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Lepa Mladjenović

Feminist Counselor, Serbia, olea.kalpana@gmail.com

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### Keywords

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## UKRAINIAN WOMEN REFUGEES IN ITALY AND THEIR RISK OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE: AN INTERVIEW WITH LUISANNA PORCU

**Lepa Mladjenović**

*Feminist Counselor, Serbia*

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**W**OMEN, CHILDREN, THE ELDERLY, and other family members fled Ukraine after Russia's renewed attack and invasion on February 24, 2022. By June, more than 7.5 million people had crossed the borders into friendly countries (UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 2022, June 1). In addition, an estimated 7.1 million people were internally displaced inside the country (International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2022, April). Of those people leaving Ukraine, approximately 130,000 arrived in Italy by early summer.

In May 2022, I (Lepa Mladjenović) visited the women's feminist anti-violence center (*Centri anti-violenza*) Onda Rosa in Nuoro, Island of Sardinia, which provides direct support to women surviving male violence. I facilitated three days of education for 22 activists on how to work with women suffering trauma from sexual violence. It was a wonderful experience. There I met the coordinator of the center Italian Luisanna Porcu, a very passionate feminist, and the coordinator of the anti-violence center, Onda Rosa. On the last day of my stay, I interviewed her about her work with women coming from Ukraine to Italy. This is a text from that interview.

My interest in and knowledge about women surviving sexualized violence comes from 30 years of direct experience in counseling women surviving war in the countries on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, as well as those living in Belgrade, Serbia. I worked as a counselor and coordinator of the Counseling Team in the Autonomous Women's Center in Belgrade, Serbia (n.d.) until 2012. Afterward, I worked as a counselor on the team Counseling for Lesbians (*Konsultacije za Lezbejke*, n.d.)

### ITALY'S SUPPORT FOR THE PEOPLE OF UKRAINE

The United Nations (UN) data from 1 June 2022 reports that since the beginning of the renewed Russian invasion of Ukraine, more than 130,000 refugees have arrived in Italy—50 % of them women and more than 30% of them children and adolescents. Several organizations and agencies came together to provide support and services to respond to the most urgent needs of minors, women, families, and others with special needs. They include the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the UN Refugee Agency, and the United Nations International Children's Fund

(UNICEF). They collaborated with four Italian organizations: the Association for Democratic Self-Organization of People (*ARCI*), the Women's in Network Against Violence (*D.i.Re*), *Save the Children*, and *Stella Polare* Association for a New Concept of Normality of Disabilities. *D.i.Re* – *Donne in rete* network (n.d.) (*Women in the Network Against Violence*) connects 83 organizations in Italy, running more than 100 Anti-Violence Centers and more than 50 Shelter Houses, listening to about 21,000 women each year. The Network was initiated by feminists working in anti-violence centers in 2006 and was formally established on 29 September 2008, after 30 years of feminist activism against male violence in Italy.

In April 2022, the collaborating groups set up two *Blue Dots* support centers in the places where buses from Ukraine enter Italy. These are meant to be safe spaces dedicated to women, children, and people with special needs (D.i.Re, 2022). After approximately 100 days after the start of the conflict, 2,600 people had come to the two *Blue Dots* support centers in the northern part of Italy on the border with Slovenia (Friuli Venezia Giulia) located in the Ferneti (TS) and Tarvisio (UD) border areas.

UNHCR officially announced the project welcoming women and children from Ukraine:

Incoming people from Ukraine are visibly fatigued by the journey and tested by conflict and flight. Both during the journey and once in Italy, they are exposed to the risk of abuse, gender-based violence, and-for children-the risk of family separation. (D.i.Re, 2022)

The two Blue Dot support centers launched at the border by UNHCR and UNICEF aim precisely to offer an initial response to the most urgent needs of those arriving.

The counselors of the anti-violence centers, accompanied by the cultural mediators, welcome the women, giving them information about the anti-violence centers present on the Italian territory and all the activities they will be able to benefit from if they are in difficulty due to a situation of violence. The presence of experienced workers ensures that any risk situations can be intercepted immediately.

