

WOMEN AND COVID-19 STORIES THAT MATTER



Photography and
stories contest



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Foreword



While the Covid-19 has shaken the whole society, the most vulnerable have been more affected. Very early on, when the lockdown started, rapid risk analysis worldwide forecasted that women were going to be affected in a more serious way than men by the pandemic. More violence and less opportunities to report, losses of jobs and less social protection, more family obligations, more care for children, elderly and sick as well as

more women as first responders, with the risk for their health and life.

It is clear that the pandemic could cause a step back on advancing women rights achieved in the last decades. We took this into account when redirecting resources for mitigating the Covid-19 consequences, by dedicating funds to easing the consequences of Covid-19 specifically for women.

We wanted also to raise awareness of the issue. What happens to women concerns the whole society, and everybody must be aware and be involved. And what better way to show how women in Kosovo were affected by the pandemic than by letting the women themselves tell their stories?

The contest was not only a story competition, but also a photography competition. The jury took that into account at the time of taking their decision. It was not an easy one, because more than 80 participants entered the competition. Every single one of these stories is powerful, moving and every single photograph is representative. Some are happy stories, some sad. Overall, they show the resilience of women in Kosovo in managing the challenges brought by the pandemic.

Among them, four stories came in first and I awarded the prizes in a ceremony at our Europe House in Pristina in November 2020. The photo stories of Arlinda, Adonjeta, Dragana and Orhidea are representative of all those who entered the competition: transforming grief into happiness; using creativity to appreciate things that we take for granted, such as family, arts, and nature; multitasking, going beyond their call of duty, and contributing to their communities even at the risk of putting their lives and health in danger. This publication shows their stories and photographs and a few others. It also features women who have worked for the

wellbeing of men and women in Kosovo in an extraordinary way during the Covid-19 period.

I hope you will enjoy it.

Ambassador Tomas Szunyog,
Head of EU Office/EU Special
Representative

**In the process of redirection of IPA 19 funds to programmes in response to COVID-19 crisis (EU for Resilience, Budget Support and EU for social protection), The EU Office in Kosovo paid strong attention to gender equality and significantly focused on the needs of women and girls. The EU Office/EUSR consulted EU member States, EULEX, several donors, multilateral partners such as UNWomen, other UN Agencies and the World Bank. Kosovo institutions such as the Office of the Prime Minister, the Ministry of Local Self Government, the Ministry of European Integration, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were also consulted. Civil society represented by the Kosovo Women Network (KWN) contributed crucially. The EU internal gender focal person and gender adviser were fully involved in the process. As a result, all the projects were approved with at least one main objective aiming at gender equality or women empowerment.*

Editorial

2020 proved us all that no matter the plans and dreams we have, sometimes things will take another turn and we will need to adapt.

Women all over the world have had to sacrifice a lot this year, given the situation with the virus and the rapid change we all had in our lives. In 2020, we were faced with the unimaginable, the incomprehensible, the invisible, and we had no choice: we were deprived of so many things and on so many levels, yet we found ourselves lucky to be alive and learning that no freedom can ever be taken for granted.

Being sure about this, Europe House in Kosovo, together with our amazing colleagues from the EU Office in Kosovo/EUSR, launched the photo competition 'Covid-19: Women and their stories' and invited women and girls of all ages and communities living in Kosovo to submit their best photos and stories of lockdown's first days. We received around 100 submissions of women being creative, mostly staying home or out in the nature, engaging in different activities that very often seem so far away from us. In 2020, women and men, we all took time to reflect and heal from the overwhelming dynamic of life, and we all discovered that some things inside of us have been silent for so long, and we reconnected with them.

Around 20 submissions have been put in this publication where you can travel in time and places and uncover what women in Kosovo did during the lockdown and the pandemic. Three prizes were foreseen. A selection board chose four women as winners, as two of them got the same number of points and shared the third place. Their names are: Arlinda Murtezi, Adonjeta Zymberi, Dragana Milosavljevic and Orhidea Shehu.

They were awarded gift cards in a ceremony held at the Europe House on the 26th of November, chaired by Ambassador Szunyog. Due to the Covid-19 restrictions, it could only be attended by a small number of people.

We have also included other women and powerful social initiatives during the lockdown, as a documentation of life during 2020 in Kosovo.

European Union in Kosovo recognises the power of women during unprecedented times like these, and strongly supports every inventiveness or originality coming from them. This photo competition is much more than a competition: it is an acknowledgment of the struggle women went through during these last months, being the crucial force of family, communities and Kosovo society.

