

## Article

# Everyday Practices of Gender in the Serbian Community of Post-War South-East Kosovo

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**Abstract:** This article aims to explore the everyday practices of gender in the Serbian community of south-east Kosovo, in a post-war context marked by sudden and radical political and social changes that deeply altered everyday life after 1999 and the establishment of the UN administration. As family and kinship ties are strongly expressed in the researched community, gender practices have been considered within that framework. This article is based on extensive multi-sited fieldwork conducted with members of the Serbian community in south-east Kosovo, and with displaced people from this region in several towns in Serbia. The field research focuses on everyday interactions and perspectives ‘from below’. The sudden and complex social and political changes that occurred after 1999 resulted in the transformation of the family structure and family roles, and thus to changes in gender practices. With the establishment of the international administration, influences linked to globalisation intensified. The migration of part of the community to Serbia, and the life of many of its members as ‘both here and there’, played an important role. Influences from Serbia, community guidance from the Serbian Orthodox Church, and changes in the ethnic and social landscape because of the war all combined to create opposing processes within the family. In family and gender relations, intensive, oppositional processes unfolded. These generated tensions within the community: the nuclearisation of the family and, for certain aspects, the liberalisation of relations in it and, at the same time, repatriarchalisation.

**Keywords:** Kosovo; Serbian community; migration; family; kinship; gender; post-war issue



**Citation:** Zlatanović, Sanja. 2022. Everyday Practices of Gender in the Serbian Community of Post-War South-East Kosovo. *Genealogy* 6: 78. <https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy6040078>

Received: 10 July 2022

Accepted: 18 September 2022

Published: 23 September 2022

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## 1. Introduction

War leads to radical social changes and disruption and forced population migrations are a key part of these changes. Experiences of war and the migration of part of a community transforms modes of both self-identification and of identification with the Other, thus re-defining intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic relations and boundaries. As much research indicates, armed conflict is preceded by processes of homogenisation within communities. Boundaries are strengthened, with various types of identifications (religious, regional, local, gender, etc.) being subsumed by an ethnic identification. Ethnicity often overshadows all other categories of belonging, and this finding was confirmed in my research with members of the Serbian community of south-east Kosovo (Zlatanović 2018). Research studies have shown that war is one of the most important catalysts for social change throughout human history (Malešević 2018). War leads to a transformation in the social order and in stratification patterns and dynamics linked to ethnic, gender, and all other relations (Olsson and Malešević 2018, pp. 728–29; Malešević 2018).

After the armed conflicts in Kosovo in 1998 and 1999, the NATO interventions, and then the retreat of the Serbian police force, the military, and paramilitary groups from Kosovo, and the establishment of the United Nations administration, a radical change in the political and social context occurred. Some members of the Serbian community migrated to Serbia in 1999, and such migrations continue to this day. In this article, I consider these points and research the everyday practices of gender in Kosovo, and how

social context and everyday life radically changed from 1999 onwards. Gender practices are tightly interwoven with family relations, and the latter are particularly strongly expressed in the Kosovo region.

The Kosovo Serbs are part of a complex network of everyday relations. On the one hand, the Republic of Serbia has striven to establish and maintain control over Kosovo through them. On the other hand, there is the majority Albanian society, the international administration and numerous non-governmental organisations, and the various actors, projects, and interests that structure all the factors discussed above. The minority (enclave) position of the Serbian community in this post-war region has made that community especially vulnerable, and it has become susceptible to the influences to which it has been exposed. The influences from Serbia have been especially strong, mainly through those members who had settled there or who resided there on occasion. The powerful influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church tightly links to the above-mentioned influences from Serbia on the researched community. The UN administration in Kosovo created the framework in which the community's life has unfolded, influencing it from 'above'. The Serbian community has been exposed to contrasting influences and value orientations, which have created tensions both within their family frameworks and in broader social frameworks. In family and gender relations, intensive oppositional processes have occurred—the nuclearisation of the family and, in certain aspects of social life, the liberalisation of links with the family unit and repatriarchalisation. This article researches these processes.

The Serbian community in Kosovo interacts and builds relationships with the Albanian community there. But while many important research studies (Luci 2005; Munn 2006; Leutloff-Grandits 2014; Krasniqi 2014, 2015; Latifi 2018; Krasniqi and Latifi 2020, etc.) have been published on gender and family relations in the Albanian community, very little is known about such relations in the Serbian community, especially the community in south-east Kosovo. Research into gender and family relations among members of the Serbian community has largely been small-scale, with the results published in Serbian (Ivanov 2009; Aritonović 2009; Milovanović 2016). This article aims to fill this gap in the literature by offering an overview of the everyday practices of gender in south-east Kosovo's Serbian community. It builds on my previous work, in which I offered a more fine-grained consideration of changes in family relations among members of this community, and a more detailed depiction of the context (Zlatanović 2011).

## 2. Research Methodology

This article is based on long-term, in-depth ethnographic research in south-east Kosovo (part of a broader area known as the Kosovsko-Pomoravlje region or the Morava river basin), in the areas of the Gornja (Upper) and Donja (Lower) Morava (in the town of Gnjilane/Gjilan—the regional centre, and in the surrounding villages of Šilovo/Shillove, Gornji Livoč/Livoq and Eperm, Gornje Kusce/Kuske e Eperme, Parteš/Partesh, and Pasjane/Pasjan; in the township of Vitina/Viti and the surrounding villages of Vrbovac/Vrbofc, Grnčar/Germcare, Binač/Binaq, Mogila/Mogille, and Klokot/Kllokot; and also in the villages of Letnica/Letnicë and Draganac/Draganoc, because of their religious significance)<sup>1</sup> (see the map given in Zlatanović 2017, p. 149). I also conducted research with displaced people from this region in a few towns in Serbia: Smederevo, Vranje, and Vranjska Banja, as there was a large number of people displaced from the south-east Kosovo region in these towns. Additionally, residents of south-east Kosovo often travel to Vranje as the closest, reasonably large town in Serbia (the distance between Vranje and Gnjilane is just 60 km). The research was carried out between 2003 and 2006, but I remained in contact with some of the interlocutors and continued to keep track of community dynamics within the region for several years after the main research period.

The fieldwork was designed to be multi-sited (Marcus 1995), because it dealt with a migratory situation. The field was defined as a network of localities (Hannerz 2003) while avoiding any claims to holism, which is one of the most common criticisms directed at the multi-sited approach (Boccagni 2016, pp. 4, 6). Qualitative fieldwork methods were used,

namely, participant observation. The field research focused on everyday interactions and perspectives ‘from below’. The research involved many interlocutors, but their number is difficult to specify precisely, as the research was qualitative with a long-term stay in the field, and so many invaluable insights were gained outside of the interviews (e.g., at weddings and festivals that I attended, etc.). As a rough guide, I completed in-depth interviews with approximately 160 interlocutors from the south-east Kosovo region, and of these, around 30 interviews were conducted in Serbia.

