

Master Thesis

‘Return Migration and Gender in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Narratives of the Women Returnees
in the City Banja Luka’

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Introduction

'The value system has been changing; the old value system will never be damaged enough to disable the new one to fully take over the rule, whereas the new system will never be able to fully rule and thus have our past completely forgotten' Emir Kusturica

The research on return migration and gender has been motivated by ongoing economic, political and social transformation processes taking place in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) over the past three decades as well as by my personal experience as a member of the society who has witnessed all these changes. By three decades, I refer to the times of communism, war and independency of BiH accompanied with the transition from the centrally-planned to the market and democratic oriented country presented in the following way. First, as a part of the Former Yugoslavia (FY), together with other members of the Eastern Block, BiH was under the communist regime until the end of the 1980s. Second, in addition to the transformations at the beginning of the 1990s, the FY broke down following the war on the BiH territory in the period between 1992 and 1995. And the third, within the independent BiH, the end of the war established the new borders inside the country and divided BiH into two Entities, Republika Srpska (RS) and Federation of BiH (FBiH) by splitting the previously ethnically and culturally mixed societies into three ethnic groups: Bosniacs, Serbs and Croats.

With these new realities on the ground, BiH became a laboratory for studying the changes of the identities, social relations and structures taking place in the previously ethnically and culturally mixed societies. In particular, changes became evident in the urban areas due to several reasons. First, the war has changed the cultural and ethnic composition of the place which frequently became the space of increased tensions between previously mixed ethnic groups. Second, the atmosphere of the discriminatory position of the national minorities of each ethnic group in the Entity and the city in which people are not the dominant group (UNDP 1998:

22), often have labeled Bosniacs, Croats or Serbs as ‘others’ forcing the minority and majority relationships between them. And third, the minority and majority relationship frequently included the returnees as minority ethnic groups and satyers, and newcomers as a majority ethnic group. Therefore, a new ethnic composition of the formerly mixed societies has been further complicated by the ongoing economic and political transformation processes.¹

In order to embark further on the path of deeper understanding of the linkages in changes of the identities, social relations and structures in today’s BiH in the broader context of the ongoing economic and political transformation processes, I am dedicating this research to studies of the gender relations of the minority and majority groups in the city of Banja Luka seen through the lens of the women returnees. Taking into account the experience of the women returnees among all three ethnic groups, this research provides a possibility to enlighten importance of the social structures and social relations with respect to the place, such as the urban area of Banja Luka, over the past three decades. In other words, instead of prioritizing the place and potentially enforcing nationalistic feelings established by the ethnic border as given, the research refers to studies of the gender relation in a broader context rather than just as a link to ethnicity. At the same time, the research does not neglect the role of ethnicity and potentially increasing nationalistic feelings in the post-war BiH. It rather further problematizes them by revealing the gender relations as lived experience by the women returnees within all three ethnic groups - Bosniac, Serbian and Croat – in relation to the ongoing economic, political and social transformation processes of the place - the city of Banja Luka – upon their return.

My main research questions are: how the gender relations have been changed for the women returnees upon their return in post-communist and post-war BiH within different ethnic groups; what is the relationship between the exile/emigration/return experiences of the women returnees with the ongoing economic, political and social transformation processes in BiH (the city of Banja Luka); and how do women feel, reflect, intend and act on their return within the particular social relations and historical contexts in which they live their lives?

¹ Within the legacy of the hundred years passed under Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires, BiH became a space of culturally mixed ethnic and religious groups: Bosniacs (Muslim); Croats (Catholics Christian); Serbs (Orthodox Christian).

In order to answer these questions, I elaborate on the narratives of the women returnees in the city of Banja Luka by asking the women returnees to share with me their feelings for the place and reflect on their lived experiences through the periods of pre-war/the exile/emigration/return. Therefore, instead of taking the place as fixed through historically defined facts and symbols, I rather elaborate on the set of feelings and women's experiences in regards to the ongoing economic and political transformation processes. The women's acknowledgment of belonging, longing, loss and gain for the place through their roles in the family and society is analyzed within three concepts: place, return and gender. The place in my research is closely linked to articulation of narratives of gender relations as a bridge in the future that unites past culturally imaginary of place. The return in my research is closely linked to articulation of narratives of gender relations as a bridge in a potential identity transformation of the women returnees. The gender in my research is closely linked to articulation of narratives of gender relations as a bridge of a potential agency of the women returnees.

