

# For Too Many Serbian Women, Home Is No Haven



BELGRADE -- When, at the age of 60, Desanka Mosaic finally resolved to leave her longtime husband, it followed four decades of violent abuse. Petar had broken her nose within a week of their wedding. Now, as she waited in Pancevo, in central Serbia, to board a bus for Germany 15 days after their divorce was finalized, he tracked her down and stabbed her to death in front of their teenage grandson.

Instead of a new life abroad, Desanka would have her initials added to a growing list on the Femicide Memorial, a digital platform to memorialize female victims of domestic violence across the country.

"She never even considered leaving him, reporting, or divorcing him because of societal pressures and the influence of his family," Desanka's son Dejan told RFE/RL's Balkan Service.

Desanka and the other victims are an ongoing testament to suffering and silence in Serbia, where women are dying in cities and households at a disturbing rate -- in many cases after having endured decades of unreported violence.

## Farewell Letter

In a farewell letter she'd written before seeking safety at a shelter that she hoped a court restraining order would keep Petar far away from, she had written: "I've left to live alone, without you and your torture, threats to kill me, and abuse -- I've had enough."

International organizations agree that, statistically speaking, **home is the most dangerous place for many women.**

In the past 15 years, 406 women have been murdered in Serbia, according to the Belgrade-based Autonomous Women's Center (AZC), a nonprofit, most of them over the age of 46. The center says that in more than half of those cases, the killers were their "married or unmarried partners."



*Dejan Mosaic and his mother, Desanka*

But while gender-based violence remains a serious problem in the most populous of the former Yugoslav republics, there are also signs that newer generations of Serbian women and girls are increasingly aware of the risks of domestic abuse.

"We have a significant number of older women who have never reported the violence," says Vanja Macanovic, head of the Autonomous Women's Center, which launched the Femicide Memorial.

She attributes such underreporting to the stigma among older generations, who often see reporting abuse as shameful.

Dejan says his mother grew up in an abusive household, with a father who drank. Marriage initially seemed like a form of protection, he says: "She was 17 when she accepted this [abuse] as a normal expression of love."

His mother "didn't realize she could report any form of violence, whether due to fear, threats, or the expectations of his family and sister, who provided her with a kind of support and love but also justified his behavior as complicated, nervous, and unpredictable."

Psychologist Biljana Slavkovic says fear and shame are among the main reasons many women endure prolonged violence. Such victims frequently believe they somehow contributed to the behavior, and they experience corresponding and pervasive guilt as a result.

"This guilt is reinforced by systems that normalize abusive behavior and teach women through transgenerational models that [suggest] it's normal to endure aggression and abuse from a partner or family member," says Slavkovic.

In patriarchal and conservative societies like Serbia, Slavkovic says, a normalization of violence prevents victims from fully recognizing their situation.

Dejan says he thinks the social environment played a role in his family's suffering. Outsiders were curious about things like where their money came from or why his mother and father married, he says, but ultimately weren't overly concerned about their well-being.

"They were interested in everything except how to stop a man like him," Dejan says. "They'd regard it as none of their business."

## **Fighting For Safety**

Informal polling of women in Belgrade by RFE/RL's Balkan Service hints at the prevalence of gender-based violence. But Macanovic says statistics show that younger generations of women are more aware and informed of the risks of abusive domestic situations.

"Unlike women who have endured 20, 30, or 40 years of violence, younger women are more likely to recognize the danger they're in," she says.

For some of the women who spoke to RFE/RL, like 21-year-old Tamara, taking action is nonnegotiable. After experiencing unwanted touching on a bus, she says, she called the police when she saw it happening to someone else.



*Vanja Macanovic, head of the Autonomous Women's Center, which launched the Femicide Memorial*

"We're not doing anyone a favor by not reporting violence," Macanovic stresses. "Those who are aware of abuse should get informed about how to help and call the police when they hear violence occurring."

The UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) warned in a [landmark study in 2019](#) that "Killings carried out by intimate partners are rarely spontaneous or random, and should be examined as an extreme act on a continuum of gender-related violence that remains underreported and too often ignored."

If anyone did try to help Desanka, her son says, it was mostly words of pity and comfort alongside advice that she should leave her husband. "But no one knew, not even my mother, how to do that when you can't trust anyone -- not even the police, who were often privately sitting with him and having coffee."

## 'Far From Resolved'

Serbia ratified the Council of Europe's convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, known as the Istanbul Convention, in 2013 and introduced a Domestic Violence Prevention Law in 2017.

Serbia's parliament-appointed commissioner for equality, Brankica Jankovic, says reports of violence have increased since the law's implementation. "But the problem is far from resolved," she adds. Jankovic emphasizes the need for specialized staff and dedicated departments to handle domestic violence cases effectively.

"It's not the same if a victim is met by an investigator fresh from a case involving theft or terrorism versus someone specifically trained to work with victims of violence," Jankovic says.

Some 28,413 cases of domestic violence were reported in Serbia in 2023, according to Interior Ministry data shared with the Autonomous Women's Center, the highest number of recorded reports since 2018. The center says it received 4,095 calls to its SOS line for psychosocial support in the same period, representing a 4 percent year-on-year increase. Twenty-seven women were murdered in Serbia in 2023.

"They feel no one believes them," says Macanovic, adding that the most dangerous moment for a woman is "when she leaves the abuser or informs him of her decision to leave."

A court concluded in connection with Desanka's murder -- and Petar's eventual sentencing to 30 years in prison for the crime -- that her ex-husband killed her "when he realized his ex-wife would not return to him and there was no chance of continuing their family life together."

A third of the victims chronicled by the Femicide Memorial had reported their abusers before they were murdered.

Dejan says he can't fathom why people fail to realize that no form of violence should be tolerated. But for years, he says, as his father grew wealthier and gained allies within institutions, his mother was like "a helpless hamster running in a wheel."

In his mother's case, her unrealized goal was "a better and brighter tomorrow," he says. "She hoped, but she was sinking deeper and deeper without realizing it."

Two days after the authorities issued a restraining order against him, Petar Mosic appeared at the shelter where Desanka was staying, prompting the local social welfare center to report the offense to the police.

Dejan says his father had information that the shelter had reported him. Had he been arrested, Dejan maintains, his mother might be free and alive today.