

How Facebook became the new feminist battleground for #MeToo in the Western Balkans

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Across the Western Balkans, women are flocking to Facebook groups that share experiences of sexual harassment, provide sisterhood and camaraderie, and confront everyday sexism with memes and dry wit. In doing so, they are also building a new regional front for activists speaking out for women's rights — and even fighting child abuse.

“During my entrance exam for drama school, me and a dozen other shortlisted girls were made to sit in just our underwear. One by one we stood up while the professor circled around us, touching our bare bodies first with a wooden stick, and then with his hands. I felt alarm bells ringing, but I wanted to enrol on the course so badly. Soon, I found out that the professor in question was well-known for such behaviour. He inappropriately touched me many more times during my studies. Not only has he never been sanctioned, but he's now vice dean at the same school.”

The post, written by a user in Bosnia and Hercegovina, is just one of thousands shared on the group Nisam Tražila (I Didn't Ask For It). Created on Facebook, the page is an invitation to survivors of sexual assault to share their experiences, support each other, and raise awareness of the issue in the Western Balkans.

The group was founded in January 2021, but quickly exploded with thousands of posts and users. Now, the initiative has become so large that the four admins, all alumni of The Academy of Performing Arts in Sarajevo, are starting to challenge Bosnia and Hercegovina's largest institutions in a bid to provide better protection and support for the victims of sexual harassment and abuse.

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“We want to change sexual assault from just a legal ‘misdemeanour’ to a criminal offence, aligning our laws with the Istanbul Convention [a European treaty designed to combat domestic violence and violence against women]. We want to open a sexual assault crisis centre, where survivors can ask for free support and counselling. And we want an open discourse about sexual assault in schools,” actress and group founder Ana Tikvić told *The Calvert Journal*.

Feminist Facebook pages like Nisam Tražila are a powerful force in the Western Balkans. Most are helmed by young women from different backgrounds, but with a similar goal. Whether by sharing memes that mock obsolete gender norms, prejudices, and stereotypes, or by acting as a rallying point for coordinated activist campaigns, they want to raise awareness on the taboo topics that threaten women's rights, freedom and wellbeing. Now, they've become so successful that they are lobbying lawmakers, launching investigations, and even reporting offenders to the police.

Besides Ana Tikvić at Nisam Tražila, *The Calvert Journal* spoke to two more admins from the area's

most popular feminist meme pages: Bojana Kovačević of Serbia's Ženska Posla (Female Stuff), and Hana Ćurak, behind Sve Su To Vještice (All Of Them Witches), also based in Bosnia and Hercegovina, plus admins from Montenegro's leading Facebook feminist page — Vala Ljeposava (named after the female character Ljeposava of the cult Montenegrin series from 80s.)

None of them had ever expected to take on the role of activist, but feel the need to act as a voice for the women on their pages.

Tikvić and her co-founders set up their page in the middle of the night in “fits of rage” following the case of Milena Radulović: a young Serbian actress who pressed rape charges against her famous acting teacher. “Our aim was to show that sexual assault is far more omnipresent than we want to admit,” she says. Just 48 hours later, more than 1000 notifications awaited them, with many people leaving testimonies to their own experiences of abuse.

When Bojana Kovačević created Ženska Posla with a few female friends in 2013, she only wanted to fight against the idea that “women weren't as funny or as witty as men”. “‘Female Stuff’ is an almost degrading term in Balkans, with connotations that it's just something shallow, stupid, unimportant, like gossip and intrigue,” she says.

But Kovačević's wit attracted more than 100,000 followers. And although the page is still famous for its memes, its members soon moved to the online space to talk about issues they were afraid to discuss in public. The page's permanently pinned post is an invitation for users to recommend psychotherapists, psychiatrists, and other mental health specialists, with hundreds of comments below.

“Mental health is such a taboo topic in the Balkans,” explains Kovačević. “It's seen as shameful to admit that you need a therapist, or that you are seeing one.”

Twenty-six-year-old Hana Ćurak of Sve Su To Vještice (All Of Them Witches), also earned her following with memes that ridiculed patriarchal norms.

“I had the idea about seven years ago to try and populate our digital sphere with the female experience: feminist language and humour,” she says. “I believe that a bottom-up, incremental cultural change is the only way to generate substantial and sustainable results in our communities, especially those which have been militarised and traumatised to the extent that many former Yugoslav countries are.”