To that end, I treat the analysis of the narratives as a set of responses on how the women returnees make sense of their presently understood past, experienced present and anticipated future (Cohler 1982). Within the reflection on this time framework – past, present, future - a possibility of enlightening the link between the return migration and gender not only in the empirical context but as well as contribution to the theoretical context of the return migration. Furthermore, the interlinkages of the three periods therefore provide a possibility to approach the gender relations in the city of Banja Luka through the potentially woman's agency in transformation of identities through the exile and return processes in contrast to the previous patriarchal perception.

In this way, a study of the transformation processes in BiH increases the possibility of understanding today's social transformation processes. Rather than bringing new geographic and ethnic borders as something fixed and stable, the research about BiH today should link the ongoing social transformation processes in the broader framework of the past three periods tracing the political and economic transition from the communist, war to post-communist and post-war times, by looking at the lived experience of its population. The research takes into consideration the feminist critics of bringing women as object of the studies while gender

ideologies and social values are equally constructed by women and men. Therefore, I see this research as an act of women's resistances by giving them space for self-reflections on their lives and gender relations lived over the past several decades as well as a potential initiative of understanding a man's position of return to the post-war BiH.

The research consists of four parts and it proceeds as follows. The first part presents the general framework of the research. The general framework briefly reflects on my personal inquiry and relevant literature review about the return migration and gender issues in BiH. The second part of the research proceeds by presenting the methodology. The methodology is developed through several stages. It begins with an explanation of the preliminary research about the return experiences of the ethnic Bosniac women returnees to the city of Banja Luka, which was done during the spring 2012. Based on the preliminary analysis, the methodology further explains the research questions. Then, it continues by elaborating on how the narratives are developed and analyzed for the purpose of the research as well as inevitably self-reflexivity through the research. Finally, the methodology part ends with a note on place, return and gender used for the purpose of the research. The third part elaborates on the transformation processes in BiH over the past three decades. It focuses on the broader framework of the general political, economic and civil society transformation processes in BiH over the past decades, including main acknowledgment about the position of women. Then, it focuses on the city of Banja Luka, which presents a place of study and conducted field work. The fourth part elaborates on the narratives of the women returnees presented separately by each ethnic group: Bosniac, Serbian and Croat. Finally, based on the results of the analysis, the concluding remarks are likely to open some space for further investigation of the social transformation processes, focusing on the gender and gender relations taking place in BiH.

I General background of the research

Having been raised in cultural diverse country, which has changed its name several times during my lifetime, challenged me to convey my research path by looking for changes of my identity in relation to the place of my birth (the city). Born as a female child in the middle-class family in the city Banja Luka during the period of the Former Yugoslavia, raised in the communist period, lived through the war times and the ongoing economic, political and social transformation processes in BiH while moving back and forth, awake a lot of inquiries of myself and the city I used to call 'home'. These inquiries became more challenging by acknowledgment that number of women with the emigration experience, but also without, share similar feelings for the city with me. While moving back and forth from my city and country in the past few years, I have been discovering that women in my city expressed their relation to the place in many different ways than just geographic place with its historical background. We relate to the place through our families, our neighborhoods, our friends, our childhood, our youth, our future. These relations are usually expressed through the sets of feelings of belongings, longings, lose and gain, as seen in some of the quotation: 'I came back here just because of my family'; 'This place has changed too much, and I would live it tomorrow if I don't have to take care for my mother'; 'I imagine myself on some other place, this is not the place I used to love. I hardly know anybody here.'; 'I decided to stay here so I need to make good conditions for my life'. 'We really had a great life here, but now everything has changed'.

Frequently, the women returnees bring the feelings of lose and gain for the city into the connection the ongoing economic, political and social transformation processes taking a place over the past three decades. First, the end of the eighties put BiH in the processes of transition from the central-planned economic system to market oriented society. Second, difficulties of the transition were accompanied with independency of BiH from the Former Yugoslavia and the war in the 1990s. In 1992 BiH entered in the civil war which ended in 1995. During four years of the military the country was totally damaged and more than 2.2 million people were resettled from their previous 'home' both internationally and internally (MHHR 2010). Third, after almost forty years of common life in the ethnically mixed BiH, the new borders were established through division of the country on the two ethnically controlled Entities: Republika Srpska (RS) and

Federation of BiH (FBiH). Therefore, within the new geographical and ethnic borders the feelings for a place became situated among the ongoing processes of democratization in post-communist (Konstavicova and Bojicic-Dzelilovic et al. 2006), a liberal peace building model (Duffield 2001) and a neo-liberal formula of development through economic liberalization, deregulation of industry and privatization of public enterprises (Holder 2010).

