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The Neoliberal Feminist Divestment from Care in Domestic Violence Prevention Advocacy in Serbia and Croatia

Abstract: Drawing on abolition feminism and critical feminist discourse analysis, the article critiques the overreliance of the mainstream feminist advocacy on the police and criminal legal system as the solution for femicide and gendered violence. Our article aims to investigate how carceral politics constructs the ways in which domestic violence is understood and approached in Croatia and Serbia, and how such politics constrains and conditions material care for survivors. During the last few years, we trace the path of local feminisms in becoming increasingly immersed in the interests of the punitive state, and the implications for the lives of the people they claim to represent. Analyzing recent research and policy documents from Serbia and Croatia, we are committed to documenting these tendencies and to their critical consideration.

Keywords: material care; feminist advocacy; violence; post-Yugoslav region; survivors; carceral feminism; abolition feminism.

Carceral feminism in the post-Yugoslav context

Carceral feminism refers to a framework that construes expanded law enforcement, legal prosecution, and incarceration as the central response to addressing violence against women.[1] Initially coined by Elizabeth Bernstein,[2] it has evolved to define

[1] Maja Solar, "Dekolonijalna feministička teorija nasilja," *Slobodni Filozofski*, November 29, 2022, accessed May 15, 2025, https://slobodnifilozofski.com/2022/11/dekolonijalna-feministicka-teorija-nasilja.html.

[2] Elizabeth Bernstein, "The Sexual Politics of the 'New Abolitionism'," *A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 18, no. 5 (2007): 128–51.

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the strong reliance of feminist groups on coercive state institutions, such as prisons, police and the criminal justice system, for punishing sexual and gender violence. Over the last fifty years, carceral responses to domestic violence and rape, developed and honed in Western countries, have become accepted as common sense globally, but have also experienced noteworthy pushback in the form of abolition feminist organizing.[3]

Contemporary feminist history in former Yugoslav countries has witnessed extensive organizing against domestic violence. Since the late 1980s, feminist organizations have been operating domestic violence hotlines (known locally as SOS telephones), women's shelters and campaigning against sexual violence. As the institutional support for domestic violence survivors was deemed insufficient,[4] these initially grassroots efforts were recontextualized in the state-run system and the institutionalization of feminist activism consolidated campaigns for higher sentences and the introduction of new offences. A crowning achievement of the said recontextualization and institutionalization came in 2024 when the Croatian government introduced "femicide" as a separate criminal offence in its new amendments to the criminal code. This came about after years of lobbying by feminist and women's NGOs, fueled by the logic that the legal recognition of femicide creates conditions for combating violence against women as a social issue.

Kristin Bumiller has made the case that neoliberalism has appropriated the feminist movement against sexual violence,[5] and we see this manifest in the case of the former Yugoslavia. A potential way to understand how this came to be is through Adriana Zaharijević's analysis of the evolution of Yugoslav feminists as citizens under distinct citizenship regimes.[6] Zaharijević's analysis reveals how, following the Yugoslav Wars, local feminists "accepted their situatedness", ceasing to be the disloyal citizens they were in the 1990s, and, for the first time, viewed their respective states "in the Westphalian frame" and "as the principal addresses of feminist demands".[7] Feminists became committed to contributing to creating working institutions and gender mainstreaming, including as pertaining to the issue of domestic violence, and their efforts began to resemble those of their European counterparts. In doing so, local mainstream feminism became increasingly carceral, reinforced and sustained by a dependence on funding coming in large part from the Western countries and a

[3] Brittany Pearl Battle and Amber Joy Powell, "'We Keep Us Safe!': Abolition Feminism as a Challenge to Carceral Feminist Responses to Gendered Violence," *Gender & Society* 38, no. 4 (2024): 523–56.

[4] Stanislava Barać, "'Feminističke sveske' (1994–1999): Između ženskog iskustva i feminističkog znanja," in *Feministički časopisi u Srbiji. Teorija, aktivizam i umetničke prakse u 1990-im i 2000-im*, ed. Biljana Dojčinović and Ana Kolarić (Filološki fakultet Univerziteta u Beogradu, 2018), 81.

