotic. There were too many posts, not enough regulation and control of what was being posted, by whom, and in what manner. Furthermore, there was not much possibility to enforce proper protection of the identity of the people being posted in the group, therefore it all escalated very soon. Some of the more serious incidents happened when posts were shared in the group without protecting the identity of the persons in the posts. Some of these were leaked outside of the group and the situation escalated with threats and insults to the moderators and the posters. As Tijana, with resignation in her voice, explained:

> *There were some problematic men, and the women who were in the group were loyal to them... for example, there was a girl who was angry at me because her boyfriend was angry at her, things like that.*

Furthermore, the lack of control on the membership allowed the group to be infiltrated by 'trolls'. '*There was general chaos… They were only fighting in the group… I don't know what to say…'*, Tijana concluded, with disappointment. Subsequently, they deleted the group and opened the much smaller and very controlled 'Safe wall of chauvinist shame', which I discussed in detail above. Tijana noted that for a group to be safe, it '*needs to be very small, closed, and very protected'.* However, in that case, when safety is achieved, there is lack of discussion and debate to animate the group, or as Tijana put it, '*in that case, at a certain point you turn in circles, because everyone agrees'.* This is one of the main contradictions in framing women's safe spaces online, the 'feminist filter bubbles' (Kanai and McGrane, 2021) that allow for a sense of safety, openness and freedom (Lewis et al., 2015), but at the same time limit the possibility of discussion, disagreement, and deliberation with a different point of view.

Katerina, who currently curates her feminist Instagram profile, shared a similar experience to Tijana's. She recounted that the first group she moderated was a closed Facebook group, where only women were members, and where '*women shared information, alerted each other about violent men… women would post about their personal experiences with violent men with the intent to alert other women in the group to avoid them'*. Katerina created the group after her own experience with violence, with an optimistic and ideological view to build female community where women could help and support each other. To her disappointment, it did not take long for the group to encounter a major disruption that led to her deleting the group and reconsidering the manner of online organizing around sensitive topics such as violence against women.

Similar to what Tijana told me about the group where sexist and misogynistic behaviour was being called out, screenshots of people posted in the group were leaked outside of the closed group creating problems for the women who had posted them. As Katerina explained, *'it was a closed group only for women, and then some women from the group took screenshots of*

the posts and sent them to the men'. This created chaos, where women were blaming each other and some even feared for their safety, since the group's aim was posting men who in many cases were violent. As Katerina was the moderator of the group, she felt that it was her personal failure. Additionally, she felt the failure even more because the disruption was caused by women who were in the group. This is one of the many cases where women's solidarity and the creation of an amalgamated community fails. For Katerina, closed groups on Facebook are a solution '*at some theoretical level',* however she thought that building communities around sensitive topics such as violence against women needs much more awareness and very strict moderation, which is often lacking in the Balkans, since, as she concluded, '*we don't have awareness*, *feminists in the Balkans do not have enough practical experience'* to deal with these issues.

What is perhaps most important for women's groups formed online, both explicitly and implicitly feminist, as spaces where women gather, share experiences, opinions, pose questions, discuss, and organise online activities, is that they serve as spaces where women organise for offline activities, such as street protests, targeted actions, media presence, or other activities and events. 'Women's solidarity' can serve as an example for women's Facebook group that has grown to be a collective organising street protests, acquiring visibility, and mobilising crowds of not just women in the group but also outside.

What is notable in all these examples is the figure and the role of the administrator or moderator of the group. These women assume the positions of leaders and controllers, providing voluntary labour to sustain the group and the communication dynamics in it (Cirucci, 2018; Kanai and McGrane, 2021). They also assume the position of 'stars' of the group who discuss the issues in the mass media and are identified to represent the group's ideas and positions, in the absence of a formal structure of the group (Freeman, 1972; Trott, 2018). This can create tensions within the group, with members who might think that the 'leader' does not represent their own beliefs and opinions, at the same time placing the 'leaders' in a more precarious position through their increased visibility (Trott, 2018). Some of these aspects will be further elaborated in the following section.

Conflict, inclusion and exclusion in digital feminist spaces

Divisions withing feminist movement has been an increasing problem in the Balkans, gaining more attention with the proliferation of the 'anti-gender movement' (Bilić, 2022; Pan, 2023; Radoman, 2023). As discussed above, right-wing groups in the region are characterised by 'strong nationalism, conservatism, xenophobia, and authoritarianism' (Radoman, 2023, p. 146), emphasising preservation of traditional values, national identity, and assuming critical stance towards Western influences, perceived as forces that want to destroy the traditional values (Darakchi, 2019). As transgender population in the region has gained more visibility recently, it has also become focal point in these anti-gender campaigns led by right-wing parties, the church, and a network of national and international actors, garnering the support of conservative or trans-exclusionary radical feminists (Bilić, 2022; Radoman, 2023). Within this constellation, groups that identify as pro-left and pro-feminist and are publicly recognised to be part of the feminist movement in the region, have recently started to employ right-wing arguments and rhetoric, overlooking the 'essential connection between transphobia, homophobia, and misogyny' (Radoman, 2023, p. 150).