Consequently, under these conditions definition of a place and return to the place considered as 'home' rather became a complex processes. In particularly, some previous literature of the return migration in BiH highlighted the main features of return in the relation to the current state of the transformation processes. Jansen in his research pointed on the importance to address 'home' through personhood and transformative social relations of the place rather than on assumptions of sedentarist memory in the post-war BiH (Jansen 2007: 17). Such an approach sheds a light on differential attitudes toward return among displaced Bosnians and embeds them in social relations, drawing attention to factors such as gender, class, education and life stage. Furthermore, the act of return was also challenged only by the reconciliation processes between the warring parts but also with increasing social gaps between stayers and returnees in order to build up a warn-torn society effectively (Kaya 2009). In his research on the return in BiH Stefansson highlights the people's attitude to achieve a certain level of what they called 'normal life' (Stefansson 2003; 2004) ; in other words the 'normal life' includes three key issues: creating sustainable livelihoods, finding a place of relational identification and developing a site of cultural attachment' (Stefansson 2004b: 174). Helms added the gender perspective to the return processes while investigating the Bosnian women's activism within the civil society (Helms 2007; 2009; 2010). The importance of women presence in the return and reconciliation processes has been related to the frequent understanding of women's potential to contribute to building up future ethnic and gender equal society in BiH (Helms 2010: 18). With her findings Helms claims that these assumptions often ended up reinforcing rigid notions of ethnic and gender difference in conformity with conservative nationalist and patriarchal ideologies. Frequently that has been a case for all groups such as Bosniak, Serb, Croat, or mixed groups followed by the gender regimes carried over the pre-war period are adhered to most closely among people of all ethno-religious backgrounds from smaller towns and villages, or working-class communities in larger cities (Helms 2012).

To follow the path of addressing complexities of the return processes, in the broader context this research elaborates on the social transformation processes in BiH through the lived experiences of the women returnees. By elaborating on the gender relation narrated through the experiences of return and set of feelings by the women returnees, this research aims to bring into discussion three important issues: first, 'a critical component of humanistic research in geography and comprehend on how people feel about place, rather than how place is in its natural physical setting' (Christou 2006: 33); second, the return as failure or success processes (Gmelch 1980), and third, the gender as fixed category (Malmstrom 2004). Therefore, instead of analyzing the return of the women returnees as embodied attachment to place taken for granted, and in this case a new established ethnic borders and the minority-majority relationships, the research rather relies on what Jansen defines as 'a culturally sensitive economy of displacement and emplacement – where investigating the conditions in which certain (re)makings of 'home' come to be seen as more feasible than others' through the lived experiences (Jansen et.al 2007).

Furthermore, by exploring the lived experiences of the women returnees the research attempt to put in center the women's subjectivism and agency, that is, their personal capacities to feel, reflect, intend and act within the particular social relations and historical contexts in which they live their lives (McNay 2003; Mahmood 2001,2005; Ortner 2006). The lived experiences of women returnees, therefore, increase possibility to analyze the women's experiences of exile/emigration and return both as a form of social interaction and link to the social structures and discourse (Malmstrom 2013). In other words, lived experiences makes visible the ways in which economic, political and social forces impinge on daily lives (Mc Nay 2004). To that end, the narratives of women returnees are likely to reveal how gender is done through 'circuits of everyday life' (Nayak and Kehily 2008) for all ethnic groups in the city of Banja Luka while co-constructing context of the feelings for the place within the current economic, political and cultural changes. Elaborating on the set of feelings where imagining ourselves to be in or to have a place, often involves complex feelings of loss and gain, entrenching a sense of belonging or rupturing this through disconnecting claims, entitlements and longings. While doing that, the research also open up the space for further understanding of the circuits which frequently still might reproduce heteronormative assumptions, as gender is also lived through class, family structure, and relationship to the local area (Taylor 2000).

