



In the Name of the Daughter. Anthropology of Gender in Montenegro

Diāna Kiščenko*

An Ethnographic Exploration of Son Preference and Inheritance Practices in Montenegro

<https://doi.org/10.1515/soeu-2021-2003>

Abstract: Montenegro is one of the 10 countries in the world with the most imbalanced sex ratio at birth, pointing to the existence of son preference in Montenegrin society. While, over the last decade, international and local organizations have raised awareness of this issue, empirical studies about this phenomenon in Montenegro are scarce. The author conducts an ethnographic exploration into women's experience of son preference in central Montenegro by presenting their personal and intimate perspective. The resulting paper suggests that son preference is shaped by and manifests through the inheritance practice of property being passed on to the male heir. Through her analysis, the author demonstrates how ideas about gender roles, family planning, housing and inheritance strategies swing back and forth between 'traditional' and 'modern,' 'backward' and 'progressive.'

Keywords: son preference, sex-selective abortion, inheritance, Montenegro, ethnography

Introduction

In August 2017, I met Ivana, a young woman in her mid-twenties from Podgorica, the capital of Montenegro.¹ She was among the few Montenegrins I came across during my fieldwork who openly shared family stories about the pressure to bear a

¹ The interlocutor's name has been changed in order to protect her and her family's privacy.

*Corresponding author: Diāna Kiščenko, Rīga Stradiņš University, Department of Communication, Rīga, Latvia. E-mail: diana.kiscenko@rsu.lv

son. As a small girl—around eight or nine years old—Ivana had asked her mother whether she could have a younger brother. Her mother agreed: ‘I would like a boy, too.’ After some time, Ivana and her older sister got that younger brother. Only later, as an adult, did she find out that every time her mother became pregnant, she went to Belgrade in Serbia to undergo an amniocentesis to determine the sex of the foetus and, if it was female, she had an abortion. Between Ivana and her younger brother, the mother had had four abortions over 10 years. ‘Can you imagine that?’ Ivana was in shock. Not only did she not support any deliberate gender-based termination of a pregnancy, but neither did she approve of her parents’ decision about who was going to inherit the family’s house. The parents owned a two-storey house in Podgorica, which they had built themselves. Although Ivana had an older sister (30 years old) and a younger brother (16 years old), her parents were adamant about their decision—the house would be passed on to the family’s only son. Ivana disagreed, but did not see how she could oppose her parents’ decision.

While parental preference for a child of a specific sex goes back a long way in human history,² son preference and the subsequent prenatal discrimination mediated by medical technologies is a rather new phenomenon. While acknowledging that son preference can manifest in certain attitudes and behaviour before conception (preconception sex selection), during pregnancy (sex-selective abortion) or after childbirth (maltreatment and neglect of a female newborn), in this article son preference is understood as referring to the attitude and behaviour during pregnancy. According to sociologist Lisa Eklund, son preference can be defined as

an institution which is based on a set of values and norms that are produced and reproduced in a complex interaction between social, economic, political and cultural factors, and which does not remain at the attitudinal level but realises itself through behaviour that favours boys and disfavors girls.³

Over the last two decades there has been a growing number of studies by demographers illuminating the sex imbalance among newborns that grows out of son preference in societies around the world—in East and South Asia (China, India, the Republic of Korea and Vietnam),⁴ the Caucasus (Azerbaijan, Armenia and

2 Laura Rahm, *Gender-Biased Sex Selection in South Korea, India and Vietnam. Assessing the Influence of Public Policy*, Cham 2020, 10.

3 Lisa Eklund, *Rethinking Son Preference. Gender, Population Dynamics and Social Change in the People’s Republic of China*, Lund 2011, 30.

4 Rahm, *Gender-Biased Sex Selection in South Korea, India and Vietnam*; Isabelle Attané / Christophe Z. Guilmoto, eds, *Watering the Neighbour’s Garden. The Growing Demographic Female Deficit in Asia*, Paris 2007; Isabelle Attané / Jacques Véron, eds, *Gender Discriminations Among Young Children in Asia*, Pondicherry 2005.

Georgia) and Southeastern Europe (Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Montenegro).⁵

In Montenegro, son preference has a long history,⁶ but only in recent years have international and local organizations started to raise awareness about this discriminatory practice. In 2011, Doris Stump, member of the parliamentary assembly of the Council of Europe, was one of the first to highlight the existence of sex selection, sex imbalances at birth in Europe and to raise significant political concern in the Council of Europe and the European Union.⁷ Stump listed the countries where prenatal sex selection takes place, among them Montenegro. In 2014, Nils Muižnieks, Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, published a critical comment about the disturbing sex imbalance among newborns in several countries around the world, also mentioning Montenegro.⁸ His comment was based on a report by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), which indicated that in the last 20 years more male than female children had been born in several countries worldwide.⁹ Besides the international actors, in 2017 the local non-governmental organization Women's Rights Center (*Centar za ženska prava*) and the advertising agency McCann initiated a social campaign called *Neželjena*. Placing the Montenegrin word for 'unwanted' centre stage, the campaign implied that daughters in Montenegro are unwanted. Alongside this campaign, the aforementioned organisations also launched a petition to prevent prenatal testing from being abused in detecting the sex of foetuses and to raise awareness about gender discrimination in Montenegro.¹⁰

5 Cf. Christophe Z. Guilmoto / Géraldine Duthé, Masculinization of Births in Eastern Europe, *Population & Societies* 506, no. 4 (2013), 1–4, https://www.ined.fr/fichier/s_rubrique/18706/population_societies_2013_506_masculinization_births.en.pdf; Géraldine Duthé et al., High Sex Ratios at Birth in the Caucasus. Modern Technology to Satisfy Old Desires, *Population and Development Review* 38, no. 3 (2012), 487–501, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1728-4457.2012.00513.x>. All Internet references were accessed on 1 February 2021.

6 Cf. Mary E. Durham, *Some Tribal Origins Laws and Customs of the Balkans*, London 1928; Christopher Boehm, *Blood Revenge. The Enactment and Management of Conflict in Montenegro and Other Tribal Societies*, Philadelphia 1984, 70.

