Cherry Picking: Response to Andrea Feldman's Review of Zilka Spahić Šiljak, ed., *Bosanski labirint: Kultura, rod i liderstvo* (Bosnian labyrinth: Culture, gender, and leadership), published in *Aspasia* 14 (2020): 196–197

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Andrea Feldman wrote a review of the book *Bosanski labirint: Kultura, rod i liderstvo* (The Bosnian labyrinth: Culture, gender, and leadership), which I edited and coauthored with my colleagues, Suada Penava and Jasna Kovačević. She decided to cherry-pick without proper references or citations to confirm her vague and biased assumptions.

Her review fixates literally on a few paragraphs of the book, disregarding the rest of the content, which turned her review into an entirely ideologically motivated criticism of the said paragraphs. The review makes unsubstantiated claims as well as gross generalizations regarding the text, entirely ignores the context where it suits her rhetoric, and even commits grammatical errors and errors in translation; therefore, I will respond to them.

The first line of the review fails to credit the coauthors who also conducted the research, namely, Dr. Suada Penava and Associate Professor Jasna Kovačević. An excerpt of the book was mistranslated by the reviewer, and the mistranslation was placed as a direct quote in two different places in the text. The author quotes the book as stating that “in Yugoslavia women achieved an envious level of equality.” *Envious* is purely, grammatically, a wrong adjective to use, as it denotes “wanting something someone else has” (as the Cambridge dictionary states), whereas *enviable* (meaning “likely to arouse envy”) would be the correct literal, if crude, translation of the Bosnian word *zavidan* in the quote. Moreover, the word in question in the Bosnian language is used to refer to something “significant,” “important,” or “worthy of attention” when used in this context.

The reviewer goes on to say that this quote is “wrong and unfounded” and offers up the research of Nada Ler Sofronić as evidence for this blanket statement. She falsely attributes the claim that “the ‘woman question’” was “‘solved’ during the Yugoslav period” to the book and its authors. This is never stated in the book, either explicitly or implicitly. It is noteworthy here that, if we take into account the socioeconomic

position of women in 1945, the year the Yugoslav state was established, it becomes clear that significant progress in the affirmation of gender equality was made between then and the 1980s, when Nada Ler Sofronić published her book. Like other Eastern European societies in the first half of twentieth century, Yugoslav society was agrarian, the rates of illiteracy among women were high, and they were excluded from public life and politics.¹ A comparison of the 1980s to the 1990s, when the democratic system was established, shows a reversal of the aforementioned progress, as evidenced by the fact that in 1986, women made up 24.1 percent of the Bosnian Parliament, whereas in 1996 this number dropped down to 2.8 percent.² I also critically reflected upon this in my previous work.³

Moreover, it should be emphasized that constitutionally, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is structured as an ethnonational state consisting of three major ethnic groups—Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats. As a consequence, when it comes to politics and public life, appointments are made based on ethnonational identity and corresponding quota and not based on one's status as a citizen of Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁴ This very fact brings into question the development of genuine democracy, meritocracy, human rights, and gender equality alike.⁵

Furthermore, the reviewer's statement that "cantonal-level elections seem to testify" that the "evolution of the democratic system" is the only thing that can increase "the number of women in decision-making positions" does not hold up to scrutiny. The slow increase in the numbers of women in decision-making positions is the direct result of the mandatory gender quota imposed on political party voting lists by the OSCE in 1997 and confirmed later by the Gender Equality Law of BiH of 2003.⁶ The problem in BiH is not democracy, and the authors never speak against democracy; the problem is the ethnonational structure of said democracy that deepens ethnic divisions and further disempowers women, who are the most vulnerable part of Bosnian society.

The reviewer goes on to cite a wrong page number for another quote from the book (on the third page, fifth paragraph overall of her review), where she cites page 128 when it should be 125. Feldman proceeds to make further errors in translation. First, the correct preposition to use after *conditioned* here is "on/upon" not "to," as something is conditioned *on* something else, but one is conditioned *to* perform an action. Second, this is also a too literal translation in the context, since here the meaning is "influenced by." Finally, by cutting off the beginning of the sentence and altering the form of the first word in her quote, the reviewer alters the meaning in a subtle but significant way. In the full sentence, the authors state, "However, this could indicate the reversibility of gender roles," whereas Feldman's statement is "The authors perceive these 'reversible gender roles.'" Whereas the text clearly says this "reversibility" is a possibility that could be indicated by the research, Feldman makes it sound as if the authors set down "reversible gender roles" as an undisputable fact. Furthermore, the book does not make any assertions as to any kind of a single true cause of its statistical findings, nor does it in any way explicitly or implicitly exclude the possibility of a positive influence of female leaders; this part merely presents a hypothesis on how a sudden decrease in economic security influenced gender dynamics within the family, and how witnessing or experiencing this in their own homes could have, in turn, in-

formed the participants' views. It does not make any claims about other factors that could have caused the said views.

This response is not a forum for challenging different ideological positions, but to demonstrate how reviews like this can mislead readers by mistranslation and misinterpretation.

◆ Notes

1. Krassimira Daskalova, "Audiatur et altera pars: In Response to Nanette Funk," *Aspasia* 10 (2016): 121–126.

2. For more references, see: Jasna Bakšić-Muftić, Nada Ler-Sofronić, Jasminka Gradašćević-Sijerčić, Maida Fetahagić, and Maja Ljubović. *Socio-economic Status of Women in BiH: Analysis of the Results of the Star Pilot Research done in 2002*, World Learning Star Network (Sarajevo: Jež, 2002); Marija Divičić, "Organizacija antifašističkog fronta žena Sarajevo u Socijalističkoj Jugoslaviji" [Organization of the antifascist women's front Sarajevo in socialist Yugoslavia] (Sarajevo: Istorijski arhiv Sarajevo, 1988), 295–296; Smiljana Leinert-Novosel, *Žene politička manjina: Perspektive sudjelovanja žena u javnom životu* [Women, minority in politics: Perspectives of the participation of women in public life] (Zagreb: NIRO Radničke novine, 1999), 29; Lidiya Sklevicky, *Konji, žene, ratovi* [Horses, women, wars], prepared by Dunja Rihtman Auguštin (Zagreb: Druga, 1996); Gorana Mlinarević et al., "The Context of BiH," in *Contesting Female, Feminist and Muslim Identities: Post-Socialist Contexts of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo*, ed. Zilka Spahić Šiljak (Sarajevo: Center for Interdisciplinary Postgraduate Studies of the University of Sarajevo, 2012); Zilka Spahić Šiljak, "Women, Religion and Politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina," in *Religion, The Secular, and the Politics of Sexual Difference*, ed. Linell Cady and Tracy Fessenden (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 121–136.

3. Zilka Spahić Šiljak, *Women, Religion and Politics: Impact Analysis of Religious Heritage of Judaism, Christianity and Islam on the Engagement of Women in Public Life and Politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Sarajevo: International Multireligious and Intercultural Centre "IMIC Zajedno" / Center for Interdisciplinary Postgraduate Studies [CIPS], University of Sarajevo / Transcultural Psychosocial Educational Foundation—TPO Foundation, 2010).

4. Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1995.

5. Nerzuk Ćurak, *Dejtonski nacionalizam* (Sarajevo: Buybook, 2004), 13.

6. Daniela Ćudić, *Approaches to Political Gender Equality in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, LUP Student Papers, Department of Political Science (Lund: Lund University, 2018), <http://lup.lub.lu.se/luur/download?func=downloadFile&recordId=8930989&fileId=8930990> (accessed 25 March 2020).