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Women on the Move. Gendered Dimensions of Migration in Socialist Yugoslavia

Abstract: This paper examines the gendered dimensions of migration in socialist Yugoslavia, focusing on both internal migration during the four decades of socialism and temporary labor migration to Western European countries in the 1960s and 1970s. By integrating these perspectives, it highlights the experiences of Yugoslav women—an often overlooked aspect in existing historiography. The study aims to shed light on how these migrations affected women's professional and personal lives. The research draws on sources from the Archives of Yugoslavia and the Archives of Serbia, as well as selected periodicals and relevant scholarly literature.

Keywords: women, internal migration, external migration, Yugoslavia, Western Europe

From the Countryside to the City: Women in Internal Migration

In the aftermath of World War II, Yugoslavia was among Europe's least developed and least urbanized countries. The orientation to heavy industry, combined with discouraging agricultural policy, relative rural overpopulation, and widespread countryside poverty, contributed to the mass migration to cities that began almost immediately after liberation. Yet, in the early postwar years, many rural residents were hesitant to move to urban areas, as industrial work was seen as undignified.[1] The migration rate stayed below natural population growth until 1955, when it began to rise.[2] This process led to a decline in subsistence farming, rapid expansion of industrial employment, and the accelerated development of markets for both industrial and agricultural commodities. The transformation from an agrarian to an industrial society occurred over the course of only a few decades. Once initiated, migrations proved difficult to regulate or contain. People's views on factory work changed dramatically: what was once considered a "degrading occupation"[3] became, by the mid-1950s, a

1 Cvetko Kostić, *Bor i okolina* (Beograd: Savremena škola, 1962), 110–111.
2 Cvetko Kostić, *Seljaci industrijski radnici* (Beograd: BIGZ, 1955), 212–214.
3 Ivana Dobrivojević, *Selo i grad. Transformacija agrarnog društva Srbije 1945–1955* (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 2013), 369.

highly desired career. Economic independence, increased personal autonomy, freedom from strict supervision and kinship control, improved living standards, and access to cultural activities emerged as the primary factors motivating Yugoslavs to leave rural areas for industrial employment. A common belief emerged in rural areas that only those who couldn't go to the city stayed behind,[4] and entire generations of village youth dreamed of leaving.[5] In just over three decades (1948–1981), about 6.5 million Yugoslavs moved from villages to cities.[6] Industrial output grew more than six times by 1965, the agricultural population decreased significantly,[7] a "modern working class" emerged, and the number of employed people increased from 461,000 in 1945 to 4,360,000 in 1973.[8] Despite the notable migration, less than half of the population lived in urban areas by 1981 (46.5%). [9] This urbanization outcome likely reflected not only prewar underdevelopment but also the fact that de-agrarianized populations did not necessarily settle permanently in urban areas. Severe housing shortages, infrastructural and communal issues in rapidly growing urban centers, relatively low wages for unskilled workers, and the chance to earn extra income from family farms were the main reasons for daily migration by *polutani* (semi-peasants, semi-workers). Additionally, the authorities found this semi-worker, semi-peasant status somewhat convenient, since the rapidly expanding cities, burdened with infrastructural and communal problems, could not accommodate everyone. Data also shows that this dual-economy lifestyle was common, often lasting a full working life. According to Joel Halpern, there were as many as 1,360,000 such workers in Yugoslavia in 1960.[10]

Socialist society sought to create a new socialist person, and thus, as Tito explained during his visit to Slovenia in 1946, it was necessary to create a "new type" of woman who would assume responsibility and obligations in the country's industrialization and reconstruction.[11] At its Fifth Congress in 1948, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia adopted a program calling for the education of women "in the spirit of socialism" and for their increased mobilization in its construction.[12] Chronic labor shortages, resulting from outdated technology, low mechanization, and low productivity, prompted the political elite to identify women as the "largest reserve of labor power," continually insisting on their inclusion in industry.[13] Thus, the no-

4 Arhiv Jugoslavije (AJ), fond 114, Savez socijalističke omladine Jugoslavije (SSOJ), fascikla 379, Peti plenum CK Saveza omladine Srbije održan na dan 6. marta 1964.

5 AJ, 114–95, Anketa CK Narodne omladine Jugoslavije sprovedena od 15. oktobra do 4. novembra 1957. među seoskom omladinom.

6 Sreten Vujović, *Ljudi i gradovi* (Budva: Mediteran, 1990), 41.

7 Мари Жанин Чалић, *Историја Југославије у 20. веку* (Београд: Clio, 2013), 254.

8 Dušan Bilandžić, *Historija SFRJ. Glavni procesi 1918–1985* (Zagreb: Školska knjiga, 1985), 389.

9 S. Vujović, *n. d.*, 41.

10 Joel Halpern, "Farming as a Way of Life. Yugoslav Peasant Attitudes", in: *Soviet and East European Agriculture*, editor Jerry F. Karcz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 362–363.

11 Josip Tito Broz, *Izgradnja nove Jugoslavije*, tom 2 (Zagreb: Napred, 1948), 130.

12 *Пети конгрес Комунистичке партије Југославије 21–28. јула 1948. Стенографске белешке* (Београд: Култура, 1949), 891.