[5] Kristin Bumiller, *In an Abusive State: How Neoliberalism Appropriated the Feminist Movement Against Sexual Violence* (Duke University Press, 2008).

[6] Adriana Zaharijević, *Being an Activist: Feminist Citizenship through Transformations of Yugoslav and Post-Yugoslav Citizenship Regimes* (The University of Edinburgh, 2013).

[7] Ibid., 18–19.

need to produce what Kristen Ghodsee defined as "feminism-by-design" programs.[8] Additionally, Zaharijević shows how the dominance of Western feminism as the assumed universal model has obscured socialist feminist traditions in Yugoslavia.[9] This has worked to reinforce neoliberal carceral logics while foreclosing Marxist, anarchist, and socialist alternatives. Neoliberalism has, therefore, appropriated the efforts initiated by disloyal feminist citizens in the 1990s, such as the grassroots organizing against domestic violence, framing and mobilizing them in neoliberal terms. Still, emancipatory possibilities are present in feminist spaces, for example, in advocating for people on the move, travelling the so-called "Balkan route" and organizing against border regimes. These initiatives are important as they demonstrate a movement away from carceral solutions and can provide roadmaps for future organizing around other social issues important for the feminist movement, such as ending domestic violence.[10]

In the Western context, the emergence of carceral feminism is closely tied to the withdrawal of the welfare state and the shift towards the neoliberal carceral state.[11] The post-Yugoslav transition to neoliberalism cannot, of course, be characterized as a shift from the welfare state to a carceral one. Still, the *de facto* impact on survivors of domestic violence was comparable. Where there was once a social protection system that guaranteed a whole slew of rights and means to support survivors leaving violent situations, there was now a void. Additionally, social issues created by poverty, marginalization, etc., have come increasingly to be dealt with via carceral means, i.e., via debt collectors, forced eviction, and increased surveillance and criminalization. Our aim in this paper is to examine how hegemonic liberal understandings of feminism individualize harm by honing in on individual acts of violence. Additionally, we aim to understand how Serbian and Croatian NGOs have contributed to reproducing carceral logics, thereby displacing material care, which we understand to be at the core of abolition feminist organizing.

[8] Kristen Ghodsee, "Nongovernmental Ogres? How Feminist NGOs Undermine Women in Postsocialist Eastern Europe," *The International Journal of Not-fot-Profit Law* 8, no. 3 (2005).

[9] Adriana Zaharijević, "The Strange Case of Yugoslav Feminism: Feminism and Socialism in 'The East'," *Montenegrin Journal for Social Sciences* 1, no. 2 (2017): 135–56.

[10] The authors of this text are also part of a collective called the Regional Abolition Feminist Collective. Since 2023, the collective has been organizing an abolition feminist summer school; first in collaboration with the Feminist Autonomous Center for Research in Athens and later independently. In 2025, the collective published a booklet with a collection of abolition feminist texts that attempt to grapple with the complexities of thinking non-carceral solutions in the region. The booklet is called *Abolition Feminism Perspectives in a Global Context: Dispatches from Novi Sad*.

[11] Elizabeth Bernstein, "The Sexual Politics of the 'New Abolitionism'," *A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 18, no. 5 (2007): 128–51.

Conceptual framework

Drawing on Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Mimi Kim,[12] we understand that carceral solutions to gender justice obscure the socio-political determinants of violence, such as poverty, state borders and racial oppression. Carceral feminism diverts the attention from neoliberal cuts to social welfare programs that allow survivors to escape harmful situations. It also discourages alternative responses to gender and sexual violence, including community accountability and transformative justice. Abolition feminism is concerned with dismantling all forms of oppression, notably prisons and policing, from a historical and structural vantage point.[13]