7 Doris Stump, *Prenatal Sex Selection*, Report, Council of Europe, Parliamentary Assembly, 16 September 2011, <https://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=13158&lang=en>.

8 Nils Muižnieks, *Sex-Selective Abortions Are Discriminatory and Should Be Banned*, Human Rights Comment, 15 January 2014, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/sex-selective-abortion-are-discriminatory-and-should-be-bann-1>.

9 United Nations Population Fund, *Sex Imbalances at Birth. Current Trends, Consequences and Policy Implications*, Bangkok, August 2012, <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Sex%20Imbalances%20at%20Birth.%20PDF%20UNFPA%20APRO%20publication%202012.pdf>.

10 Women's Rights Center, *Otkrivena ploča neželjenim djevojkama*, November 2017, <https://womensrightscenter.org/otkrivena-ploc%C2%8Da-djevojc%C2%8Dicama-koje-nijesu-dobile-priliku-da-budu-rodene/>.

The reports and activities initiated by international and local organizations are based on studies by demographers, statisticians and economists. These studies present quantitative data about the skewed sex ratio at birth and discuss the demographic and socioeconomic context of son preference in Montenegro.¹¹ In light of the scarcity of qualitative research, in this paper I aim to demonstrate women's experience of son preference in central Montenegro. I argue that it is not possible to understand son preference without considering gendered inheritance practices. This helps to situate and explain some aspects of the cultural logic of son preference. In this article, I would like to refer to the debate about gendered inheritance practices in Montenegro initiated by feminist scholar Jennifer Zenovich. According to Zenovich, the idea still prevails that a family's property—house, apartment, land—needs to be passed from one male heir to another, thus disadvantaging daughters.¹² This could be described as a form of symbolic and material discrimination against women in Montenegro. And while a daughter is expected to marry and rely on her husband's and in-laws' resources, in a situation where the housing situation, family planning practices and inheritance strategies differ from the traditional ones, marriage is not a solution, but yet another disadvantageous situation for women. In order to demonstrate how women experience son preference and how the latter is shaped by and manifests through inheritance practice, I briefly review the history of the ideas of inheritance rights and residency patterns, present some data on sex imbalance at birth and combine these with my ethnographic fieldwork material.

The empirical data presented in this article is based on an in-depth semi-structured interview and further, informal conversations with Ivana, the 26-year-old Montenegrin woman from Podgorica described at the outset of this study. I conducted the interview in English, audio recorded it with the verbal consent of the interviewee, and later transcribed it. The stories presented in this article demonstrate the social pressure experienced by Ivana and her mother to give birth to a son and their views on inheritance rights. It is important to note that the account of Ivana's mother's experience is told by Ivana and should be perceived as her mother's life events as well as Ivana's reflection on them. Listening to stories and narratives is a meaningful way to study the son preference phenomenon and inheritance issues, because through these forms, 'notions of culture and questions

11 Cf. Guilmoto / Duthé, Masculinization of Births in Eastern Europe; Fengqing Chao et al., Systematic Assessment of the Sex Ratio at Birth for all Countries and Estimation of National Imbalances and Regional Reference Levels, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 116, no. 19 (2019), 9303–9311, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1812593116>.

12 Jennifer A. Zenovich, Willing the Property of Gender. A Feminist Autoethnography of Inheritance in Montenegro, *Women's Studies in Communication* 39, no. 1 (2016), 26–48, 38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2015.1113217>.

about that culture are transmitted'.¹³ The experiences of Ivana and her mother echo those of many other women and men that I met during my eight months of ethnographic fieldwork in 2017 and 2018 in the central and northern regions of Montenegro. The research was carried out as part of my doctoral studies at Riga Stradiņš University and was approved by the university's ethics committee. The main methods used in the research were participant observations as well as semi-structured and unstructured interviews. In total, fifty-six semi-structured interviews and forty-two unstructured interviews were carried out. The interviews were held in English or in Montenegrin with interpreting assistance from a local colleague.¹⁴ When possible, the interviews were audio recorded with the permission of the interviewee, and later transcribed. The sampling for my research was not conducted strictly, but rather defined by access to people and using the snowball technique, which implies a selection of participants based on the recommendations of the previous interviewee.

There are several ways to study son preference including the outcome approach and the causal approach.¹⁵ The outcome approach quantifies human behaviour and is usually carried out by demographers, economists and public health researchers.¹⁶ The causal approach tends to embrace the cultural embeddedness of the practice, its social contexts and economic and legal constraints, and is carried out by social anthropologists and sociologists.¹⁷ There are also studies that combine both approaches.¹⁸ In this article, I mainly apply the causal approach, using ethnographic material enriched with some statistical data and findings from demographers. This is a deliberate decision as there has been an ongoing dialogue between anthropology (also gender studies and sociology) and demography (also statistics and economics) around 'what the former call gender bias and the latter, sex selection'.¹⁹

13 Navtej K. Purewal, *Son Preference. Sex Selection, Gender and Culture in South Asia*, Oxford 2010, 1.

14 I am profoundly grateful to my friend and colleague Milena Bubanja for her enormous support during my research.

15 Cf. Eklund, *Rethinking Son Preference*, 16.

16 Cf. contributions in Attané / Guilmoto, eds, *Watering the Neighbour's Garden*.

17 Cf. contributions in Tulsi Patel, ed, *Sex-Selective Abortion in India. Gender, Society and New Reproductive Technologies*, New Delhi 2007; Lihong Shi, *Choosing Daughters. Family Change in Rural China*, Stanford 2017, 83.

18 Cf. Elisabeth Croll, *Endangered Daughters. Discrimination and Development in Asia*, London, New York 2000.

19 Christophe Z. Guilmoto, *Sex Imbalances in Asia. An Ongoing Conversation Between Anthropologists and Demographers*, in: Sharada Srinivasan / Shuzhuo Li, eds, *Scarce Women and Surplus Men in China and India. Macro Demographics versus Local Dynamics*, Dordrecht 2018, 145–161, 147.