II Methodology

This research is based on the narratives of the women returnees to the city of Banja Luka. By women returnees I consider women who spent several years out of the city of Banja Luka either in other countries of the EU or in the country/region of the FY and BiH. The social identity of the women returnees varies but all women participants in the research shared a common experience of being absent from the city during the war period and/or short periods afterwards either as refugees, internal displaced people or labor migrants. It includes women of all three ethnic groups Bosniac, Serbian and Croats, ages between 40-65 years, with different family status: married, single, and different education: primary, high school and university. Most of the women presented in the research are employed or retired while previously most of the women belonged to the middle-class families, as typical for the times of the FY. The number of contacted women is much higher than presented in the research. However, the presented stories of seven women include almost all examples noticed through the research, despite on particularity of each individual case. The reason to include the women with different ethnic background comes from the preliminary fieldwork done during the summer 2012. Namely, when I first entered the fieldwork my focus was the new geographic and ethnic map of the cities in BiH. In other words, while addressing my interest in the Bosniac women returnees to the city of Banja Luka, I settled my research aim on examining the gender relation within the Bosniac ethnic group, considered as a minority group in the city of Banja Luka. Within the newly established geographic and ethnic borders, the relationship of the majority-minority ethnic groups refers to the different ethnic background of population. To this end, the majority group in the city of Banja Luka is Serbian, while minority groups are Bosniac and Croat. The new ethnic composition of the city appeared after the division of the country where Banja Luka became the center for concentration of the Serbian population in BiH and the capital of RS. Although the Serbian population presented the majority population even before the war, the number and position of Bosniacs and Croats was significant and important for the life inside the city. Therefore, my initial questions were: how the Bosniac women returnees feel about the city after the years of exile and absence; and how they experienced, as a member of a minority ethnic group, return to their previous 'home'. Moreover, what triggered me the most was to understand

how the period of absence influenced the gender relations within the Bosniac ethnic group, and what impact it has on women's agency in the (re)integration in the city Banja Luka.

With the first findings I understood that the return encompassed simplicity of understanding the gender relation through the ethnicity and the minority-majority issues. First, the Bosniac women returnees to Banja Luka rather narrated their experiences of return to the city of Banja Luka through the set of feelings for the place seen and themselves as mothers, wives, sisters and friends. Due to changes of the structure of the population in Banja Luka, their usual feelings for the place as emerging as a stranger intertwined with the feelings to return because Banja Luka is their 'home' and it has been hard imagining themselves in another place – 'This is my city' [Ovo je moj grad]. Banja Luka for them is the place where they have family and friends, and where they once felt happy. Second, to follow the thoughts of the Bosniac women returnees, I have been referring to the readings that war brings a potential opportunity for women and a chance for them to arrange everyday life in a more independent way (Cockburn 1998). To that end, I proceeded with my research by looking at the potential agency of the Bosniac women returnees. Hence, within the agency dimension, the situation on the ground appeared to be much more complicated and complex. The post-war environment followed by difficulties of the economic and political transformation enforced the Bosniac women returnees to take the responsibility for their families. In order to maintain the living standards of their families, they frequently participated in various kinds of low skilled jobs or became the political and civil society activists. In addition, many Bosniac women returnees chose further engagement in the temporary migration processes. Under these conditions, the return created ambivalent feelings for the Bosniac women returnees. On the one hand, they consider themselves as potential agents for changing the position of their families and ethnic groups through their engagement in the public space either in the politics or labour market. On the other hand, their appearance on the labour market or politics as well as civil society has been frequently followed by oppression from the male members of their ethnic group and the new power relations increasing between women themselves.² These findings triggered me to start to think how the women from other

² The preliminary work was done within the NGO established by the Bosniac women returnees in the city of Banja Luka in 2012. On my return in visit of the NGO, I realized that there were some changes in their work due to the problems among the women themselves. The situation was totally different to what I

ethnic groups have been facing their daily activities in regards to the gender relations. In conversations with Serbians and Croats (although in minority), I discovered that many women got engaged in the temporary migrations in order to maintain the living standards of their families or save their children during the war and after the war. As in the case of the Bosniac women, Serbian and Croat women shared similar experiences of engagement in different kinds of low-skilled jobs, entrepreneurship, politics and civil society activism upon their return.

To that end, I started questioning the return migration and gender in the city of Banja Luka in the broader context rather than the minority-majority relationships and ethnic belonging. In other words, by examining the set of feelings potentially reflecting through ‘nostalgia’ for old times while looking for a ‘normal life’ in the present days, what triggers me the most is to understand how the ongoing transformation processes in BiH might be understood through social structures, such as the gender relations, within all three ethnic groups addressed through the politics of place. What women have to say in their own voice; how they experience the gender relations upon their return and within their ethnic groups; what are their feelings for the place where they share periods of presence and absence through the past times? Do these feelings make a difference among the women returnees from different ethnic groups? This set of feelings, which I have attempted to examine further through the lived experience of the women returnees from different ethnic groups, question a potential women’s agency carried through the emigration processes and return to the relationships with the ongoing transformations of the place.