As Leigh Goodmark argues,[14] advocating for more law, more prosecution, and increased police presence strengthens the carceral system, which in turn will result in more women behind bars. Furthermore, research consistently shows that higher incarceration rates are not associated with lower violent crime rates.[15] Most importantly, decades of mainstream feminist advocacy for harsher custodial penalties have not resulted in rape being any less prevalent in society, nor have they generated greater safety and direct support for survivors.[16]

Alison Phipps[17] argued that, as a product of neoliberalism, carceral feminism adopts the logic of individual responsibility, according to which the structural problem of hetero-patriarchal violence is pathologized as a behaviour of deviant individuals. In the same way, material care is positioned as an individual responsibility following the retreat of the welfare state. Studies have found that in countries where carceral feminist legislations are passed, in the form of harsher penalties for perpetrators, women are less likely to report domestic violence.[18] The consequence of being the sole carer and provider for the household, in the absence of state economic support, is felt by many women as a coercive reason to stay with their abusers.

We have defined material care based on the definition proposed by Chatzidakis et al. in *The Care Manifesto*: "Care as a social capacity and activity involving the nurturing of all that is necessary for the welfare and flourishing of life."[19] We understand that the current care crisis stems from neoliberal restructuring of social reproduction, which reassigns the responsibility for care from the welfare state to personal

[12] Angela Davis, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement* (Haymarket Books, 2016); Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation* (Haymarket Books, 2022); Mimi Kim Kim, "Anti-Carceral Feminism: The Contradictions of Progress and the Possibilities of Counter-Hegemonic Struggle," *Affilia – Journal of Women and Social Work* 35, no. 3 (2020): 309–26.

[13] Angela Davis et al., *Abolition. Feminism. Now* (Haymarket Books, 2022).

[14] Leigh Goodmark, *A Troubled Marriage: Domestic Violence and the Legal System* (NYU Press, 2013).

[15] Don Stemen, *The Prison Paradox: More Incarceration Will Not Make Us Safer* (Vera Institute of Justice, 2017).

[16] Alison Phipps, *Me Not You: The Trouble with Mainstream Feminism* (Manchester University Press, 2020).

[17] Ibid.

[18] Amia Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the Twenty-First Century* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021).

[19] Andreas Chatzidakis, et al., *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence* (Verso Books, 2020), 5.

responsibility and charity.[20] What we understand as material care, specifically related to the research focus of this article, is related to the material needs of survivors of violence: food, shelter, healthcare provisions, childcare assistance and economic security.

Methodology

As feminists living and operating in the region, we come to this analysis from a standpoint of having been disillusioned with (neo)liberal feminist and NGO organizing against domestic violence. Our aim with this critique is to open up space for exploring possibilities of transformative justice. In this paper, we have employed a critical discourse analysis (CDA) with a feminist materialist lens[21] to examine the reproduction of neoliberal carceral logics in Serbian and Croatian feminist activism against domestic violence and to investigate how this approach obscures the possibilities for developing material infrastructures of care that would constitute a more supportive and transformative response for women who have experienced violence.

We analyzed content that would be representative of feminist advocacy for femicide prevention in Croatia and Serbia. A two-part report titled "Social and Institutional Response to Femicide in Serbia" was published by FemPlatz, a well-regarded, and highly active feminist think tank from Serbia that has called on the Serbian government to establish a Femicide Watch body. In the Croatian context, we have looked at the study by Dunja Bonacci Skenderović, called *'If I Can't Have You No One Will!' An Analysis of Croatia's Intimate Partner Femicide 2016–2023*, and the publication *Examination of Coercive Control in Intimate Partner Relations* by Autonomous Women's House (AWH) in Zagreb. Both were created with support from Solidarna Foundation, a philanthropic organization, with one of its major funds dedicated to covering costs of accommodation, food, and other immediate needs of the survivors of domestic violence. Given that Croatia has already criminalized femicide, this comparison between nation-states allows for a broader view of the carceral policies that could come about in neighboring countries.