The History of Inheritance Rights and Residency Patterns in Montenegro

The intricate and complex history of Montenegro makes it arduous within the confines of this article to give a more profound historical review of the country's residence and inheritance practices. I will briefly discuss the changes that have occurred since the twentieth century, also highlighting some prevailing ideas about gender roles and female–male relationships. Historically, residence and inheritance practices were influenced by a given mode of production. Bette Denich, who did her fieldwork in Yugoslavia in the mid-1960s and also wrote about the presocialist period, argued that there was a historical contrast between pastoralists and agriculturalists, who with their patricentric organization inhabited the Balkan region for centuries. While 'patricentrism is a social structure in which the core residential and economic units consist of agnatically related men',²⁰ there are differences between pastoralists and agriculturalists, between coastal and mountain areas:

The first situation, characteristic of agriculturalists, occurs where males exclusively inherit the patrimonial estates and form autonomous households with wider corporate ties to other kinsmen. In contrast, the conditions in pastoral communities enforce the maintenance of corporate ties among brothers and with more distant collateral kinsmen.²¹

In agricultural communities, land is the basic resource, and in order to keep it within the family, that family needs male offspring to inherit the land and the surname. Therefore, 'families are identified only by links through males'.²² In pastoralist communities, it is important to connect with unrelated households by marriage in order 'to maximize alliances with co-fathers-in-law'.²³ According to Denich, Montenegro was seen as 'an extreme version of patrilocal, exogamous grouping with clear hierarchy along sexual lines, in which property and power are vested exclusively in men'.²⁴ This depiction should be viewed with caution, however, because there was a distinction between the hinterland and the coastal regions, particularly in the Bay of Kotor, which was strongly influenced by the Venetian period from the fifteenth till the eighteenth century.²⁵

20 Bette S. Denich, *Sex and Power in the Balkans*, in: Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, ed, *Woman, Culture, and Society*, Stanford/CA 1974, 243–262, 246.

21 Denich, *Sex and Power in the Balkans*, 246.

22 Denich, *Sex and Power in the Balkans*, 258.

23 Denich, *Sex and Power in the Balkans*, 250.

24 Denich, *Sex and Power in the Balkans*, 244.

25 Kenneth Morrison, *Montenegro. A Modern History*, London 2009, 9.

For a woman, marriage meant moving away from her natal group where she had no further rights and into her husband's household which consisted of strangers—the husband, his male agnates, other unmarried women, and unmarried girls. The basis of the group would be 'male agnates and unrelated unmarried women.' This created a 'patrilineal paradox,' where, on the one hand, unmarried women were not recognized as important, while on the other hand, the survival of the very structure heavily relied on them. The main problem was to combine the interests of unrelated women in the exogamous patrilineal group so they could contribute to the group they belonged to, but were not from.²⁶

Residence and inheritance practices were also related to the organization of the household. Christopher Boehm, who did his fieldwork in the 1960s in Montenegro and analysed historical accounts of feuding from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, argues that both women and men had their respective tasks in the household. Indeed, a good woman 'was the very foundation of the household'.²⁷ She was expected to organise the upbringing of the children and to take care of household tasks, but above all, she had to give a birth to a son.²⁸ This would not only secure the continuity of the lineage, but also the woman's place in the group.²⁹ Women were binders—they linked fathers and sons, and male in-laws. Other than this, women had to be healthy and strong in order to perform physically demanding tasks outside the household, because men were often away on raids.³⁰ Here, too, the survival of the household therefore relied upon women.³¹ Besides physical abilities, women had to be of 'good moral character as far as honesty and sexual behaviour were concerned'.³² A good man in Montenegro had to be a *junak* (a good warrior, hero), who could go into battle. But a man's honour was also connected to his household—the wellbeing of its members and his ability to provide: 'Montenegrins were seldom able to become rich by local standards, partly because of the scarcity of land and partly because their values in the economic sphere were geared towards "living well" rather than towards accumulating objects'.³³

With respect to children, during the first part of the twentieth century, there were different attitudes towards male and female newborns. The birth of a son brought joy and was celebrated by men drinking *rakia* (a popular fruit spirit)

26 Denich, *Sex and Power in the Balkans*, 251 and 260.

27 Boehm, *Blood Revenge*, 70.

28 Boehm, *Blood Revenge*, 70.

29 Denich, *Sex and Power in the Balkans*, 246–250.

30 Boehm, *Blood Revenge*, 70.

31 Denich, *Sex and Power in the Balkans*, 252.

32 Boehm, *Blood Revenge*, 70.

33 Boehm, *Blood Revenge*, 72.

while the birth of a daughter was perceived as a misfortune.³⁴ The insignificance of female offspring manifested in the way fathers enumerated their children. When talking about the number of children he had, a father would mention only the number of sons and would not include his daughters. The reason behind this was the way a family saw the life trajectory of their offspring—while a son had a permanent position in the family, a daughter's position in the household was of a temporary nature, as sooner or later, she would leave her birth family.³⁵

During state socialism (1945–1992), Montenegro's experiences and those of the other entities within the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, were ambivalent:

In most parts of the country the old and the new co-exist, and sometimes the old traditional mores, the values of the consumer society and a socialist rhetoric are mixed to such an extent that they create contradictions, conflicts and many ambivalent situations for women and men who experience them.³⁶

While the state promoted institutionalised equality by guaranteeing the right for both sexes to work, social protection, education and health services, there were discrepancies between the position of women in the public and private spheres, rural and urban areas and among different groups. While women were encouraged to take an active part in decision making and political life that would lead to more gender equality, they experienced a double burden, as women were not liberated from their domestic work and had limited opportunities to become active in political life. When it came to family issues, women were entitled to up to 12 months of maternity leave on full pay, their right to freely bear children as they wished was inscribed in the 1974 constitution, and abortion had been legal since 1952.³⁷

Despite Montenegro's progressive direction during the socialist period, patriarchal dynamics in male–female relationships persisted, as well as the unbalanced attitude towards male and female children.³⁸ As part of building a new society, there was an attempt to change patriarchal patterns, but they were

34 Durham, *Some Tribal Origins Laws and Customs*, 187–188.

35 Denich, *Sex and Power in the Balkans*, 252.

36 Mirjana Morokvasic, *Institutionalised Equality and Women's Conditions in Yugoslavia*, *Equal Opportunities International* 2, no. 4 (1983), 9–17, 9, <https://doi.org/10.1108/eb010386>.