Some pages are even creating a language of memes that is entirely their own. Montenegrin Facebook page Vala Ljeposava is named in honour of the female lead in the country's legendary 80s sitcom [*Djekna Jos Nije Umrta, A Ka' Ce Ne Znamo*](#) (*Djekna Hasn't Died Yet, And We Don't Know When She Will*). Ljeposava is an archetype of the wise, Montenegrin women, who carries the weight of an entire family on her shoulders. But with her unprecedented wit, she shows the patriarchal society in which she lives for what it really is — a miserable power grab. The group uses scenes and quotes from the show to create their own take on Montenegrin society and politics.

All of the admins agree that the problems they face in their respective countries are felt across the entire Western Balkans. The similarities have spurred them on to create regional campaigns: combining forces to bring attention to important issues.

One campaign focused on obstetric violence, or when women are subjected to neglect or abuse during childbirth. Hundreds of women told these admins about their experiences being verbally abused or threatened by hospital staff, denied pain relief without valid reason, or being subjected to medical procedures to which they did not consent.

Some [Balkan revenge porn] groups had more than 30,000 members. Some also shared images of child abuse. The youngest girls pictured were just 10 years old.

“Obstetric violence became a hot topic after a news story where a pregnant woman went into pre-term labour after being severely injured at the hands of her abusive partner,” says Kovačević. “But instead of being able to access a safe space [in the hospital], she received another round of horrible treatment.”

The campaign received significant media attention, but also a reaction from authorities. In Montenegro, the country’s Ministry of Health has made the first steps towards addressing the issue by setting up a counselling service and calling on women to report obstetric violence.

For the Montenegrin admins at Vala Ljeposava, however, that isn’t enough. “We didn’t call it quits when they assigned a psychologist to the OB/GYN clinic, (although we appreciate they did what they could immediately), and we won’t call it quits until we achieve our lawful rights, which, unfortunately, still exist only on paper,” she told *The Calvert Journal*.

But although all countries in the Western Balkans face similar problems, only Croatia has so far been willing to take more concrete steps to clamp down on sexual harassment.

“Nisam Tražila has had their best results in Croatia,” says Tikvić, who is herself Croatian. She believes that the country’s EU membership may motivate officials to make it appear as if they are tackling harassment — even though for women living in the country, real life differs little from elsewhere in the region. “The University of Zagreb suspended two professors [after reports of sexual harassment and assault came to light]. In other countries, that hasn’t happened yet, even though there were numerous cases across different universities.”

She’s found that regionally, women from Montenegro are least likely to submit their own experiences: perhaps because the country is smaller, she says, or because women fear that their identities will be found out if they submit their experiences. “We didn’t have even a dozen testimonies come in from Montenegro, which might say that women are more afraid in these smaller, more conservative societies,” she speculates.

Any results are hard earned. Being a moderator of these pages is difficult: all of the work is voluntary, and often requires great effort and energy. “Reading numerous traumatic experiences can leave you shocked and in pain for days to come,” says Kovačević.

Some of their activism work takes a particular toll. In another coordinated campaign, page administrators took on the role of the police, unmasking public groups on messaging app Telegram that shared revenge porn: where men distributed explicit pictures of their former partners to the wider public without their permission. Some of these groups had more than 30,000 members. Some also shared images of child abuse. The youngest girls pictured were just 10 years old.

“The law doesn’t currently recognise revenge porn as an offense in itself, so we had to actively look for the pictures of underage girls in order to report these groups to the police,” says Kovačević.

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There is also the pushback from predators and abusers themselves. “Someone tried to hack our page,” says Tikvić, “but luckily we were offered free help from professionals in sexual violence and NGOs.”

Some women who left descriptive accounts of their experiences on the page also saw their abusers recognise themselves in the post — leading to further threats and violence. In order to protect users, admins now immediately delete messages from their inbox and store their content off-site.

Disapproval also comes from society more widely. “There’s always a 50/50 split, with feminism in Balkans: there are the people who realise there’s a problem and support you, and those who try to diminish your efforts and say all of these stories are ‘exaggerated’,” says Tikvić.

Kovačević agrees: “When a group of women become too powerful, there’s always a group of men warning that we’ve gone too far. That’s exactly what happened: the community that our pages created has truly become an institution — and a trustworthy one. We’ve become too big for all those who simply don’t want us on the horizon.”

Admins deal with the pressure by accepting their limits: “We can only do so much. It’s up to institutions to change laws and the way they operate,” says Kovačević.

But they also remain true to the creativity (and often the tongue-in-cheek humour) at the heart of these pages, and built their following in the first place.

“It’s a really tough job, especially when you take into account the conditions in which we live: the poverty and the aftereffects of the Yugoslav Wars. To me, every woman who goes out and makes her own decisions is a hero,” says Ćurak. “I just wish that everybody would go out there and learn about solidarity, integrity, and responsibility — at least through memes.”

Durđa Radulović

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