The Autonomous Women's House in Zagreb is actively involved in drafting legislation on the domestic and international levels as a part of activist networks and institutionalized advocacy entities on gender issues (e.g., the European Women's Lobby). By working directly with survivors and managing scarce support systems, Solidarna and AWH have established themselves as experts, contributing to the understanding of domestic violence, and preferable responses to it, as a question of expertise. Bonacci Skenderović also lays claim to this professionalization of labor emerging from political and economic struggles. She is, for example, introduced as "an expert for gender equality" on the official website of Croatia's ombudswoman. At the same time, on her LinkedIn account, she describes herself as an independent consultant specializing in the elimination of violence against women, with a focus on intimate partner femicide.

[20] Ankica Čakardić, "Who Cares? Neoliberalism, Informal Labour, and Life-Making," *Sociologija* 64, no. 4 (2022): 503–18.

[21] Michelle Lazar, *Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

A data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis following a six-step approach outlined by Braun and Clarke.[22] In coding our data, we determined the main themes in relation to our focus on material care. These themes are an outcome of coding, categorization, and analytic reflection.[23] Themes were then reviewed, defined and named. Broader thematic categories were examined from the perspective of argumentation and thesis-building. Following CDA,[24] we were interested in how analyzed texts produce meaning; from morphosyntactic and lexical relations to (inter)textuality.

Our analytic approach can be defined as deductive since we came to the data with preconceived themes, based on abolition feminist theory. Considering terminology, when discussing the above-mentioned publications, we are utilizing concepts used by the authors of the publications, such as "perpetrators" and "victims", but since our research is grounded in abolition feminism in our discussion we prioritize terms like "people who cause harm" or "people who have survived harm" to destigmatize and humanize those involved.

Analysis: social and institutional responses to femicide in Serbia

FemPlatz's "Social and Institutional Responses to Femicide in Serbia"

The first part of the publication disentangles theoretical premises and offers research on juridical practices. The second requires these responses to become stricter and clarifies what should be delegated to which institution, from police to clinical pathology departments. It offers research and NGO assistance to the state for the regulation of domestic violence and therefore domesticity. By delegating the responsibility for addressing violence to the very structures that produce it, in both parts, the monograph conceptualizes "care" as something that can only be created and enforced by more laws and more repression. It positions care as a vertical process that ascends from the state authority to the individual whom the state professedly protects. Material care for survivors is nearly entirely absent from the report, save for parts of the discussion that analyze the work of NGOs focused on domestic violence prevention.

The publication engages in the analysis of sixty-five court cases for the criminal offences of murder, aggravated murder, grievous bodily harm qualified by death, manslaughter and domestic violence with fatal outcome, which refer to the cases of violent deprivation of life of women by men. Special attention is paid to the method of committing murder, with several categories assigned to the method utilized: suffocation and strangulation; using a firearm; hitting with fists, feet, use of various objects and tools capable of serious bodily injury and severe damage to one's health; stabbing with a knife, ax and other sharp objects; multiple ways of execution using multiple means of execution. Within the framework of the method of execution in certain

[22] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, *Thematic Analysis. A Practical Guide* (SAGE Publications, 2022).

[23] Johnny Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (SAGE Publications, 2016).

[24] Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies* (SAGE Publications, 2015).

cases, the authors of the publication concentrate on the behavior of the perpetrator after the crime has been committed, which they claim, "together with the method of execution, shows special ferocity, cruelty and insensitivity towards the victim".[25] These court cases serve a function of showcasing the need for severe punishment for men who cause harm and calling out the perceived inadequacies in the legal system, which has failed to punish them appropriately. They also contribute to the individuation and decontextualization of violence, which we elaborate on later in the paper.