In this context, when discussing groups as spaces for sharing and supporting, it is important to point to the complexities of such groups and the possibilities of conflict within them. What might be noticeable for the groups on social media and for women's groups and organisations in general in the region, is the existence of the 'us' and 'them' rhetoric when positioning themselves and their feminism (Trott, 2023). Namely, the members of the group need to have similar or identical views on important matters that might be otherwise dividing. However, in this way, the possibility for open discussion in these feminist spaces can be limited and contested and they risk being turned into 'feminist filter bubbles' (Kanai and McGrane, 2021), where members are in agreement with each other and there is no diversity of opinions.

The observation of the dynamics of communication and feminist formations on social media, supplemented with the findings from the interviews with feminist activists, has confirmed the notion that there are different types of feminism that intersect and sometimes clash due to different ideological beliefs, professionalisation and dependence on donor funding of certain

civil society organisations, as well as rigid and inaccessible structures. While the feminisms and the views and perceptions of gender, gender roles, and marginalisation of the participants and groups included in the research are mainly intersectional, I have also included one group where women affiliate with radical feminism. Groups and individuals that identify as radical feminists advocate for criminalisation of sex work and support gender critical positions. With this positioning, even though mainly not explicitly, they exclude transwomen and trans activists, as well as sex workers from their activism.

I discussed this issue of division and exclusion with Elena, who is one of the co-founders of the radical feminist collective 'Women's solidarity' and who shared with me their perspective in relation to this issue. As someone who also identifies as feminist activist, I was interested to hear 'the other side' and explore the conflict, pondering on the areas of convergence and reconciliation. As also discussed above, 'Women's solidarity' clearly state that they are radical feminists and their main focus of activism is violence against women and other practices they consider to be harmful, such as pornography, prostitution and surrogacy. They do not engage in directly discussing trans issues, however they organise workshops and lectures on gender critical feminism. While all these practices they consider to be 'harmful' are inherently exclusionary, criticisms are mainly aimed at the discussion on trans issues, due to its relevance in the current context of anti-gender discourses in the region. There was a big controversy when one lecture they organised, that was to take place in the Belgrade Library, was cancelled due to pressure from an LGBT+ organisation which instigated further debates around the divisions within the feminist movement in Serbia (Milovac, 2023).

Elena recounted that, due to her open ideological affiliation with radical feminism, she had been subjected to various attacks, being placed on what was known as a '*culling list',* grouped with '*nazi and right-wing politicians'.* According to her, the conflict was mainly between them and one trans activist who was posting hateful things about them in another group. She had seen some of the content posted about them and explained that the comments posted about them are extremely violent, with '*photo of a bat, photo of a knife… what they would do to us because we are nazi and we deserve it'*. She felt that these attacks were unfounded since they have emerged as a collective to protest the ubiquitous rape culture and victim-blaming in sexual violence against women and these are the main goals of the group. For her, the conflict

and targeting were uncomfortable and disturbing primarily since it came from other activists, acknowledging the lack of healthy discussion. She elaborated that, in her opinion, everyone should be free to express their opinion and position without attacks or undermining, which, as she stated, was what they, as a collective, were doing. She emphasised that they had not posted or written anything that would directly refer to the group or trans activism and that their position is clear and does not refer to anything they have been accused of:

> *We, in 'Women's solidarity' are radical feminists, if you look at our website it will be clear to you, there is no hate, our focus is just the female body, embodiment, that's what attracted me to radical feminism.*

However, by observing the posts in the group and scrolling back, I found several posts that discussed matters of de-transitioning, sex and gender, use of women's spaces, and support of notable trans-exclusionary feminists, like JK Rowling. It is to be noted, though, that these posts were mainly posted by very few members of the group and there are no posts of this nature by the admins and moderators of the group. Elena emphasised that she has been to numerous events with transgender people, and she has '*never experienced any aggression from trans people',* although she had '*from trans activists*', as threats in certain Facebook groups. She also emphasised that she did not feel uncomfortable or scared to be in public spaces due to these online attacks.

It appeared that the positioning of the collective aimed to set the direction of the feminist activism of the group, primarily concerned with violence against women perpetrated by men, though this created exclusions. Similar to what Trott (2023) discussed in her analysis of exclusion and inclusion in feminist activism, their purpose and hope was to engage a large collective in single-issue campaigns, but 'at the expense of standing in solidarity with and recognising, and thus legitimising, the very existence of some of [their] most marginalised comrades' (p. 139). What was even more appealing to me about this group and what motivated me to include it in the research, was the fact that the co-founders of the collective are young women in their 20s, a younger generation of feminists, who align themselves with conservative strains of feminism, indicating to a more general backsliding towards more traditional positions in relation to gender and women.