13 Ivana Dobrivojević Tomić, „Uloga žena u migracionim kretanjima u socijalističkoj Jugoslaviji", u: *Seobe od Antike do danas – Migrations from the Antiquity to the Present Days*, ur. Snežana Vukadinović, Svetozar Boškov, Ifigenija Radulović (Novi Sad: Centar za istorijska istraživanja Univerziteta u Novom Sadu, 2020), 419.

tion that a woman who "could carry a rifle" should also be able to "work excellently on construction sites" was frequently voiced at AFŽ (Antifašistički front žena/Antifascist Women's Front) meetings.[14] The opening of numerous industrial facilities allowed for the mass employment of women, granting them economic independence and, as would soon become evident, partial emancipation. As in other Eastern European states, the discourse on gender equality in Yugoslavia provided an ideological framework for the rapid employment of women.[15] Yet, the pressing realities of scarcity and poverty, which endured until the late 1950s, drove women to work far more than the ideals of emancipation.[16] However, women's employment, economic independence, and socialist emancipation also had a darker side. In the early postwar years, there were virtually no formal distinctions between "men's" and "women's" jobs. Women were considered capable of performing all types of work, yet they were still more frequently dismissed and paid less than men. Despite undertaking physically demanding tasks, such as hauling timber, working in mines, digging and moving earth, stacking lead, and carrying heavy sacks, company managers often viewed them as unprofitable and costly labor, insisting that their proper place remained at home, "because motherhood is also an important matter."[17]

Despite the efforts and ideological work of AFŽ activists in Yugoslav villages, conservative attitudes proved difficult to overcome. Women's work in industry was often considered "shameful",[18] and peasants were reluctant to allow their wives, daughters, and sisters to seek employment. Many believed that a girl working in a factory would inevitably fall into "immorality". [19] In patriarchal communities, women's economic independence was condemned, and girls who pursued it were sometimes openly called "whores".[20] Daily migration was also considered unacceptable, and it was not uncommon to hear that a girl who had taken a factory job was no longer seen as a "respectable local girl" or a "proper family woman". People believed she "would no longer obey" and assumed she sought employment to "fool around" or find a husband. Even in Leskovac, an old textile center with a strong industrial tradition, it was common to ambiguously remark that a girl who became employed had "taken off her skirt". Semi-peasants–semi-workers (*polutani*) were often reluctant to marry employed village women. "Real peasant girls are much more faithful than they are", one semi-peasant–semi-worker from the Mladenovac area told Professor Cvetko Kostić. "They don't wear makeup, they don't parade along the promenade, and they take better care of the household. They know how to do

[14] Državni arhiv Srbije (DAS), fond Đ 79, Glavni odbor AFŽ Srbije, Zapisnik sa sednice Izvršnog odbora gradskog AFŽ svih reonskih izvršnih odbora, sekcija za stručno uzdizanje kadrova žena i drugarica sa radilišta, 20. 8. 1947.

[15] Tomas Frejka, "Determinants of Family Formation and Childbearing during the Societal Transition in Central and Eastern Europe", *Demographic research*, 19, (2008), 148.

[16] Vera Gudac-Dodić, „Karakteristike i neki aspekti položaja žena u Srbiji 1945–1955", *Tokovi istorije*, 1–2, (2000), 76–77.

[17] I. Dobrivojević*, Selo i grad*, 233–234.

[18] C. Kostić, *Seljaci industrijski radnici*, 212–214.

[19] I. Dobrivojević*, Selo i grad*, 212–213.

[20] Vedrana Premuž Đipalo, „Žene u doba socijalizma: Slučaj Dalmatinka", *Ethnologica Dalmatica*, 23, (2016), 169.

all domestic chores, can cook, mend clothes, and—most importantly—they don't argue with their men or constantly insist on their rights".[21]

The modernization of society, the limited but notable economic liberalization beginning in the late 1950s, and the gradual transformation of Yugoslavia into a consumer society contributed to a partial shift in perceptions. The mass employment of women allowed families to increase their income and improve their standard of living. Even in the most patriarchal and economically underdeveloped regions, the financial benefits of women's work prompted a reevaluation of traditional moral norms. A conversation recorded by the Croatian ethnologist Vedrana Premuž Djipalo with a worker at *Dalmatinka*, the spinning mill and thread factory in Sinj, which opened in 1951, illustrates how women's earnings contributed to changing attitudes toward female labor and its social acceptance. "They used to say she's a whore, she's whoring around in Dalmatinka, it was the truth, she was notorious", recalled a former worker. "But once she started bringing money home, and people began to see a better life, the mentality in our village slowly began to change. Afterwards, more or less everyone wanted to work. It lasted a long time—ten years at least. Many people initially didn't want to let their girls go to the factory, and later, they were begging for it".[22]

Conservative and traditional views of women's roles within the household, combined with the practical need for at least one family member to remain on the farm, significantly shaped migration patterns: men participated in rural–urban migration far more frequently than women. According to 1964 data, of all migrants leaving agriculture, 71.9% were men and only 28.1% were women. This pattern was consistent across all republics and regions, with the notable exceptions of Vojvodina and Slovenia, where women's share of migration approached 50%. Moreover, the increase in women's employment was driven primarily by the entry of younger generations into the workforce, while women from agricultural backgrounds transitioned into urban employment at a much slower pace.[23] In the early socialist period, rural widows and divorced women were typically the first to migrate to the cities, followed by married women, usually from poorer households, who accompanied their husbands. Only afterwards did young unmarried women begin to arrive, usually accompanied by parents or relatives already employed in the same factories. Once in the cities, women from the countryside adapted quickly to both factory work and urban life. Receiving their first paycheck often marked a symbolic turning point: many cut their braids and replaced their traditional peasant footwear, scarves, and aprons with modern urban clothing.[24] As in the prewar period, women workers were employed primarily in the textile, tobacco, and leather industries. However, in line with communist ideals of full gender equality, some also took on physically demanding positions in machine-building and other heavy industries. [25] Most women migrants were completely unskilled and often illiterate, so they were assigned the sim-

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21 C. Kostić, *Seljaci industrijski radnici*, 173.
22 V. Premuž Đipalo, „Žene u doba socijalizma: Slučaj Dalmatinka", 169.
23 AJ, fond 142/2, SSRNJ, 617, Prilog proučavanju položaja žene u našoj poljoprivredi na selu.
24 C. Kostić, *Seljaci industrijski radnici*, 176.
25 I. Dobrivojević*, Selo i grad*, 213.

plest tasks in companies.[26] Another migration pattern involved the male head of the household, usually the husband, moving to the city first. If he succeeded in establishing himself, his wife and children would later join him.[27] In some parts of Yugoslavia, where men were more heavily involved in non-agricultural work, women made up the overwhelming majority of agricultural producers.[28] Periods of living apart could last for years, depending on family circumstances and material conditions. In these situations, women bore the greatest burden, managing both agricultural work and child-rearing on their own. Furthermore, the large-scale migration of peasants to urban areas and industrial employment increasingly strained rural marriages, often leading to separation or divorce as husbands formed new relationships in the city.[29]