The authors also conducted a limited perpetrator profiling with the limited data available from the court verdicts. What is interesting from the abolition feminist perspective is the fact that there is an acknowledgement of the futility of prison sentencing for those perpetrators who have previously been in prison on account of committing domestic violence. The authors even directly quote from one verdict, which explains that the perpetrator "has been convicted a total of seven times in the last 10 years, for committing the most serious crimes and that he was not affected by prison sentences".[26] There was also special attention paid to the perpetrator's primary family, criticizing the lack of data on the 'completeness' of the primary family, child abuse and the perpetrator's youth deviant behavior from the court judgments. This conservative focus on the 'complete' nuclear family and child abuse comes back again later in the paper, where the authors have conducted interviews with five incarcerated men who have committed femicide.[27] Each interview included the question, 'How was your childhood? Did your parents abuse you?' The ethical justifications for posing such questions are dubious, as is the overall adversarial tone in which the interview responses are analyzed alongside the court judgments to 'catch' these men in their lies and to show the irredeemable monstrosities of their acts. A closer look at each of the five interviews reveals the underlying aspect of material and economic issues in the lead-up to the fatal violent act. The rising economic inequality, destruction of living conditions, devastation of social protections, and lack of communal care and cohesion are all conducive to gendered violence. This greater context is disregarded in the analyzed publication, which adopts the logic of individual responsibility, according to which the structural problem of hetero-patriarchal violence is pathologized into deviant individuals.[28] There is a lack of acknowledgement of the privatization of care, which is the family's most fundamental feature.[29] This absence of critique towards the nuclear family reflects a broader failure to challenge state institutions outside of a reformist context. Sophie Lewis[30] argues that the family is a state institution that perpetuates violence. Therefore, to combat gender violence, the focus needs to be on collectivizing care.

[25] Slobodanka Konstantinović Vilić, Nevena Petrušić and Kosana Beker, *Društveni i institucionalni odgovori na femicid u Srbiji I* (Udruženje građanki FemPlatz, 2019), 117.

[26] Ibid., 147.

[27] Konstantinović Vilić, Petrušić and Beker, *Odgovori na femicid u Srbiji I*, 304–44.

[28] Phipps, *Me Not You*.

[29] Kathi Weeks, "Abolition of the Family: the Most Infamous Feminist Proposal," *Feminist Theory* 24, no. 3 (2023): 433–53.

[30] Sophie Lewis, *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation* (Verso, 2022), 9.

The authors did briefly acknowledge the importance of the social status of victims in connection with femicide. The importance of victims' social status, which largely depends on their occupation and employment, was identified as a condition for a proper analysis of the phenomenon of femicide. However, there is no subsequent critique or analysis of the current neoliberal economic system, which devalues women's reproductive work. Nor does it mention that most measures offered to survivors of domestic violence in Croatia and Serbia are deeply gendered and low-paid, such as the governmental incentives to hire survivors as carers for the elderly (Serbo-Croatian: gerontodomaćice).[31] This makes women more vulnerable to domestic abuse because they are pushed into economic precarity and financial dependence on other family members.

The study's recommendations focus on improving perpetrator programs, advancing women's societal position, dismantling stereotypes, eradicating patriarchal patterns, integrating gender perspectives in state policies, and preventing discrimination against women. However, specific steps to achieve these goals are not provided. The emphasis is on law implementation, stating that effective femicide prevention requires adequate resources for enforcing laws and supporting domestic violence victims, especially in underdeveloped areas. While advocating for state budget support can be seen as care for survivors, it also reinforces the carceral state. These demands may not be feasible within a neoliberal system that privatizes and individualizes care.

The second part of the publication is split into two major sections, the first consisting of analyses of questionnaires distributed to members of the police, public prosecutor's office, health institutions and centers for social work and of open-ended interviews with activists associated with and employees of NGOs focusing on violence against women and the second consisting of a contribution on how to gather data on femicides. Throughout, a case for greater NGO involvement is being made. One of the first questions participants were, for example, asked was "To what extent does continuing education influence the effectiveness of your institution in preventing domestic violence, violence against women, and femicide?" NGOs would, presumably, be involved in some capacity in this continuing education as the participants were soon asked to react to the statement "Collaboration between women's organizations and your institution is crucial for the successful prevention of violence against women and the prevention of femicide." The report also cites the Istanbul convention, but only as it pertains to the centrality of NGOs.[32]