Almost all interlocutors belonged to the Serbian community, and as much of the research was conducted immediately after the armed conflict, access to members of other communities was restricted. The interlocutors expressed following the Serbian Orthodox faith, either implicitly or explicitly. I strove to acquire as many different perspectives as possible in this work: my interlocutors had a wide range of ages, educational levels, occupations, places of birth, and places of residence. The educational structure of the interlocutors included in this research reflected the educational structure of the population of south-east Kosovo: the population was mainly rural; the older interlocutors had completed up to four years of primary school, while the middle-aged and younger ones had mostly completed primary or secondary school; those with higher education were mainly schoolteachers.

### **3. South-East Kosovo’s Serbian Community: The Social Network, Interior Boundaries, and Its Meaning and Significance**

South-east Kosovo’s Serbian community consists of those who define themselves as ‘long-time inhabitants’ and colonists, settled in this region during the period between the two world wars. There are also other lines of division within the colonists, which depend on their place of origin (Montenegrins, Herzegovinians, etc.). The researched region was mainly settled by a population from south-east Serbia (from the mountainous and hilly regions in the wider area around Vranje), who the long-time inhabitants pejoratively referred to as *Šopi*, *Šopci*, or *Šopovi*. From as early as the 1960s, colonists began to sell their property and leave Kosovo. During the research period, an extremely small number of the descendants of the colonists remained in Kosovo; those who remained had married long-time inhabitants. Within those who self-identified as long-time inhabitants, one special sub-group consisted of the ‘Serbian Gypsies’ (*Srpski Cigani*).<sup>2</sup> They define themselves as Serbs, but the Serbian population in the surrounding area largely considered them to be ‘Gypsies’ and drew on offensive, ingrained stereotypes. The boundary between these two groups within the broader category of long-time inhabitant is an ambiguous zone of negotiation (for more on this, see: [Zlatanović 2017](#)).

A primarily rural population now makes up the Serbian community of south-east Kosovo. They are very proud of their long-time inhabitant identity, and this identity’s supporting constructs include having lived in this region ‘from time immemorial’, and thus having a strong link to the land, home, kin, and to their specific tradition, which they value highly. The community is closed off locally. The social network is marked by dense, strong, and multiple connections between members—they all know each other; one person’s cousin is also their neighbour. The fragmentation of the extended family household occurred in the socialist period, and it resulted in a situation where family members remained on the same estate. However, this estate was divided up, and so kin and neighbourly relations (more on this topic will follow) emerged in parallel.

The community was an ethnic, religious and linguistic minority in an environment and post-conflict region that was predominantly Albanian. This situation further strengthened and closed off the social network. The exodus of part of the community that occurred in 1999, and the later migration waves, had a strong effect on the image that long-time inhabitants had of themselves and others, as well as on the life of family members and the wider community as it became displaced.

The village–city dichotomy, which implies a range of other dichotomies, has played an important role in Kosovo ([Duijzings 2000](#), pp. 12, 20). It is tightly linked to the long-time inhabitant–newcomers dichotomy. In this context, long-time inhabitants referred to the

old urban population (irrespective of their ethnic belonging), while newcomers referred to those who moved from rural settings to the city, which in this case referred to Gnjilane. Nevertheless, the urban and rural spheres were not two strictly separated entities, but rather variable perspectives of interpretation and experience, permeated with meanings and emotions linked to belonging (cf. [Henig 2017](#), p. 50).

An identification with Kosovo is extremely pronounced, and the Kosovo Serb community shares many aspects of life organisation with the Kosovo Albanians, and it is in many aspects distinct from how the population of Serbia lives. Local identifications are highly emphasized within the community—both broader ones (Donja Morava/Gornja Morava) as well as narrower ones (village identifications).

#### 4. Living in a Post-War Region

During the research period, the social reality in Kosovo was conspicuously ethnicised. Authors who have conducted research in post-war and post-Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina have drawn attention to how the complexity of Bosnian society is largely reduced to its ethnic or ethno-national dimensions, with identity-based perspectives predominating in the analyses ([Bougarel et al. 2007](#), p. 13; [Jansen 2015](#); [Henig 2012](#), p. 4). Jansen has advocated a research approach that does not focus on identity concerns, as while people are worried about identity-related questions, many other aspects of life also worry them, including pragmatic aspects. An identity register is not always the primary register ([Jansen 2015](#)). The prominent ethnicisation of everyday life in Kosovo has interfered in the pragmatic and emotional aspects of life, but it is important to bear in mind the complexity of the social reality, which also transcends the ethnic codification here.

Everyday life entails activities and experiences that make up the ordinary life of people and communities; that is, everything they do as part of their daily routines. Synonyms for ‘the everyday’ include routines, habits, and repetitiveness. The everyday is often linked to the private sphere, while the private and public are inseparable in practice. In this post-war region, everyday life—as a set of common, routine, repetitive activities that are both predictable and secure—has been completely uprooted.

##### 4.1. *The War Is Over, but It Is Still Going On*

The period immediately after the armed conflicts (in 1999 and 2000) was marked by chaos, various forms of violence and attacks on property (in ethnically mixed villages, this included setting houses and outhouses on fire and stealing cattle), as well as fleeing to Serbia. For members of the Serbian community, moving from one town or village to another, or even visiting the cemetery, which is located far away from the residential areas, for a *Zadušnice*,<sup>3</sup> was completed in convoys accompanied by international military forces. Gradually, the situation calmed down. Humanitarian aid arrived and people moved more freely. However, even many years after the armed conflicts, everyday life in this post-war environment was marked by violence, insecurity, chaos, and limited freedom of movement, all amid a new legal framework established by the international administration, the mass migrations of the Serbian and Roma populations, and the sale of property. The situation varied in crucial ways from place to place. Life in the enclave (in Vitina and several nearby villages, and a small urban enclave in Gnjilane) was far less favourable than that in the large and ethnically homogenous Serbian villages in the area around Gnjilane, such as Šilovo and Pasjane.

During my first research stay in villages in the Vitina enclave in 2003, the core image I had of Kosovo’s social reality was one of devastation and desolation, with international military troops in armoured vehicles everywhere. Newly built buildings lined old and eroded roads: their flashy architecture was at odds with the surroundings and strengthened the experience of post-war divisions and trauma. It was only possible to travel from one village to the next by car. If anyone wanted to go on foot, they had to travel in a group. Free movement was permitted within the ethnically homogeneous Serbian villages. In ethnically mixed villages, men moved around in groups, while women only left for places

in the immediate neighbourhood. Because of the difficult conditions of movement, friends and kin from different villages were unable to see each other often, and they could not even visit one another for the *krsna slava* (family patron saint's day).<sup>4</sup> In the village of Binač near Vitina, the *krsna slava* was celebrated without guests, because kin living in the nearby houses celebrate the same saint's day, while those living further away were no longer able to come. Everyday life was coloured by the traumas of war: existential insecurity, the experience of a ghetto and of isolation, and a sense of life on hold, as if time had stopped.