While Elena and her collective took a firm stance in their approach to feminism, the other participants I interviewed expressed their desire to learn more about feminism which could also imply that they would be open to change their position if they deemed it necessary. In this sense, being a feminist who expresses and enacts feminism in digital media spaces is an ongoing project that involves 'undoing and unlearning the systems of heteropatriarchy' (Trott, 2023, p. 140). This position also mirrored my own, which I confirmed and expanded during the time I conducted the research and discussed different aspects of feminism and feminist activism with the participants and observed social media spaces. In this sense, the discussion with the feminists with whom I do not agree has also enriched my understanding of feminist practices and formations in the Balkan context.

For the participants who have found themselves embroiled in the conflict, but who have a different approach to feminism, the existence of visible divisions and conflicts among feminists and activists who should be fighting for the same or similar causes was very disappointing. Andrea, who is also in her 20s and was active in feminist and student protests, discussed what was happening with 'Women's solidarity' and her disappointment to see the arguments that created conflict and divisions. It was important for her to also discuss how, as she acquired more knowledge around feminism and feminist activism, she was reassessing her beliefs and positions. She stated that the discussion around trans issues was '*the biggest problem*' in the group, which considerably irritated her. She said that she was very confused with everything. To her, it seemed like there were two sides that were at war, some LGBT organisations on one side and some feminists on the other, while the rest of the members were trying to understand what was happening and who was in the right. She further contemplated and expressed how what was happening was also frightening, in a way. The situation in the group, along with the situation she was facing with her political activism which made her a target of harsh gendered hate speech, as described above, soon became too much for her to bear and she decided to withdraw from social media for a while.

During that period, as she was expanding her network socialising online and offline, she also became friends with a trans girl which further helped her reconsider and realign her feminist

views and positions. As she explained, she started to understand the situation and became more aware how problematic and harmful divisions are:

> *It might make sense in some situations, to have a space exclusively for women, but the whole fight against violence in general became clearer to me, because it does not come only from men and not only women are victims, trans people are also subjected to violence, and not only that, but women can also be violent...*

Since that moment, she started identifying as intersectional feminist, departing from her previous beliefs she described as '*anti different issues, such as anti-prostitution, anti-pornography…'.* Some of these issues were still important to her but inclusivity became the priority and the guiding force for her activism. When I asked her for some more clarification on her positioning, she emphasised that she was '*firmly on trans people's side',* because she believed that no one should be subjected to violence, and '*knowing more on what they go through, I think everyone has the right to decide about their own life and not be subjected to violence'*.

This is an important aspect to consider when examining the affordances and limitations of digital media spaces, as spaces where feminist values and beliefs can be re-examined and recalibrated (Coffey and Kanai, 2021; Kanai, 2023), not only to form alliances but to facilitate visible support to marginalised groups which might be excluded from some spaces. Being in these spaces, opens the possibility for further offline building alliances and socialising, as well as aligning beliefs and opinions in support of marginalised communities. Advocating more for this approach to feminism and feminist activism might alleviate some of the oppositions and conflicts that mainly arise in these digital spaces, but which are constituted and fed by the wider political, social and cultural context.

Male surveillance and regulation of safe spaces

Drawing on theories on gender and technology that explore the intrinsic gendered conceptualisation of technology, the final important aspect to analyse and discuss around safe spaces online is the notion of male surveillance of such spaces and its implications on feminist activism (Megarry, 2018), as an expression of the underlying power relations (Andrejević, 2015). What emerged from the discussions and observation of public digital media spaces is that these spaces are imbued with violence expressed through trolling (Lumdsen and Morgan, 2018), shaming, e-bile (Jane, 2014), cyber-bullying, stalking (Ellison and Akdeniz, 1998), sexting (Powell and Henry, 2017), and other forms of harassment and abuse, or the persistent threat of such behaviours. Private spaces online, on the other hand, provide some respite (Pruchniewska, 2019; Trott, 2023), however they are further problematised due to the 'surveillance network' character of Facebook, as a platform that is 'regulated and searchable, and can be forced to provide information to government agencies' (Shaw, 2014, p. 276).