The modernization of society also led to a shift in perceptions of women's work, which increasingly came to be seen as socially and economically valuable. Yet despite the steady rise in female employment, deeply rooted patriarchal beliefs about women's capabilities persisted for many years. Stereotypes such as "a woman, by her psychological and physical constitution, is incapable of working both at her job and at home", along with the notion that a mother's employment was primarily responsible for children's poor education and school performance, endured for decades. These attitudes reinforced the belief that men should be hired first, "not only for economic but also for social reasons". Women faced greater obstacles in securing employment; even professionally trained and qualified women rarely obtained positions that matched their skills, and few reached managerial roles. While motherhood remained a central role for women in conservative circles, company management was particularly cautious about hiring young women who might become pregnant or were in the early stages of pregnancy.[30] As the economic crisis deepened and unemployment rose in Yugoslav cities from the mid-1960s onward, resistance to women's employment intensified, and various "theories" questioned the value of women's labor. Growing numbers of young, educated women waited for jobs,[31] while public opinion often held that a woman's place was at home and that her primary focus should be her family, regardless of her education. Men's work was considered more productive, and mothers' employment was blamed for children's educational neglect. These attitudes directly influenced employment policies. Consequently, women faced higher unemployment rates, were often reluctant to attend vocational training courses, and companies hesitated to provide stipends to female students, viewing it as "an insecure investment" since "she may marry and have a child, which means leaving employment". When layoffs occurred, women were the first to be affected, even into the late 1960s. Party reports indicate that, in an effort to reduce

26 AJ, 142/2-625, Zaposlenost, zapošljavanje, školovanje i stručno obrazovanje žena.

27 Andrej Simić, *The Peasant Urbanities. A Study of Rural–Urban Mobility in Serbia* (New York and London: Seminar Press, 1973), 81–82.

28 AJ, 142/2-626, Društveni položaj žene

29 „Зашто се разводе сеоски бракови", *НИН*, 3. 10. 1954; AJ, 142–90–402, Zapisnik sa sastanka Komisije za rad među ženama Saveznog odbora SSRNJ održan 3. februara 1955; I. Dobrivojević*, Selo i grad*, 267–268.

30 Ivana Dobrivojević Tomić, „Između nebrige i neznanja. Žene, seksualnost i reproduktivno zdravlje u socijalističkoj Jugoslaviji", *Glasnik Etnografskog insituta SANU*, 2, (2019), 310–311.

31 AJ, 142/II-625, Društveni položaj žene.

labor surpluses quickly, some companies dismissed all married women "regardless of their professional qualifications or work performance".[32] Warnings that "raising women's professional qualifications is not merely a women's issue but a significant socio-economic matter", and claims that women's employment improves family living standards, had little effect.[33] From 1969 onward, unemployment rates among women with secondary and higher education rose most rapidly.[34] Official statistics also clearly reflected employment policies during the economic crisis: among all individuals with higher, post-secondary, or secondary professional education seeking work in 1968, the percentage of unemployed women—64.2%—far exceeded their representation in schools and universities.[35]

The migration of people from villages to cities, combined with economic independence and life without constant kinship supervision, typical of rural areas, contributed to more open expressions of emotion, the liberation of sexuality, and shifting perceptions of extramarital relationships. The sexual revolution, occurring alongside similar changes in Western Europe, further promoted the emancipation of female sexuality. However, the conditions under which the Yugoslav sexual revolution unfolded differed significantly from those in the West. At a 1963 meeting, it was noted that in some villages "not a single young man remained. What, then, is the fate of the girls left behind, without prospects for independent lives or marriage? …The girl chooses to move to the city, hoping to ease these difficulties. Uninformed and unprepared, she often accepts the first unsuitable marriage proposal to make up for what she has missed and frequently enters intimate relationships with young men about whom she knows little, not even the most basic details". Authorities believed that, because trade unions and the People's Youth were minimally involved in "helping male and female workers in companies", many young people were likely to take the "wrong path in life" due to bad influences. Rural girls arriving in the city thus became "easy targets" for "conquerors and lovers", as it was difficult to resist their "promises and flattering words". Living in conflict with existing social norms brought numerous problems. In the Bor mine alone, 350 male and female workers suffered from venereal diseases in 1953, including a notorious case in which a sixteen-year-old girl infected thirty people. Because principles of gender equality were applied more in the workplace than in personal relationships, at sessions of the Belgrade City Committee it was noted that society and the Party blamed pregnant girls, "mostly from homes for war orphans", for "low moral standards", while there was no discussion "of the very low moral standards of young men from working-class backgrounds, who were responsible for these situations".[36]

The housing shortage in Yugoslav cities and the lives of tens of thousands of young men and women who had just arrived from the countryside, living in

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32 Ivana Dobrivojević, „Planiranje porodice u Jugoslaviji 1945–1974", *Istorija 20. veka*, 2, (2016), 84–85.

33 AJ, 142/II-625, Društveni položaj žene.

34 Susan L. Woodward, "The Rights of Women: Ideology, Policy and Social Change in Yugoslavia", in: *Women, State and Party in Eastern Europe*, ed. Sharon L. Wolchik, Alfred G. Meyer (Durham: Duke University, 1985), 253.