#### 4.2. Improvising a 'Normal' Life

The members of the Serbian community who remained mostly worked in agriculture, but from 1999 onwards, this was mostly subsistence farming, as they did not have anyone to sell goods to. The infrastructure was outdated, damaged, or non-existent. Power cuts occurred on an everyday basis (for several hours, and even for the entire day), and people were unable to carry out basic household chores. There were relatively well-supplied grocery stores in the villages. The locals bought the rest of their goods in Vitina and Gnjilane, in shops owned by Albanians. They were oriented in a significant sense towards Vranje: each day, vans from many villages in the Kosovsko-Pomoravlje region travelled to Vranje. They went to Vranje to complete various administrative tasks, undergo medical treatment, and make purchases.

Serbs in Kosovo did not immediately recognise the UN administration. In education, healthcare, and the courts, "parallel structures" financed from the Republic of Serbia's budget continued to operate.<sup>5</sup> Many reasons contributed to their maintenance. First and foremost, there was limited freedom of movement and a lack of trust in members of the Serbian community within the newly established, temporary UN administration. The functioning of such 'parallel structures' was marked by a high degree of improvisation, given that there were not enough experts left in Kosovo. Teachers in schools often did not have the appropriate professional qualifications. Many more educated people, such as doctors and teachers, worked in Kosovo and returned to Serbia for the weekend, where their families lived. Those who were originally from the Kosovsko-Pomoravlje region sold their property and moved to Serbia, where they could not find work. Attracted by the high wages, which were twice as large as those that doctors and educational workers received in Serbia (in what became known as the 'Kosovo supplement'), they left for Kosovo to work in schools or in medical clinics. The Kosovo Serbs were dissatisfied with these people's work: they came on Monday and left on Thursday, while children often missed lessons—and these people received high wages while not living in Kosovo. School classes were often shortened, the teaching was simplified, and the educators with whom I spoke said that these circumstances were such that the children could not concentrate on learning and that, given the situation, it was important for their education to continue, albeit under these circumstances.

General practitioners worked in the medical clinics in larger villages where Serbs lived, and on certain days, a dentist and several specialist doctors would attend. Surgical and gynaecological interventions presented a challenge, as did treating more serious illnesses. Residents were instructed to visit the health centre in Vranje for specialist check-ups and hospital treatment. Check-ups during pregnancy, as well as the birth itself, were mainly carried out in Vranje. Just before childbirth, married couples usually rented a flat in Vranje, or stayed with relatives. Several women gave birth in Vitina, in the hospital where Albanians work. The mother to be and the baby were well cared for, but nevertheless, members of the Serbian community did not trust them. In a conversation with a woman who gave birth in November 1999 in Vranje, and on three later occasions in Vitina, I found out that the staff in the Vitina maternity hospital treated her very well. I will now tell this interlocutor's story here, to facilitate a more complete understanding of the links between ethnic, regional (Kosovo), and gender identification. Indeed, when she gave birth to her third little girl, the Albanian midwife comforted her with the words that next year she would have a boy.



From 1999 onwards, the number of Serbs in this region has been rapidly decreasing, and as a result, the remaining members of the community have been feeling ever less secure. The dynamic to the post-war changes has created a new ethnic and social landscape (Zlatanović 2011, p. 235). Although interlocutors mainly continued to see a life for themselves in Kosovo, they evaluated the future as uncertain. Families who remained in Kosovo strove to secure their future by buying property in Serbia, even if they simply bought the worst piece of land on the outskirts of a village.

The sale of houses and land (with which the rural population had a deep emotional connection) has led to conflict within family and kin frameworks, as well as within the wider Serbian community. The Serbs highlighted their multi-generational “rootedness” and connection to their lands and to this region as distinctive features of their ethnic and regional identity. They bitterly described the sale of land inherited from their ancestors, as well as migrations and the separation of family members as a “tearing apart”: “We were torn apart”, “we are all scattered”. They perceive their community (ethnic, regional, local, kin) as a whole whose parts have been harshly and violently separated (Zlatanović 2011, p. 234).<sup>6</sup>

The improvisation of a ‘normal’ life, both at the level of the individual and at the level of the family and the wider community, is captured in the phrase that Ivana Maček used to describe life in Sarajevo under siege: the “imitation of normal life” (Maček 2009, pp. 5–10, 62, 82).

#### 4.3. ‘Our’ and ‘Their’ Time

Attributes related to liminality featured in the interlocutors’ discourse on the post-war period and the UN administration’s rule in Kosovo. These denoted an excruciating, unidentified, and undefined state when a person is ‘neither here nor there’, and when they have no opportunity to make any kind of long-term plans. In every conversation, the main question they raised was of whether to stay in Kosovo or move to Serbia. This question was accompanied by their experiencing their situation as threatening and uncertain. Burdened with the problems of everyday post-war life and waiting for the problem of Kosovo’s status to be finally resolved, the interlocutors drew a sharp boundary in their periodisation: they divided the time before and after 1999 into ‘ours’ and ‘theirs’. The 1990s, a period when Kosovo was under the Belgrade regime’s control, was denoted as “our time”, while the period after 1999 was “their time”, that is, Albanian. They often said that things were difficult, but what could be done about it here—“their time has come” (Zlatanović 2011, p. 233).<sup>7</sup>

Members of the researched community were deeply linked to their home, kin and the way of life in Kosovo. In their statements, almost all interlocutors had the attitude that a person is always better off in their birthplace, and that leaving their ‘hearth’ and departing for a ‘foreign’ world is not simple. Many of the interlocutors did not wish to move, but they did not wish to remain in a situation that they perceived as unfavourable, and which could also become highly risky. Many were not able to move to Serbia, as they could not secure accommodation there and find work. They had been mulling over these issues for a long time, and this process had been wearing them out. They felt connected to their home, kin, and the way of life in Kosovo, and their fear was that “Everything is torn apart... You are no longer on your own territory and with your own family”, as this discussion between two sisters-in-law demonstrates. They lived in homes next to one another (denoted here as interlocutors 1 and 2: IL 1, IL 2; researcher: R). In the conversation they conveyed their uncertainty surrounding life under the UN administration and Kosovo’s undefined status, and thus the impossibility of any kind of long-term planning and investing; they could not renew their home furnishings, for instance, purchase a new rug or curtains, as they feared that they might be forced to leave their home. The sentences “We cannot go on” and “You cannot live and create a life for yourself” express the essence of this transitional period, which has lasted a very long time. Through the example of post-war Sarajevo, Stef Jansen

has spoken of a yearning for a ‘normal life’, naming this kind of period “yearnings in the meantime” (Jansen 2015).

IL 1: Don’t leave what is yours.

IL 2: Of course, leaving your family and home isn’t easy...

IL 1: Your customs and friendships and home...

IL 2: Well, it’s all being torn apart... You are no longer on your own territory and with your own family.

IL 1: You can’t keep things together any longer. No longer, no longer, no longer! There is nothing worse than that...

IL 2: Uh...

R: But, well. Your village is big, you can still all stick together.

IL 2: We are still sticking together, but you know...

IL 1: What use is us being a big village!

IL 2: They are selling the fields! They are selling the homes! What?!

IL 1: We are in decline, we can’t go on.

IL 2: We can’t, and if you want to do something, to build a second house...

IL 1: You can’t live and create a life for yourself, yeah...