37 Morokvasic, *Institutionalised Equality and Women's Conditions in Yugoslavia*, 11. Cf. Adriana Zaharijević, *The Strange Case of Yugoslav Feminism. Feminism and Socialism in the 'East,' Montenegro Journal for Social Sciences* 1, no. 2 (2017), 135–156, 140, <http://www.mjss.ac.me/images/files/issue2/03%20Full%20text.pdf>.

38 Cf. Morokvasic, *Institutionalised Equality and Women's Conditions in Yugoslavia*.

not eradicated.³⁹ In some families, female children were perceived as a tragedy and the women (the mothers) were blamed, while the birth of a son was seen as the man's achievement.⁴⁰ In the urban context, families preferred two children and the decision about the number and sex of the children was based on their ability to educate them and, regardless of sex, prepare them for economic independence. While in the past, women had had to rely on a male-dominated group and its economic resources, during the socialist period women living in an urban context prepared themselves for independence by acquiring a paid job.⁴¹

In socialist Yugoslavia, the forms of residency changed along with the family structure. While there were still households where several generations of one family lived together, socialism brought new family models and residence types. The nuclear family model and neolocal residence type started to dominate both in rural and the urban settings. In response to growing urban areas as well as increased expectations of comfort and privacy, new apartment buildings were built in the cities.⁴² Urban planners thought that this would be the most desirable and egalitarian form of housing for the increasing urban population.⁴³ At the same time, building costs and demand for apartments encouraged the construction of private family houses.⁴⁴ People started to build their own two-storey houses, despite the fact that rural families were smaller.⁴⁵ Concerning inheritance, 'laws giving equal rights to women came into force and customary inheritance laws which before acknowledged only the male right of inheritance now provided equal inheritance rights'.⁴⁶

Moving closer to the present-day situation in Southeastern Europe, masculinity and femininity could be characterized as 'hybrid, overlapping, and also contradictory', swinging back and forth 'between global and local images mixed

39 Irena Petrović, Promena vrednosnih orijentacija ekonomske elite. Patrijarhalnost, autoritarnost, nacionalizam, in: Mladen Lazić, ed, *Ekonomska elita u Srbiji u periodu konsolidacije kapitalističkog poretka*, Belgrade 2014, 193–218.

40 Morokvasic, Institutionalised Equality and Women's Conditions in Yugoslavia, 14.

41 Denich, Sex and Power in the Balkans, 261–262.

42 Rose M. Somerville, The Family in Yugoslavia, *Journal of Marriage and Family* 27, no. 3 (1965), 350–362, 358, <https://doi.org/10.2307/350279>.

43 Brigitte Le Normand, The House that Socialism Built. Reform, Consumption, and Inequality in Postwar Yugoslavia, in: Paulina Bren / Mary Neuburger, eds, *Communism Unwrapped. Consumption in Cold War Eastern Europe*, Oxford 2012, 351–371, 353.

44 Rory Archer, The Moral Economy of Home Construction in Late Socialist Yugoslavia, *History and Anthropology* 29, no. 2 (2018), 141–162, 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2017.1340279>.

45 Somerville, The Family in Yugoslavia, 358.

46 Karl Kaser, The Stem Family in Eastern Europe. Cross-Cultural and Trans-Temporal Perspectives, in: Irina Vainovski-Mihai, ed, *Social Behaviour and Family Strategies in the Balkans (16th–20th Centuries)*, Bucharest 2008, 251–272, 257.

with value positions and perceptions of gender roles which mainly follow traditional patterns'.⁴⁷ Since the collapse of socialism in the 1990s, similar to the successor states of the Soviet Union, which experienced a 'patriarchal renaissance',⁴⁸ the former Yugoslav countries experienced a 're-traditionalization of gender roles'.⁴⁹ Women were encouraged to stay in the private field, creating 'a strikingly gendered exodus of the public sphere'.⁵⁰

Regarding postsocialist Montenegro, Schubert noticed how son preference and the practice of leaving the family's property to a male heir continue to exist.⁵¹ The laws are straight forward—women have the same rights as men regarding inheriting property. Article 18 of the Montenegrin constitution claims that the 'state shall guarantee the equality of women and men and shall develop the policy of equal opportunities'.⁵² Article 58 states that 'Property rights shall be guaranteed. No one shall be deprived of or restricted in their property rights, unless so required for reasons of public interest, with rightful compensation'.⁵³ Article 11 of the Montenegrin Family Law states that 'Property relationships in the family are based on the principles of equality, reciprocity and solidarity, as well as on the protection of the interests of children'.⁵⁴

In practice, however, only 4% of women in Montenegro own a house, 8% own land, 14% own weekend houses and 23% own a flat.⁵⁵ According to Zenovich, the tradition of passing property down to the male heir 'continued long after the laws

47 Gabriella Schubert, *Women in the Balkans / Southeast Europe*, in: Gabriella Schubert / Johanna Deimel, eds, *Women in the Balkans/Southeastern Europe*, Leipzig 2016, 23–34, 29.

48 Anastasia Posadskaya, *Zhenskoe izmerenje sotsial'noj transformatsii*. Ot Forumu k Forumu, Materialy Vtorogo Nezavisimogo Zhenskogo, Moscow 1993, 13–19.

49 Vesna Nikolić-Ristanović, *Post-Communism. Women's Lives in Transition*, *Feminist Review* 76, no. 1 (2004), 2–4, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.fr.9400151>; Žarana Papić, *Women in Serbia. Post-Communism, War, and Nationalist Mutations*, in: Sabrina T. Ramet, ed, *Gender Politics in the Western Balkans. Women and Society in Yugoslavia and the Yugoslav Successor States*, University Park/PA 1999, 153–169, 154.

50 Jennifer Zenovich, *Property, Postsocialism, and Post-Yugoslav Identity. A Feminist Communication Performance Ethnography*, PhD thesis, University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2018, 24, https://scholarworks.umass.edu/dissertations_2/1310.

51 Schubert, *Women in the Balkans / Southeast Europe*, 29.

52 Ustav Crne Gore, Službeni list RCG, br. 1/2007, 38/2013, 5, <http://www.skupstina.me/images/dokumenti/ustav-crne-gore.pdf>.