Therefore, understanding return for the women should be related to the heterogeneity of women’s migration experiences viewed as a product through a range of the intersecting forces and processes, which emphasize the ability of emerging the migrant’s agency in production to the place and identities (Silvey 2006). At the same time, the life history allows us the inquirers to introduce additional anchor points for understanding the subjective and the structural as mutual informants in understanding our own and other people’s lives (Schacklock and Throp 2005:156). In saying that ‘narrative imitates life, life imitates narrative’ (Bruner 1987:13), Bruner is pointing

came across just one year ago. While then I perceived the relationship in a form of solidarity, now I see it in a form of power.

out two things: firstly, that we build our narratives of self around our understanding of the episodic and temporal qualities of lived experience; and, secondly, the human beings live out their lives in ways that can be understood and communicated narratively (Burner 1987:13). In those terms, the story becomes an object of the study, focusing on how individuals or groups make sense of events and actions in their lives (Mitchell and Egudo 2003:3).

According to aforementioned, the narratives of the women returnees in this research attempt to reveal a link of the individual stories and biographies within the set of social processes undergone by the political and economic transformations in BiH. In other words, within the systematic method, the analysis of the narratives focuses on the connection between many stories narrated by women returnees. In order to connect the stories, the analysis inserts three important concepts: temporarily ordering, coherence of the stories and contextual aspects of narratives. Namely, the analysis of narratives approached as a set of responses to something that happened (expressed through the feelings and believes), present a complex process of understanding how human beings make sense of their experiences (Michler 1986) of presently understood past, experienced present and anticipated future (Cohler 1982). By telling the story of the life, the past is always related and constructed to the present moment, and a potential extension over time as an imagined future. Therefore, instead of understanding the return as a single stage of the migration processes, in the research, the return is rather framed through several stages: pre-migration, migration and post-migration stage which in this research are approached as periods of communism-war-independency. Each of these stages might be explored through the separated story, but the importance of the temporality ordering reminds that narratives of women returnees need to be approached by accomplishing the women stories here and now in terms of the place and time. In that way, we are becoming aware of somebody's fear, hope, and other feelings that stand behind the stories such as the self I once was, the self I could have been, the self I am dreaming of becoming. The coherence of the stories brings to our understanding the way the narrative is told within the structure and context of the respondent's cognitive world. The contextual aspect of the narratives refers to the interview situation and the active role of the interviewer. This reminds of my personal engagement in the research and the subjective truth which the narratives might produce and above all the challenges of analyzing the interviews within the structure, meaning and interactional context. In other words, the analysis of the

narratives requires attention to the general proposition that telling story is a significant way for individuals to give meaning to and express their understandings of their experiences. This brings the last but not least important part of the methodology which refers to contextual aspects of narratives. Here I briefly explain how the narratives have been conducted as well as my personal engagement in the narratives both as a listener and a participant.

The fieldwork has been conducted since the 2012 onwards. The selection of the interviewed women was done in various ways. I selected my participants through the associations and organizations working on the return migration and gender issues and personal networks. However, I appreciated the most occasional and spontaneous talks with women on the streets happening through the time of the fieldwork. These talks helped me to identify various issues tackling every day's life of the women in my city. In the majority of cases, it appeared that the women linked to me quickly either as mothers, sisters or friends and most of all, their fellow citizens. Our talks usually started with some everyday issues, such as economic and political situation in the country, and then continued about changes of Banja Luka that had occurred over the past decades. This short introduction usually leads to the women's talk about their personal problems upcoming through their family relations while inserting them in the broader social, political and economic context. For example, they usually raised the questions about unemployment of their children or problematic relationships with their children, poverty, disappointment in the 'community', friends, lack of social relations as well as nostalgia for old times with almost no hope for better future. By old times, I refer to the days of the pre-war and communism period. The similar situation was at the arranged meetings. I have been meeting the women returnees on different occasions, different time periods and with most of women I had opportunity to talk at least two or more times during the last year. We were meeting in the public spaces, their homes and their organizations. Sometimes, I was allowed to participate in their meetings, which I used for an observation. The time of the meetings was not limited. The majority of meetings lasted longer than two hours. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed and translated from Bosnian/Croat/Serbian. The material was used for an analysis of the narratives.