IL 2: What’s happened to things, that’s it, we don’t buy anything new for the home any more.

[...]

IL 2: You don’t dare invest! You don’t dare buy something, change your rug or curtains, or...

IL 1: No, no, this situation we have found ourselves in from 20 years ago, that’s how it is, we don’t buy anything.

IL 2: How can I invest in the home, if I need to leave it all behind?!

In researching social relations in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina, the authors Jansen, Brković, and Čelebičić depicted the situation in which the ‘common people’ found themselves, using the chronotopes of the waiting room and the labyrinth. The chronotope of the waiting room can be applied to the Kosovo Serbs as well: their situation is like being in a closed space, and they are waiting there for something that depends on the decisions of others; people behind closed doors who surround the waiting room (Jansen et al. 2017, p. 17). The labyrinth chronotope, a space with no entrance and no exit in which people are stuck (Jansen et al. 2017, p. 16), also precisely describes the condition of the Kosovo Serb community.

## 5. Religious Practices and Traditionalism

In June 1999, after the Yugoslav and Serbian army and police retreated from the region, the only Serbian institution that remained in Kosovo was the Serbian Orthodox Church, which offered aid to members of the Serbian community in many ways, seeking to prevent their emigration. For the Serbian community in Kosovo, the Church has a much greater significance above and beyond being a religious institution; it is seen as the only institution that did not abandon the community in hard times. The Serbian Orthodox Church has expressed a very involved political attitude regarding the Kosovo issue.

Within Kosovo’s Serbian community, from the late 1980s, internal homogenisation processes have resulted in a fusion of ethnic and religious identification, and they have become indistinguishable (Zlatanović 2018). In this context, belonging to the Serbian nation entails following the Orthodox faith, and this belonging is defined primarily and almost exclusively through it. Intensive processes of homogenisation, the strengthening of ethnic identity, and the build-up of sharp and impermeable boundaries have also come to feature in other Kosovo communities. A deeply rooted hybrid religious practice, typical of Kosovo,<sup>8</sup> has been suppressed in the hidden domain of privacy. From the late 1980s, and especially from 1999, the Serbian Orthodox Church has had an ever-stronger influence on identification matrices among Kosovo Serbs. Kosovo Serbs are increasingly dedicated

to familiarising themselves with Church practices through learning; they include these practices in their rituals, and the Church requires believers to stick to their rules.

In those parts of the Kosovsko-Pomoravlje region covered by this research, traditionalism was extremely pronounced in all spheres of life, especially in the village by Vitina (Gornja Morava). As the Serbian community was undergoing attrition, surrounded by the majority, dominant Albanian community, it resorted to traditionalism, in both its social organisation and in its everyday and common practices, as a way of resisting its decline in a space that it experienced deeply as its own. Given the post-war context and minority (enclave) situation in which the community found itself, traditionalism as a form of resistance is completely understandable. The reasons for resorting to traditionalism should be searched for in Kosovo's frontier character, with a weaker influence from the central state administrations, and thus in the influences of modernising processes, and in the society's poverty, continual conflicts, etc. Traditionalism can be expressed in different forms. The researched community resorted to the form that Balandier calls fundamental traditionalism: it tended to preserve those values and approaches to resolving social issues that had been confirmed the most in the past (Balandije [1967] 1997, p. 228).

## 6. Family and Gender Relations

The Serbian community in south-east Kosovo (as with the Kosovo society of which it is a part) is a classic example of a community with a patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal family organisation. In the first half of the twentieth century, the prevalent pattern was the multiple extended household which was (1) vertical (multi-generational, consisting of parents with their married sons, grandchildren, and great grandchildren) and (2) horizontal (consisting of many brothers with their wives, children, and grandchildren). Interlocutors born in the period around the Second World War said that they had grown up in that kind of family, which they called *zajednica* (a community). A typical sentence that followed an interlocutor's comment on this pattern of family organisation was, "We lived in a community" (*Živeli smo u zajednici*). My interlocutors were not familiar with the term *zadruga*, which first appeared in Vuk Karadžić's Serbian Dictionary (Vienna, 1818) and which is used to refer to this kind of household in the literature.<sup>9</sup> As Hristov explained, the term *zadruga* was probably coined by Vuk Karadžić himself, and it was then introduced into both literature and political discourse in order for "young Balkan countries in the 19th century to mark the multitude of historical forms under which the 'complex family organization' was known among the South-Slavic people in the region" (Hristov 2022, pp. 1–2; cf. Todorova 2006, p. 127).

In the period after the Second World War, the state applied legal measures in the field of agriculture to limit the quantity of private land. This resulted in the large, extended family households splitting into smaller units (Kaser [1995] 2002, pp. 433, 440, 447). The division of the family household and other property (farmland, home furnishings, etc.) was a task usually completed by one of the brothers staying with the parents in the household, while the other brothers in the immediate vicinity gained plots to build a home there. This agnatically based neighbourhood (brothers and their families) formed a looser community. The dividing up of the extended family household has been a long-time process in this region. Interlocutors born after the Second World War spoke of how, through marriage, they entered a family with more than twenty members during the 1960s, and they described their relationships with this large number of sisters-in-law for whom they prepared food and helped one another during childbirth. And while in other parts of the Socialist Yugoslavia the patriarchal patterns were broken down, modified, or survived in an altered form, in Kosovo, they remained almost untouched (cf. Kaser [1995] 2002, pp. 452–69). In Kosovo, the frequency of ethnically mixed marriages was extremely low—the lowest in the Socialist Yugoslavia (Petrović 1985, p. 74). Modernising procedures that the Socialist Yugoslavia attempted to put in place hardly influenced them at all. As Duijzings has pointed out, Kosovo was a poor, peripheral society in which central government authority had only been nominal for most of its modern history (Duijzings 2000, p. 5). Thus, in the socialist period,



attempts to create a state administration to reform society encountered many difficulties. The vertically extended family was the dominant model, and it was also typical at the turn of the millennium.

The interlocutors' statements—people of various ages and levels of education—as well as common practices demonstrated that the value system of the extended family, organised in line with patriarchal principles, continued to be powerful during the fieldwork period. They believed it was good if a person had as many brothers as possible; such people make up a stronger group, and this offers the individual a form of protection. As one of the interlocutors in her later years explained, many brothers with women and children form a unit like a garrison, and even a whole army, which makes the family more powerful in front of others (see the female interlocutor's statement given in: [Zlatanović 2011](#), pp. 238–39). The mother-in-law (the mother of the groom) would start the wedding celebration dance, according to the model as ideally conceived, with her sisters-in-law. All women who danced in the mother-in-law's circle dance would be called mothers-in-law, and they would dress in traditional costume. This demonstrated the deep rootedness of the value norms of the extended patriarchal family, as well as these women's need to emphasise and maintain them. In the early twenty-first century, too, the family was experienced as a basic security net: as a unit for attack and defence in conditions of poverty amid a lack of existential security and a struggle to survive, as Ger Duijzings ([Duijzings 2000](#), pp. 6–7) earlier explained it. A great importance was attached to family and kin relations. People even knew the fine details of cousins who were distantly related to them, to the extent that I was unable to follow all these relationships. I gained the impression that all community members were in some form of kin relations with one another. In the researched community, the family represented a *total social fact* in the full sense of the word—if we follow Jasna Čapo's paraphrasing of Marcel Mauss ([Čapo 2022](#), p. 12).<sup>10</sup>