53 Ustav Crne Gore, Službeni list RCG, br. 1/2007, 38/2013, 13, <http://www.skupstina.me/images/dokumenti/ustav-crne-gore.pdf>.

54 Porodični zakon Crne Gore, Službeni list RCG, br. 1/2007; Službeni list CG, br. 53/2016, <https://mpa.gov.me/biblioteka?query=Porodi%u010Dni%20zakon&sortDirection=desc>.

55 Montenegrin Employers Federation and E3 Consulting LLC, *Report. Women in Management in Montenegro*, Podgorica, December 2017, 1–32, 5, <http://poslodavci.org/en/publications/women-in-management-in-montenegro>.

no longer existed, and the reverberating patriarchal ritual structures the discursive and embodied effects of Montenegrin gendered hierarchy'.⁵⁶ These practices are largely connected to gender roles, where a woman's main role is her reproductive function—to produce an heir without being able to be an heir herself.⁵⁷ The lack of access to property rights place women in Montenegro in a vulnerable position. Married women become dependent on their husbands' and in-laws' resources, and in the event of divorce, women could find themselves without housing.⁵⁸ Their lack of property might also influence Montenegrin women's independence and ability to start a business.⁵⁹

'I Would Like to Have a Boy.' Pressure to Bear a Son

The second time I met Ivana, in summer 2017, she bravely declared: 'I want to talk about what is happening in Montenegro in order to change something,' and began to recall different episodes from her and her mother's lives illustrating the pressure they had experienced to give birth to a male offspring. According to Ivana, her mother was placed under pressure to bear a son by her husband's parents. Ivana believed that they had presented her mother with something akin to an ultimatum: 'We will love you if you give birth to a boy.' 'And my mom took it seriously. She continued to do it [abortions, D.K.] to make them [the parents-in-law, D.K.] love her. Finally, she had a boy. She was 44,' explained Ivana. However, even though her mother had fulfilled the reproductive aspirations of her in-laws, this did not improve her relationship with them: 'And they didn't, they didn't love her in the end,' Ivana revealed with sadness. On the contrary, the situation even deteriorated. Following an argument, Ivana's mother and her in-laws stopped talking to each other. In addition, Ivana believed that her mother still suffered emotionally because of the abortions: 'She goes to Church and prays: "God, please forgive me!"'

⁵⁶ Zenovich, Property, Postsocialism, and Post-Yugoslav Identity, 14.

⁵⁷ Cf. Jennifer A. Zenovich, Willing the Property of Gender. A Feminist Autoethnography of Inheritance in Montenegro, *Women's Studies in Communication* 39, no. 1 (2016), 26–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2015.1113217>.

⁵⁸ Ivana Petričević, Women's Rights in the Western Balkans in the Context of EU Integration. Institutional Mechanisms for Gender Equality, November–December 2012, https://ravnopravnost.gov.hr/UserDocsImages/arhiva/images/pdf/lzvješće_Womens%20Rights%20in%20the%20Western%20Balkans%20in%20the%20Context%20of%20EU%20Integration.pdf.

⁵⁹ Montenegrin Employers Federation and E3 Consulting LLC, Report. Women in Management in Montenegro, 5.

Ivana's mother's experience illustrates the son preference and sex-selective abortion phenomenon in Montenegro. While son preference has a long history here, prenatal sex selection and access to abortion has only become available in the last 50 to 70 years. Abortion has been legal in Montenegro since 1952,⁶⁰ but prenatal sex selection did not become available globally until the 1970s with the emergence of two diagnostic techniques—amniocentesis and ultrasonography.⁶¹ Since then, the most commonly used method of observing the existence of possible son preference in a society is to look at the sex ratio at birth. The biological ratio is 102–106 boys to 100 girls, although the levels appear to be closer to 103 in Sub-Saharan Africa and 107 in East Asia.⁶² There is a common understanding that when the number of newborn boys per 100 girls goes beyond 106, it is assumed that there is human intervention, i.e. female foetuses are being aborted in favour of possible male offspring in the future. According to demographer Christophe Guilmoto, sex selection has been driven by three factors—existing son preference in society, access to technologies such as ultrasound and amniocentesis, and a decline in fertility.⁶³

The situation in Montenegro is statistically challenging to assess, because of the small number of annual births.⁶⁴ In Montenegro, in 2017 (the year I conducted my fieldwork), the number of births was 7432 and in 2018, it was 7264.⁶⁵ This difficulty is resolved by using cumulative data for several years. In the case of Montenegro, using cumulative data for the years 2000–2008, demographers have determined that the sex ratio at birth in that period was 109.7.⁶⁶ In 2017, the ratio was 107.2 boys to 100 girls. Overall, the sex ratio at birth in Montenegro began to rise in the mid-1980s, plateauing in the 2000s. In the last two decades, however, the ratio has been on the decline. Compared to other countries with a skewed sex ratio at birth, Montenegro could be described as being slightly affected by sex selection, as the ratio has fluctuated around 110 at its maximum level.⁶⁷ One possible explanation for this might be that only some groups of people in

60 Morokvasic, Institutionalised Equality and Women's Conditions in Yugoslavia, 9.

61 Christophe Z. Guilmoto, The Sex Ratio Transition in Asia, *Population and Development Review* 35, no. 3 (2009), 519–549, 528, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1728-4457.2009.00295.x>.

62 Chao et al., Systematic Assessment of the Sex Ratio at Birth, 9303.

63 Guilmoto, The Sex Ratio Transition in Asia, 524.

64 Christophe Z. Guilmoto, High Sex Ratio at Birth in Southeast Europe, A Research Note, October 2010, <http://www.demographie.net/guilmoto/pdf/research%20note%20on%20BM%20in%20Europe4.pdf>.

65 Statistical Office of Montenegro, Lifebirth by Sex and Gender, October 2019, <http://monstat.org/eng/page.php?id=49&pageid=49>.

66 Guilmoto, High Sex Ratio at Birth in Southeast Europe.

67 Chao et al., Systematic Assessment of the Sex Ratio at Birth, 9305.

Montenegro practice sex selection and the kinship system and gender roles may be undergoing potential changes and becoming more flexible.