Abolitionist theory is not ambivalent when it comes to NGOs and has clearly delineated the sector's inherent carcerality, dubbing it the non-profit industrial complex (NPIC). Dyland Rodriguez and Ruth Wilson Gilmore have explained the extent to

[31] Valentina Šipuš, "Uloga programa 'Zaželi – program zapošljavanja žena' kao oblika deinstitucionalizirane skrbi," *Marsonia: Časopis za društvena i humanistička istraživanja* 2, no. 2 (2023): 61–74; Željka Zelenović Vuković and Tatjana Mijušković, *Podrška nacionalne službe za zapošljavanje ženama koje su preživjele nasilje u porodici i žrtvama trgovine ljudima* (Autonomni ženski centar, 2023).

[32] Nevena Petrušić, Natalija Žunić, and Vida Vilić, *Društveni i institucionalni odgovori na femicid u Srbiji II* (Udruženje građanki FemPlatz, 2019), 17.

which the NPIC is intertwined with the prison industrial complex (PIC), which serves to represent dissent while the NPIC manages it through incorporation into the state.[33]

The activities of women's organizations are elaborated in considerable detail, offering insight into various operational aspects. The language used to describe these organizations is notably favorable and affirming. Women's organizations are portrayed as entities that "provide support," in contrast to institutions such as the police or the prosecution service, which are described as "institutions responsible for handling cases of violence." This rhetorical distinction contributes to a humanized and empathetic portrayal of the NGOs, underscoring their supportive and survivor-centered role. Such linguistic framing is absent from previous sections of the text, where no comparable description is provided for the work of the police, the prosecution, or, paradoxically, even the healthcare institutions. This suggests a narrative asymmetry in the representation of institutional actors involved in the prevention and response to gender-based violence.

Additionally, care for survivors is absent from much of the second part of the publication, except in relation to NGOs, whose activities are outlined and elaborated in great detail. The publication emphasizes the devotion and altruism with which NGOs approach this work, which is emblematic of the sector´s origins in charity work carried out by upper- and middle-class women, which had for centuries been unpaid and not seen as work at all.[34] NGOs are also positioned as central to domestic violence response. The report contains one particularly illustrative example involving the work of a women's organization from southern Serbia, in which the NGO organized meetings, printed and distributed materials, and even educated stakeholders on their responsibilities.

> The police were thrilled. That was where we found our space. Things started moving faster and getting resolved more quickly.[35]

This positioning of NGOs as mediators and coordinators of the state's domestic violence response is rooted in what Mimi Kim has dubbed as the advocacy-law enforcement collaboration model.[36] The authors appear to favor deeply carceral Community Coordinated Response (CCR), which envisioned that domestic violence could be dealt with through the reform of state systems if survivors and advocates were placed at the center of change[37]. This never came to be, and instead, CCR is limited to cooperation with law enforcement alone.

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[33] INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex* (South End Press, 2007), 9.

[34] Sarah Jaffe, *Work Won't Love You Back* (Bold Type Books, 2021), Chapter 5.

[35] Petrušić, Žunić, and Vilić. *Odgovori na femicid u Srbiji II*, 88–89.

[36] Mimi Kim, "Abolition and the Renewal of Community: from Carceral Feminism to Collective Self-determination," *Community Development Journal* 59, no. 4 (2024): 696–715.

[37] Ibid., 701.