In the most situations, I was surprised by openness and willingness of the women returnees to accept my invitation and share their 'life story' with me. While I am still not quite sure about their perception regarding my research, I am quite sure that they were looking for a space where their voice might be heard. Here are the words of one of the interviewed women: 'Well, you will see throughout the life that it is easier to share your life and problems with a stranger. You see that person once, tell all what is on your mind and soul, then we go home happy... Like it is a kind of feeling that we all did something good, you by listening, and me by telling...'. The question which I asked myself then and throughout the analysis is: how much I could be a 'stranger' in the research by both terms as a listener and a researcher? In other words, my personal experience challenged the self-reflection of collection and analysis of the narratives in different ways. According to my experience and feelings for the place, I realized that some interviews were reaching almost 'therapeutic form' as the women returnees could freely and deeply reflect on their lives and so could I. This was the first point of my awareness of my constant self-reflection. A life story interview may have a profound effect on the participant recalling sensitive issues of their life course. I immediately became aware of the potential problems involved and disciplined myself enough to be solely a researcher during all sessions. As it has been recommended by various scholars:

For most people, recounting their life story is a positive, if emotional, experience from which they can gain much satisfaction and a renewed sense of perspective, but the listener should always ensure that the narrator is comfortable at the end of the interview and is surrounded by the support they need, whether from family and friends (Slim Thompson, Bennett and Cross: 2000: 116-117).

This is related to the most important issues of the self-reflections and that has been my personal experience of living in Banja Luka over thirty years. Moreover, I keep being aware of my interest in the research about the women returnees in my city as a journey of discovery about myself. Although I have not shared the experiences of exile, the common points with the women returnees are my sex, class, the place of origin as well as family status. I am a female child of the middle-class family and I was born in the city of Banja Luka. I lived in Banja Luka during the

communist period, war and durable transition processes taking place from the 1990s onwards. The difficulties of the economic and political processes in BiH followed by difficulties to adjust to new social relations and orders emerging in Banja Luka as well as desire for traveling existing from before, influenced my frequent absence from the city. While moving back and forth, I was usually thinking how I feel about my city and country upon every return since the ethnicity has not been an issue for me. I do not feel myself as Serb and I do not feel as Bosnian, because I do not understand the meaning of either one. For me, ethnicity was something I faced for the first time in my adolescent age, after I spent my childhood in the Tito's times where we were all considered to be Pioneers who believe in brotherhood and unity (bratstvo i jedinstvo), and above all equality. We never raised an issue of religion and ethnicity, and in those times that seemed to be of no importance. As a member of the middle-class family, I had an opportunity to travel around a lot around the FY and neighboring European countries, spend holidays at the Adriatic coast, simply enjoying the benefits of an average life of the middle-class family defined in the communism. The war and separation from the FY suddenly broke a dream of unity and equality. I remember the war as a moment when all friends, with who I grow up left, and I remember days of waiting for the war to end so the old life will continue. But that has never happened. I frequently remember these days through the scene of one movie when a piece of the land with happy people split up from the rest of the earth while sailing in the unknown direction. In these feelings of loss and longing, the only thing I was familiar with was my city. It was the place where I have my memories of my primary school, my high school, my university, my neighborhood but above all my family. However, during the time of absence and return I understood that meanings of the place have changed. The old memories became rather blurred because I didn't have anybody to share them with. Then I realized that new people came, those who remained became rather invisible and many decided not to return to BiH. I thought that other people don't understand the meaning of the buildings as something which had a life and many memories. Furthermore, the social relations of the population in the city became strongly influenced by the ongoing political and economic transformation processes taking place in BiH and the city of Banja Luka. The discourses 'political engagement' 'nepotism', your personal networks or power of your family became overdominant in daily discourses which seemed unimportant in the communist times. Under the new increasing discourses, our daily lives

became more an issue of belonging to a minority group such as ‘high-class’ rather than to an ethnic group. Upon all these acknowledgments, my feelings for the city and country have started to change. Even though I had a job and ‘normal life’, I did not feel belonging to the people and I started to distance myself from everything in the city. The only thing which remained permanent in this set of feelings is my family. Moreover, being a female child, I have taken the obligations for my parents and other family members seriously. I also describe the relationship to my family as a source of my energy and safety, the place I can be myself without worries of judgments and acceptance. This is the only feeling which has not changed under the pressure of the transformation processes going on and because I still call Banja Luka ‘home’.

In order to continue with the analysis of the narratives from the women returnees, the temporarily ordering, coherence of the stories and contextual aspects of narratives take into account notes of the concepts of place, return and gender through which the most important elements of the return migration and gender are presented in narratives of the women returnees.

