



## THE TRAFFIC IN REPAIRMEN AND A CASE OF GENDER IMPROPRIETY IN POST-WAR SARAJEVO

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My search for a repairman in Sarajevo started with the broken sink in my apartment. I was a newcomer to the city, both culturally and linguistically.<sup>1</sup> And I turned to Šemsa, my primary interlocutor, for assistance—but instead, I learned her “little secret”: Šemsa was essentially incapable of finding a repairman herself, and as a result, her house existed in a deep and long-standing state of disrepair. Šemsa appeared to be out of sync with the women in her community, existing outside their network of reciprocal relationships and thus cut off from access to repairmen. In this article, I draw on my fieldwork in Sarajevo, with Šemsa at the center, to focus on the gendered labor of repair as a relationship between households, communities, and women.

At first glance, repair brings to mind broken things (household gadgets, roofs, walls, infrastructure, electricity, etc.) in need of fixing, usually by men. However, accessing repair labor depends on the care and maintenance of one’s community ties, something that primarily falls to women. Perhaps nowhere does this fact emerge more visibly than in a postwar context, where much is in acute disrepair, and material repairs often require taking care of communal bonds.

Since the end of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina (hereafter Bosnia)<sup>2</sup> in 1995, the international community has invested significant funds in projects meant to address lingering damage from the conflict: not only the return of refugees and

interethnic reconciliation initiatives but also urban restructuring projects and the renovation of public buildings. Meanwhile, the repair of private houses, apartment blocks, and household appliances has fallen mainly to private citizens and remains largely unexamined in scholarship.<sup>3</sup>

This article articulates how gendered, everyday repair practices can teach us about how social and material order is re-established, maintained, or left unattainable in a postwar setting. By paying particular attention to Šemsa, a Sarajevan woman with a household full of broken items and difficulties getting repairs done, I understood both the importance of repair and the necessity to comply with gender normativity in the maintenance and repair of homes in the aftermath of war in Yugoslavia.

In postwar Bosnia, communities have been reconfigured primarily along ethno-religious lines. Networks of solidarity, meanwhile, have been built principally along kinship lines. Scholars of the region have noted the strengthening of patriarchy following the violent conflict in former Yugoslavia (Milić 2010; Simons 2007; Draganović 2016; Košarać and Kurteš 2021). The transition from the former Yugoslavia to post-conflict ex-Yugoslav states has marked a period of “retraditionalization and repatriarchalization” (Milić 2001, 2010) in which women have assumed increased domestic responsibilities. Building on this assessment, I add that paying attention to domestic tasks of repair reveals the micro-processes of such retraditionalization by allowing us to see mundane repairs as processes of repatriarchalization, in which gender roles themselves get “repaired” by being forced back into strict binaries. To show this, I use the word *repair* to refer not only to women’s work restoring objects but also to the remaking of social relations in Bosnia. Repair is never merely a domestic task, but also always social and political. As my work with Šemsa makes clear, it is vital for women to nurture their social relationships to sustain a home that runs smoothly, especially in dire post-siege economic conditions, where funds for repair services are limited. Maintaining ties with one’s neighbors (*komšiluk*), friends (*prijatelji*), and kin (*rodbina*) entails exchanging visits, attending rituals, expressing a readiness to help one another, and participating extensively in everyday conversation.<sup>4</sup> The latter among community members include sharing information about mutual acquaintances or relatives, city life, health care, and the job market, as well as tips and recommendations on how to get things done. An ideal Sarajevan woman, no matter whether a working woman or a housewife, is expected to excel in these activities. Women’s share of gender normativity makes for a demanding task.

My ethnographic interest in repair developed gradually as I followed the daily lives of three families in Sarajevo, each of whom had experienced the

siege and wartime years of 1992 to 1995, albeit in different ways.<sup>5</sup> My fieldwork, conducted between 2006 and 2008, initially focused on observing the daily chores, tasks, and social activities of nine households. Over time, however, I realized that paying close attention to the daily lives of nine separate households proved almost impossible. As such, I focused on the three households most well-connected to the others through kinship, friendship, and neighborly ties. The gendered labor and social dynamics present in both the public and private inner workings of these three households shaped my participant observation of their daily activities: cooking, cleaning, shopping, watching television or videos, chatting over coffee and cigarettes, daydreaming, receiving guests, paying social visits, attending funerals and religious rituals, taking city walks, spending weekends in the mountains, and helping children with their homework. At the same time, I continued following the other six households for rich insights and invaluable information, which I obtained through in-depth interviews and regular visits.

Examining the repair ordeals of Šemsa, an unconventional Sarajevan woman, provides insight into both the system of gendered reciprocities at play and the generative aspects of its ruptures. My broader ethnography on everyday life draws on [Henri Lefebvre's \(2004\)](#) approach to the eventfulness of the everyday, seeing it as a conflict-ridden and saturated zone full of instances of excess that are not necessarily determined by historical, social, and political "systems." [Kathleen Stewart's \(2007\)](#) way of tackling ordinary moments in terms of mundane impulses, encounters, sensations, and habits is another source that deeply shaped my ethnographic attention to the daily lives of Bosniaks (Slavic Muslims of Bosnia-Herzegovina) in Sarajevo. Practices of, attitudes toward, and relationships enabling repair as a category of household labor comprised a small but salient part of my broader work investigating the quotidian worlds of Bosniaks.

Repair tasks in postwar Sarajevo remain primarily the responsibility of men. But almost every extended family in the city had lost a male family member to the war or migration.<sup>6</sup> Tending to the repair needs of women without male relatives to rely on was usually mediated by their female friends, relatives, or neighbors. Women with more influence due to their age, social and material capital, and ties to male relatives (and thereby direct access to male labor) shared the precious resource of male labor with female-only households.<sup>7</sup> So if repair was men's work, "trafficking in repairmen," particularly in the absence of men, was women's work.