35 I. Dobrivojević Tomić, „Uloga žena u migracionim kretanjima u socijalističkoj Jugoslaviji", 422.

36 I. Dobrivojević, „Planiranje porodice u socijalističkoj Jugoslaviji 1945–1974", 86.

provisional factory barracks and single-person hotels, created conditions that facilitated sexual liberation. Traditional patriarchal norms were eroding, and old values were disappearing, making the line between acceptable and forbidden behavior increasingly blurred. Freedoms that went beyond socially accepted behavior often drew one-sided condemnation from Party officials, even though harsh living conditions, lack of supervision, and the influence of older workers were what drove many uneducated young migrants toward social marginalization. Party officials described the rapidly constructed workers' barracks as a "necessary evil", but also as centers of "immoral behavior". The barracks where girls lived were described as "gathering spots for the army, police, and others". In the northern settlement in Bor, prostitution emerged, as the low wages of unskilled female workers often compelled them to sell their bodies. The Party also expressed concern that the proximity of male and female barracks facilitated the formation of "temporary relationships" among residents. Collective living contributed to the erosion of privacy and personal boundaries. In Belgrade workers' settlements, there were reports of "girls bringing boys into shared rooms…and having sexual intercourse in front of everyone", while in the Rakovica settlement, "actual procurers" were present. *Omladina* noted critically: "It is painful to even speak of morality. During work, conversations are dominated by swearing, dirty jokes, and crude anecdotes, so for young workers from the countryside, conversation during work essentially becomes a school of depravity".[37]

Women who lived according to their own moral convictions often found themselves, particularly during the 1950s and 1960s, on the public "pillory of shame", as extramarital pregnancies attracted attention and suspicion from the community. Behavior in private life was frequently considered more important than knowledge, skills, or dedication at the workplace. *Borba* reported that during discussions about laying off excess employees at the Banovići mine, every proposal regarding a woman ended with comments such as "she is immoral, she has one or two illegitimate children", and "drunken workers cause fights in the restaurant because of her".[38] Similar situations occurred in Užice, where two female workers were dismissed for inappropriate behavior—one due to an extramarital pregnancy, and another "because she had taken an indecent photograph in the park".[39] A report analyzing the position of working women noted that at the Proleter factory, a good, qualified worker with sixteen years of service had to be dismissed due to "immorality". The number of extramarital pregnancies was steadily increasing due to inexperience and lack of knowledge.[40] According to some estimates, around 700,000 children were born out of wedlock in the period 1950–1965. Unskilled factory workers, trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty, ignorance, and low social status, were more frequently affected by extramarital pregnancies.[41] However, in

37 I. Dobrivojević, *Selo i grad*, 427–428.
38 „Још нешто на тему морала", *Борба*, 11. 1. 1954.
39 „Лажни морал", *Борба*, 31. 12. 1953.
40 AJ, 142/II-279, Neki problemi porodice u savremenom jugoslovenskom društvu.
41 I. Dobrivojević Tomić, „Uloga žena u migracionim kretanjima u socijalističkoj Jugoslaviji", 423–434.

cases of unplanned pregnancy, societal pressure often pushed unmarried girls and women toward abortion, whether legal or illegal. "Most girls come from rural areas to attend high school, university, or vocational courses", explained Mira Đorđević, a social worker on the abortion commission in Belgrade, in an interview with *NIN*. "Here, they quickly meet people. The big city they once dreamed of soon overwhelms them and leaves them behind. Then, when it's already too late, they come to us".[42]

The migration of women and their increasing participation in the workforce created a problem that had been largely unknown in the interwar period: childcare. Women from urban backgrounds could sometimes manage by leaving their children with mothers, mothers-in-law, or other relatives, but migrant women faced an almost insurmountable challenge. At the Belgrade factory *Oktobarska sloboda*, workers who were late due to childcare responsibilities were reassigned to lower-paying positions and given "the harshest tasks", accompanied by the remark: "Do what you know with the children". Despite campaigns to open kindergartens even in rural areas, factory workers had to improvise as best they could—bringing children to the workplace, locking them in a room, or leaving them with neighbors or older children for supervision. Before the issuance of regulations on the maintenance of childcare institutions, nursery capacities were insufficient. After 1951, following reductions in social benefits, the number of available spots declined sharply. As a result, during working hours, very young children were often left unsupervised and exposed to the streets. In Niš, preschoolers played around tram tracks, running in front of moving trams, while in many industrial centers, younger children were left locked at home, and older children were "tied to their beds". In Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Leskovac, women—lacking better options—brought their children to work and "kept them close by".[43]

Although female employment was becoming increasingly socially accepted, intensive migration to cities during the 1960s and 1970s, combined with inadequate investment in social welfare systems, exacerbated the childcare problem. In 1966, Yugoslav nurseries and kindergartens could accommodate just over 89,000 children, leaving an estimated 30% of children "unsupervised" while their parents worked.[44] The greatest difficulties were in caring for children under three years old: there was only one nursery in all of Montenegro, and just over half of the available capacity in the so-called Serbia proper was concentrated in Belgrade (1976).[45] Because demand far exceeded available facilities, applications for childcare institutions were largely rejected, and many parents did not even apply, knowing that securing a spot was nearly impossible. Even policies that aimed to increase the number of children per kindergarten group, in violation of regulations, could not significantly alleviate the problem for working parents.[46]

[42] „Шта мислите о абортусу", *НИН,* 28. 7. 1963

[43] I. Dobrivojević, *Selo i grad*, 430–431.

[44] AJ, 142/II-279, Dr Marko Mladenović, Neki problemi porodice u savremenom jugoslovenskom društvu

[45] AJ, 142 /II-A 1144, Društvena zaštita dece (1976).

[46] AJ, 142/II-A 1144, Razvoj društvene brige o deci i ostvarivanje društvene akcije Sindikata (1977).