Editorial team:

Arbër Selmani, Ylli Tafarshiku, Reyes Charle Cuellar, Maria Berishaj-Sylejmani, Erëza Vela, Vedat Shehu

Winners of the competition Covid-19: Women and their stories



"It's obvious that with all the restrictions on movements, women are the ones who are most vulnerable and affected - in families but also in the social and economic lives. So it was obvious for us that we needed to do something specific for women. Therefore we decided not only to fund different activities but also

to have this competition and to have a public demonstration of our support for women."

Ambassador Szunyog



“I am Arlinda Murtezi, mother of five, and I live in Fushë Kosovë. I look after my children myself, and make a small profit from selling handicrafts through a business I have opened.

When the pandemic started, I was unable to sell my work. Since I have tailoring skills, I realized that it would be good to help my community by sewing reusable masks. Someone suggested I sell them, but how can I get rich when my neighbours get sick? I distributed these masks for

free throughout my neighbourhood. I'm proud that I did something for mankind.

I chose to do this work and I am glad that COVID-19 cases have not reached my neighbourhood. I have thus contributed to the health of my neighbours. I am also glad that I had the opportunity to teach other women how to sew masks.”





2nd place

Adonjeta Zymberi



“When the world was in lockdown and everyone changed their way of life, when humanity was trapped for several months inside their homes, we tried to better understand ourselves and those around us, as we struggled to overcome these days of isolation.

While humans struggled with the pandemic, nature was able to breathe again, and it triumphed in the midst of this all. This connection between the silence of the streets and the flourishing of nature, inspired me to create this mask filled with nature,

which at the same time bears the powerful message that the future thrives even in difficult times. These flowers were picked in Butovc to create this mask of my quarantine, which I have frozen through photography, and it will be a memory for my son Yl Driti too, with whom I managed to spend quality time, despite working from home, which in the circumstances of the dynamics of my life I find quite impossible.

We breathe with nature, while taking care of ourselves and each other!”

"I believe that the COVID-19 situation has been a burden on us all. I felt it on my shoulders, because I am a mother of three, a nurse, and I also run a private company "Miris jutra", through which I sell different types of sweets. As a nurse, I saw the frightened faces of patients, who at first did not know how to deal with this unplanned situation. In them I noticed a desire to fight, and that desire was especially pronounced in my colleagues, doctors and nurses. We did our very best to instill in people the belief and hope that this will be over soon, all the while also inviting them to take responsibility and respect the epidemiological measures.

After all that hard work, I would return home to work in my small bakery. This was definitely one of my ways to make people happy in these difficult times.

I hope that through my role as a mother, nurse, and leader of a small company, I have contributed to making people feel better during this difficult situation, which we hope will be over soon."



3rd place

Dragana Milosavljevic





3rd place

Orhida Reka Shehu



“Being a mother is a blessing from God, but also a great responsibility and I am a mother of three. My experience of the pandemic was one of the strangest in my life. I work as a nurse in the private sector, while my husband works in the public sector, and we are both on the front line. Together with a colleague of mine, we felt it was necessary to launch an initiative for blood donations, as many people were in urgent need of blood during this period. There was little interest, due to the COVID-19 situation. The event was organized in a

very professional way, in coordination with the Blood Transfusion Center in Prishtina. 51 blood donors contributed. The situation got worse later, when both I and my husband tested positive for COVID-19. I remember one night, I woke up in pain and had trouble breathing, and I wanted to go to my children’s room to hug them for the last time, as I felt my life was about to end, but my legs wouldn’t move. We won our battle, we escaped from COVID-19, but emotionally I am yet to recover.”

More Stories from the Competition

The following are a selected number of stories from women who entered the competition

Albulenë Krasniqi

“My two photos depict my confrontation with two situations, and my efforts to change the atmosphere of stress and panic into goodwill and creativity.



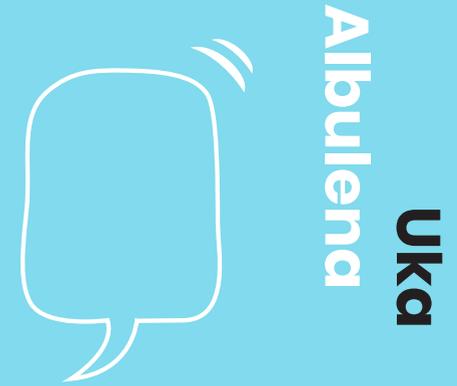
The first photo: it was April 4, 2020, the day I finished a bookcase, at a time when I was looking for different ways to rid myself of the surrounding monotony and despair. I was the only girl at home; we live together with my three brothers with their wives and children, as well as my two elderly parents.