The female residents of most of the households I observed were trafficking this precious male labor, offering their extended circles of relatives, neighbors,

and friends access to the skilled labor of their male relatives, shoring up their own prestige in the process. This specific, urgent, and vital exchange significantly impacted on female-to-female relationships in the community. Female-only households receiving male-performed repair services facilitated by their female social connections could, to a limited extent, provide acts of care in return, such as cooking and childcare. But these situations seldom allowed full reciprocity: acts offered in exchange were rarely accorded the same prestige. Moreover, the likely possibility that the original recipient would require male repair assistance again in the future tacitly structured and consolidated the unequal relationship between the two sides.

I call the relational labor of women with extensive kin and long-standing neighborly relations “trafficking repairmen” (Rubin 1975),<sup>8</sup> and I articulate it with Joanne Nucho’s (2016) elaboration of gender propriety. To be clear, women’s mundane acts of trafficking repairmen do not reverse conventional gender hierarchies between men and women. Women may still be trafficked by men, but some women also shore up gender propriety and social capital in the process of trafficking repairmen.<sup>9</sup> This exchange is structured by both competition and solidarity. Having multiple repairmen within reach, especially some who work “for free,” enhances the status of a woman and that of her household. Providing access to repair labor—such as when a neighbor’s son is sent over to fix something—constitutes a moment at which typically invisible female labor fetches an exchange value in kind within the intimate circulation of care and reciprocity. Repair thus renders visible the labor of women, providing them with a stage on which to check, show, barter, and enjoy their usually unseen acts of care for their kin and community.

### SEEKING A REPAIRMAN

Šemsa is a childhood friend of my Sarajevan mother.<sup>10</sup> They lived in the same neighborhood and went to the same schools, staying friends throughout their lives. She was my anchor in the city. When faced with a broken sink, I turned to Šemsa for a handyman. I assumed she would have a list of repairmen in her phonebook, or people, friends, neighbors, or family members she could ask for a recommendation. Yet this was not the case at all. A week-old newspaper turned out to be her only source of information. “Take it easy, come over for morning coffee, and we will find someone,” she told me, leading me to believe that finding a man to fix things in Sarajevo would prove as easy as sharing a cup of coffee. She pulled out her paper and quickly found a listing for a repairman.

The repairman knocked on the door the next morning at eight. Čazim entered with a bold, irritable, and arrogant air. The way he entered without even removing his shoes made me uneasy from the beginning, but since I was in urgent need of assistance, I kept silent. I spoke very broken Bosnian back then, so the repairman had to repeat everything to me at least twice, with no guarantee that I would correctly understand. Meanwhile, Šemsa sat nonchalantly sipping her morning coffee and reading the newspaper in my messy living room. Čazim seemed frustrated with Šemsa: she could have helped facilitate communication between us, but instead sat back and left us to struggle.

Meanwhile, the repairman acted like the man of the house who was not getting proper assistance from the women around him. Čazim began working in the bathroom but had to leave after a short while since he had scheduled another appointment right after mine. On top of that, his mobile phone rang constantly as he worked, and he stopped frequently to answer it. I realized I had made a huge mistake by paying him in advance. He did not show up the next day, nor did he answer my calls. Šemsa did not ask me any questions about how the work had gone, and I did not share my complaints with her. As I would understand in time, Čazim's condescending manner had a lot to do with the fact that we had found him through the newspaper, having no direct connection to him. No social ties bound him to us. We had tacitly declared to him that we had no standing in the city's network of repairmen, and hence had made visible our marginal position in the community. We were the kind of clients he could treat poorly. And he did.

Undeterred, I tried again soon after to find someone to assist me. However, I now had to find a person to both repair the sink and fix additional tiles that Čazim had broken. Relying on my limited communication skills, I sought assistance from my new neighbors. By chance, the neighbors downstairs were renovating their apartment and had a repairman, Zaim. Zaim said he was actually an engineer who picked up manual jobs in "difficult times." He smoked and talked constantly while "fixing" my broken tiles. I served three rounds of coffee. At the end of the day, I was left with a leaking lavatory, asymmetrically placed faucets, and a Muslim map of my neighborhood according to their bathroom renovations.

Apparently, Zaim had recently refurbished toilets in neighborhood apartments in which Muslims resided. He explained that buildings in the former Yugoslavia had not been constructed according to the specific needs of Muslims; there were no toilet nozzles in them. One always learns something from a repairman, I thought, even if the repairs are not completed. I finally drew on my

last resort, which I had been saving for a serious emergency: I called my uncle in Sarajevo to ask for his help arranging the necessary repairs. By now I had realized that my failed attempt to hire a repairman from a newspaper was better off kept a secret between Šemsa and me, as it would expose her lack of capital in the city's repairman trafficking network. I also understood that Šemsa's inability to find a repairman, and the state of disrepair in her home was read as a sign of her "flawed" femininity (*nesavršena ženstvenost*), which became gossip fodder for other female community members, allowing them to share their ideas about gender normativity with me, their resident ethnographer.

### REPAIR AND VEZA

My fieldwork on everyday life in postwar Sarajevo showed me how trafficking in repairmen constituted a significant practice through which some women converted their gendered domestic labor into prestige and social visibility within their community networks.<sup>11</sup> I did not learn this from a woman masterful at trafficking repairmen, though. In fact, I might not have noticed the social importance of repair had my main interlocutor proved defter at trafficking repairmen. Šemsa's repair-related ordeals illustrate how gender propriety shapes access to repair services among intimate social circles, further revealing the intertwined nature of emotional, material, and relational infrastructures. Repair sets a stage where gender propriety and the gendered division of labor are enacted and constituted.