Coming back to Ivana's mother's story, I argue that her experience highlights several relevant aspects regarding gender roles, reproductive aspirations, the role of technologies and the relationship with in-laws in Montenegro. As mentioned earlier, a woman's value in a patrilineal inheritance system is her reproductive function, and her role is to give birth to a male offspring that could inherit the family's property. The woman is seen as the invisible glue connecting the male line, leaving no trace in the family tree, which 'contains only the names of the men—the women are completely uncharted'.⁶⁸ Even though, because of their reproductive function, women are needed by the patriarchal and patrilineal system, they still can experience a tense relationship with their parents-in-law. Of the different possible reasons for tension between the woman and her husband's parents, one might be the absence of a son. The story about Ivana's mother, who assumed, wrongly, as it turned out, that deselecting female foetuses and later giving birth to a son would establish harmonious relations with and eventual acceptance in her husband's family, is a clear illustration of this. Even though her son's birth ultimately did not improve the relationship, her story clearly shows the existence of pressure to bear a son. The mother's reproductive strategy—to have four abortions after two daughters in order to get a son—is a strategy commonly used by women with no sons.⁶⁹ Those who already have a son are more likely to avoid having more children than those without a son. This phenomenon is called the 'stopping rule'.⁷⁰ Not only contemporary technologies, but also ancestral knowledge has been applied in order to secure the birth of a son. During my fieldwork, I was repeatedly told about the existence of the historical practice of choosing a female name such as Stanica, Stanojka, Stanka, Stanislava, which resembles the Montenegrin word 'to stop' (*stati*), in order to stop the birth of further female offspring and welcome a male child.

Ivana's mother's experience also illustrates the meeting of technology and tradition, where modern medical technologies serve reproductive desires rooted in old traditions.⁷¹ On the one hand, she used the latest medical technologies to make

68 Zenovich, *Willing the Property of Gender*, 31.

69 United Nations Population Fund, *Sex Imbalances at Birth. Current Trends, Consequences and Policy Implications*, 22.

70 Guilmoto, *The Sex Ratio Transition in Asia*, 528.

71 Kate Gilles / Charlotte Feldman-Jacobs, *When Technology and Tradition Collide. From Gender Bias to Sex Selection*, Policy Brief, The Population Reference Bureau, Washington/D. C., September 2012, 1–6, 1, <https://www.prb.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/gender-bias-sex-selection.pdf>; Géraldine Duthé et al., High Sex Ratios at Birth in the Caucasus. Modern Technology to Satisfy Old Desires, *Population and Development Review* 38, no. 3 (2012), 487–501, 497–498, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1728-4457.2012.00513.x>.

informed choices about her body, prospective children and family configuration. On the other, her reproductive decisions and practices assisted by modern technologies perpetuated deeply problematic ideas that men and male offspring are more valuable than women and female offspring. Her journey to Serbia, her use of amniocentesis to check the sex of the foetus, four abortions of female foetuses and the birth of a son after six pregnancies brings together modernity and tradition, science and patriarchal ideas in Montenegro. Medical technologies do not improve the situation for women, but rather exacerbate the existing gender inequality in Montenegrin society.

However, not only her mother but also Ivana herself felt pressure to have a male child. At the time of our interview, she had a two-year-old daughter named Aleksandra. She recalled episodes when relatives would ask about a second child, clearly suggesting the need to have a son. ‘Honestly, I am sick of that story,’ she told me, sighing heavily. Her parents do not place Ivana under any pressure regarding the number and sex of her children. But it is a different story with grandmothers, grandfathers, aunts and uncles. Ivana recounted short episodes from family gatherings, where some relatives expressed their wish for her to have a son: ‘Look, Aleksandra is cute, but I hope you will have a son.’ She disliked these moments: ‘I want to throw up. I always get angry. I am sick of it.’ Yet not only Ivana’s relatives, but also her husband desires a son. She recalled the doctor’s visit where she found out the sex of the foetus:

My husband is also a modern guy, but the tradition remains in his mind somewhere. We went to the doctor. I was seven months pregnant. I said to my doctor: “Please, tell me [the sex of the foetus, D.K.],” because up till then they hadn’t been able to tell. He said, “I think it is a girl.” I said, “Oh, great!” I told my husband: “It’s a girl!” He said: “I knew it.” We didn’t talk for the whole day. I asked him: “Why?” He said: “I felt like I would like to have a boy. I do not know why—but to have a boy.”

Ivana’s story about her husband’s reaction reveals the underlying ideas of ‘modernity’ versus ‘tradition,’ ‘backward’ versus ‘progressive.’ While the modern and progressive man in Montenegro should not consider the sex of his children as important and should not put pressure on a woman to give birth to a son, a ‘traditional,’ ‘backward,’ ‘old-fashioned’ man would. He would prioritize a son and exert pressure on his wife to bear one. Even though Ivana wanted to think of her husband as a modern man, who did not prioritize having a son, she admitted that his reaction signalled a different attitude regarding the sex of the foetus. Not only his clearly formulated aspiration to have male offspring, but also the silence between them that day indicated the pressure and sense of failed expectations.

Ivana and her mother represent two distinct generations and their stories have many similarities as well as differences. Not only did they both experience pressure

to bear a son, but also interference from their relatives in their reproductive decisions. This was manifested through the ultimatums Ivana's mother received from her in-laws and the regular questions to Ivana from relatives about when she was going have a son. On the one hand, relatives got involved with their comments, questions and even ultimatums directed towards women (not their husbands), while, on the other, when it came to prenatal testing, abortion and other activities related to reproductive health, both women were very much on their own. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that, according to Ivana, some people in Montenegro 'blame women for the sex [of the offspring, D.K.],' and female children are seen as a tragedy,⁷² especially if there are already several daughters in the family.