Before the lockdown, I had thought about buying a bookcase. However, during the pandemic I changed my mind; I collected some tools my father had left in the backyard, and I started working on the bookcase every day. Intentionally, I kept stretching the days, as this awakened in me a sense of usefulness and my power to create a bookcase with wood, nails and hammer.



In the second photo, behind me stands the machinery inside a factory. This situation is during the month of May, when I started working in a paper factory in the village of Mirusha.

The situation in the family took on a different turn every day; my brothers were unemployed, my parents too, and everything was different. This moment shows part of my work to alleviate my family's hardships and to live up to my responsibilities as university student.”



“My little sister, Albulena was studying in Master of Laws degree in Ghent, a crowded, beautiful and dynamic city, with approximately 250.000 population and 1.3 million visitors. Due to COVID-19, she closed within one room all alone with five exams and Master thesis to finish in order to graduate. Since this was the first time she was living away from family we encouraged her to return home as we saw the situation getting worse, but as a strong woman she is, Albulena didn't back off, but decided to stay in Belgium.

She told us that she was feeling incredibly lonely as she has seen only around ten people in three months period, mostly supermarket workers where she got the groceries. She was upset that her favourite movie “I am a legend” became almost her reality. But she continued studying even harder and finished all her exams and submitted her Master thesis on time. Albulena graduated with the greatest distinction and was chosen



on top 3 students of Ghent University. In the picture, she is celebrating her diploma before the University building in Ghent, Belgium.

Albulena is the best proof that even a pandemic cannot stop women to achieve their goals.”

Arbresh.info

Since the beginning of the pandemic COVID-19, observing the urgency for real-time reporting of developments related to the outbreak, the arbresh.info portal established a special section on "Covid-19", on which it publishes domestic, regional and global information on coping with the coronavirus.

A staff of 30 people, 20 of them women, were engaged in drafting and following a strategy for the most professional reporting, initially on Kosovo's coping capacities, then covering the institutions that were already dealing with the identification and handling of cases, and later on the consequences in various sectors.

At the time of the almost total "lockdown", for about three months the arbresh.info portal rotated its staff to field duties and work from home.

After the "relaxation" of the measures, the staff returned to the office which provided enough space for social distancing. Staff reductions were not even considered, and the salaries have been paid regularly, despite the delays of the Government assistance for businesses, and the ongoing problems we face with the collection of payments from the companies that advertise on the arbresh.info portal.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the supply of masks and disinfectants has not been lacking, while the offices

are cleaned regularly, and have also been disinfected several times.

Since everyone's work has been quite important, the portal has chosen to nominate all female staff, to honor their commitment to keeping citizens informed, despite the extraordinary circumstances.

Reporters:

1. Albinë Bajraktari
2. Albinë Haliti
3. Arditë Shkodra
4. Arditë Zeka
5. Agnesë Citaku
6. Elmedinë Ballazhi
7. Elona Haxhiu
8. Elvinë Sefiu
9. Fitore Hajdari
10. Gita Lushi
11. Miradije Avdimetaj
12. Razije Rexhepi
13. Trina Galanxhi
14. Vlora Selimi
15. Xheneta Pacolli

From the administration, for their great help regarding the necessary documents for field work, coverage of hygienic needs and other administrative issues:

1. Edona Llumnica
2. Vjosa Sylaj Borovci
3. Leunora Krasniqi
4. Gentiana Dakaj
5. Albina Vucetaj



Arta Ibishi-Citaku

"Fortunately, my family and I enjoyed each day of the lockdown. Getting used to the new rules did not cause us any difficulties. I am thankful to God for my good health and for making good use of that period. What's important for all is the collective mental health, which has been affected in many dimensions, but I hope we will recover together, supporting each other.