Great emphasis is placed on the role played by gender stereotypes in the prevention of domestic violence, while other factors, such as class, poverty, and marginalization are almost entirely sidelined, except when discussing Roma women. Several problematic statements are made with regards to what the authors describe as the "living culture and customs of Roma women", who are said to be "socialized – through Roma culture and customs – to respect their husbands, while their husbands often do not reciprocate that respect".[38]

Croatian studies and perspectives on femicide

Dunja Bonacci Skenderović's publication *'If I Can't Have You No One Will!' An Analysis of Croatia´s Intimate Partner Violence 2016-2023* and *Examination of Coercive Control in Intimate Partner Relations* by Autonomous Women´s House (AWH) rely on the existing theoretical considerations in Anglocentric research, which they uncritically apply in elaborating on their findings. Bonacci Skenderović cites Rachel Louise Snyder's *No Visible Bruises: What We Don´t Know about Domestic Violence Can Kill Us* and Jane Monckton Smith's *In Control, Dangerous Relationships, and How They End in Murder* as primary resources in constructing her own analysis of domestic violence in Croatia. Both Bonacci Skenderović and Autonomous Women's House publications draw heavily from the work of criminologist Evan Stark,[39] who is credited with coining the term "coercive control". Stark defines "coercive control" as a harmful tactic that subjugates women through violence, intimidation, isolation, and control of resources.[40]

In his books and other aspects of public engagement, Stark advocated for the integration of coercive control into the Australian, English, Welsh, and Canadian legal systems, which became the models that other countries (including the post-Yugoslav countries) strived to mimic and build upon. While Bonacci Skenderović is more careful in her conclusions, Autonomous Women´s House states at the end of their research report, titled "directives and recommendations", that it is necessary to "introduce specific laws that recognize coercive control as a separate criminal offense. These laws should be clearly defined and enable an effective legal response to this form of violence." At the moment, these two studies are among the first, but represent a strong pull in a carceral direction.

Bonacci Skenderović connects coercive control to femicide through Jacquelyn Campbell's "danger assessment model,"[41] which evaluates the risk of lethality in inti-

[38] Petrušić, Žunić, and Vilić. *Odgovori na femicid u Srbiji II*, 54.

[39] Evan Stark, "Coercive Control," in *Violence Against Women: Current Theory and Practice in Domestic Abuse, Sexual Violence and Exploitation – Research Highlights in Social Work*, edited by Aisha Gill, et al. (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2013); Evan Stark, *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

[40] Stark, *How Men Entrap Women*, 15.

[41] Jacquelyn Campbell, Daniel Webster and Nancy Glass, "The Danger Assessment: Validation of a Lethality Risk Assessment Instrument for Intimate Partner Femicide," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 24, no. 4 (2008): 653–74.

mate partner violence. Stark likens coercive control to kidnapping due to its routine violence often resulting in severe injury or death. Both models suggest that predicting the escalation of violence to lethal outcomes is possible. This perspective is echoed by the Croatian AWH, Solidarna Foundation, and Skenderović. The development of femicide predictive models underpins criminal profiling and state responses to reproductive roles in nuclear families, an area overlooked by both radical and liberal feminisms.

AWH´s and Bonacci Skenderović´s studies concentrate on "intimate partner violence", framing domestic abuse primarily within romantic partnerships. Their reliance on Stark's 'coercive control' and Campbell's 'danger assessment' emphasizes recurring behavioural patterns that can be mapped, anticipated and ultimately criminalized. These frameworks, originally created to support survivors in assessing immediate risks, are repurposed as tools for state institutions, transforming psychological assessments into legal ones. Both studies conclude with policy recommendations that call for deeper integration of feminist agendas into state institutions, particularly through police training, social work and legislative reform. Bonacci Skenderović, for instance, stresses the need to strengthen institutional protection of victims and prevent femicide by recognizing coercive control as a legal category, while AWH proposes ten recommendations exclusively centered on legal and institutional interventions.

This approach narrows domestic violence down to the interpersonal level and reduces it to a set of behaviours enacted by 'aggressive male bodies.' Violence is framed as natural impulse, either to be corrected via education or incarceration, rather than a social relation embedded in capitalist reproduction. By naturalizing men as perpetrators and women as victims, violence is treated as ahistorical, explained not by structural conditions but by individual pathology. The family is presented as a neutral, unproblematic unit threatened only when violence becomes excessive, obscuring its role in organizing women's reproductive labour for the market.