A note on place

Theorizing place in my research is closely linked to articulation of narratives of gender relations as a bridge into the future that unites past cultural imaginary of the place. People locate and reshape themselves in correlation to place as much as place contains a nation’s social history. The place has its definition, a history, a meaning in both facts and symbols. It is not fixed but rather fluid and contested space though the constructed, represented and narrated terms. In other words, the place is multidimensional and carries many layers. It constructs many identities that are also contested as they cross geographical, historical and cultural boundaries refracted through prisms of ethnicity, gender, race and class (Christou 2006). How people feel about place can be explained in the relation to the social construction of the place. Perceived either in modernity (Giddens 1990), the production of the social world (Massey 1994) and the space is conceptualized as freedoms while the place to security (Tuan 1997: 3). Therefore, the return attachment to the place than can be explained in the relation to the social construction of the place, which is at the same time embeds the existing structural part of the place. As McDowell points out on ‘not to be too carried away by the fluidity of this new conceptualization

and representation of relational place, as customs and institutional structures clearly persist through time and 'set' places in time and space as it were' (McDoowell 1999: 5). Socio-spatial associations may persist in time, conditioned by social relations. From a geographic perspective, space-'real', 'represented', and 'imagined' is a foundational concept in the understanding of world constituents, either collective (community, nation, ethnic group) or self-based (gender, identity, ethnicity, culture) (Christou 2006). Casey notes, 'an effort to assess the relationship between self and place should point not just to reciprocal influence but, more radically, to constitutive co-ingredience: each is essential to the being of the other. In effect, there is no place without self; and no self without place' (Casey 2001: 406) - human construction is what makes place. It is this interaction that poses challenges in interpreting the objective and subjective world in reality. Finally, the critical theoretical exploration of the notions of place and self not only enlightens the research processes but also provides conceptual challenges to the empirical material gathered. How place-based practices of women involve an interrelated set of transformation around the body, environment and the economy that could provide alternative ways formed in their mobilization as explained by the 'women and politics of place' framework (Massy 1994). Therefore, the women returnees' lives, as significant sources for the articulation of emigration/exile and return, transformed into narratives might question constructions of nation, self and place.

A note on return

Theorizing return in my research is closely linked to articulation of narratives of gender relation as bridge in a potential identity transformation of the women returnees. Studying return allows us to assess the consequences of the migration experience on the women migrants themselves, their families, and on the society of the home country. The experience and effects of migration are critical in shaping and reshaping identities. Identities in turn are multi-faced, negotiated, situational (Benmayor and Skotnes 1994) and increasingly fragmented and fractured (Hall and di Gay 1996). It might be while the women migrants perform their economic roles in a foreign country, the women experience change, in their identities, their personhood and their relationships. They display day-to-day struggles to create new material possibilities and

meanings in their lives (Barber 2000; see Gibson et al. 2001) and ways of resisting (Scott 1985), coping and forging identities to sustain them through the migration journey and eventual return home. The multiple and new identities in turn, explain why return becomes elusive and ambivalent for many of the women migrants. While they appear to be diligently responding to the expected gender roles of altruistic mother and dutiful daughter, they also make choice affecting control over their lives, thus combining filial of parental obligation with their own interests, goal and ambitions (Asis 2002; Tacoli 1999). Individual if given adequate opportunities, 'can effectively shape their own destiny and help each other' (Sen 1999: 11) and can be active agents who can promote and achieve social and political transformation. Therefore, application of the concept of return in this way encompasses simplistic reading of return addressed by the theories. Instead of conceptualizing return as failure or success, the socio-economic context as well as returnee's expectations (Gmelch 1980) gains importance. As Cassarino underlined that return shows various perspectives and multiple meanings (Cassarino 2004). The return includes various experiences related to kinship obligations, childcare and social networks, which reflects on agency within the wider context of transnationalism and the specific context of return. Equally important is a time and space dimension of return. Time for instance, included such aspects as the influence of the duration of stay abroad, professional advancement and associated social change in the home country as crucial elements. Space refers to the impact of the local context in the home country on the returnee's expectations as well as the high expectations of family and friends. Some studies (see Colton 1993; Byron and Condond 1996; Lewis and Wiliams 1986) showed that despite the higher living standards of returnees their families, traditional values, gender relations and other embedded behavioral patterns seldom changed and were often reinforced further. While going back to their home environment, returnees might use their acquired skills to distinguish themselves from local and renegotiate their position in society in novel ways. Studies shows that gender might play a role in shaping geographic nobilities, belongings, exclusion and displacement (Silvey 2006). The return might initiates new projects by way of mutual obligations, opportunities and expectations within the family, the wider kinship circle and common ethnic group belonging.