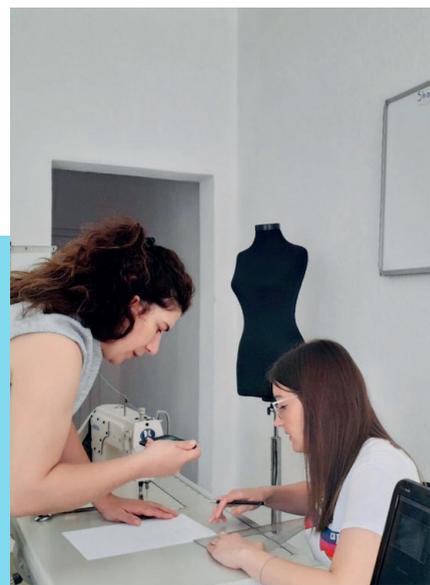
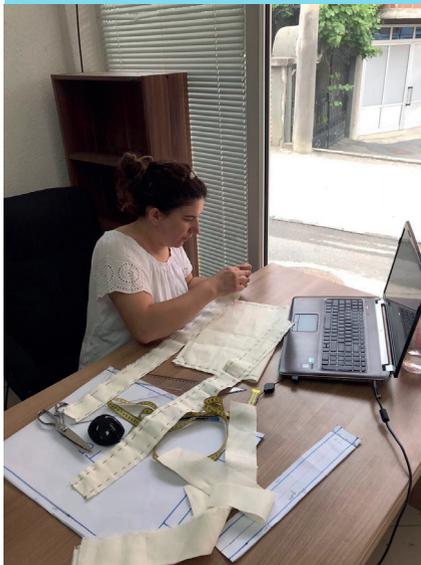
For me personally, my bicycle is a gift that allows me to enjoy freedom and I would invite everyone to start practicing cycling.

I wish health and prosperity to all. I wish all the best and good health to everyone!"



Sadrinja Bardha

“We decided to provide free online training during this period of isolation, for all women and girls who are interested in participating in trainings on business development and empowerment. We have also started the online tailoring training.”



Minic Bojana



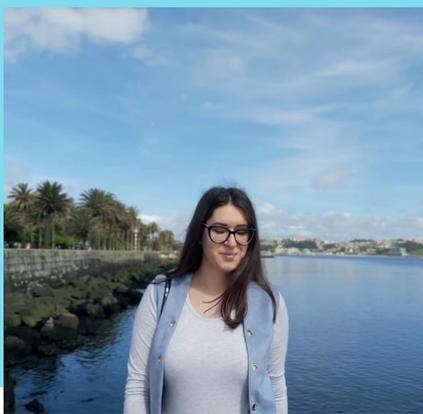
“In the middle of all this chaos, I have brought a little baby boy to this world. Yes, yes, I’ve become a mother in 20 years of age. After a difficult, laborious birth and a lengthy recovery, I have finally started enjoying the wonders of motherhood, and that has become my dearest chaos.”



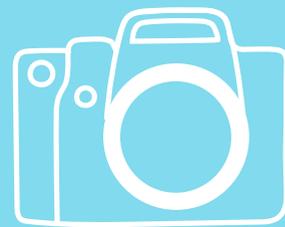
Brankica Timotijevic

“As someone who loves to travel, I have decided to apply for an exchange in Portugal, but I would not go there to a typical University, I would have a practical internship instead. They have accepted me and I went there around the beginning of February, when there was still no big fuss in public about the pandemic.

Until the mid-March I’ve enjoyed my life in Porto, meeting new people from all over the world, and touring through the city. When, around the middle of March, the emergency state started in Portugal, there were no movement limitations, so I’ve used all the time I had for long walks along the beach, out in a clean air, whenever I was done with school tasks and writing of my graduation exam. The time was passing a bit slower than usual, but all the obligations related to the graduation exam, internship reports, the internship work at the University in Porto, made everything go easier, along with occasional preparation of



food and cleaning of the apartment. The pandemic had disrupted so many things, those related to school, then the stay in Portugal itself, as well as the return home which had turned into a true little two-day adventure trip. But, everything went well somehow, even though we were all afraid, and I got home safely, and I’ve graduated in late June, which was one of nicer events during the pandemic and the state of emergency.”



“On the photo I am standing with my mother who suffers from cancer. My prayer that April day was for this year to be as white as the snow that fell, because the stress of the pandemic was added to our suffering. At that moment, my mother had to take a CT scan, a tumour marker, but everything was closed, and I spent every minute of my life during the pandemic thinking that my mother would die from lack of treatment.”

“In the second photo, we are just as worried, but the slightly more relaxed measures rekindled our hope for life. After many efforts and hardships, we managed to at least see our mother smile.”

“During the pandemic, mother underwent a cycle of chemotherapy; she was exhausted. Her red blood cells count dropped dramatically, and we went to Prevala for a few days so that mother could recover. This situation was a very bad experience for our family.”