*Veza* means "relation" or "connection" in Bosnian, referring to those connections crucial to accessing public services (Brković 2017, 2022). Akin to the notion of *wasta* developed by Nucho (2016) in her work on everyday life in Lebanon and by Julia Elyachar (2010) in the context of Cairo—*veza* underscores the important role of personal networks in getting things done—from finding a job to receiving proper health care. Nucho insists that we pay attention to "gender propriety" when mapping access to services and networked infrastructures.<sup>12</sup> In Sarajevo, running a household and smoothly maintaining a family's social obligations are seen primarily as a woman's responsibility. Practically speaking, women's acts of trafficking masculine repair tasks do themselves not only concern house maintenance but modes of maintaining community ties.<sup>13</sup> *Veza* is necessary for repairs, but *veza*, too, demands maintenance and repair.

Women incur debts to one another when exchanging access to repairmen.<sup>14</sup> This holds true whether they merely extend a reference or personally contact and send the repairman to someone in need. Moreover, calling a repairman is one thing; having the effective power to ensure that he actually shows up (let

alone does the job competently) is another. For female-headed households without men, repair services can come at high cost—be it financial or social indebtedness to a friend, family member, or neighbor. Debts to others for access to services are hard to pay off for those who do not have male relatives to mobilize, either for themselves or to traffic to others.<sup>15</sup> In this arrangement, the gendered division of labor remains unchallenged—women who mobilize male labor receive the surplus prestige within this peculiar economy of solidarity, but home maintenance remains the primary mode of care and is strictly categorized as women’s work (Staples 2006; Levin 2016). Repair services in this setting are hard won: they require building, sustaining, and nurturing solid relationships with neighbors, friends, family, and colleagues. Having skilled and willing male labor within reach is a matter of luck, but also one of skill—not only the deft skill of women “traffickers” but also the skill of asking for assistance.

### ŠEMSA’S WELL-REPAIRED SHOES

Despite our earlier failure to fix my broken sink, I learned that Šemsa was on good terms with two repairmen: a cobbler and a video repairman.<sup>16</sup> I had accompanied her several times to take shoes to the cobbler, Hamid, for repair (or re-repair). For years, she had only one pair of shoes. She was very proud that she had been able to save them so many times. Every now and then, often as I was putting on my own shoes in her doorway, she would show me the cobbler’s latest repair trick that had kept her beloved shoes from falling apart yet again. One piece of neatly sewn leather on the side attached to another piece at the back, where the shoe meets the ankle. Hamid took care to delicately hide patches by making stitches look like part of the shoe’s design.

Each time they met, Hamid also provided Šemsa with tidbits of news from the city and the latest jokes circulating in the bazaar. “Have you heard this one?” was the cue, followed by snippets of gossip: who was the new owner of the shop at the corner; how one mafioso (*mafijaš*) had chased the other along the little streets of the old market a few days ago; who had relatives visiting from Sweden, Norway, or Germany this summer; who got his son or daughter a job through *veze* (plural form of *veza*); who was very sick; and who had recently died. The last word was always another joke. Hamid never failed to send his regards to Šemsa’s husband as they exchanged their final goodbyes at the doorstep. She would come home with her shoes repaired, several “new” jokes, and with fresh news about shopkeepers, clients, and neighbors. In accompanying Šemsa on her visits to Hamid’s shoe repair, I saw a new side of her; I saw her as a woman moving confidently through the city, steady both on her feet and in her social relations.

Hamid had not always been a cobbler. He had never apprenticed to a master nor did he learn the craft from his father, like the rest of the repairmen in the Old Town bazaar. Rather, he had “God-given talent!” as he put it. He used to work at one of the big, state-owned companies in the city, Energoinvest,<sup>17</sup> but he lost this job after the war. He started repairing shoes at an old repair shop whose owner had died before he could teach his own son the craft. The son, a good-looking young man, had inherited the store not knowing the work but equipped with the laid-back attitudes of Sarajevan shop keepers: he sat comfortably in his chair and hosted the customers with coffee while Hamid, a former technician, repaired the shoes. Hamid dominated the conversations—he took center stage from his little atelier at the back of the shop. The customers came for him. The owner knew that and behaved accordingly. Hamid’s customers appreciated not only his craftsmanship but also his former career at Energoinvest, a once legendary company in Bosnia.

I once asked Hamid how he had gotten involved in the craft of shoe repair. He proudly told me the story of his first repair in detail. His mother had taken his boots to several repairmen, but he was not satisfied with their efforts and decided to repair them himself. He spread newspapers on the table, placed the boots on top, and studied them for hours. Some parts he had to deconstruct, he added, to understand the logic of the stitches. “It is mathematics, you know!” He made a thinking gesture as he said this by putting his index finger to his temple and turning it around. Within two days he had made the boots like new. Then he started repairing his Energoinvest colleagues’ shoes. He began to earn a reputation, as well as some pocket money. *Ma snašao sam se, hvala bogu* (“I’ve found my bearings, thank God”), he added. Over time, I understood that losing his job had led to difficult times, but that he was doing much better than many other colleagues who had also become unemployed or who had to live on small pensions. Hamid’s remark about “finding his bearings” underscores the creativity behind the art of survival in an economically and politically unstable country. His pride in his self-taught craftsmanship resonates with the newly popular cult of entrepreneurship that compels subjects to be self-made. I cannot help but wonder if Šemsa’s fondness for Hamid had something to do with his claim of being self-made, his creativity, and his scrappiness—possessing survival skills despite his vulnerability.