Some of the interview participants emphasised the important aspect related to regulation and freedom of expression on social media platforms, as important for providing control and security to feminists online. Katerina, who manages her feminist Instagram account, discussed verification of public accounts on social media as an important aspect in relation to protection, authority, and practices of social media regulation, and how it was her perception that social media platforms are reluctant to verify feminist accounts in the Balkans. This issue is entangled with the broader discussion around online spaces as intrinsically masculine public spaces, where women's participation is limited (Massey, 1994; Wajcman, 2010). It is also an important part of women's online participation that produces affective states that have impact on various aspects of women's experiences, self-confidence, autonomy, and empowerment. Katerina emphasised that '*women who use digital space to talk about feminist topics, have absolutely no protection mechanism'*. She explained that she was trying to verify her account on Instagram by sending all the documentation that is required for verification, fulfilling all the criteria, however her requests have been denied. Her suspicion was that it was because of the topic she posts on – feminism. She further explained that verification is

performed by people who are employed locally, therefore she suspected there was prejudice in the decision-making. She said that she had discussed this issue with other feminists who curate feminist accounts on Instagram and concluded:

> *It's impossible to verify feminist accounts in Serbia and Montenegro*. *We can't get verified, even though that verification would provide us with additional levels of protection for the account*. *It's simply how it is. They just don't want it. They don't want us to have some higher level of protection when we talk about feminism. If we were someone's pet* [referring to accounts of animals that get verifications]*, we would have that protection, but since we talk about women's rights, it's 'sorry, but fuck it'*.

The reported difficulty in obtaining verification is important to present here, as one more element of women's experiences with feminist activism in digital media. It demonstrates the prism through which feminists work and enact their feminism, the perception that societal discrimination is present in every aspect of life and work and that there is a constant perceived vulnerability. This constant vulnerability is also shaped by algorithmic control. Tufekci (2017), examining social movement dynamics and social media platforms, addressed the power platforms exercise over content shared by users mainly through 'the ability to set the rules by which attention to content is acquired rather than by picking the winners directly, the way mass media had done in the past' (p. 138). She emphasises that these companies 'shape the rules, which give them real power, but they are also driven by user demand, creating a new type of networked gatekeeping' (Tufekci, 2017, p. 138). For social movements, the algorithmic control of content that social media platforms apply implies either increased visibility or content that is buried, which can be a big push or an obstacle (Ibid.). Ultimately, social media platforms are driven by their commercial aims and therefore push content that caters to those aims, combined with the ideological views of their founders (Tufekci, 2017; Nurik, 2019). It is important for women to call out these inequalities and force social media platforms to take more accountability in the moderation of content. It is ultimately social media platforms that decide the content that we engage with. This is important to take into consideration, especially in this moment of increased polarisation and ostracization of certain marginalised groups in our societies.

Tijana, who often posts memes and other content dismantling sexist and misogynistic stereotypes, discussed the important aspect that needs to be considered when discussing women's groups as safe spaces. She talked about the surveillance that exists within the social media platform itself (Megarry, 2018) and its implications for the freedom of expression exercised in such groups. She had been in the role of moderator of several closed women's groups, and she emphasised how she realised that there could never be full privacy on Facebook, that there would always be some regulation which impacts the perception of these spaces as authentic 'safe spaces':

> *You can help each other in a group for solidarity, for advice, but even in those groups there is surveillance by Facebook. Even in the small group, when I posted some meme, Facebook algorithm added some restrictions to my profile… There is never full privacy. And Facebook is part of the problem, platforms are part of the problem.*

Social media platforms are ultimately companies that are founded by men, therefore individual ideology has a much bigger influence than in a traditional established company (Tufekci, 2017). The process of content moderation of social media platforms is most often unclear, subjective, and discriminatory (Nurik, 2019). Analysis of gender-based censorship on Facebook has revealed that social media 'can never be neutral, equitable, or non-discriminatory, particularly when left to self-regulate' (Nurik, 2019, p. 2893). In this sense, while women's spaces online facilitate women's activism and collective action, as well as sharing of experiences and support, these spaces ultimately cannot be considered entirely autonomous spaces free of male interference (Shaw, 2014; Megarry, 2018). As discussed with Katerina and Tijana above, this is something that feminists constantly grapple with in their quest for safety and privacy. Therefore, the discussion about 'safe spaces' online is fraught with contradictions, and the best way to move forward is to discuss what Clark-Parsons (2018) refer to as 'safer spaces'.

Conclusion

The establishment of consciousness-raising groups through social media is what distinguishes the new feminist formations of what some scholars consider to be the fourth wave of feminism (Blevins, 2018). Young feminists, instead of joining recognised non-governmental organisations and a centrally organised movement, are gathering in communities, forming their consciousness-raising groups online, and are discussing issues that are relevant to their lived experiences (Lewis et al., 2015; Blevins, 2018; Clark-Parsons, 2018, 2022; Trott, 2018, 2023). Closed feminist groups on Facebook in many ways facilitate these new formations of feminism for young feminists and can even be considered indispensable for organising and engaging in collective action online and offline.