Kraja Ermira

Gentiana Pallaska



A day in the quarantine

“Mother still wakes up before 7 a.m. The world is at a standstill, time less perceptible than ever, yet Mother still wakes up before 7 a.m.

Mother makes tea in the morning, starts her work as early as can be, and waits for the rest of us to wake up. The city goes on in uncharacteristic silence, birds showing up here and there as we watch leaves form and bloom, and our inner worlds merge into one from spending all hours together, all of us here, helping, working, learning, and re-learning to love and be loved in return. Father wakes up a little later, works hard and cracks jokes and it feels as if time, once a precious commodity, is now strangely abundant.

Mother cooks breakfast, lunch, dinner, and keeps us going with eyes overflowing with love and a heart settled in place for all the time we get to spend together. The times of COVID-19, though stressful, strange, and exhausting, still made time slow down and people reflect, as we did here at the dining table turned into a little island of all that is important, precious, and infinite.”



The story of her mother

“When lockdown started, I ended up alone, telecommuting from my apartment in Prishtine/Pristina and leaving it once a week to do grocery shopping. Part of my family lives in Prizren while my brother doctor and his wife live in Turkey. One of my sisters works in a pharmacy, which means she is an essential worker working all the time. Video calls were our way of communication for more than two months. I was craving homemade pie but did not have courage enough to enter a bakery and buy some pie (so called burek).

The first time I went to Prizren, my mum made the most delicious pie I ever tried. She was also making sure there is always proper food to keep the immunity of my sister who is exposed to potentially infected people buying medicines. The lockdown brought us

closer together and showed us that staying connected with the family even though not physically present is the most important thing and reunion is very much appreciated.

Showing love is not only saying it with words but also with small deeds and actions, including being responsible and respecting protection measures. It means you are taking care and thinking of people who are dearest to you. Appreciating every moment we spend together and meanwhile keeping in touch from distance.”



Miftari Sehida

Story of Nanny Fahrige

"This is Nanny Fahrige. An old and tired face, not tired because of the pandemic but from grief. She lost her husband Ajfer because from the COVID-19 virus, on July 16, 2020. Now her life story has changed, because she lost the chapter that accompanied her for 37 years.

Throughout his life, Fahrige's husband worked in this shop, the 'Besiana' store. Now, Nanny Fahrige welcomes customers, respecting the safeguards, pulling herself together and taking the place of her husband... to support her family with the income from the shop and to look after them. She is trying to welcome customers just like Ajfer would, with love and respect.

The COVID-19 virus left Nanny Fahrige with an empty bed. But Ajra, my daughter, has decided not to leave her grandmother alone. Now they are reading something, before Ajra closes her eyes and dreams of a world full of colors, and Nanny Fahrige dreams of meeting her husband, whom she loved so much, in the next world..."



"I don't feel like it". For each photo captured, the reaction was the same. That is why the main character in the photos almost never looks spontaneous. And she is not spontaneous. Being photographed bothers her, but she believes that some situation should and must be documented.

I have also shown the photographs I have chosen for this competition to my friend who is on them. We have talked about how I could describe them.

What has changed – I asked her.

The answer was – everything.

"Starting from the fact that we have spent two and a half months inside our apartments, houses... Some will say it was not so bad. But it is tough when you know that you are not allowed to do something, that it is prohibited, and then you wonder – what about all those people who don't work for a living, what about those who live on social assistance, how are they surviving? Then add news to all that: every day a new number of people gets infected, deceased... Every day. That is where the daily scare is coming from, she explained.

She believes that the consequences of the "new normal" and permanent insisting on "social" distance, not physical, will yet to become truly visible.



Months of introspection, whether through book reading, observing others, or oneself – that is what's really on those photographs. A lengthy insight into oneself cannot be pleasant to anyone. Perhaps that is why my protagonists' photo is not spontaneous."

Enis Puka



lockdown confronted them with an unprecedented and grave situation.

The photo shows Teuta engaged in field work, conducting interviews with people (for shows and documentaries), always complying with the safeguards set by the government. Despite the situation and the risks, these projects have been successful.

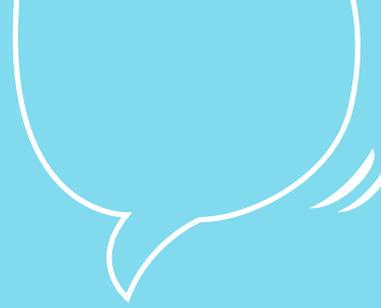
Teuta and other women reporters have been in the forefront in the fight against the pandemic, so that citizens staying in their homes would know how to protect themselves from Covid-19. Reporters, in addition to their professional duties, also had chores to do at home for their families, had to help family members mentally, financially, and also look after them.”