Yet strangely, given her frequent praise of his stitchwork, Šemsa also often spoke of Hamid with pity. “Such a nice guy but without much luck!” According to her, it was difficult to be fifty-something but single. She added, “He has an old and very sick mother. His brother had died in the war, so Hamid takes care of his

children as well.” Šemsa’s fondness for Hamid’s work appeared to stem in part from her belief that her loyalty to him as a cobbler made for a mundane act of kindness and solidarity (*svakodnevna ljubaznost i solidarnost*), something she owed him not only as a customer but also as a good neighbor and acquaintance. In the postwar context of survival, relationships cannot be neatly categorized (Jašarević 2017). In Šemsa’s case, although she pays for the repair services, the logic of the transaction is saturated with moral concern rather than sheer economic rationality or a valuation of artisanship or service. Hers was a mundane gesture of community repair as well as an acknowledgment of the war’s devastating effect on each Bosnian in different ways.

### REPAIR AT WHAT COST? NOSTALGIA FOR THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA

By the time my washing machine gave out, I had grown aware of the seriousness of the matter.<sup>18</sup> The machine was a Gorenje after all,<sup>19</sup> a Slovenian brand that produces and sells large household appliances. In Bosnia, Gorenje appliances are cherished as markers of a former, functioning Yugoslavia. This time, I knew to ask my uncle’s wife for a hand. She forwarded the problem to her daughter, my cousin, who would ask her husband, Sanin. He had worked as a staff member at the American consulate. He said he had guided U.S. Marines around the city. He looked like a young, responsible man, helpful to his family and friends. He seemed to know many things and many people in this small city. Sanin answered my plea and immediately called his family’s trusted repairman, to my immense relief. I had already learned that a woman should not pick up the phone and call a repairman from the newspaper, let alone a single woman with broken Bosnian. This young in-law of mine seemed to be a safe connection, a trusted *veza* in the moment.

Once again, however, things did not go smoothly. This time my repair problem invited other characters onto the scene. The repairman was busy that week and promised to call my cousin’s husband or me the following week. Neither my in-law nor the repairman called me back; I had to resort to doing all my laundry by hand. Teta Sadina (Aunt Sadina), an old family friend and now neighbor, whose apartment sat opposite mine, had returned from her summer vacation, and through her kitchen window noticed me reduced to washing clothes by hand in my kitchen sink. Every time she asked if my machine was fixed or if I had found a repairman, I had to reply “not yet,” taking care not to say anything that could be understood as a complaint about my family members.

Eventually, Šemsa and I were invited for lasagna at my cousin Alma’s house (Sanin’s wife). Šemsa and Alma quickly began exchanging jokes, a solid sign that

both were women in the know (Hamid's latest shoe repair was paying off for Šemsa). Eventually, my uncle's wife—Alma's mother—broached the repair issue. Apparently, she had been asking around on my behalf but was recommended the same repairman who had failed to reply to Sanin. She explained that he was the only repairman she trusted in the city. Apparently, he was kind, gifted, and honest. She added, "He is a Serbian guy, right? I guess his wife is Muslim, isn't she?"<sup>20</sup> The last question was addressed to nobody in particular. Nobody answered, nor did she seem to expect a response. The question sufficed to render the repairman acceptable. She asked for the details of my street address, apartment building, floor, and the like. The highly regarded Serbian repairman was eventually sent to me and my Gorenje machine got fixed. I did not inquire about his wife.

His visit, however, did not go unnoticed by Teta Sadina who visited me shortly afterward and mentioned that she had seen the repairman who had come by apartment, and that he was not a Muslim. Although she had at one point added his contact number to her *long list* of repairmen (her emphasis), she had erased him later, when she decided that only Muslim repairmen should be allowed to enter homes for repairs. Yet she left without supplying me with an alternative name to hire in his place.

### OUR GUYS, OUR THINGS

Should someone ask me who is taking care of the soul of former Yugoslavia in the households of Sarajevo, I would immediately answer: housewives and repairmen. They are the ones responsible for taking care of "the robust and enduring" devices from the "good old days of Yugoslavia." Electronics and home appliances by Iskra or Gorenje,<sup>21</sup> and engines by Rade Končar,<sup>22</sup> all remain deeply valued; they are carefully repaired and re-repaired. In Šemsa's case, her inability to immediately refer me to a repairman revealed not only her vulnerable position in terms of gender propriety but also that she either did not care for or did not appreciate the value of the older brands so prized in ex-Yugoslavia. Or, even worse, it revealed that she was financially capable of buying new things, which was partly the case. Many people had lost their secure jobs and social benefits as a result of the war: the uneven distribution of such losses remains one of the deeper fissures extant among members of the same family, neighborhood, and community.<sup>23</sup> Calling a handyman from the newspaper, as Šemsa must do when in need of assistance, manifests broken relationships and interrupted reciprocities: the repair of things cannot be done without taking care of relationships.

Sarajevo is a city of close-knit communities. For every new person one meets, one can easily identify a common acquaintance. Yet the increase in strangers following mass emigration during and after the war, as well as the arrival of newcomers from outside Sarajevo, that is, *došljaci* (internal immigrants who came from other parts of Bosnia after the war), has created anxiety among many native Sarajevans. Most of the city's repairmen, I learned, had left the country, since they could with their hands "earn their bread wherever they go" and were less limited than other laborers by language skills. The repairmen left in the city are thus often subjected to new selection criteria: Muslim or not? Nevertheless, there is always room for negotiation, as long as he is "our guy," meaning he is married to a Muslim, the child of a mixed marriage, or someone who stayed in the city during the siege (*opsada*). Ultimately, *naš čovjek* ("our guy") is Bosnian, but he need not always possess an entirely Muslim background.