While feminist spaces online are crucial for feminist organising and collective action, they are also spaces with their own complexities in their modes of constituting and functioning. Disruptions in these group can have the effect of strengthening the sense of community, as well as to create conflict and completely derail the discussion among the group members (Herring et al., 2002; Kanai, 2023). Even though based on the idea of 'structurelessness' (Freeman, 1972) of feminist consciousness-raising groups, groups need moderators and administrators to keep control and moderate the communication in the group. These moderators and administrators consequently become the 'stars' of the group (Freeman, 1972; Tufekci, 2017; Trott, 2018, 2023). Mainly out of necessity, these women assume authoritative positions, with the ability to control the membership of the group, as well as the dynamics of communication in it. In the case of 'women's business', for example, the administrators needed to make several posts to delineate the rules of the group and emphasise that they will be the ones to implement the repercussions if those rules are not respected. In 'Women's solidarity', on the other hand, it was the decision of the administrators not to remove the content that could be considered offensive to some members, which ultimately brought them into a situation of conflict and debates. The case of 'Safe wall of chauvinist shame' can be used to best demonstrate the important position administrators and moderators have in these groups whose aim is to serve as safe spaces for women. Their desire to allow more freedom for the members resulted in chaos,

disagreements, and even harassment of some of the members. Thus, as Kanai and McGrane (2021) also discuss, it is important to note the labour these women perform and its importance for the functioning of the groups.

Discussing the amount of voluntary labour performed by administrators and moderators and the risks implied with a laxer approach to their role, leads to the conclusion that it is extremely difficult to define feminist spaces online as safe spaces. Even with the application of the highest security in a closed private group, there is always the need for caution and awareness of the structure and politics of the platform. Furthermore, communicative practices on social media platforms are constantly 'under watchful eyes of men' (Megarry, 2018), who impose their ideological beliefs and rules and regulations of the platform. Therefore, taking on Clark-Parsons's (2018) call for the rejection of the binary view of safety in digital spaces, it could be sufficient for feminists to strive for *safer* spaces instead of safe spaces online.

Another point important to emphasise here is the embeddedness of the communication dynamics and alliance formation of digital spaces in the wider social, cultural and political context. The feminist formations occurring in a context of neoliberalism and intense gender backlash have their own expressions in these conditions. This creates somewhat contradictory feminist identities that propagate solidarity, at the same time rejecting openness, acceptance and tolerance towards other marginalised groups. Therefore, taking into consideration the challenging context in which feminists today conduct their activism, perceiving feminist groups online, and digital spaces in general, primarily as spaces of learning, unlearning, sharing, and supporting, is more productive for the perceptions and impact of new digital feminist formations. More important than a call for inclusivity, is the call to feminist radical solidarity (Pan, 2023), in which 'woman is not wolf to woman' is unconditionally and categorically applied and effected.

8. FINAL CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTION

When I started conducting the research in 2021, my guiding focus of analysis was sexism and misogyny online as silencing mechanisms or motivators for action. During these three and a half years, as I was reading, discussing, presenting, watching, listening, and researching, I kept refocusing and recalibrating. At times, I was struggling to conceptualise and put into words the developments I was witnessing with feminist activism, sexism and misogyny, and gender equality in general, in the Balkans and globally. Therefore, this thesis is not an attempt to provide a straightforward answer to how feminist activism is formed and realised, but to offer a more ambiguous overview of the effects and implications of what women and girls are experiencing in online spaces, and the effects of those experiences on feminist activism and the fight for women's rights in the specific context of the Balkans. My belief that memories travel through time and space and shape the realities we live in in the present, especially the way we build collective identities and engage in movements (Hajek, 2016), underpins this analysis.

During the period I was conducting the research, many profound changes happened in the societies where my research is located and in the online spaces I was observing. The pandemic postponed the start of my research several times and then changed the ways we socialise and communicate in profound ways. There was also an important shift in the use of social media platforms, especially among the younger population. In the last couple of years, Facebook has become markedly less popular with this cohort, often perceived as a platform focusing only on profit and overrun by advertisements and an algorithm with a flaw in its design, that pushes away young users. Twitter, on the other hand, has become X, bought and run by one of the richest men in the world, and flooded with hateful content. Instagram, in the family of Facebook, still fares mostly well with the younger generations, however its primary focus remains on aesthetics and self-presentation, which in some ways, might undermine more complex content dealing with serious social and private issues. At the time I am finishing this thesis, TikTok has become the social media platform that facilitates in the most representative manner the Habermasian ideal public sphere, in ways that manage to be attractive and interesting for younger generations and engaging and informative for older ones. However, its use in the Balkans, still not as widespread as in Western societies, is already becoming a

topic of discussion as a new space where women and girls are harassed (Bami, 2024). These developments will necessitate new and current analyses to capture the intricacies of engagement with social media and situate them within the specific non-Western context of the Balkan societies.

Women's online participation and the challenges presented with the use of social media have been extensively discussed within Western academia and other relevant civil society and international organisations. While Western societies have been discussing and implementing measures to protect women in online spaces, this issue has been mainly neglected in some of the other parts of the world. To counter damaging narratives and eradicate discrimination and violence against women, there needs to be a concerted effort that would be global, transnational and comprehensive. This research, and its accompanying papers and presentations, will be a part of the wider collective efforts to tackle violence and discrimination against women.