Story of Teuta Gashi

“This is Teuta Gashi, a reporter in Kosovo. During the lockdown, she and many of her colleagues worked relentlessly. They were at risk and put others at risk, but they did all this to inform people and keep the positive energy in everyone.

Journalism is a profession, a challenge even in normal situations, but the



Musa Adriana

Story of Xhyla Haziri

“This is Aunt Xhyla (Xhyla Haziri), the most hardworking woman I have ever known. She is a seamstress by profession, and also secretary of the Office for Missing Persons in Mitrovica.

Seeing the economic situation in our society, which was especially aggravated during the pandemic when masks became mandatory, my aunt started producing free masks for all citizens who could not afford to buy them for themselves and their families. This initiative led to many women like her joining in and helping, each in their own way, to achieve this goal.

She began all this work voluntarily, providing her own materials. So far she has managed to sew about 1700 masks and all of them have been distributed to citizens. All this made me think, as a young women in Kosovo, that not every job is performed for financial gains.

She has inspired many other women and has shown that a strong woman can not only succeed on her own, but can also help others and influence the development of society.”



NGO Zensko Pravo (Women's Rights)



"The picture depicts a mother and a minor son who reunited after 37 days of separation during the COVID-19 lockdown.

The child visited his family in Serbia when the borders got closed, and the mandatory quarantine at the Student Center in Pristina was imposed. After 34 days of trying to find the solution to reunite with her son, Dragana Rasic, the mother of the child and domestic violence survivor, was referred to NGO Women's Rights in North Mitrovica by the DV police officer in the same town due to the case's complexity. Upon hearing the case, Tijana Simic LaValley from the organization contacted responsible authorities, as well as women in the

decision-making position to help solve the problem. Among them was a Colonel Afërdita Mikullovc, Commander of South Mitrovica Police Station. With an efficient collaboration with the Colonel Mikullovc and quick response by the OCMIA, the mother and child were reunited at the Jarinje border after 37 days.

The story is an excellent example of how vital women-led organizations and women in decision-making positions are, as well as the collaboration between NGOs and the institutions. At the reuniting moment, both Kosovo and Serbian police officers almost teared up, wishing the boy COVID-19, free family time with his mom."

OTHER EXTRAORDINARY WOMEN DURING THE PANDEMIC

...which were not a part of the competition, but their actions during the pandemic are good examples of women's initiative and leadership.



Elza Ramadani



...and how stray animals were not forgotten during the pandemic

“The pandemic and quarantine (lockdown) brought many changes to people’s lives, and obviously to the lives of their pets, but especially to those of stray animals in Kosovo.

At the beginning of the coronavirus lockdown, stray animals in Kosovo were left without food, because there was no restaurant waste and no people on the streets to feed them. Many activists and the “Poppins” food factory (which has donated hundreds of kilograms of pet food) got together and fed stray dogs and cats. The organization I represent (Animal Rights Foundation), assisted by some volunteers, has gone to great lengths to feed stray animals; we filed an request with the MIA (Ministry of Internal Affairs) to issue circulation

permits to a number of activists, so that they could go out at any time to take care of stray animals.

What is also very important, is that during the pandemic the organization managed to rescue some dogs that were being kept for dog fights, and we also made inspection visits to the state project for castration and sterilization of dogs throughout the Republic of Kosovo, a project managed by the Food and Veterinary Agency.

It is worth noting that the organization I lead, has launched an awareness campaign on pets and COVID-19, because in Kosovo (and in some parts of the world) people were misinformed that pets could carry the coronavirus. Of course, this was not true (as confirmed by the WHO), and through our awareness campaign we managed to avoid a wave of abandonment of home pets.”

...and how the voices of activism are important during difficult times

“During the time of pandemic, the governments all over the world made sure to protect and support their citizens in this very difficult time of humanity, but unfortunately in Kosovo we had to deal with another injustice. We experienced the fall of the government, in a time of pandemic.

I had to raise my voice somehow, because we citizens voted for change and now we were being manipulated. By blindfolding the statues of our heroes, I wanted to express our anger and disappointment with the reality.