### MAKING DO TO GET BY

*Naš čovjek* sometimes appears in the guise of a perfect stranger in public places (*na javnim prostorima*). During my initial fieldwork a decade after the war, I remarked on people's tolerance of an individual falling apart in public spaces. "Normalcy" (Maček 2009; Helms 2010; Jansen 2015; Kurtović 2018) is a luxury to be collectively maintained during moments of people falling apart: whether they are suffering an emotional breakdown, running out of money, or simply existing while surrounded by things out of order—everyone was simultaneously made nervous by and tolerant of such cases. Seeing a man become hysterical on the tram, in line at the post office, on the street, at the coffee house, or in the neighborhood was ordinary. There existed a charged and collective sense of patience during these moments. Everyone silently waited for the outburst to pass. Silence, patience, and charged disregard served both as forms of solidarity with the person breaking down and as moments of collectively acknowledging and lamenting the steep costs of the war en passant. The vacillation between neglect and respect, empathy and apathy, underscored a shared and deep comprehension that the war had not ended for some people.<sup>24</sup>

Nobody is a complete stranger in this city, and everyone knows that the war devastated some lives more than others and that, moreover, this devastation took on different forms and degrees of severity. As a result of the war, many people lost their jobs, their dependable salaries, and their means of subsistence. Educational programs and careers were interrupted. Sanin, the bodyguard responsible for U.S. Marines, for instance, had been an accomplished classical guitar player during his high school years. He could not attend the conservatory for

a formal music education because, by the time the war ended, it was too late, too expensive, and he already had a family to take care of. He worked for some time in Iraq at one of the U.S. military bases. When I asked him about his experience, he simply responded, “Thank God, I had a job” (*hvala Bogu, imam posao*). He was fortunate to be agile and healthy enough to access the right networks to secure such a job. Less fortunate people proffered their skills in the gig economy. Newspaper listings of repairmen are full of former engineers, technicians, teachers, and accountants now working as plumbers and electricians.

Among the postwar residents of Sarajevo, I readily observed attachments to things in less than perfect shape. Siege time had been marked by deprivation and fear, but it also cultivated routines and attachments to things that people could not shed easily afterward. One neighbor, Sanija, became a coveted card reader since the day four kings appeared in a row and she predicted that the Dayton Peace Agreement would be signed and the siege would end. Gospodin Nikola (Sir Nikola) continued feeding the pigeons in the attic of his building ever since the siege, despite the many complaints lodged by neighbors about the terrible smell. Teta Sadina has read *The Magic Mountain* by Thomas Mann at least a hundred times since it kept her good company during the siege days. “Why should I read another book?” she asked, “since it tells everything.” Zarifa crammed her balcony with pots in which she grows more peppers than her family could possibly consume. “It kept us from starvation during the siege,” she explained. Rizvo has spent more time keeping his old Volkswagen Beetle running than he ever spent driving it. Long after our initial attempt to repair the broken sink, Šemsa told me that when their sink broke during the siege, they started using the faucet in the bathtub. It took them several years after the siege to get a new sink installed, not because they did not have money (in fact, they are one of the relatively well-off families in the city), but because they just got used to things as they were.

### ŠEMSA: AN UNCONVENTIONAL ANCHOR

Šemsa is a Sarajka (Sarajevan woman) by birth, a married, retired woman in her early sixties who lives with her husband and two daughters in their twenties in one of the *mahalas* (neighborhoods) on one of the hills surrounding the city and very close to Baščaršija—an old Ottoman market district. Her only son left the city during the war and lives in Australia. In her heyday, before the war, she had worked as an import/export specialist at two companies in the former Yugoslavia. She had regularly traveled within that country for her job, as well as internationally, visiting İstanbul, London, and other European cities.

At the time, Bosnians, like many ex-Yugoslavs, could travel freely across Europe (Greenberg 2011). She says she does not miss being in the workforce at all, but she misses traveling a lot.

Šemsa's husband is a retired account manager of one of the larger companies operating in Sarajevo and spends most of his time making model ships in his workshop in the garden. If he is not in his workshop, he is watching TV or eating. He is morbidly obese, and the only service he expects from his wife is to be fed. He is a loner. The only social life he engages in involves meeting other model ship makers every now and then, and dining out with his former boss at a fancy restaurant once or twice a year. Šemsa thus has no male labor to barter within her community, nor do she and her husband ever socialize with others as a couple. As a result, they do not have a way to get things fixed outside of hiring repair services.

Šemsa is often accused by other women of not being *taktična* (strategic) and even having *teške naravi* (difficult temper). She herself was to blame, people insisted, if she possessed neither the social relationships needed to effectively manage her household nor the ability to persuade her financially comfortable husband to put things in order in their home. Šemsa exists on the periphery, defying and failing to comply with the social norms expected of a Sarajevo woman her age and class. That she does not complain about her husband or express longing for her only son abroad only increases other women's disapproval of her, as well as their unwillingness to engage with her. Yet rather than discuss her family, Šemsa quotes the lyrics of songs she has memorized from MTV videos, or cites her favorite books, re-read many times. Predictably, neither tactic eases her interactions with other women or makes them feel that she has anything in common with them. Only her jokes seem to be appreciated. She tells one after another like a chain smoker, and this is when the women around her most respect her. Šemsa's belonging in the community therefore depends on her access to new jokes.

### REPAIR AS AN OBJECT OF ETHNOGRAPHIC INQUIRY

Šemsa is my companion in Sarajevo. Careful attention to her mundane practices, emotions, spoken words, broken objects and relationships allowed me to see her as a "nodal point" in the sense developed by Sara Ahmed (2004): a way to define affective economies as social, material, and psychic phenomena.<sup>25</sup>

Postwar economic hardship meant that many people were left with old and non-functioning household appliances. The Bosniak families whose domestic lives formed the core of my research are all connected to Šemsa through kinship

or neighborly connections. Most of them are living on small pensions now. The broken state of their home appliances left them constantly in need of each other's help, and many daily social behaviors were loosely connected to repair. For example, if a male member of the neighbor's household gave a hand in fixing something, this would lead to having at least a coffee, if not a quickly prepared meal, with his family. Through focusing on the gendered nature of mundane life, I came to see that repair is always about order and disorder, proper form and formation, as well as needs, desires, and limitations. Yet understanding the role repair plays in the material construction of social order and gendered normativity took more time.