From the Countryside to European Cities: Women in International Migration

Even before the Second World War, the Yugoslav region was a significant source of emigration.[47] Migration flows were disrupted by the war and by postwar policies implemented by Yugoslav authorities. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, large numbers of people crossed the border illegally, prompting Party officials to denounce such departures as acts of betrayal. Over time, however, changes in foreign and domestic policies, increasing rural-urban migration, economic difficulties, and rising unemployment gradually softened attitudes toward temporary labor migration, and ultimately led to its full liberalization toward economically developed Western European countries. During the 1960s and 1970s, more than a million people, predominantly unskilled rural workers, migrated in search of better-paying jobs, most often to West Germany, Austria, France, and Switzerland. The rapid economic growth in these countries, combined with a rising demand for unskilled workers willing to perform the most physically demanding jobs, facilitated these migration flows—a pattern typical not only of Yugoslavia but also of other underdeveloped European countries such as Greece, Spain, Portugal, Italy, and Turkey.[48] The period from 1963 to 1973 marked the peak of this migration wave, effectively "shattering the myth of full employment under socialism".[49]

Research conducted by sociologists in the 1970s confirmed that economic motives were the decisive factor in individuals' decisions to migrate abroad.[50] According to Yugoslav estimates, the average income of workers abroad was two to three and a half times higher than the average wage at home. Women, however, generally earned less, as they were predominantly employed as unskilled laborers in the textile and electrical industries or as domestic workers in German households. Although migrants' wages were initially lower, over time they gradually converged with the earnings of local workers.[51] Mirjana Morokvašić's research showed that women often worked longer hours than men, despite receiving lower pay. Opportunities for further vocational training were minimal and, except in Sweden, largely negligible. The situation was similar regarding language learning. Workplace accidents and health hazards were not uncommon, particularly in France, where most women worked outside the organized industrial sector. Yugoslav women rarely re-

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47 See: Vesna Điković, *Iseljavanje u Sjedinjene Američke Države. Jugoslovensko iskustvo 1918–1941*. (Beograd, Institut za noviju istoriju Srbije 2012); Ulf Brunnbauer, *Globalizing Southeastern Europe. America, Emigrants and the State since the late 19th Century* (Landham, Md.: Lexington, 2016); Predrag Marković, "Gastarbeiters as the factor of modernization in Serbia", *Istorija 20. veka,* 2, (2005), 145–146.

48 Ivana Dobrivojević, „U potrazi za blagostanjem. Odlazak jugoslovenskih državljana na rad u zemlje zapadne Evrope 1960–1977", *Istorija 20. veka,* 2, (2007), 89.

49 Silva Mežnarić, „Jugoslovenska sociologija vanjskih migracija. Pokušaj sistematizacije", *Migracijske teme*, 1, (1985), 79.

50 Melita Švob, Karmen Brčić, „Povratak migrantica", *Migracijske teme,* 2, (1985), 17.

51 Петар Драгишић, *Зидари туђе среће. Београдска штампа о економском емигрирању из Југославије у западну Европу крајем шездесетих и почетком седамдесетих година* (Београд: Институт за новију историју Србије, 2019), 40.

sponded collectively to these conditions; instead, they sought compromises and changed jobs when opportunities arose. They sought to be "good workers" and to demonstrate that, as foreigners, they could outperform local employees by working harder and exceeding production norms. According to Morokvašić, this behavior was also shaped by the temporary status of migrant workers. Even after spending fifteen years abroad, Yugoslav women often lived and worked as if their stay would last only two or three years, focusing on saving as much as possible.[52]

By the mid-1970s, migration to foreign countries began to decline sharply. Western European labor markets had largely met their demand for foreign workers, prompting governments to restrict, or in some cases, halt the influx of unskilled labor.[53]According to data from the Federal Employment Bureau, between 1972 and 1980, only 41,099 women secured employment abroad through the institution. As in earlier periods, many also found work through informal channels, typically with the assistance of friends and relatives already living abroad.[54] Nevertheless, changes in Western European immigration policies altered migration patterns. Migration of Yugoslavs, particularly women and children, continued, as family reunification remained permitted. Economic motives, however, continued to predominate, and many women who joined family members abroad were able to find work, albeit under significantly more difficult conditions due to employment restrictions.[55]

The greatest numbers of migrants left from Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia, although migration gradually came to encompass all regions of Yugoslavia. Authorities became increasingly alarmed as emigration from certain regions reached what they described as a "critical point", particularly because those leaving were predominantly young men and women in their most productive working years. Because most gastarbeiters came from agrarian regions, the transition from rural to urban life, with its distinct customs, behaviors, and moral norms, required them to adapt to a very different way of living. Limited education, lack of language skills, and unfamiliarity with the new social environment further complicated their integration into host communities.[56] Although Yugoslav citizens' clubs were officially open to both men and women, women mostly attended during special events, social gatherings, or on weekends when their children participated in Yugoslav language and culture classes or Pioneer meetings. As a result, the clubs tended to function as predominantly male social spaces during regular hours, while special occasions and weekends brought together a broader and more diverse cross-section of the migrant community.[57]

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52 Mirjana Morokvašić, „Žene iz Jugoslavije na radu u Evropi. Analitički okvir za tumačenje promena do kojih dolazi", *Sociološki pregled*, 4, (1982), 29–30.

53 I. Dobrivojević, „U potrazi za blagostanjem", 97–98.

54 AJ, 548, Savezni rad za rad, zdravstvo i socijalnu politiku, fascikla 160, Melita Švob, Aktualna pitanja položaja žena migranata. Materijali za raspravu.

55 M. Švob, K. Brčić, „Povratak migrantica", 17.

56 Ивана Добривојевић Томић, „Напори југословенских власти на сексуалном просвећивању радница привремено настањених у западној Европи почетком 70-тих и почетком 80-тих тих година 20. века", *Токови историје,* 1, (2018), 83.

57 Brigitte le Normand, *Citizens without Borders. Yugoslavia and its Migrant Workers in Western Europe* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021), 147.