Sudden and complex social and political changes from 1999 led to the family structure and its roles being transformed, and thus to changes in gender practices. The vertically extended family remained—and remains—the dominant model, and its value orientation remains highly desired. A young pair begin their life in the house of the groom's parents. If there are many married brothers in the family, then some of them separate off by getting a plot of land from the father to build a house. This setup makes migrations of parts of the family extremely difficult: for instance, that of a married couple, either young or middle-aged with children, who want to separate off from the older family members and live independently in Serbia. The vertically extended family becomes a nuclear family in migration situations. Many old married couples continue living by themselves in Kosovo. Irrespective of the process of the nuclearisation of the family (both younger and older members), the Kosovo family culture continues to be based on the extended family model (cf. [Davydova-Minguet and Pöllänen 2021](#), p. 9). Although many families live separated off from one another (in Kosovo and in Serbia), transnationally in a sense, their parts function as a whole in many aspects—certain members are 'both here and there', without definitive decisions made about where they habitually reside, and they strive to maintain a sense of mutual connection and familyhood (cf. [Davydova-Minguet and Pöllänen 2021](#), p. 14). Nevertheless, the increasingly visible nuclearisation of the family structure creates tensions in roles and relationships that are inevitably changing.

The following sections will consider everyday practices of gender affected by intensive, ambivalent processes—the nuclearisation of the family and the liberalisation of relations in it, and, at the same time, its repatriarchalisation. Old patterns are changing, but some of their aspects are tied up in the community vulnerability in the post-war situation, and so they have become more prominent.

#### 6.1. *The New Post-War Conditions and Old Norms: Restrictions on Women's Freedom of Movement*

In the period after the armed conflicts, moving from village to village or to the town of Gnjilane became very risky, as did moving within ethnically mixed environments. Over

time, the situation calmed down, but even many years after the conflict, moving in certain areas was risky. The public transport that linked the villages, as well as the village with the town, was slow and not completely established. Under such conditions, kin relations between people living in the immediate neighbourhood offered important mutual help and security. The Serbian community's limited freedom of movement led to women's further confinement in family and kin frameworks, strengthening their connection to and dependence on men. I attended wedding preparations when the gathered women complained to one another that they could not visit their cousins in another village or make purchases in Gnjilane because they would have needed the men (husbands or sons) to take them there, but the men were too busy or displayed a lack of understanding regarding their needs, or their car was not in good working order (the women did not have driving licences), etc.

Women's movement, especially that of young women, was limited and controlled by old, deeply rooted patriarchal attitudes, as I will now illustrate through two examples. In Kosovo, I travelled in a car that an acquaintance drove. His cousin came with us—a young, married woman without children. She lived with her husband in a large town in Central Serbia. The husband was unable to take leave from work, and so she left on the journey without him to visit her parents for a religious holiday—*seoska slava*, the village patron saint's day. We travelled to the same village on the outskirts of Gnjilane, which was inhabited by a Serb population. She and I had planned to spend around a week there. When chatting during the journey, I suggested that one day we take a walk through the village together so that she could show me the buildings she had mentioned during our discussions. She reacted to my suggestion with surprise; she was astounded. She said that she could not walk around the village; that her husband would find out, that someone would surely tell him, and that she had only come to spend time with her parents. Her cousin, my acquaintance, wanted to understand the situation, and he further explained that this young woman's husband may get angry if he found out that she had gone outside for a walk (this would have been during the day, in a village with only a few larger streets). Nevertheless, we did go for a walk later, but with her older cousin accompanying us, and not very far from her parent's house. The second example concerns a young, married woman from an ethnically homogeneous Serbian village near Vitina. I had long, substantial conversations with her; she was a warm-hearted interlocutor and a highly dedicated mother and housewife. Her husband worked hard all day and she stayed alone at home with a small child. When she needed to buy something in the nearby small supermarket, she always called her husband's cousin, a woman who lived in the house next to theirs, and they would go together. She explained to me that this was necessary because, if she went by herself with the child to the store, "the villagers would say all kinds of things". These two examples are from villages with a Serbian population and moving around within them was secure.

During the research period, the girls married at a young age, usually immediately after finishing secondary school. People believed that if a girl was not married by the age of 21–22 at the latest, then afterwards it would be more difficult for her. A very small number of girls continued their education, but they did not receive support from the family or the wider community. One of my young interlocutors expressed regret over not having moved away to study, because she had been an excellent pupil. She explained that, in Kosovo, the situation was such that it was difficult to travel and stay in a large town. Furthermore, her parents would not have supported her (due to financial reasons, but also because they took the view that a female child does not need to be educated and to move away from home). One middle-aged interlocutor, the mother of a school-age girl, said that she would love for her daughter to complete university studies, but that she could not permit her female child to be in a large town with no one watching over her. If that were the case, she would perhaps choose to stay with her as support when she was studying. Restrictions and checks on movement also extended to the education of female children. Nevertheless, albeit rarely, there were examples of girls from that region gaining a university education.

A very small number of women were employed (in education, healthcare, the administration, or the village shops). Some women earned money by sewing or weaving at home. Certain women were conjurers, and they had a special status in the community (Ilić 2007). When we touched on topic of women's employment during the research conversations, women usually replied that, "There isn't even any work available for men" (to compare with the situation in the Albanian community: Latifi 2019, p. 200). It is important to bear in mind that the results of the research studies in other places the world over demonstrate that war and political instability have a negative influence on opportunities for work and conditions for women, and lead to their decreasing participation in the labour market (Kooli and Muftah 2020).

## 6.2. *Marriage, the Preference for Sons, and the Interaction between Religious, Ethnic, and Gender Identifications*

During the research period, it was expected that the girls would enter marriage as virgins and that they would be 'deflowered' in the house of the groom's parents. If it turned out that the young woman was not a virgin, this detail would be hidden to save the family's face. As one young married woman explained:

IL: They don't respect her much. [...] That stays with her forever. If people find out that she was not a virgin, that will follow her for her whole life. And if she argues with her mother-in-law or father-in-law, or with her husband, they will always throw that back at her.

R: What do they say to her?

IL: They say, 'Here you are arguing with us, and we know what you were like when you arrived! You don't have the right to raise your voice at us!' Woah ... they say something nasty to her, so she feels bad. Just like that. Or when she won't do something, they just say that nasty thing, and then she is sad afterwards. That's what I heard.

Marriage necessarily begins as patrilocal, but in the new post-war circumstances, this does not mean that it will stay that way. Migrations to Serbia, either permanent or temporary, have loosened the patrilocal concept. Divorce is extremely rare. When it does occur, the children remain with the father; they are considered as belonging to his family, and the woman returns to her parents' house alone. However, the parents are typically not very understanding about her return; the reasons are complex, but they emphasise that this is now the house of her brother(s) and that her place is no longer here, but rather with her husband.