While both Ivana and her mother experienced social pressure to bear a son, their reactions differed. Her mother made journeys to Serbia specifically for tests and abortions, while dealing with a tense financial situation in the family, limited time for the abortion, and health risks in order to have the 'right' future pregnancy. Ivana, on the other hand, perceived social pressure as an invasion of her privacy and her body and refused to participate in discussions regarding her reproductive aspirations. Ivana sees her reproductive decisions as solely her private business. 'It is my opinion, my decision, my destiny,' she explained. When asked about the future, Ivana told me, 'My goal is to have maybe two, maybe three children. I like children very much. If I have enough money, I will have three children. Boys, girls —it doesn't matter.' Ivana was against son prioritization, against sex-selective abortions, and she believed that she would never have abortions like her mother did. During her first pregnancy she inquired about the sex of the foetus, but because of the position of the foetus, she did not find out that they were expecting a girl until she was seven months pregnant. Her aspirations for more children were expressed in relation to financial resources:

We want to give our children everything. We want to buy them new trainers, new clothes, go to the seaside, take them out to eat ice-cream every day. But everything costs. We do not want to have another child yet. Maybe in a year or two. Or, if we can get a loan for the apartment. But until then, no.

This approach echoes the anthropologist Lihong Shi's claim that nowadays 'young parents have started attending to the quality of their child-rearing rather than the number of children they have'.⁷³ Parents' decision about the number of children they want must also be viewed in the context of the new ideals of happiness, which include more material goods and leisure, and where more children can endanger

⁷² Morokvasic, Institutionalised Equality and Women's Conditions in Yugoslavia, 14.

⁷³ Lihong Shi, *Choosing Daughters. Family Change in Rural China*, Stanford/CA, 2017, 83.

the life ideal.⁷⁴ Ivana's case illustrates this as she wants to ensure the necessary clothing, entertainment and comfortable living conditions for her daughter and her husband before thinking about a second child.

'A Boy in Our House.' Inheritance and Housing Strategies

When describing the family's financial situation in the 1990s, Ivana's usually energetic speech slows: 'We were poor for 13 years, she [her mother, D.K.] went to Belgrade, to buy some cloth and sell it here [in Montenegro, D.K.]. Did [it, D.K.] against the law.' According to Ivana, thanks to their hard work, her parents could acquire the resources to build their own house in Podgorica. Now they have a two-storey house with four rooms. 'A very big house, a very big house,' Ivana emphasized. Some time ago, her mother visited her two daughters to inform them that the family's house would be given to their younger brother. The daughters can neither ask for any part of the house, nor demand to sell it. The mother also suggested that her daughters get married in order to acquire a house. When I asked Ivana, how she felt about that, she answered:

I got used to it. I was not OK [with it, D.K.]. Maybe as we were growing up, she [the mother, D.K.] told us and repeated it to us so many times. And we got used to it. Now we talk about it as though it has to be like that. When I tell my husband: "That is Bojan's [the brother, D.K.] house". He is like: "Why?" "My mom told me so many years ago." And that is it. We haven't questioned the decision again. That is it. That is Bojan's. A boy in our house, oh, my God. The only son. That is Montenegro.

The mother's firm statement about the youngest brother's exclusive rights to the family's property reveals a very typical inheritance situation in Montenegro, one which has existed for a long time and prevails to this day. According to Zenovich, 'Male property ownership is a constitutive and foundational component of the maintenance of the patriarchal symbolic order,' which influences the way women and their life trajectory are perceived in society.⁷⁵

By denying both daughters' access to inheritance rights and suggesting they marry in order to have their own housing, Ivana's mother represents the idea of a daughter as someone else's property, transferred from her natal family to her husband's family.⁷⁶ Not only in the past, but also today, Montenegrins are familiar

74 Shi, *Choosing Daughters*, 47.

75 Zenovich, *Willing the Property of Gender*, 29.

76 Zenovich, *Willing the Property of Gender*, 35.

with pejorative expressions such as: ‘Having a daughter is like watering a neighbour’s garden’ or the phrase *tuda večera*, which literally translates as ‘someone else’s dinner’. These expressions imply the idea that having a daughter is a worthless investment as, sooner or later, she will leave her natal family and contribute to her husband’s family. Once she is married, a woman is not her father’s, but someone else’s worry. Her husband and his family are responsible for the well-being of the family, including the women who marry in. This also includes access to new housing for women, while not giving them the right to inherit it. A son, on the other hand, is seen as a very valuable asset as he will continue the family’s lineage, while inheriting and maintaining the family’s properties.

The transfer of the family’s property to the male heir indicates what can be given away and what needs to stay within the symbolic and physical boundaries of the family, who is part of the family, and who has only a temporary position in it. While the family’s property is seen as an asset that needs to stay within the family, a daughter is seen as something that can be given away. By denying a daughter access to inheritance and seeing her life as a predefined trajectory moving from father to husband, she is symbolically excluded from her natal family, and yet not fully integrated into her husband’s family. In her autoethnographic account, Zenovich concludes that ‘[...] the people who I have considered my family are, indeed, not my family anymore [...]’.⁷⁷

How should Ivana’s and other Montenegrin women’s experiences be interpreted? Why is there such a strong preference to leave the family’s property to a male heir or to the closest male relative? While most Montenegrins that I met during my fieldwork would just resort to the safe answer: ‘It is our tradition,’ it might be worthwhile looking at this question from another perspective. What would happen if the family’s property were given to a female offspring? What would it mean? If a woman were to inherit property, ‘it would significantly affect the balance of the patriarchal model, because women would attain value outside of their value in reproduction of the bloodline’.⁷⁸ A woman as an inheritor undermines the structure of the patriarchal society. As long as the perception remains that daughters move away from their natal family to another family when they marry, the transfer of property to the daughter must be avoided. In Ivana’s case, her natal family worked hard to acquire their own house in Podgorica and passing it on to the daughters would mean giving a house, with all its material value, away for free. Passing the property on in this way would make not only the daughters wealthier, but also their husbands and their husbands’ families. Leaving the property to a male heir means that the resources stay within the family. However, this should not be seen as a purely rational decision. There is a symbolic

⁷⁷ Zenovich, *Willing the Property of Gender*, 38.

⁷⁸ Zenovich, *Willing the Property of Gender*, 39.

component as well. Even though Ivana disagreed with her mother's decision, she also confessed that she would not like to see her parents sell the house and share the money between the three of them. 'We built it the hard way, and I have emotions attached to that,' admitted Ivana. The house carries not only material, but also a symbolic meaning—the strength and pride of the family.