Final reflection on my positionality as a researcher

I conducted this research during some very turbulent times, experiencing personal and social events that impacted my views and perspectives. Starting this research during the COVID-19 pandemic, experiencing social isolation, with digital spaces the only public space where socialisation occurred, deeply affected how I experienced and viewed social media platforms. These were spaces where my life was 'happening'. In the second year of the research, I moved to the other side of the world, to a completely new environment, and faced different challenges of adaptation. In this period, social media platforms were my safe space where I kept the connection with my family and friends back home.

At the same time, I was transcribing, translating, and analysing content that was very disturbing and in many ways triggering. I was listening to the women who, in some way, have become my friends, recounting some of their harrowing experiences in digital and other spaces. I looked at the screenshots and images they shared with me and recognised the

culture that upholds violence in all spheres of the society and places women and other marginalised groups in a secondary position. I listened to some of the women's stories describing specific episodes of violence and remembered the violence I would see around me, through my work and in my personal relationships.

I found myself in a position of contradictions and confusions. On one side, I was full of nostalgia for the culture that is mine, that makes me 'special' and different, and on the other side, the distance made me more aware of how 'toxic' that culture could be. With this awareness, and the realisation of how this could affect me and my mental health, I was careful to exercise self-reflection and implement some methods for self-preservation. Finalising the research, I am cognisant of how important this has been for me and therefore, my final thoughts here are an appeal for more self-reflexivity, empathy, and solidarity, in the hope of building feminism and feminist activism with more mutual understanding and collaboration.

The specificity of feminist formations in the Balkans

While writing and presenting excerpts of the thesis, I kept contemplating how I could capture all the nuances of the Balkan cultures which contribute to the specific formations and enactments of feminism. I had different encounters with various audiences where I would be asked for more clarification, more information, more emphasis on what makes the region 'unique'. I kept returning to some of the writings of feminist scholars who take a critical stance on the hegemony of the Western perspective within feminism. Thus, my aim is not to present the Balkans as a 'special' and different context, but to situate women's experiences from the region within the global discussions and concerns. To do this, I needed to acknowledge and examine both the similarities and the differences with Western formations of feminism, without falling into the trap of over-emphasising the 'Orientalism' of the Balkans within the Western discourse.

Women's experiences online and feminist digital publics require theorisation beyond Western feminist structures, 'empowerment' feminism and generalisations about 'Third

World Women'. This could be achieved by contextualisation through which women's experiences are situated within the context in which they occur, inextricably steeped in the wider social, cultural, political, and economic developments. As this analysis exemplifies, feminism in the Balkans is still primarily concerned with violence, harassment, and sexism, and feminist publics are formed as a reaction to the broader context of deeply entrenched patriarchy with all its elements of subjectification of women through violence and marginalisation. At the same time, we are witnessing a new 'pandemic' of gender backlash and violence against women around the world. This is especially visible and impactful in societies with fragile democracy and systems, like those in the Balkans. While online violence and harassment represent a significant part of the problem, especially within the context of neoliberalism, computerisation, and automation, it is still a fairly new phenomenon that has recently come to prominence in wider discussions.

There are several historical, social, and cultural points I consider to be crucial for the formation of new feminist identities in the region, and which are common for the countries of ex-Yugoslavia, which also have their own specificities and differences. As discussed in chapter 4, looking at the history of feminism in the Balkans, socialism was the first important feminist point of reference, due to its specific approach to women's rights and gender equality. It is important to note that feminism in the 1980s ex-Yugoslavia emerged in a society where gender equality was one of the primary postulates enacted through various policies mainly in the economy and the labour market. Since the society claimed to be gender equal, even integrating abortion in its constitution, little space was afforded for feminists to publicly advocate for women's rights, as was the discussion at that time in Western feminism. This historical perspective is very important, since it is the foundation on which feminism was ultimately built in the countries of ex-Yugoslavia.

Furthermore, as I discussed in chapter 4, it is important to note that some of the women active at the time of 'NGOisation' of women's organisations and activism in the 1990s (Bias, 2019), are still active in leadership positions in women's non-governmental organisations today. This creates a complex environment for new formations of feminist activism where younger generations of feminists not only need to find ways to deal with the open sexism and misogyny in their societies, but they also need to navigate societal and financial constraints

and conventions and find effective ways to express their feminism and advocate for issues that concern them.

An important aspect of these feminist formations in the 1990s is that the organisations and networks formed during that period and later are characterised by dependency on external (Western) donors for implementation of their activities, which then has repercussions on the identification of their priorities and their manner of work (Bias, 2019; Ghodsee, 2003). With substantial external funding and resources aimed at capacity building, often guided by Western values and manners of work, these established organisations and networks, for the most part, have become impenetrable, or unattractive for the younger generations of feminists, whose feminism is developed within the context of neoliberalism, globalisation, and 'popular feminism' (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Digital media has provided space for feminist organising that is not dependent on external donors and provides the freedom to young generations of feminists to use social media as their primary space of activism, organising collective actions and, in some cases, building their 'brand' as feminists. These pages and groups exemplify the central aspects of online feminist activism today, transcending borders and facilitating meaningful connections, linking specific local stories and context with the larger regional and global narratives of inequality (Baer, 2016).