To ensure and protect the rights of Yugoslav citizens working abroad, the state concluded employment agreements and either signed new or amended existing social security conventions with most of the countries to which Yugoslavs migrated for work. The notable exceptions were overseas countries—the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand—which did not enter into such agreements, likely because they were more interested in long-term immigration than in temporary foreign labor. Although these interstate agreements guaranteed equal rights and treatment for Yugoslav workers, reality frequently diverged from the legal framework. Yugoslav migrants often had to accept lower wages and inferior-quality jobs, were denied the accommodation guaranteed by host-country regulations, and faced numerous challenges related to workplace safety as well as exercising their rights to holiday leave and unemployment benefits.[58]

Information about the actual living and working conditions of Yugoslav migrants abroad was often partial and sporadic. Housing for the majority of these workers was inadequate: they lived in barracks or large dormitory blocks, isolated from the local population and lacking even the most basic facilities.[59] "Housing is a luxury", wrote *Ilustrovana politika*, "one that requires an entire month's salary". For this reason, Yugoslav women and other foreign female workers at a chocolate factory in Aachen opted to live in factory dormitories. The cramped rooms held four beds each, so most Yugoslav women spent much of their time in the hallways, where tables and benches were set up.[60] Workers at the Dr. Oetker factory near Karlsruhe lived under similar conditions. "Four beds, four wardrobes, a stove—that is the 'comfort'", reported *Politika*. "On each floor, there is one refrigerator for everyone. There is no bathroom in the dormitory, none at all—so the women have to bathe at the factory. They complain, saying it is inconvenient… True, the rent is not high, fifty marks per bed. Still, they tell us it is better than living in private rooms, because anyone who can takes advantage of foreigners".[61]

Collective housing eroded workers' individuality and privacy, creating particular challenges for women. Limited language skills, unfamiliar surroundings, and a completely new way of life further hindered their integration and socialization. At the same time, the drive to earn as much as possible, coupled with isolation and a lack of social contact, pushed many Yugoslav migrants to work overtime. This created a vicious cycle, making meaningful socialization and quality leisure time difficult, if not impossible, for many. To maximize their savings, many worked themselves to exhaustion and ate irregularly, jeopardizing both their health and their capacity to work.[62] Although the Yugoslav press frequently highlighted the prospects of high earnings in Western Europe, it offered very little insight into the everyday realities faced by Yugoslav workers abroad. In fact, sensationalist articles often reinforced a

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58 AJ, 142/II-419, Privremeno zapošljavanje žena u inozemstvu i stvaranje uvjeta za njihovo zapošljavanje u zemlji gledano u okvirima općeg kretanja stanovništva, zaposlenosti i zapošljavanja u SR Hrvatskoj (oktobar 1973).

59 AJ, 142/II-419, Privremeno zapošljavanje u inostranstvu i žene, 17. 11. 1972.

60 „Горка чоколада", *Илустрована политика*, 29. 5. 1973. Cited in full according to: П. Драгишић, *н. д.*, 159.

61 „Оне су утрле стазу", *Политика*, 15. 11. 1971. Cited in full according to: П. Драгишић, *н. д.*, 160.

62 AJ, 142/II-419, Privremeno zapošljavanje u inostranstvu i žene, 17. 11. 1972.

stereotypical image of these workers, portraying them as diligent laborers and frugal savers, willing to sacrifice everything to save money.[63]

While Yugoslav authorities did not impose legal restrictions on employment abroad, as was the case, for example, in Spain, temporary work initially attracted mostly men. By 1961, statistical data show, only 3,612 women had gone abroad to work. Over time, women began migrating to all the countries where Yugoslavs were employed, albeit in varying numbers. Initially, these were women from economically more developed regions, typically with a university education or employment in industry. Later, female migrants increasingly included agricultural workers and women from less economically developed areas of Yugoslavia. By 1971, the number of women employed abroad had risen to 211,161, with the pace of female labor migration particularly pronounced between 1968 and 1971.[64] The proportion of women among Yugoslav labor migrants steadily increased from the 1960s, reaching 31.4%—almost identical to their share in the domestic workforce, which stood at 31.8%. In Sweden and Switzerland, women accounted for nearly 40% of all Yugoslav labor migrants.[65] The educational background of these female workers was highly disadvantaged. With 54.8% lacking even a primary school education and possessing little or no industrial work experience, Yugoslav women constituted an unskilled labor force, often trained on the job for factory work or employed in auxiliary roles within the service sector. Women were also the youngest and most vulnerable segment of the workforce, with 45.5% under the age of 24. Since a significant portion of workers, by some estimates as many as 50%, found employment abroad through informal channels rather than official Employment Bureau programs, instances of clandestine or irregular work disproportionately affected women. Sources indicate that larger factories offered higher wages, better working conditions, and stronger labor protections, whereas exploitation and denial of rights were most common among small employers with only a few workers. Women were disproportionately employed by such small firms, which made them particularly vulnerable to these problems. Moreover, those who arrived in West Germany through family reunification were initially not permitted to work. "Hotel owners are indeed eager to hire women from Yugoslavia, especially those without work permits. The women themselves do not seek protection out of fear. Employers take advantage of this, paying them below even the minimum wage and requiring overtime work". Once a woman was formally employed, she enjoyed the same rights as local female workers. Under the social security agreements between Yugoslavia and the primary destination countries for migrant labor—West Germany and Austria—Yugoslav women were entitled not only to paid maternity leave and child allowances but also to the option of taking their maternity leave in their home country. However, many workers, due to language barriers or unfamiliarity with the system, were unaware of their entitlement to free healthcare or did not know how to access it. If unexpected problems arose, temporary workers could seek assistance from consular staff at one of the 38 Yugoslav diplomatic missions—tho-

63 Vladimir Ivanović, *Geburtstag pišeš normalno. Jugoslovenski gastarbajteri u SR Nemačkoj i Austriji 1963–1973* (Beograd, Institut za savremenu istoriju, 2012), 308–309.

64 И. Добривојевић Томић, „Напори југословенских власти", 84.