Some ethnographic insights unfold not only in time but over long periods. I undertook my initial ethnography a decade after the end of the war, when attention to daily life revealed many objects and relationships still in need of repair. My regular return trips over a period of almost twenty years have shown me that some broken things might be irreparable. Yet life continues with its full generative power. The Dayton Peace Accord is almost impossible to ameliorate;<sup>26</sup> frictions between the Muslim-Croat Federation and the Republika Srpska are doomed to be unworkable;<sup>27</sup> most domestic disputes I witnessed might never be fully resolved; Šemsa's kitchen cabinets might never get fixed; Sanela, who graduated from medical school, might never get a job in the city, so she continues working as a receptionist at a hostel; Fikreta began to suffer from dementia some time ago, but everybody thinks it a coping mechanism she developed to make the loss of her only son, killed in the war, more bearable; Aunt Sadina might never save enough money to get her teeth fixed; Lejla passed away before she could find enough money, energy, and time to visit her only daughter in Vancouver; Hamida's elder daughter might never recover from her mental illness and remains suspended between clinical and civilian life forever; Sanin turned a mercenary in Iraq for the United States, and might never find his *fgr* (*fina gradska raja*, "nice urban buddies") again;<sup>28</sup> everyone attentively follows the news from the ICTY,<sup>29</sup> even as they feel deeply that full justice is impossible; every July 11 the Srebrenica massacre is commemorated, even as everyone is reminded and horrified by new individuals' remains being identified every year;<sup>30</sup> Almasa and Zijneta's grandson looks like he will not recover from his drug addiction and, having lost both his grandparents and parents, may remain dependent on his sister's care. The list goes on, endlessly. Almost thirty years after the end of the war in Bosnia, peace remains fragile, sovereignty constrained, the economy precarious, and any vision of a unified citizenry dubious. Life in postwar Sarajevo demands frequent repair at every level of both private and public life, and most of the time, these efforts at repair end in the acceptance of *things as they are*.

## CONCLUSION

In a setting like postwar Sarajevo where many things are broken, including social bonds, making things run smoothly and arranging them in space have become important community-rebuilding and meaning-generating activities.<sup>31</sup> In Sarajevo households, the dominant criterion of comparison is not between a good house and a better house, but between a damaged house and one that has been repaired. The ability to smoothly manage a home conveys a sense of normalcy *par excellence*.<sup>32</sup> The work required for such a home falls to women.

Since the demography of the city has changed drastically in post-conflict times, there are many female-only households that need a hand in repair tasks. Although repair is primarily a male domain, it is the women relatives of these repairmen who mediate the care of repair for their female friends, acquaintances, neighbors, and relatives. Trafficking repairmen has thus become a sign of prestige for women, one based largely on their age, class, locality, and access to capable male family members who can be mobilized to complete repair tasks for others when needed.

The case of Šemsa, a woman who does not conform to gendered social and cultural expectations, highlights both the relevance of the structure as well as its limits. The affective and moral registers of the mundane events that emerge from Šemsa's incompetence, disinterest, and limited resources concerning the required repair tasks in her home underscore the significance of the cracks in a system. They convey the generativity of the break as well as the agentive capacities of a noncompliant subject even within a conservative setting. Šemsa is not a rebel, and her actions should not be viewed as deliberate tactics of resistance. Her existence, which rejects expressions of pain, pity, condescension, and criticism directed at her, constitutes an enduring question mark that people in her community can neither easily respond to nor avoid. An array of broken objects surrounding her attest to the fact that one can lead a simple life, possibly even a good life, if one is willing to live with the consequences of brokenness. And to laugh a lot while doing so.

## ABSTRACT

*In postwar Sarajevo, repair is mainly a masculine activity, and people lean on communal networks to get things fixed under dire economic circumstances. Yet increased numbers of women without men in their households as an effect of the war necessitate the mediation of other women in facilitating access to men's labor. Women of social capital who have access to men gain prestige by proffering male repair services. Examining the case of a gender-nonconforming woman provides rich insight into the pivotal role that "gender propriety" plays in establishing systems of daily care, normalcy,*

and social order in Bosnia. The mundane gendered work of repairing broken things ultimately depends on cultivating, sustaining, and sometimes recalibrating relationships among women. [postwar Bosnia; Sarajevo; anthropology of everyday life; reciprocity; gender; maintenance and care]