The emphasis on 'predictability' and pattern recognition produces the illusion that violence can be brought under control through carceral means. Yet psychological models, while useful for describing interpersonal dynamics, are a poor substitute for deeper political and economic analysis. They detach domestic abuse from gender as a structural regime and from the ways capitalist states rely on women's reproductive labour. In this optic, prevention becomes synonymous with criminalization. Carceral feminism thus reproduces the very cycle it claims to break by offering either state intervention or charity, while avoiding questions about economic precarity, social reproduction, or the conditions that sustain women's vulnerability to violence.

Both studies channel feminist engagement towards bolstering state power. Their frameworks reaffirm the state as protector against violent men while sidelining any vision of alternative forms of care, solidarity, or collective resistance. This is not a challenge to structural violence but a reinforcement of institutional logics that perpetuate it.

Conclusion

In this article we have identified several themes stemming from our analysis of the above-mentioned studies from Serbia and Croatia. These topics include lack of material care for survivors, individualizing and pathologizing violence, invoking more law for the prevention of domestic violence, positioning NGOs as central to prevention with expert consultants specialized in domestic violence and conceptualization of care as a top-down, highly-regulated process informed by carceral logic.

The delegation of responsibility for responding to violence onto legal institutions and carceral structures is emblematic of carceral feminist thinking, which has resulted in mainstream feminist and LGBT+ activists support for hate crimes legislation, demands for harsher prison sentences for those who commit sexual assault and advocacy for more "community" policing within the politics of the anti-violence movement.[42] However, legal feminist theorists and especially abolition feminists have criticized the reliance on laws to solve social issues.[43] Additionally, these kinds of alliances with the punitive state ignore the historical legacy of the state's criminalization of gender non-conformity, as well as the reproduction of violence, power, classism, and colonialism inherent in the system. As Anna Terwiel put it, to "see policing and punishment simply as feminist solutions is an act of bad faith," considering the many injustices faced by individuals disproportionately affected by the punitive state.[44]

In the analyzed studies, violence is individualized and pathologized, while the wider neoliberal context of precarity and artificial scarcity is ignored. Carceral feminism diverts attention from neoliberal cuts to social welfare programs that allow survivors to escape harmful situations. In this sense, it sidelines the material reality of domestic violence survivors. The consequence of being the sole carer and provider for a household, in the absence of state economic support, is felt by many women as a coercive reason to stay with their abusers.[45] It also discourages alternative responses to gender and sexual violence, including community accountability and transformative justice.

In conclusion, we pose the question, "What about the material reality of the survivor?" as a starting off point for future organizing against domestic violence. Abolition feminism urges us to envision responses to gendered violence beyond punishment, centering material care as a collective, life-affirming practice. This is what Marieme Kaba[46] calls the "jailbreak of the imagination." Carceral punishment repeats the same patriarchal, capitalist, and colonial dynamics that produce violence

[42] Sarah Lamble, "Transforming Carceral Logics: 10 Reasons to Dismantle the Prison Industrial Complex Through Queer/Trans Analysis and Action," *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*, edited by Eric A. Stanley, Nat Smith, and CeCe McDonald (AK Press, 2011).

[43] Leigh Goodmark, *A Troubled Marriage: Domestic Violence and the Legal System* (NYU Press, 2013).

[44] Anna Terwiel, "What Is Carceral Feminism?" *Political Theory* 48, no. 4 (2020): 422.

[45] Goodmark, *A Troubled Marriage*.

[46] Mariame Kaba, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us* (Haymarket Books, 2021).

and abuse. Grounded in solidarity and mutual aid, material care challenges the state's claim to be the sole guarantor of safety and reframes prevention as the creation of social conditions in which violence cannot easily take hold. By material care we mean concrete provisions of housing, income support, healthcare, childcare, and community infrastructures that allow survivors not just to escape violence but to live with dignity. Such practices shift the focus from criminalization toward sustaining life and redistributing resources, recognizing that violence is rooted in economic precarity, patriarchal family structures, and state abandonment.

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