

Bulgarian Gender Equality Coalition



Royal Netherlands Embassy



Gender Project for Bulgaria Foundation



Council of Europe Information Center

Project: "Bulgarian Gender Equality Coalition – Becoming a Broad Basis for Personal and Institutional Change"

INFORMATION SHEET № 7

Seventh Forum of Bulgarian Gender Equality Coalition – 29th March 2006

Council of Europe Information Centre

THEME: **Standpoints to Masculinity**

SPEAKERS: Ralitsa Muharska – Bulgarian Association of University Women /BAUW/ and Dimitar Kambourov – Sofia University /SU/

PARTICIPANTS: Representatives of NGOs, state institutions, universities, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences /BAS/

ISSUES DISCUSSED:

1. Masculinity/masculinities – whose problem?
2. Are Balkan masculinities to be found on the Balkans?
 - Societies built up of masculine communities?
 - Which groups tend to be competitive?
 - What is the value of outwitting each other?
 - How far does aggressiveness “work”?
 - Are the power structures military?
3. Our native contribution to the “old boys’ networks”:
 - Using family connections to get a good job – do women also take advantage of them?
 - Our boys and the concept of “our people” – who were “our boys” during the socialist period and who are they now?
 - Are the circles of friends a novelty? How are the firm circles formed?
 - The “services”, “business groups” and “nomenclature” – what type of power structures do they represent?
 - The homosocial nature of transition: are there feminine homosocial relations?
 - Are women’s organizations homosocial?
 - Could marginality become an advantage?
 - The “I’m not a feminist” policy
4. “Bulgarian culture is feminine”
 - Cultural differences and government, sociological surveys and the mental stereotypes: who orders them, who makes them and how? What is the place of the women’s movement?

The speakers Ralitsa Muharska and Dimitar Kambourov presented the concept of “Balkan masculinity” and its historical origins in the mountain shepherd cultures of the Balkans. The shepherds lived in closed male communities which were constantly competing with one another, and there the idea of overpowering the others through outwitting and cheating them gradually converged with the idea of masculinity. Anthropologists claim that this idea of masculinity can be traced through the periods of Ottoman occupation (the rebel groups), the socialist regime (party circles and security services) up to the present Bulgarian society of transition (the sportsmen who became mafia bosses). The existence and domination of male groups is a stable phenomenon, it is only their names that change over the years. But they are all related to authority and determine its homosocial nature.

In societies of transition, masculinity takes destructive forms – it is the “primitive” masculinity, the one demonstrated with muscles and uniforms, that dominates, and it has found its ultimate expression in the illegal bosses’ culture and pop folk music culture. This “solidified” form of masculinity has taken over the authority, and being the dominant power, it opposes any attempts to reflect on the concept of masculinity. It is only femininity that can be discussed because it is marginalized. On the other hand, it is undisputedly true that this model of male domination is largely supported by women who lack gender sensitivity.

Dimitar Kambourov presented the issue of Balkan masculinity in another perspective: the Western point of view and the way it has been translated and incorporated into our gender sensitivity. Interestingly, the West “discovers” all its colonies as “feminine”, only the Balkans are seen as “masculine”. This concept provokes misunderstanding and misinterpretation: the West cast us into “masculinity” to show that they see us as “primitive” and “uncultivated”, which is definitely a negative projection, whereas the Balkan people see it as positive and confirm this notion as machismo. This misunderstanding is related to the phenomenon of the self-colonizing Balkan culture which observes itself from aside and reproduces foreign projections with pride or humiliation.

Another issue that the forum participants discussed was the hierarchy of values conventionally referred to as “masculine” (competitiveness, activism, individualism) and “feminine” (compassion, diligence, solidarity) according to which some sociologists define different cultures as “masculine” or “feminine”. Following this classification, Bulgarian culture is viewed as “feminine”, like most southern cultures. The reasons for this are found in the feminization of education and the compulsory military service (the army turns out to be a major conformist factor).

The forum participants also discussed the possible strategies women and women’s NGOs could undertake in order to cope with the domination of destructive masculinity. Various suggestions were made: some participants suggested bringing forward “women’s” values and positive characteristics to change the existing model of domination; others proposed to reconcile men and women’s values and models of behaviour in order to combine and use the best of both. The two major feminist strategies related to equality and difference were discussed. However, neither of them works well in Bulgarian context because of the “invisibility” of gender issues and the lack of reflection and auto-reflection on the gender stereotypes.

It was said that if we want to change stereotypes, we need new civil education. If children are brought up and educated to be citizens who are sensitive and tolerant to difference, then the negative attitudes to “femininity” and “masculinity” might be overcome. BGEC members agreed on the need for gender education within civil education curricula, and identified this cause as one of the possible directions for the future work of the Coalition.