## **SARDINIA FEMINISTS' RESPONSE TO VIOLENCE**

My sisterly talk with Luisanna Porcu, a feminist psychologist and coordinator of the anti-violence center Onda Rosa (*Pink Wave*) in Nuoro, Island of Sardinia, was done in the new premises of Onda Rosa on the 9<sup>th</sup> of May 2022. She informed us about the history of feminist organizing against male violence on the Island of Sardinia:

Before 1990 only the nuns of the catholic church took some care of women surviving male violence. In 1997, there was a small group of activists that opened the Telephone Line for women – this project transformed into Anti-violence Center Onda Rosa (n.d.). Then, in 2001 one of the feminists from the women's discussion group opened the house she inherited to support women survivors of violence. At that time, we knew close to nothing about male violence.

There was an important development in 2014 when The Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT- L'Istituto nazionale di statistica) reported the results of the wide-reaching research on violence against women. They showed that every third woman

in Italy, around eight million, was subjected to male violence; “31.5% of 16- to 70-year-old [women] have suffered some form of physical or sexual violence during their life.” Luisana Porcu said:

These research findings resulted [in] a budget increase from the government for support of women. However, it was unevenly distributed depending on the region of Italy. In Sardinia, in the last financial year, the local government supported eight anti-violence centers and five refugee houses for the island of 1,5 million inhabitants.

Luisanna Porcu told me that this year (2022), they will celebrate 25 years of work of the Onda Rosa. The anti-violence center now has three shelters for women, a telephone line, counseling, and various projects, particularly with women with disabilities and with women in migration.

### WELCOMING WOMEN AND CHILDREN FROM UKRAINE

Luisanna Porcu described how they welcomed women and children from Ukraine:

Network D.i.Re already for years collaborates with UNHCR for the work with women in migration. Two years ago, we made three videos for women coming from Africa and Asia under the title *Leaving violence. Living safe 2020*. Therefore, this particular action on the border in 2022 is part of the broader collaboration between D.i.Re and UNHCR, whose overall objective is to facilitate the access of asylum-seeking and refugee women to the D.i.Re Network's Anti-Violence Centers. For this occasion, we prepared [a] leaflet in four languages with information about protection [against] violence and their rights as citizens.

In this collaboration on the Italian border, Luisanna Porcu worked in a team with another woman, a cultural mediator and translator for Ukrainian and Russian, herself a woman from Ukraine working in Italy. They talked to all the women and children who arrived in Italy by the bus from the border from Slovenia from 11 – 22 April 2022. In these 12 days, they talked to 179 women who arrived with 284 children.

I was under intense emotional impressions many days after I came back from the border working with women from Ukraine. At moments it was very painful. The wars kill bodies, but it also kills dreams and hopes. Sometimes we saw a deep nothingness in women's eyes as if nothing made sense – I don't know where I go now if I will ever come back if I come back, what will I find, I don't know when this will finish... who will survive... Sometimes mothers passed their desolation on to their children.

We learned that women's desire is not to create another life here in Italy but to return to their exact former life. They leave the people they love, their homes, their jobs, and they do not know what they will find in Italy. Who they will meet. This insecurity is full of fear of sexual violence, even if they are not ready to name it. Some of the buses from Ukraine arrived by night, and just observing women and men getting out of a bus in the middle of the night in an unknown place, it is obvious that night itself is retraumatizing for women. From an early age we girls are taught to fear night in connection to rape.

Our work consisted of women-to-women encounters. That is why they liked to talk to us; they could feel secure among women. They all gladly welcomed

the flyer we distributed about our women's anti-violence centers. The information on the flyer we made was simple, clear, written in big letters, and easy to understand for those who had little schooling or are dyslectic. Among the many flyers they received, they hold on to ours. It has not happened that it has been "forgotten" or "slipped" from their hands and found by us later on the pavement.

## RISK OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN ITALY

Luisanna continued:

In our interviews, we found out that not one of the 179 women we talked to said she had experienced sexual violence during the first months of wartime or in the process of leaving Ukraine and arriving in Italy. But the most important conclusion rests in their fear of their future, which puts them as women and girls in very vulnerable positions. We know most of them will be treated as second-class citizens. We also know from our experience working with migrant women what it means that some of their bodies will be used by men who will offer them "security" or "financial bases."