65 B. le Normand, *op. cit.,* 57.

ugh the staff was insufficient to meet the demand. West Germany was a partial exception: within the organization Arbeiterwohlfahrt, 90 Yugoslav social workers provided guidance on labor and social legislation, and an additional 14 Yugoslav trade union activists worked with the German union. Nevertheless, even those employed as social workers were not always formally trained for the role, as language proficiency was often the primary criterion for their employment. [66]

The Conference for Women's Social Activity maintained that the key problems faced by women in temporary employment abroad were fundamentally the same as those faced by men, relating to their overall labor, socio-economic, and political status. Nevertheless, the Conference aimed, without separating women from the broader concerns of migrant workers, to highlight the specific challenges encountered by female migrants. Unofficial, or "black-market", employment was identified as one of the most pressing issues affecting the vulnerable position of both women and men abroad. Accordingly, the Conference aimed to support efforts to fully institutionalize the employment process, emphasizing that women should be provided with essential information about the destination country, including its living and working conditions, before deciding to migrate. This would ensure that their choice was "realistic and based on a balanced assessment of both the benefits and risks of temporary employment abroad". Since most of these women were young and poorly qualified, often entering the workforce for the first time, the Conference emphasized the importance of informing them about their rights and responsibilities under labor contracts. Through discussions, lectures, and educational materials, such as films, leaflets, and brochures, women considering employment abroad were to be educated about taxes and wage deductions, overtime work and workplace safety, rights to paid leave, unemployment insurance, and health benefits, particularly in cases of pregnancy and childbirth.[67]

Isolation from their families, the desire for emotional attachment, partial emancipation, and the weakening of patriarchal attitudes brought from home all contributed to both women and men engaging more freely in sexual relationships. As most migrants were young and unmarried, their knowledge of sexual life, contraception, unintended pregnancy, and motherhood was limited. The expression of female sexuality among Yugoslav workers was met with suspicion and public condemnation. It was openly claimed that "no other nation provides as many prostitutes as the Yugoslavs" and that Yugoslav women were "the most promiscuous". Patriarchal norms did not prevent Yugoslav men from engaging in temporary relationships with their female compatriots; in cases of unplanned pregnancy, however, women were often left to cope on their own. Under these circumstances, Yugoslav women usually returned home to obtain abortions, although some, fearing gossip and social stigma, were reluctant to seek care at local clinics. In response, Slovenia introduced a practice that allowed women to undergo abortions in Ljubljana rather than in their place of birth. In extreme cases, these pressures led to infanticide. A social worker at the Yugoslav diplomatic mission in Stuttgart reported cases in which newborns were found dead in public spaces, such as parks, under bridges, or in trash bins, and were

[66] И. Добривојевић Томић, „Напори југословенских власти“, 84 –85.

[67] AJ, 142/II-419, Privremeno zapošljavanje u inostranstvu i žene (1972).

later identified as children of Yugoslav women. Incomplete data on the rising number of out-of-wedlock pregnancies and the growing number of abortion requests during holiday periods prompted Yugoslav authorities to consider the need for sexual education for women temporarily employed abroad. This policy was also influenced by an initiative of the International Planned Parenthood Federation (European region), in which Yugoslavia played an active role, aimed at examining issues related to family planning among migrant workers.[68]

In an effort to obtain more reliable data on issues related to sexual and marital life, the Federal Council for Family Planning conducted a survey in December 1972 among Yugoslav social workers assisting workers abroad. The survey sought to assess the difficulties Yugoslav migrants faced in establishing relationships with the opposite sex, fulfilling their sexual needs, obtaining advice on contraception, accessing contraceptives and abortion services, and addressing related concerns. Each question included a response scale, with separate categories distinguishing issues encountered by male and female workers.[69] Nonetheless, the data collected were indirect and partly subjective. Social workers were most often approached by individuals with limited education and a poor command of the host country's language—that is, those who experienced the greatest difficulties adapting to and integrating into their new environment. Despite these limitations, the survey was considered valuable, as a significant number of social workers provided identical responses to certain questions, suggesting consistent patterns in the experiences of Yugoslav workers abroad. According to the social workers' assessments, Yugoslav migrants frequently encountered marital difficulties, particularly when one partner remained in the home country. Infidelity was identified as a "common" problem in 64% of responses concerning men and 73% concerning women. Conversations with workers conducted by Dr. Pavao Trenc suggested that infidelity was often perceived as an inevitable consequence of prolonged abstinence and extended periods of separation. Observations by court employees in Vojvodina indicated that holiday periods—when workers returned home for vacations—coincided with the highest numbers of divorce petitions, serving as an indirect indicator of the marital difficulties faced by Yugoslavs abroad. Dr. Trenc, a neuropsychiatrist and World Health Organization fellow who visited most European countries affected by labor migration, concluded that prolonged spousal separation led to altered sexual and emotional expectations. Men and women abroad, shaped by new experiences and temporary relationships, often reassessed the partners they had left behind in Yugoslavia. Such estrangements were frequently unavoidable. One woman summarized her experience poignantly: "Only now, when I slept with him again after my return, did I realize how he had exploited and humiliated me all those years".[70]

Young Yugoslav women arriving from rural areas, often inexperienced and raised within patriarchal value systems, frequently struggled emotionally in their new

[68] И. Добривојевић Томић, „Напори југословенских власти", 87–88.

[69] AJ, 142/II-419, Anonimna anketa o problemima planiranja porodice kod naših radnika na radu u inostranstvu (1972).

[70] AJ, 142/II-419, Utjecaj ekonomske migracije na odnose među spolovima, brak i planiranje porodice (oktobar 1973).

environments. Living independently, without the strict social control characteristic of village life, enabled more open expressions of emotion and sexuality. Loneliness, the sexual revolution in Western Europe, and the growing valorization of romantic love, rather than marriage alone, gradually reshaped attitudes toward extramarital relationships.[71] Inexperienced and left largely on their own, many women—believing that "everyone is good and sincere toward them" and that "young men truly love them"—entered relationships without considering contraception. Awareness of potential consequences often emerged only with pregnancy, contributing to a steady increase in the number of children born out of wedlock abroad.[72] Numerous domestic and foreign reports claimed that Yugoslav female workers were "prone—indeed, more so than women from other countries—to short-term relationships". Limited knowledge of the language and local way of life often led them to choose fellow countrymen as partners. However, partial emancipation came at a cost. While male–female relationship patterns transformed to some extent abroad, expectations often remained rooted in patriarchal norms. Young women tended to believe that a relationship with a man should be permanent, while men assumed responsibility for shared savings and family planning. Following a breakup, women frequently faced difficult circumstances: they could not prove the disappearance of joint savings, were left to manage any extramarital pregnancy on their own, and had no legal recourse against their partners.[73]