An important point of distinction this thesis shows between expressions of feminism in the Balkans and feminism in Western societies is that for Western feminists, feminist activism and 'empowerment' are often linked to financial gains and economic empowerment, with the 'girlboss' paradigm and feminism being promoted and used by celebrities. For women in the Balkans, their activism is still mostly concerned with violence, harassment, misogyny, and sexism, with only initial traces of feminist figures who might capitalise on their expressions of feminism, mainly on Instagram and TikTok (for example, @kriticki and @tamponzona, discussed in Chapter 4). As this analysis demonstrates, feminist solidarity and communities of care are formed mainly as a reaction to the wider context of deeply entrenched patriarchy with all its elements of subjectification of women through violence and marginalisation. However, these new formations of feminist 'brands' will require further analysis.

Affordances and limitations of digital public spaces for feminist activism

Solidarity, communities of support and collective action are especially important for younger feminists in digital spaces, since their activism is independent from the larger organisations which are structures with established protection mechanisms, alliances, and safe modes of activism. The new generations of feminists move away from the formally established structures toward a '*do-it-ourselves* ethos of *networked feminism*' (Clark-Parsons, 2022, p. 153, italics in original). The freedom of participation provided by digital spaces enables collective action without the gatekeeping of the established leaders in the feminist movement. This is one of the main affordances of digital spaces for feminists today.

Feminists are able to engage and disengage in different causes and groups in digital spaces, as they learn, communicate and advocate on various topics. They are able to find their 'tribe', as shared sensibilities, humour, awareness, beliefs, and knowledge links them to other women. As discussed in Chapter 7, even though social media platforms cannot be considered to provide entirely safe spaces for women, private groups on Facebook, or private spaces on other social media platforms, where feminists, and women more generally, gather and discuss are indispensable as consciousness-raising groups. These are spaces where women learn, unlearn, support each other, share experiences, and engage with their feminist activism. Perhaps most importantly, these are the spaces where women organise for offline activities and protests.

However, feminists engaging in digital feminist activism also face numerous obstacles when it comes to the creation of lasting social and political impact. In general, women who self-identify as feminists and acquire some visibility with that identity, are subjected to increased gendered hate speech in online spaces, which is further exacerbated if they also engage with discussions on wider political, social, and cultural issues (Fichman and McClelland, 2021). Interview participants shared excruciating testimonies of harassment and violence when their activism was perceived as contrary to the predominant nationalist discourses. This ultimately demonstrates the limitations of women to engage in discussions that concern the society on a broader level and to contribute to creation of opinions that shape politics.

Experiences of attacks, insults, threats, harassment, and violence, provoke various emotions and reactions. Interview participants discussed anger and frustration, fear and anxiety, and shame and humiliation. These affective states were not separate but enmeshed and converging, with shame transforming into anger and rage, fear and anxiety into defiance, and desolation into resilience. Some of them also discussed joy and excitement, mainly incited by the possibility of demonstration of solidarity and engagement in collective action. What has been significant for all participants was the alleviation of the individual responsibility and burden when acting as a collective. To achieve this, they employed various strategies of collective actions.

The affective states identified in Chapter 5 provoked reactions that were analysed in Chapter 6. Namely, the sexism and misogyny women experience on social media platforms have a chilling effect on their wellbeing and activism. To respond to these experiences, they engage in naming and shaming, hashtag activism, using humour as a response to rape culture, and create collectives for united action. While all these have produced some effects that the participants identified as positive, such as awareness raising and recognition of certain new phenomena as issues to be addressed on a societal level, overall, not much has been achieved in terms of structural societal changes.

Additionally, feminist activists who assume leadership positions in administration and moderation of groups take on a significant voluntary labour and emotional burden, controlling and making sure that communication and interaction in the groups is respectful and in accordance with the rules (Coffey and Kanai, 2021). As demonstrated by some interview participants, this can also lead to burnout and disillusionment. Simultaneously, they acquire more visibility and authority to represent the group, with which they also become more vulnerable to harassment and violence, both in online and in offline spaces.

Finally, participation in social media platforms is encumbered by the rules and regulations of these platforms and the ideological beliefs and backgrounds of their founders (Tufekci, 2017). This further complicates the situation for feminist activists who note the discriminatory, unclear and biased policies these platforms enforce, ultimately silencing women’s and the voices of other marginalised groups (Nurik, 2019). Ultimately, platforms like Facebook and X

(Twitter) were not engineered with the intersectional values of feminists in mind, instead they are led by their commercial aims for profit and larger outreach (Clark-Parsons, 2022). This also makes the activism work of feminists online more complicated and fraught with concerns, where they need to strategically position themselves for the imminent sexist attacks they would get in discussions around feminism, and carefully thread the regulatory biased system of the social media platform.