From the early 1990s, the birth rate has been falling: married couples usually opt for three children.<sup>11</sup> Only male offspring are desired, and they must be gained at any price. Brothers are desired over sisters. When the family has a third or fourth daughter in a row, the congratulations they receive are perceived as mockery. I was a guest at the first birthday celebration of a little girl who was the first-born child of a young married couple. The guests typically congratulated them with the words: "Next year—a son!" while the girl whose birthday was celebrated was not mentioned. After the birth of a female child, numerous magical rituals are conducted to ensure a male child will be next. These magical practices oriented around having male offspring are incredibly rich and elaborate.

During the research period, the practice of sex-selective abortion began to be applied. If the married pair had two daughters, during the next pregnancy they would resort to medical methods for determining the sex of the foetus based on testing the amniotic fluid. This can be carried out for an expensive fee in private clinics in Serbia. If they found out that the foetus was female, the married pair would opt for an abortion.<sup>12</sup> The patriarchal gender hierarchy and repression were deeply internalised, and not even young women questioned them.

Gender relations were constructed in such a way that only by having a son were women able to strengthen their position within the husband's family. The more sons a

woman had, the stronger her position would be. Interlocutors of various ages spoke of their great desire to have a son, and they were prepared to go through multiple pregnancies to achieve this. For example, one of them had three daughters, and her fourth child was a son. She explained her great desire for a son in terms of her not having had a brother. As she had no brother, it would have been difficult for her to handle not having had a son as well. She was born as the third daughter in the family, and so they gave her the name 'Dosta', which literally translates as 'Enough' (b. 1972). The significance attached to brothers in this region was also reflected in the question that male and female interlocutors often asked me: 'Do you have brother?' When I said no, they expressed their sadness. I would also like to mention here the very upsetting story of an interlocutor (b. 1942) who had only one child, a girl. After several years of marriage, she had a daughter, born as a very small baby, and she never gave birth again. She was consequently subjected to insults from her husband's family, especially from the older sister-in-law who had several sons. The insults were not only directed at her, but also at her daughter. The sister-in-law told her that she should be ashamed of having only had a female child, especially one born weak, and she called the child mean names. Given that there were no sons in the marriage, when splitting up the family's extended household, her husband gained significantly less than her brothers. Her daughter then had three sons, which gave her a great sense of satisfaction.

As for her preference for sons, various forms of identification were strongly entwined: gender, broader regional (Kosovo), ethnic, and religious identifications, etc. In all of these, the demand that a woman has a male child and is dedicated to her family and to maintaining the patriarchally determined relations was prominent. The interlocutors gave reasons typical of the patriarchal value system: sons were needed to maintain and further the family, the family name, house, and *krsna slava*—the family patron saint's day<sup>13</sup>; it was important to have someone who will care for the parents in old age, given that the daughters leave the household through marriage; and when there are more sons, the family is stronger, etc. But they also mentioned one specificity of Kosovo, as a territory on which and over which wars have been fought. Older men explained that the Albanians had won Kosovo through their high birth rate and large number of sons (Zlatanović 2011, pp. 240–41). Albeit less often, this kind of explanation also featured in women's statements.

The Serbian people's birth rate and issues related to it, such as conceptions of the family, gender relations, the role of women, abortion, etc., is one of the topics that the Serbian Orthodox Church follows closely (in public statements from its representatives, in publications, etc.). Given the great importance that the Orthodox Church has for the Serbian population of post-war Kosovo, their attitudes on the family and birth rate go hand in hand with deep-rooted patriarchal values, and such attitudes further strengthen these values. At a wedding in St. Mark's Church in the village of Šilovo in 2006, the priest gave a sermon in which he underscored birth as the meaning of marriage, and he set this picture against the background of the biological decline of the Serbian people:

"Because the first and fundamental command of God given to our parents is 'Give birth and multiply and fill the country and rule over it'. I am especially underlining this not only to you, but to all young married couples who here, in God's temple, enter the sacred secret of marriage. Because, we are witnesses to our nation's stumbling, both spiritually and biologically, and it is threatened with extinction. This is why, as your priest in charge of this parish, I want you to celebrate present-day marriage and, above all, I appeal to this commandment of God, which you should definitely bear in mind. May you have a happy marriage blessed by God!"

Through the example of the priest's sermon, it is clear how religious and national discourses are strongly interwoven as part of the project of preserving the nation, as is also visible in other procedures that the Church and political representatives follow. The Serbian Orthodox Diocese of Raška-Prizren and Kosovo-Metohija has awarded the order of the 'Mother of Nine Jugovićs' to mothers with four (a silver coin and a certificate) and five or more (a golden coin and a certificate) children. The certificate has "Serbian mother

[her name]” written on it, which emphasises and separates off the ethnic belonging of the woman and her children. This decoration is awarded on the Vidovdan religious holiday (28 June). This was the day on which, according to legend, the Battle of Kosovo took place in 1389 between an army led by the Serbian Prince Lazar Hrebeljanović and an invading army of the Ottoman Empire. The order was named after the epic poem ‘The Death of Mother Jugović’, a woman who lost nine sons and her husband in the Battle of Kosovo. The Office for Kosovo and Metohija of the Government of the Republic of Serbia participate in the award ceremony. This award to mothers is part of a complex series of events for marking Vidovdan, in which representatives of the Church and the political elite emphasise that Kosovo is a holy Serbian land in which Serbs should remain and persist.

Nation and gender are tightly linked and mutually construct one another (Yuval-Davis 2004, pp. 4, 21), and Kosovo is a paradigmatic example of this. Since the 1980s, polemics on Kosovo in Serbia’s political and public discourse have been oriented around not only nation but strongly around gender as well (Milićević 2006, p. 271). The high birth rate of Kosovo Albanians has been categorised as part of the “ideological programme of the counterrevolution” (Milićević 2006, p. 272) and as part of demographic pressure on the national state. In that framework, and with the break-up of Yugoslavia, nationalism, wars, and the general retraditionalisation of society, the role of women in the biological reproduction of the nation has been emphasised. Women are recognised and respected but only as mothers—mothers of the nation (Milić 1994; Bracewell 1996). State nationalism strongly aligns with the local practice of rigid patriarchal patterns. Amid the conflict, this is about strengthening ethnic and religious boundaries, and women are forced to assume—and here, they accept and support—the role of being a guardian of tradition. Reproduction, as the only recognised female role, also emerges from an essentialist understanding of identity (nation as a metaphor for the family and kin group). Thus, for example, the results of research into students’ attitudes at the University of Mitrovica (a city in the north of Kosovo with a majority Serbian population) on gender roles in the family demonstrate that a high percentage of those surveyed—both men and women—agreed with the statement that “one of the main interests of each nation is for women to have as many children as possible” (Ivanov 2009, pp. 161–63).<sup>14</sup> In considering the processes through which European nations formed, Miroslav Hroch has also pointed out that, in the national discourse, women feature exclusively as mothers and as those who bring up and educate the future members of the nation; their role is to maintain national continuity, and they are only recognised and respected in that role (Hroch [2005] 2015).