My concern was especially for the girls, 18 – 23, who do not have relatives or friends to stay in Italy. We already noted that many men in Italy had fired their caregivers or nurses they already had; with the crisis in Ukraine, they plan to pay less for the caregiving work of women from Ukraine because their dependence for survival is stronger. We only have estimates about the prevalence of the phenomenon of men with rape fantasies who plan to exploit women's bodies through unpaid work and unwanted sex. Our estimates are based on our experience supporting women who fled from their countries and work gratis to have somewhere to sleep and to eat, and in most cases, they are also sexually abused. ISTAT research on gender violence in Italy from 2014 confirms that the prevalence of sexual violence is higher among women from Ukraine and Moldavia. ("Foreign women are much more prone to rape and attempted rape (7.7 percent vs. 5.1 percent). Moldovan (37.3%), Romanian (33.9%) and Ukrainian (33.2%) women experience more violence.")

In our interviews we talked to women about their rights they can exercise to live with full citizenship. Supporting women was a very positive experience because of the synergy between the various organizations present at the border in giving everyone the right information for a life free from violence in Italy. We also reminded women that they have rights to say "No," to conditions they don't want. We explained [to] them how our women's anti-violence centers work so that they already have a trusting information after talking to us on which they can lean on if they need us. We wanted to transmit to them our women's solidarity and sympathy.

We also observed that full buses that came full from Ukraine went back half full, meaning that some of the women who arrived at the very beginning of the invasion were now going back home, even though the war is advancing. Those who were going back had different reasons; some because they felt they were a burden at the homes of relatives, or they felt unsecure or helpless, and some wanted to go back and seed potatoes. Some said they felt they didn't belong here. Some want to die in their own homes. The news from the UNHCR on this border by the 9<sup>th</sup> of May 2022 is that the number of people entering Italy from Ukraine has drastically decreased. The UN (2022) said

that as of 9 June 2022, there have been more than 2.3 million “cross-border movements” back into Ukraine.

## ITALY TO FULFILL ISTANBUL CONVENTION DEMANDS

Luisanna continued:

Our conclusion is that the risk of sexual violence for women we talked to starts now while they are in Italy. The same goes for women from Ukraine in every other country they fled to and for all women with the status of migrants and refugees. This means a huge responsibility for feminists in Europe. It's up to us to act. I read that many international organizations are offering support to women sexually abused in war in Ukraine. It is of great importance to have permanent monitoring in the war zones. But in fact, my position is that we must make it visible that women from Ukraine are at risk of sexual violence outside of Ukraine, also.

What is missing in Italy? There is not one center dedicated to sexual violence solely. Not one. It is a shame for a developed EU country. The Istanbul Recommendations also insist on services for survivors of sexual violence. What does it mean for us feminists in Italy? We have worked very hard to have more than 100 anti-violence centers concentrated on violence in the family. Now is a good time to take sexual violence seriously, educate ourselves, pressure the government on their duty to fulfill Istanbul Convention demands, and enable us to open Rape Crisis Centers. We must do it. It is my dream to open the Rape Crisis Center on my island Sardinia. I have already started to work on it.

At the end of the interview, Luisanna Porcu and I talked about feminist knowledge about women who live in conditions of multiple oppressions and how they are more exposed to sexual violence. It starts with violence toward immigrant and refugee women or those of non-white ethnic origins, like Roma or African women living in peripheral settlements and it includes women with disabilities. Our planning discussion envisioned more education on sexual violence and the opening of Rape Crisis centers in Italy.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

**Lepa Mladjenović** is a lesbian feminist activist, anti-war activist, and feminist counselor for women with trauma from male violence, and lesbians in Belgrade, Serbia. She is the co-founder of several feminist groups and networks in the region, including the *SOS Helpline* for women survivors of male violence, 1990, *Women in Black Against War*, 1991, *Autonomous Women's Center Against Sexual Violence* in 1993 where she worked as a Coordinator of the Counselling Team and counselor for survivors of sexual violence and rape in war until 2013. She facilitates women's groups on the trauma of sexual violence for activists. She is the co-founder of: *Arkadija* - Lesbian and Gay Group (1991), *Labris* - Lesbian Human Rights organization, (1995), *Counseling for Lesbians* (2013). In 2013, she was awarded The Anne Klein Women's Prize is given by the Heinrich Böll Foundation who are committed to gender democracy. She is the author of a Serbian book *Feminist Approach to Neurobiology of Trauma of Rape*, Autonomous Women's Center, Belgrade, 2020.

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