## NOTES

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1. My use of gendered language here is deliberate. During my fieldwork the assumption I continually encountered was that if I required a repair, it would be provided by a man.
2. Bosnia experienced immense violent conflict, characterized by crimes against humanity and genocide. The 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement de facto sanctioned the territorial division of Bosnia along ethnic lines. Sarajevan Bosniaks (Slavic Muslims of Bosnia) whose daily life was the focus of my ethnographic research from 2006 to 2008, use different words to refer to the violent breakup of Yugoslavia. Besides the word “war” (*rat*), “siege” (*opsada*) is most commonly used. The siege of Sarajevo from April 5, 1992, to February 29, 1996, made for the longest siege of a capital city in the history of modern warfare. The focus on siege differentiates the experience of Sarajevans, for example, from the genocide in Srebrenica. Some Bosniaks use “aggression” (*agresija*) as well. And for some, the time lag between *agresija* and *opsada* proves significant, implying the planned and intentional nature of the siege. Moreover, the passive term *aggression* allows speakers to avoid the pitfalls of substituting an ethnic identity to name the aggressor in view of the historic and existing ethnic heterogeneity of the country. Similarly, within Bosnia, the term *ethnic war* is not commonly used as, like Bosnia itself, the Bosnian army that defended the city comprised different ethnic-cum-religious groups. Hence, I often came across the use of the pronoun “they” (*oni*) to refer to the armed forces attacking the city. The majority of Sarajevan Bosniaks reject the terminology of *civil war* for underemphasizing the degree to which Sarajevo and Bosnia came under attack. Moreover, they object, the war broke out following the declaration of independence of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1992; referring to it as “civil war” thus undermines the sovereignty of the new nation. Likewise, the term “conflict” (*sukob*) does not much satisfy them either, as the word’s use in nonviolent contexts potentially makes light of the intensity of violence experienced by my interlocutors. In this article I use *war*, *violent conflict*, and *siege* to address the armed attack and struggle experienced by city dwellers between 1992 and 1995.
3. Azra Hromadžić and her collaborators (2015) express a similar problem in her analysis of aging and care. She criticizes the dominance of studies of ethno-nationalism and the absence of academic attention to the mundane struggles of “ordinary people.”
4. In her sophisticated ethnography of the crucial role women’s interactions play in community economic activities, Julia Elyachar (2010) coins the term *phatic labor* to draw attention to the seemingly trivial communications that constitute a community infrastructure as essential to the economy as roads, bridges, or telephone lines.

5. Diversity in experiences of the siege served as my primary criterion in choosing these three households. One of the families remained in the city throughout the siege, another spent half the war abroad, while the third family included members residing in another city during the siege who became internal immigrants and moved to the city following the war.
6. 1.2 million people, or a fifth of its population, left Bosnia after the 1990s; additionally, 1 million people were displaced within the country (Kadusić and Suljić 2018). About 90,000 internally displaced persons came to Sarajevo from other parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina, while 240,000 people left the city. For the impact of population displacements on the social texture of the city and the cultural cleavage between locals and newcomers, also see Anders Stefansson (2007) and Zaira Lofranco (2017).
7. One fourth of the households in the country are female-headed, whereas 27 percent of the households in the urban areas are headed by women (Smajić and Ermacorra 2007).
8. Gayle Rubin's (1975) classical work, "Trafficking Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," can be applied, albeit with a twist, among Sarajevans in post-conflict times. Rubin's work follows Claude Lévi-Strauss's studies of kinship systems as she explores the role of women's marital exchange across different times and cultures. According to Rubin, this exchange generates much more than other gift exchanges, since it constitutes the essence of reciprocity and kinship, as well as of the "sex/gender system."
9. I draw on Joanna Nucho's (2016) brilliant elaboration of the role gender propriety plays in accessing networks and services in the Armenian community in Lebanon.
10. My mother left Sarajevo for Istanbul when she married a Bosnian man in 1966 who moved to the Turkish metropolis and stayed.
11. Andrei Simić (1983) in his longitudinal research on traditional Yugoslav families, which extends to Yugoslav successor states, illustrates the articulation of patriarchy and what he calls "cryptomatriarchy." He points to the importance of motherhood and aging in female empowerment. Female power gains visibility and recognition primarily through sons.
12. What I learned in Sarajevo shares much with the conclusions that Nucho's (2016) ethnographic insights generated about the role of perceptions of gender propriety in differentiating access to Armenian women's organizations in Bourj Hammoud, Lebanon.
13. Although literature on the gendered division of labor in domestic work abounds, there is not much written on the relationship between male service providers and women. The work of Lisa Parks (2000) and Gül Özyeğin (2010) mark two exceptions.
14. As a case in point, the heavy and incessant work of mending the deteriorated texture of material life after the war has put an emphasis on household care, something reminiscent, to some extent, of Claude Lévi-Strauss's writing on *sociétés à maison* (1991). Lévi-Strauss developed the notion of "house societies" to surpass the explanatory and classificatory limitations of kinship systems. The notion enabled him to address the house as a social institution with a *personne morale* and biography of its own. Furthermore, it provides an analytical and descriptive space capable of evaluating the coexistence of otherwise incommensurable kinship systems, filiation and residence, hypergamy and hypogamy, heredity and election, as well as taking into account the social, architectural, and symbolic aspects of the house together (see Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995; Joyce and Gillespie 2000; Borić 2007; Carsten 2018). It would make for too strong a statement to argue that contemporary Bosnian social structure provides an example of Lévi-Strauss's "house societies." Yet when one takes into consideration the intensive and urgent need to repair the physical structures of dwellings in postwar times, a need that requires serious co-operation among neighbors, friends, and families, it calls for a particular attention to the urgent and gendered modes of relationality mediated by the repair task itself. Home repairs then are acts in which we can observe how gendered social roles are performed.
15. For the relationship between the growing significance of kinship ties and politics, see also Doubt and Tufekčić 2019; Wigen 2018; and Štikš 2015.