### 6.3. Gender Relations amid Post-War Migrations

The migration of Kosovo Serbs in 1999 was forced. In Serbia, they gained a status as internally displaced people. The migration was co-ethnic—the migrants belonged to the same ethnic group as the population in the regions to which they migrated. Consequently, this migration falls under the category of an ethnically privileged migration (Münz and Ohliger 1997; quoted by: Čapo Žmegač 2005, p. 200). Although one may expect a less complex process of integration under such circumstances, the results of many academic studies in different parts of the world show that the same ethnic affiliation between the migrants and the long-time inhabitants do not necessarily play a significant and connective role (Čapo Žmegač 2005; Čapo Žmegač et al. 2010; Marušiak and Zlatanović 2020).

Kosovo Serbs’ *us* vs. *them* distinction was constructed in line with their own value system and their conceptualisation of kin and generalised human solidarity. They described the residents of Serbia as selfish and inhospitable, in contrast to themselves, who are even prepared to host people unknown to them. Almost all interlocutors with whom I discussed the topic of the migration of Kosovo Serbs explained—sometimes with amazement, sometimes with condemnation, regret, or even bitterness—that in Serbia, neighbours do not know one another, they do not display respect for their elders, and family members do not respect one another. They depicted their Kosovo identity as superior: they stick to their Orthodox beliefs, traditions, they celebrate religious festivals, and they respect



their kin. “There is no respect there” (of traditions, festivals, elders, kin members) was an oft-repeated phrase. The words ‘respect’ and ‘empathy’ were key words in constructing the boundary between *us* and *them*: while the Kosovo Serbs claimed to respect tradition and have empathic interpersonal relations, they viewed residents of Serbia as having lost both these features.

As for all the interlocutors with whom I discussed the topic of gender relations in our conversations, they believed that, for both men and women, gender relations were better in Kosovo than in Serbia. Here, I convey part of a conversation in which three married, middle-aged women participated. They emphasised that, in Kosovo, married partners respected one another, their marriages were long-lasting, and the women had a good character and respected their husbands (in contrast to those in Serbia). There was an interesting interweaving of gender and the wider regional (Kosovo) identity.

IL 1: I’d never live in Serbia! [...] In our marriage in Kosovo, the wife respects the husband so much, he would never experience that in Serbia.

IL 2: And vice versa!

IL 3: And vice versa, it’s the same!

R: And is the woman respected by the husband?

IL 1: Yes!

IL 2: I’m one example, see! Sometimes I sleep in the morning. My husband gets up, starts a fire, makes me coffee. I get up, come down, and drink coffee. Or, while he’s making the coffee, I wash the bottles, for example, I give the children some milk, I fill the bottles with milk. In the meantime, if I’m busy, for example, I make cheese, he goes out, brings me wood, gets the fire going, and we listen to one another like that.

R: And in Serbia you think ... this doesn’t happen?

IL 2: Well, it depends.

IL 1: Not so often.

IL 2: Let me tell you. Every, fourth marriage, usually five or six years and then they divorce. That’s it, as far as I know.

R: Here the marriages are more stable, nevertheless.

IL 2: Here they last!

R: And do they last perhaps because the woman puts up with more, is a little ashamed to get a divorce, or do they last because they really are good?

IL 2: No! Because they are, how can I put it, here, women are different. I mean, how can I put it, how can I express it? They have a different opinion, I mean ... they have their own character! They simply have respect.

IL 1: Here, Sanja, a woman will rarely leave her husband and go off with another guy. But in Serbia—nah! A ‘house friend’, he’s a lover! But it’s not like that here!

At a gathering, I asked several young women and girls where a woman would have a better, nicer life: in Kosovo or in Serbia. All had resided in Serbia for a shorter or longer period. All emphasised that women have a much better life in Kosovo, for many reasons. A woman ‘need not’ be employed (to leave home, separate herself from her children, be in the outside world, which they commented on as foreign and dangerous); it is taken for granted that the husband will support the family. They considered women in Kosovo to be ‘protected’, respected as a mother and housewife, which was repeated in the statements that the older women made. One young married woman explained that women in Serbia have freedom, whereas women in Kosovo have love (a husband, children, kin). To gain and retain the family’s love, they have to stick to deeply internalised patriarchal norms and reproduce them. Equally, one should have in mind, as Vera Erlih also explained it, that a woman’s position is better in places where the patriarchal order is preserved (men’s power is not undermined, and both gender roles and thus women’s expectations are clearly defined), compared with those environments in which patriarchalism is coming undone and where ambivalent demands are placed on women (Erlich 1971). In the narratives gathered spontaneously during the research, men expressed respect for their wives as industrious and involved housewives, and they especially praised their proficiency in

making bread, a highly valued foodstuff in the agrarian culture. A statement from one older interlocutor summarised the views of many men: “Without women’s hands, the house is not blessed”. Around Vranje, where I researched wedding customs in the late 1990s, women were ensnared between conflicting demands linked to undermining the patriarchal value system. This included, for example, the demand to be employed and the demand to enter marriage as virgins (Zlatanović 2003).

As I mentioned earlier, one of the main points of conflict within the family, as well as within the wider community, is the sale of property to Albanians (primarily land, but also homes), to which the rural population has a deep emotional bond. It can happen that part of the family advocates the sale of the property and the investment in property in Serbia, but part of the family rejects this. The landowner is always a man, usually a father, as the community adheres strictly to the norm of customary law. In situations marked by an experience of threat, it happened that, after the sale of the family property, the daughter would ask for part of the money from her father, or a sister would ask this of her brother (according to customary law, women’s rights were completely excluded in the inheritance system). This had an especially negative connotation as a ‘sin’ in the community, and as a bad practice taken on from Serbia. This is one of the most painful topics in the community. The community also pressures women before the decision on the sale of property is made. For example, in the house of a young married couple where I was staying, a neighbour (an older man) visited. He started a conversation about the sale of land to Albanians for large amounts of money in the village that the young wife is from. The neighbour told her in a sharp tone that, if her father decides to sell part of the land, she dared not request money from him, as that would be a sin. She replied that she would never request money from her father. Irrespective of the pressure that women face to leave the existing social order unchanged, it has already been called into question.

#### 6.4. *In Limbo—The Inversion of Reality and (Un)Desired Influences*

The international administration established their presence in Kosovo in the year 1999, and influences linked to globalisation consequently intensified. The international community had a particularly big impact on the Albanian community through various projects, workshops, and seminars—of which many were about family and gender relations. Members of the Serbian community expressed high levels of distrust and refused to participate. In the spontaneous narratives gathered, my Serb interlocutors spoke of great changes in Albanian families. For instance, women refused to have large numbers of children, fathers lost their authority and control over daughters, girls strolled the streets ‘half-naked’, went out at night, etc. Many interlocutors pointed out to me that some of their Albanian friends had complained that their traditional, patriarchal culture had been torn apart with the arrival of the ‘foreigners’. Given that the Serbian and Albanian community are imbricated in enduring interactive relationships (for more on the interactional approach to ethnicity, see Jenkins 2008), the mentioned influences reached members of the Serbian community via the Albanian community. For example, during my fieldwork period, young and middle-aged women followed soap operas in Albanian on TV channels with great interest. The lifestyles that such series displayed was often critiqued by men because of the amount of adultery, divorce, and illegitimate children. The men were also critical of the time that women invested in these activities.