During the pandemic, Waterfalls and Park of Mirusha have been destroyed by a project from the municipality of Klina. With no environmental permit and no public hearing, something was built in a monument of nature protected internationally by IUCN.

My activism during pandemic has given hope for change and expression and if we stand together we can raise many issues and change them, it’s not easy to deal with such issues at this hard time.

I am a single mother with a full time job that keeps my food and roof over my head and taking all family task in my shoulder and at the same time not giving up in activism is hard, emotionally.



I am not planning to give up as long as I am living here, you will hear me roar like a lioness.”

Flutra Zymri

Mrika Nikqi



...and how the youngest woman in the world to climb the Seven Summits reinvented herself to keep fit

One may not say that a day spent in quarantine is an ordinary day, but we try to adapt every time we face life situations.

Me too, from a completely different situation from a year ago - during which, together with my dad I climbed the highest peaks of the seven



continents, with days full of activity, effort and sacrifice, the pandemic brought me days with plenty of free time, but not with as many opportunities to continue climbing new mountains as I had planned.

Seeing that the pandemic was not coming to an end, I slowly pick-up the activities within the recommendations by the NIPHK. Every morning, as I always do, I do stretching exercises at home for about an hour despite the current pandemic situation. Then I continue with the obligations about studies, and I continue doing the work that needs to be done during the day. I have worked hard planning the accomplishment of goals and plans for the future. I have cared more than ever for my physical and mental health.

Healthy eating and exercise were part of my routine, as always. It was also the right time to make the most of it with my family.

Dr. Donjeta Pllana, Dr. Pranvera Abazi and Dr. Zana Kacaniku

...and how three women managed the testing at the Molecular Diagnostics Laboratory

"The beginning of 2020 found us observing the spread of the virus across countries and the media's frightening footage, hoping that we would not experience the same.

Although attending specialty education in different countries, including Kosovo, this was a new experience for us - in February when we started testing the first SARS CoV-2 suspicious samples, a hitherto unknown virus.

With the increasing demand for testing, we got mobilized with the few capacities available for the sole purpose of testing all the samples that came to the Molecular Diagnostics Laboratory at the National Institute of Public Health of Kosovo.

Working in the laboratory is too tedious for microbiologists, which was aggravated by specific equipment, reduced staff, extended hours, the working method with additional protective equipment, and others.

The responsibility we had was far greater than the fear, the stress, and the persisting work. With little



sleep, erratic eating schedule, and changing lifestyle, but willing to provide assistance and contribute to our country, our main goal was to provide faster test results for Kosovo citizens without distinction.

Mimosa Kusari



...and her initiative to support women-led businesses affected by Covid-19

Like in any other aspect, women in business have been affected in a different way than men during the Covid-19. Mimosa Kusari – Member of Parliament, has a long tradition of fighting for women rights and gender equality, in particular for the rights of women at the working place. It was her who in the previous legislature proposed a gender quota for women on corporate boards, including the share-holding companies. She did it against resistance from many, including political representatives and some within the business community. However, she managed to engage other women MPs and to convince the Assembly.

It was clear that during the pandemic, she was not going to remain passive. Acknowledging the situation by which many women businesses were affected, she focused her energies into trying to do all in her hands to assist. As a member of the Kosovo Assembly

Parliamentary Budget Committee and a committee on economic development committee, she has the forward-looking idea of proposing to the Assembly the set-up of a specific budget code dedicated to assist business own or led by women, which had been affected by the economic crisis as a consequence of the Covid-19. Efforts involved having to send the proposal back for revision or put it for re-voting. She had prominent allies such as the speaker of the Assembly and other women MPs, who assist to convince the different political groups. She even had to justify the initiative by comparing it with other expenses, such as those dedicated to defence, for other MPs to understand that what she was proposing was reasonable and proportionate: That the assistance through the grant scheme foreseen for the economic recovery during the Covid-19 would reach equally both men and women entrepreneurs. Eventually, the initiative was passed by the Assembly with a comfortable cross-party majority, which included the representatives of most of the non-majority community MP.

The measure proposed will apply not only for this year, but for the future, as the specific budget code will stay for successive budgetary years. In practical terms, at least 400.000 euros, out of a grant scheme of 1 Million euros is targeting women-led business under the 2021 budget. Furthermore, the debate in the Assembly and the arguments given within, helped the government losing the fear to speak up for women rights and gender



equality. The initiative of Ms Kusari triggered another advanced measure taken by Kosovo Government. In October 2020, under the initiative of the Agency for Gender Equality, the government of Kosovo adopted a plan for the implementation of the Economic Recovery Program, which provides for the allocation of 2 million EUR to address the gender dimension of the challenges created by Covid-19.