Since they were not able to inherit her family's property, Ivana and her husband tried to find their own way of securing housing for themselves. They rented several apartments where they lived with their daughter for five years, with the plan of buying their own property in the future. Living apart from their parents was possible because they both worked and could therefore afford to rent an apartment. Ivana and her husband represented a shift from the patrilocal to the neolocal residence pattern. As described, these changes increased after the Second World War, under socialist Yugoslavia. When talking about private housing, Ivana mentioned her older sister, who also would not inherit anything from their parents. Her sister works abroad, and together with her partner, plans to have her own house in the future, too: 'She is building a house right now, a whole new house with furniture and everything, because they got a 20 thousand [euro, D.K.] loan. And she will earn 20 thousand. Her boyfriend will earn 20 thousand, too. And they will have a big house in one year.'

Ivana believes that it is important for her family to own an apartment or a house, too. Therefore, she thought that her husband might also go abroad and earn some money in order for them to buy property, as she was not totally happy with the fact that they were renting their apartment. There was always a risk that they would need to move out. She recalled a situation where the apartment owner asked them to find a new place as his son had got married and the young family needed the apartment. Altogether they moved four times in the period of five years. 'I am sick of it,' Ivana sighed. She added that she thought it was hard to afford a nice place to rent. Buying an apartment would give them a chance to get a nice property while paying almost the same as they pay now. 'But what about the inheritance from your husband's family?' I wondered. The situation was ambiguous. Even though Ivana's husband is the only son in the family, his family's property will most probably be split in two—one will go to Ivana's husband and the other to his sister. Ivana thought that her husband 'will feel a little bit sorry that the whole thing will not go to him'.

While her parents suggested that Ivana get access to housing through marriage, this did not in fact happen. Ivana's husband did not own property, and there was a possibility that, in the future, his parents would divide their property equally between him and his sister. This placed the young family in an uncertain position—Ivana did not inherit because of her parents' traditional approach to inheritance rights, while her husband did not inherit, at least not an existing house, because his parents did not want to follow the traditional route. The way out was to acquire their own resources in order to buy an apartment. Owning an apartment was not just

about a physical space where the young family would reside, but the private property steeped in ideas of independence, autonomy and power. Ivana saw this as an opportunity to reclaim the power that was taken away from her when her mother denied both daughters their inheritance rights and suggested she marry in order to get access to her own property through her husband's family.

Conclusion

In this article I have shown, using the example of Ivana and her mother, how the older and younger generation of women in Montenegro have experienced pressure to bear a son. The mother's desperate attempts to have a son after two daughters by performing four abortions in the 1990s coincided with the broader social and political changes in Montenegro. The collapse of socialism in Yugoslavia and the slow transition to neoliberal capitalism was accompanied by a reversion to the traditional role of women and an increasing imbalance in the sex ratio at birth. In 2015, when Ivana and her husband had their first child, a daughter, not only was the sex ratio at birth declining, but Ivana's attitude towards the sex of her child was also diametrically different to that of her mother's, reflecting changes in society's perceptions. But despite Ivana's dislike of the notion of prioritizing sons, she was constantly reminded of it. The idea of a son as a more desirable offspring became an integral part of her life through her mother's reproductive attempts, pressure from relatives and her husband's disappointment when he found out they were having a girl. On the other hand, by objecting to the prioritization of sons and emphasizing the need to treat children equally, Ivana positioned herself as modern and progressive, describing her family members as old fashioned and traditional. All in all, these experiences demonstrate that the idea of men and male offspring as more valuable than women and female offspring is still present in contemporary Montenegro.

Son preference is inextricably linked with the inheritance practice in the patriarchal system, where the family's property is passed to the male heir. The attitude and actions of Ivana's mother and husband suggest that son preference is shaped by and manifests through this inheritance practice. Ivana's husband's disappointment in the fact that his wife was expecting a girl and his hope of inheriting the family's property without having to share it with his sister are part and parcel of the patriarchal order. By denying both daughters access to their rights to inherit the family's property, the mother placed them in a materially and symbolically disadvantageous position. Although they were encouraged to gain access to housing by getting married, this was no solution. None of the daughters' partners had inherited property from their parents, and both families lived apart from their parents, who could therefore not provide housing. These women could neither acquire the

resources from their natal family, nor from the family of their partners. The way out of this double deadlock was to become part of the neoliberal economic system—to acquire financial resources by participating in the labour market and relying on private bank loans. On the one hand, being denied the right to inherit their family's property disempowers women in Montenegro. On the other hand, however, attempts to accumulate resources of their own in order to purchase a property can function as an empowering mechanism. Acquiring private property is a way of claiming the power that has hitherto never been fully granted to women in Montenegro.

In 2020, while working on this article, I wondered how Ivana was doing three years after we first met in Podgorica. I contacted her via Facebook and she kindly shared some events from her life. In 2018, she and her husband had a boy. It was just as she had said in 2017—they had planned to have a second child one to two years after their first. Everybody around them was happy. Her husband and father were delighted. But for Ivana it was the same as when her daughter was born, her only wish was: 'Just let [the baby, D.K.] be healthy and good.' Apart from this wonderful news about the birth of their son, the significant part of our Facebook conversation was about the physical, emotional and financial struggle they had been facing. After the first child was born, Ivana and her husband planned to have more children, but felt insecure about job prospects and income. Ivana's work did not generate enough income for the family, and her husband worked for a state-owned company with a low salary. They still did not own an apartment as they had wanted. But when Ivana got a new job in a large import/export company, this gave them hope. By that time, she had also become pregnant. As a result of some health complications in her pregnancy, she was unable to physically work, and therefore lost her job; 'So, I was at home with one kid, one on the way, rent to pay on an apartment and one salary of 350 euros, with no help from the state. And that was completely legal. But in the end we survived.'

Acknowledgement: This manuscript benefited from very valuable comments by three anonymous reviewers as well as Čarna Brković; my sincere thanks go to all of them.

Research funding: This project received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 project 'Closing the Gap between Formal and Informal Institutions in the Balkans' (INFORM), Grant Agreement no. 693537.

Bionote

Diāna Kiščenko is a PhD student in Social Anthropology at Rīga Stradiņš University.