16. Šemsa's preferred pastime is watching her favorite films again and again. Whether viewing *The English Patient* or *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* for the umpteenth time or roaming the streets of Sarajevo, she keeps herself and her mind in motion but takes comfort in habit and repetition.
17. Energoinvest was a state factor public company in Bosnia founded in 1951. This large electric engineering enterprise had its headquarters in Sarajevo, with more than a hundred daughter companies spread around Bosnia. Moreover, it held joint ventures and partnerships across the globe. By the end of 1980s, the company had more than 40,000 employees. Following the collapse of Yugoslavia, the enterprise underwent privatization, today continuing on a regional and much smaller scale.
18. My sink and broken tiles eventually got repaired by the handyman my uncle found. I never mentioned Šemsa's involvement in my prior repair efforts to my uncle, so as not to tarnish her reputation. I claimed that another foreign researcher friend of mine had forwarded me the name of an unskilled handyman, and that I had not known better when I called him.
19. Gorenje was a Yugoslav public-sector company founded in 1950 and located in Slovenia. It had concentrated on the production of household appliances. In time, Gorenje evolved into multinational company, and in 2018, the Chinese company Hisense became the majority shareholder in the Gorenje Group, with a 95.42 percent stake.
20. According to [Snježana Mrđen \(2010\)](#) in 1990, one of seven marriages in Yugoslavia was ethnically mixed, whereas Bosnia had a ratio of one to eight. Her comprehensive analysis of intermarriages in the former Yugoslavia between 1970 and 2005 revealed a significant decline in interethnic marriages after 1990.
21. Iskra was one of the leading makers of technological equipment and electronic consumer goods in Yugoslavia. Founded in 1941 as a state enterprise, the company was privatized in Slovenia following the breakup of Yugoslavia.
22. Rade Končar was one of the first enterprises to structure according to the self-management system. The beginnings of the enterprise can be traced to 1921. From 1946 to 1990, the company was owned by the state. It manufactured electric vehicles and industrial products. Following the breakup of Yugoslavia, it became privatized in Croatia.
23. Most of the women in that social gathering are retired and/or widows. The average pension of \$300 barely suffices to pay overheads. As a result, most retirees depend on their children's support and, if lucky, that of a close relative in the diaspora.
24. An acclaimed Bosnian director, Namik Kabil's documentary *Informativni Razgovori (2007)* illustrates powerfully a difficult to articulate sentiment of tacitly missing the siege times for its solidarity and obstinate hope.
25. I am also inspired by Vincent Crapanzano's *Tuhami: Portrait of a Moroccan (1980)*, Ruth Behar's *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story (1993)*, and João Biehl's *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment (2005)*, masterful ethnographies that focus on one person to reflect on the cultural, political, emotional, material, and historical constituents of their life.
26. The Dayton Peace Agreement, signed in December 1995 to urge an end to the war, remains the country's major constitution. The country's ultimate political authority is the High Representative for Bosnia under the command of the European Council. Bosnia's governmental structure is highly complex and asymmetrical: There is a bicameral parliament and legislature. The presidency rotates every eight months among the three members of the presidency, each of whom represents the three main ethnic groups. Nevertheless, constituent ethnic groups have different commitments to the central state. Since the power-sharing regulations of the Dayton provision require agreement among all three groups and endow each group with a right to veto, the process of decision making is subject to constant blockages.
27. According to the Dayton stipulations, Bosnia is territorially divided into two entities—the Croat-Bosniak Federation of Bosnia, and the Republika Srpska (RS). In addition to these two entities, there is Brčko District, a self-governing, multinational

district formally part of both entities. Furthermore, the federation comprises ten cantons, seven of which are populated mostly by Bosniaks, the rest mostly by Croats. While Serbs of the RS can be said to enjoy their territorial autonomy most, Croats' and Bosniaks' autonomy remains limited to cantons endowed with less power. Additionally, the Republika Srpska's separatist tendencies, frequently and boldly expressed, keep endangering Bosnia-Herzegovina's already fragile sovereignty.

28. *Raja* (a word stemming from the Ottoman Turkish word *raya* for tax-paying peasants and their flocks) describes a circle of friends, and especially for Sarajevans, it constitutes important social capital they assume to carry throughout their lives. It denotes a mixed community (Croats, Serbs, and Muslims of Bosnia) of friends who grew up together, and being a member implies that one is "cool" and one of "our buddies" or "our girls." In contemporary Sarajevo, where relationships among the Croats, Serbs, and Muslims have started to be referred to as "intercommunal relationships," having a *raja* has gained the additional meaning of being engaged with non-Muslim Bosnians. It is a tacit claim; no one blames, no one asks, no one praises, but everybody notes differences. "I have lost my *raja*" is also a statement of nostalgia, a widely shared sense of disorientation, as well as a tacit reproach of the community's contemporary texture, whose demographic profile has changed drastically because of external and internal migrations. *Fina gradska raja* thereby includes all the qualities I briefly summarized, with an additional emphasis on the urbaneness of the circle of friends. See also Šavi-ja-Valha 2017, in which the author illustrates how the notion of *raja*, which transcends social, ethnic, class, and religious differences, necessitates the willingness to mock and be mocked.
29. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), established in 1993 and dissolved in 2017, was a United Nations court of law dealing with war crimes that took place during the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s. The ICTY indicted 161 individuals, resulting in 89 convictions, 18 acquittals, and 13 referrals to a national court.
30. One of the most creatively destructive forms of atrocity in Bosnia was to dig up mass graves from their original sites and transport their contents to secondary locations, sometimes dispersing them to multiple locations. It is therefore possible that parts of an individual skeleton have been exhumed from multiple locations, and it is highly probable that most of the already buried body parts will never attain corporeal unity. During the Srebrenica commemoration and funeral each year, it is for this reason some recently identified parts of a body that are buried. See also Wagner 2008 and Jugo and Wastell 2015.
31. One of the artworks that contributed to my thinking about the constructive aspect of homemaking and the conflation of building, maintenance, and homemaking in a postwar setting is the brilliant curatorial work called *Under Construction* by the Bosnian artist Maja Bajevic. In a five-day performance in 1999, five women refugees from Bosnia embroidered patterns on the National Gallery of Bosnia-Herzegovina, a building under construction at the time. For more details, see the artist's website, <https://majabajevic.com/works/women-at-work-under-construction/>
32. Home was also where most Sarajevans spent their siege times. Homes thus turned into both shelter and an extension of the battlefield. Fixing houses during times of peace, which left Bosnia with shrunken territories, as a result gained additional importance.

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