The fact is that affirmative measures in benefit of the less represented, generally women, are not always

easy to understand. They are never seen as a priority. It seems that it is never the right moment. As Ms Kusari says, in politics 'If you wait for the right moment to introduce change, the change is never going to happen. Change hurts, even if it's for better, because generally people like status quo and they don't want to engage in change'. But this Covid-19 crisis has helped us understand that even in the time of uncertainty, there is always room for change for the better.

The Shelters for Domestic and Gender-based Violence in Kosovo

...and how they operated uninterruptedly to admit and support survivors during the pandemic

Rapid assessments all over the world showed that victims of domestic and gender-based violence will be specifically affected during the Covid-19. Measures imposed by Kosovo government included a lockdown period between 12 March and 31 May. That meant many women would find themselves confined with their abusers. Isolation and financial dependency could add power and control to the perpetrator and there were fears that the number of fatal cases could increase.



Bakery in the shelter in Gjakovë/Đakovica

The government of Kosovo showed a vital degree of concern. On April 15, the victims of violence were exempted from the restriction of movement issued by the government. However, the Agency for Gender Equality, Women Civil society organisations

and international organisations, including EULEX, raised concerns about how difficult it might be for the victims to report cases, and how well the regular protection system would work during the lockdown.



Responding to those concerns, on 24 April 2020 the Ministry of Health issued an Information Circular establishing a dedicated space within the 'Student Center' in the University of Pristina, where victims of domestic and gender-based violence could be quarantined before being sent to the regular shelters. The temporary shelter has been functioning since. The victims are sheltered there and are not sent to the regular shelters until it is certain that they do not have Covid-19.

They receive regular services from the Victims Advocacy Office and the Centre for Social Welfare. Kosovo Women's Network coordinates access to the services, including psychological and legal aid. The Circular was later on amended whereby victims from non-majority communities were given the option to be sheltered at the Women's Inclusive

Center in Novo Brdo, if they felt more comfortable.

Kosovo has eight permanent shelters for survivors of domestic and gender-based violence, which have operated uninterruptedly to admit victims during the pandemic. The shelters are in Ferizaj, Gjakova, Gjilan, Novoberdo, Peja, Prizren, Prishtina and South Mitrovica. A new safe house was opened in Zubin Potok in the last term of 2020. From the beginning, the government of Kosovo as well as the international organizations and NGOs have supplied essential needs and advice. Specific actions have ensured that the shelters possess the needed capacities to assist survivors. Actions were well coordinated between the civil society, women's rights organisations and the international community in Kosovo.

The shelters have made great efforts to offer the victims the same range of service that they regularly offer, even under the most difficult circumstances: a safe place to reside; submissions of requests for protection orders and emergency protection orders, assistance during the process of self-recovery, including by providing psychological care, physical care, rehabilitation and reintegration support, as well as legal assistance. For this, they deserve a mention in this dedicated publication. However, it is crucial to remember that their work only represents one aspect of the whole system of prevention, protection, and punishment. The tackle of the phenomenon of domestic

and gender-based violence is still a challenge in Kosovo. Inter-institutional coordination among all involved (police, prosecutors, social services, health authorities, courts, etc) is of the essence.

Read comment

The European Union is one of the larger donors on the fight against domestic and gender-based violence in Kosovo. On 25 November, the Head of the EU Office/ EUSR Ambassador Szunyog marked the beginning of the 16 Days of Activism Campaign against Gender-Balanced Violence in Kosovo and visited the shelter for survivors of domestic and gender-based violence in Gjakovë/Đakovica, which is financed by the EU and implemented by UNWomen. He also visited an EU funded business sewing project led by a survivor and participated in the lighting up in orange of the bridge in the context of the cultural heritage projects with the UNDP.

In line with this year's global theme, "Orange the World: Fund, Respond, Prevent, Collect!", Ambassador Szunyog outlined the need to have a functioning system of prevention, combating and protection that responds to the needs of the survivors at all the stages and praised the work of the civil society organizations working on combating the phenomenon. He referred to the recent inclusion of the Istanbul Convention in the Kosovo Constitution and expressed the EU's continuous commitment towards supporting Kosovo in ending violence against women.

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WOMEN AND COVID-19 STORIES THAT MATTER



Recognizing women
and their challenges during
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