Single parenthood posed a significant challenge, creating numerous difficulties for women abroad. For instance, the Belgrade press reported the case of a single mother working in West Germany who had to pay 200 of her 450 Deutsche Marks salary to a German woman who cared for her child.[74] Some women who became pregnant unintentionally—whether because they felt unable to raise a child alone or due to pressure from entrenched patriarchal and moral norms—chose to place their children for adoption. Policies in the host countries often facilitated this, allowing Yugoslav women, like other foreign female workers, to arrange adoptions discreetly. However, even the decision to terminate a pregnancy posed significant challenges. Abortion was prohibited in most European countries, so Yugoslav women either returned home to undergo the procedure or turned to "third-rate but inexpensive abortion providers" in their host country.[75]

However, mass migration to Western European countries also created numerous social problems in Yugoslavia. Most often, it was the spouses who went abroad for work, leaving their children in the care of grandparents or other relatives. The scale of this phenomenon is illustrated by incomplete but indicative data from a survey conducted in Croatia at the initiative of the Republican Secretariat for Public Health and Social Protection. Covering 69 of the 105 municipalities, the survey found that as many as 54,914 children aged 0–15 lived in families in which one, both, or the only parent was temporarily employed abroad. In some municipalities, such as Ozalj and Imotski, 75% and 51% of children, respectively, lived in incomplete and insufficiently functional

71 И. Добривојевић Томић, „Напори југословенских власти", 90.
72 AJ, 142/2-419, Privremeno zapošljavanje žena u inozemstvu i problemi koji iz toga proizlaze.
73 И. Добривојевић Томић, „Напори југословенских власти", 90–-91.
74 П. Драгишић, *н. д.*, 158.
75 И. Добривојевић Томић, „Напори југословенских власти", 91.

families. Psychologists, pedagogues, doctors, and social workers observed that children deprived of full parental attention exhibited mood swings, skipped classes, performed poorly academically, and often repeated grades. In extreme cases, educational neglect was reported, along with tendencies toward vagrancy and delinquency.[76] Experts also noted that children tended to view the money sent by their parents "through immature eyes", drawing "faulty conclusions" that schooling was unnecessary, since their parents were able to earn a good living "without education or qualifications".[77]

Although life in an incomplete family couldn't be considered the sole cause of all the difficulties observed, it was noticeable that children separated from their parents faced significant challenges in adapting to their circumstances. The children of single mothers who chose to work abroad were particularly vulnerable. Acting independently and without the support of social services, these women often arranged for other families to care for their children in return for financial compensation. In some cases, mothers did not provide regular financial support for their children, leading to disputes in which foster families turned to social services to assume responsibility for the children in their care.[78] The Center for Social Work sometimes intervened—offering guidance, reaching out to parents or employers, and providing material support—to help stabilize the situation of children in foster care.[79]

Over time, Yugoslavs increasingly adapted to their new societies, adopting the language, habits, and lifestyle of their host countries. What was initially intended as a temporary stay became permanent for many, as economic opportunities abroad proved more favorable than in their homeland. Conditions eventually allowed for family reunification, with spouses and children joining migrants, giving their lives abroad greater stability. Interaction with the local population intensified, both at work and in daily life, leading to closer social ties. Consequently, mixed marriages began to emerge, with up to 19,809 Yugoslav women marrying German men between 1965 and 1977.[80]

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76 AJ, 142/2-419, Problemi iz oblasti socijalne zaštite koji nastaju odlaskom na privremeni rad u inostranstvo.

77 AJ, 142/2-419, Varga–Majarić Zdenka, Privremeno zapošljavanje žena u inozemstvu i problemi koji iz toga proizlaze.

78 AJ, 142/2-419, Problemi iz oblasti socijalne zaštite koji nastaju odlaskom na privremeni rad u inostranstvo.

79 AJ, 142/2–419, Varga–Majarić Zdenka, Privremeno zapošljavanje žena u inozemstvu i problemi koji iz toga proizlaze

80 AJ, 548–160, Melita Švob, Aktualna pitanja položaja žena migranata. Materijali za raspravu.

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Women on the Move. Gendered Dimensions of Migration in Socialist Yugoslavia

Summary: Dynamic internal and external migration shaped life in socialist Yugoslavia over four decades. For women, leaving the countryside and abandoning agriculture as a traditional occupation brought profound changes. Overall, economic independence provided women with relative autonomy and freedom, living conditions in urban areas were better, and standards of living were higher. Employment opened opportunities for professional development, whether through company-organized training programs or part-time education. However, due to heavy workload and prevailing patriarchal attitudes, women rarely pursued further education or engaged in political activities. While women generally adapted quickly to employment and city life, the erosion of traditional morality did not automatically result in the establishment of new social norms, which proved slow and difficult to define. The economic independence, coupled with freedom from the constant kinship supervision typical of rural communities, encouraged a more open expression of emotions and shifting attitudes toward extramarital relationships. When these freedoms exceeded socially accepted boundaries, they often provoked one-sided condemnation and, in some cases, led to dismissal from work. Although authorities formally sought to uphold the gender equality enshrined in all postwar constitutions, in practice, women's social and political advancement was limited—if not largely hindered—by traditional societal beliefs and their dual responsibilities at work and at home. Economic crises, rising unemployment, and the desire to improve living standards and alleviate housing shortages prompted many Yugoslavs to seek work abroad during the 1960s and early 1970s. Among them, young, underqualified women from rural areas migrated in significant numbers, gaining both economic independence and social emancipation. Many women were compelled to accept jobs that local women typically avoided because of low pay or harsh conditions, leaving them vulnerable to discrimination and exploitation both at work and in daily life. The decision to work abroad also carried significant personal and family challenges. Married women often left their children in Yugoslavia under the care of relatives due to poor living conditions abroad and the inability to provide adequate housing. In other cases, only the husband migrated, leaving the wife at home with all household responsibilities. Prolonged family separation placed emotional strain on children as well as both partners. Marital crises, frequent divorces, and the avoidance of child support payments were common consequences, revealing the difficult social impact of labor migration for both women and men.

Keywords: women, internal migration, external migration, Yugoslavia, Western Europe