Even though feminist activists have reported high levels of joy and excitement they have felt through their activism and collective actions online and offline, their vulnerabilities and their frustration with the communication dynamics and the lack of tangible solutions for increased protection and safety, has ultimately resulted in less engagement on social media platforms. Almost three years after I conducted the interviews for my data collection, I hardly see any posts from the interview participants on Facebook. There are also less and less posts in the groups I have been observing. Some of the participants have continued their activity on Instagram, however, from what I have observed, with less intensity and seemingly less engagement. While the use of social media platforms has undergone a significant shift globally, especially in the last year of my research, the conclusion that some of these women have experienced a 'burnout' and decided to withdraw from social media is also to be considered.

With this, a significant aspect of feminist activism and advocacy facilitated with the affordances of social media platforms, has been undermined. This opens the space for consideration of the consequences from the gradual disappearance of critical feminist voices from the public spaces of social media, especially during a significant period of increased anti-gender rhetoric proliferating in these public spaces.

The complexities of new digital feminisms in the Balkans

With this research, I have endeavoured to contribute to the knowledge and awareness of how the complex systems of social media platforms and networked society further facilitate the

perpetuation of heteropatriarchy, looking at feminist activism to discuss oppositions to these systems through the affordances of digital media spaces. In the analysis, I take both the position of cyberfeminists who regarded digital spaces as spaces with limitless possibilities for women's empowerment and liberation, and the position of critics who claimed that digital media spaces exacerbate the fraught position of women and other marginalised communities, replicating the dynamics of offline communication and oppression, limiting their participation in the public sphere.

The discussion throughout the chapters in this thesis demonstrates that feminist activists find ways to navigate the complex digital media spaces and advocate for the matters they believe in, most importantly for the eradication of the culture of violence that exists in the societies they live in. Even though I included diverging positions and beliefs when it comes to feminism and feminist ideology, the commonality in all of the forms of feminist activism performed in digital media spaces in the Balkans is that they are primarily concerned with the different types of violence facilitated through the power relations in the society, namely through masculine domination and feminine submission (Bourdieu, 2001).

It is important to note that the new feminist formations are embedded within the wider context of the social, cultural and political developments of the societies. Therefore, new feminist formations that occur within a context of neoliberalism and intense gender backlash will have their own expressions of these conditions. This allows for formation of feminist identities that foreground their activism within a neoliberal consumerist culture simultaneously assuming a conservative position, rejecting openness, acceptance, and tolerance. The results of these developments are divisions within the feminist movement, with ever increasing focus on individual feminist activism and less on collective action. This, unfortunately, goes in favour of the right-wing rhetoric that relies on nationalism, traditionalism, and marginalisation and discrimination of diversity, which is perceived as a threat to the established values and beliefs that, they believe, comes from the West.

On the other hand, there is another group of young women who belong to these new formations of feminism, adept at using social media, curating content adapted to each platform, presenting an image of themselves that is equally carefully curated, who fit within

the conceptualisation of 'popular feminism' (Banet-Weiser, 2018). They form their identity around feminism and claim feminist activism as their calling and ideology, adopting a more aesthetic appearance, discussing feminism and feminist issues in an easy to digest manner, and adopting feminist identity as their brand. Two notable examples of this type of feminism became especially noteworthy during the last year of the research, one with her Instagram profile (@kriticki), the other with her podcast (@tamponzona). While regarded as positive for feminism, for their awareness-raising and knowledge sharing, these new formations of feminism have their critiques which could be adopted from critiques of popular feminism in Western societies, since they employ similar tactics and engagements. These new formations of neoliberal popular feminism need further analysis with their contextualisation within the complexities of the Balkan societies.

The research has ultimately revealed the ubiquity of sexism and misogyny online, as an expression of the wider culture of violence and ethno-nationalism, as remnants of the wars, and the complicated political, social, and cultural situation of the post-socialist societies, perpetually in transition. Additionally, globalised digital media platforms allow for the proliferation of spaces like the 'manosphere' with influencers who reify hegemonic masculinity and normalise misogyny, adding to the culture of violence and objectification of women. Feminists need to navigate this context very carefully, oftentimes risking delegitimization and labelling of their cause and activism. As right-wing discourses become stronger and more ubiquitous, this becomes an even more fraught reality for feminists in the Balkans, as well as globally. This demonstrates the need for addressing traditionalist and patriarchal social norms and patterns, both in online and offline spaces, and careful framing of feminist issues and feminist activism to address the marked traditionalist, right-wing, anti-gender, nationalist discourses that have become dominant and which contribute to the backsliding of the achieved progress.

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