The post-war period, marked by Kosovo’s non-defined status, had all the attributes of liminality—indefiniteness, ambivalence, timelessness, and a state of being ‘betwixt and between’ clearly defined positions. Inversion marked a liminality in relation to a structured system (Turner 1969).

Such a period was also marked by the relaxing of social norms, their loosening, inverting, or suspending, and this was most explicitly reflected in intergenerational relations. Older people’s authority was contested in a situation marked by extensive migration, insecurity, uncertain futures, and a flurry of new emerging values. Older members of the community complained that young people can do what they like without worrying about

the opinions of those around them, living ‘from one day to the next’. Girls would stay out late with young guys, and in general, young people did not pay attention to the advice of older people. The incursion of new lifestyles is visible in the altered relations towards customary practice. Thus, for example, in the period before 1999, wedding receptions were held in the house of the groom’s parents. The post-war changes led to restaurants being opened for such occasions, where many young couples wanted to have their wedding reception. The choice of location for the wedding party was one flashpoint for intergenerational tensions. My interlocutors interpreted the year 1999 as a threshold: since then, ‘everything’ had become disrupted and changed for the worse. In their opinion, this was influenced by changes that the international administration had brought about, and by influences that had arrived from Serbia.

## 7. Conclusions

This article considers the everyday practices of gender in the Serbian community of south-east Kosovo immediately after the armed conflicts and the establishment of the UN administration. Family and kinship ties are extremely important in this researched community, and so gender practices have been considered within that framework. The research focus is on everyday community interactions analysed from the point of view of the participants themselves—a view from ‘below’.

The Serbian community was an ethnic, religious, and linguistic minority in an environment and post-war region that was predominantly Albanian. This alone meant that it was a vulnerable community caught in a complex network of relations and influences. The international administration established its presence in Kosovo in 1999, when influences linked to globalisation consequently intensified. The migration of part of the community to Serbia, and the life of many of its members as ‘both here and there’, played an important role. Influences from Serbia, community guidance from the Serbian Orthodox Church, and changes in the ethnic and social landscape due to the war all combined to create opposing processes within the family. The Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo is of great importance to the Kosovo Serbs as the only Serbian institution that has remained alongside them; the Church’s role in the retraditionalisation and repatriarchalisation of the Serbian community is very strong, and its influence is increasing over time.

The armed conflict of 1998–1999 led to a radical change in the context—in the framework that politically defines society, as well as in the migration of part of the community. In this deeply altered context, traditional patterns had a firm grip, and they endured in comparison with other templates and values that suddenly filtered through from 1999 onwards. The old patterns were exposed to changes, and this process was accompanied by conflicts in many domains. The old value system was shaken up, and the new one was difficult to establish, and so in many aspects of life, the community found itself in a kind of vacuum. From 1999 onwards, we can speak of a transformation in family organisation and the roles in it. Opposing influences and powerful forms of internal resistance accompanied the transformation. Everyday practices of gender in the post-war region were coloured by ambivalences, which led to members of the community experiencing these changes as being in an exhausting *limbo*.

This research was conducted immediately after the armed conflict, and so there is value in following the community and the changes it has been through from a current-day perspective, including changes currently underway two decades later. Under these new circumstances, the research should also include members of the Albanian community—the Serb’s most significant Other, with whom they are linked in many ways.

**Funding:** This research was funded by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia on the basis of the Agreement No. 451-03-68/2022-14/200173 from 4 February 2022.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted in accordance with the declaration of Helsinki. Ethical approval was not required.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data are not publicly available due to privacy issues.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> From this point on, the names of the localities are given in the Serbian variant only.
- <sup>2</sup> The term ‘Serbian Gypsies’ (*Srpski Cigani*) is used tentatively, since it is an exonym.
- <sup>3</sup> A memorial service on an important day remembering the dead, when members of the Serbian community visit the cemetery.
- <sup>4</sup> The *krsna slava* is considered a peculiarity of the Serbian Orthodox faith. It is inherited patrilineally. A votive loaf is prepared, wherein the host takes boiled grain and red wine to the church in the morning and later serves it to their guests at home. The host then celebrates their *krsna slava* at home by laying on a feast for their guests.
- <sup>5</sup> The international administration in Kosovo used the phrase ‘parallel structures’ to name the organs and institutions that continued functioning in Kosovo after 10 June 1999, and which—according to the UN Security Council resolution—they did not have a mandate for (OSCE 2007, p. 5).
- <sup>6</sup> For more on the sale of inherited land and the purchase of property in Serbia, and the problems that have arisen in family and kin relations due to this, see: Zlatanović (2011, pp. 233–36, 241–22).
- <sup>7</sup> In a meticulous analysis of language materials gathered during fieldwork with displaced people from Kosovo, Svetlana Ćirković established that the period of war, the year 1999, represented a ground zero, a reference point that divided the past from the present. In other words, it was a “temporal marker of the border” (Ćirković 2012, pp. 9, 83, 188).
- <sup>8</sup> As Ger Duijzings explains, ethnic and religious boundaries in Kosovo were often fluid; these boundaries were overcome through mixed pilgrimages and prayers addressed to the saints and holy sites of other communities, and through ignoring the complaints of theological orthodoxies that demanded their believers stick to their religious rules and rituals (Duijzings 2000, p. 2).
- <sup>9</sup> The *zadruga* as a topic has motivated ongoing academic polemics. On this topic, let me single out just a few of the references: Kaser ([1995] 2002); Todorova (2006); Naumović and Ivanović (2018); Hristov (2022).
- <sup>10</sup> The situation in the Albanian community is similar. As Tafir Latihi summarised: ‘Family ties and kinship are central to people’s sense of social identity’ (Latifi 2019, p. 197).
- <sup>11</sup> In the socialist period, the birth rate of the Serbian population in Kosovo was higher than that in Serbia, but lower than the birth rate of the Kosovo Albanians.
- <sup>12</sup> As Kiščenko explains, there has been a growing number of studies by demographers who draw attention to the sex imbalance among newborns that grows out of a preference for sons in many societies in the world—in East and South Asia, the Caucasus, and South Eastern Europe (Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Montenegro) (Kiščenko 2021, pp. 70–71). On the preference for sons and the practice of sex-selective abortion in Montenegro, see (Kiščenko 2021). The thematic section ‘In the Name of the Daughter’ (Brković 2021) offers very inspirational insights.
- <sup>13</sup> Petko Hristov explains how family rituals (Serbian *slava* and Bulgarian *sluzhba*) built family ideology (Hristov 2014).
- <sup>14</sup> This university’s official name is the University of Priština, which has temporarily moved to Kosovska Mitrovica, and its work is financed by the Republic of Serbia’s Ministry of Education, Science, and Technological Development.

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