A note on gender

Theorizing the gender in my research is closely link to articulation of narratives of gender relation as a bridge of a potential agency of the women returnees. Important note here is that gender is still often associated as equivalent to women issues, which is very problematic. Gender structures tackle everything in societies and that includes both woman and man. Furthermore, gender ideologies and social values structures together institutions such as those within the economy, politics and religion (Malmstrom 2013). Therefore, instead of exaggerate and essentials gender differences, the accent should be on woman and man as active agents. Furthermore, women should not be analysed as a vulnerable or non-existing category where women are associated as equivalent to women issues. These problematic forms needs to be further elaborated and analysed to disclose certain exposed groups and in the combination of different forms of discrimination. To that end, the gender in this research does not neglect a potential similarities between women's and man's shared experience, interaction and appropriations of space; it rather focuses on the lived experience of the women returnees as prompts inquiry unto the role of agency in the construction of gender. Agency is a universal capacity to act, it is socio-culturally mediated what provides possibility of local defined agency (Malmstrom 2013). The need to understand agency as the capacity to act according to the demands of the specific socio-cultural context is crucial; where each context comprises the complex interaction between the local and a variety of wider national and global forces (McNay 2004). Furthermore, according to McNay the continual process of becoming a subject results from a complex interplay between the phenomenal nearness of lived experience and social structures of power and inequality (McNay 2004). She places into the centre of analysis agency as lived experience in relational terms. This approach to agency means to privilege people's own views and voices in an experience-near analysis of the processes of making women – or manhood in daily life. The relationship between norms and personal experience in this approach is central. Experience here refers to the sensory and also the more reflected and interpreted way in which we are in the world and the ways in which we act on it, since all lived experiences are embodied inasmuch as we experience the world (Bruner 1986). The inclusion of the subject's lived experience makes it possible to broaden out analytical focus in studying gender in the field of place meaning ascribed to the identity. However, it is important to be aware of the notation of

experience as problematic for feminist theory, which has assumed a 'unity' between women as women, and viewed experience as a source of 'true' knowledge while neglecting its relation to the local constructed knowledge (Malmstrom 2004; 2009; 2010). An awareness of the disarray between women as women and the heterogeneity of women's experiences in relation to class, ethnicity, and age for example is crucial when discussing women's role in the place.

III The political, economic and civil society transformation processes in BiH

In order to analyze the narratives of the women returnees in BiH, and more precisely the city Banja Luka, the third part of the research proceed by brief overview of the mean features of the gender relations addressed through the political, economic and civil society transformations over the last decades in BiH. Namely, the previous discussions about gender relations in BiH have been related mostly to patriarchy and the women's performance on the labour market and public space. In the periods of the FY the women were consider to be equal to man in terms of paid work, social rights and participation in the public space. The assumption of equality was related more to the urban than rural areas, where lot of women served in their families and farms without ability to profit of neither aforementioned benefits (Korac 1991). However, the women in both urban and rural areas shared common features of the patriarchal gender relations which failed to 'cross thresholds of the family' under socialist revolution (Morokvasic 1986: 127). Than in the period of war a perception was that women might empower their position in the society with the militarization of a man. The new equilibrium within the gender relations was likely to be established through the practices and opportunities of everyday life. However, the war reflect on ethnification of sex as weapon in the aggression, where women were reduce to symbolic property, marked for appropriation, defilement or destruction (Cockburn et al. 2001). Finally, in the post-war periods the documents on the policy level gained a little attention (Cockburn et al. 2001). Under these conditions the gender relation remains sensitive on the patriarchy while becoming more complicated during the ongoing post-war and post-communist transition explained further in text.

Therefore, the overall discussions of the women position in today's BiH cannot be examined without addressing ongoing turbulent economic, political and social transformation processes. These processes emerged as a consequence of two events, the failed of the Eastern block and the civil war in BiH. Both events have their own characteristics. First, in comparison to other countries of the eastern block the FY - and BiH as a part of it – with its own particularities cannot be fully identified with other countries. These particularities were not related just to the economic and political systems but as well as to the social realities within the multiethnic and multinational BiH. Second, the new appearing conditions from the 1990s

influenced on the gender relations as well as lives of both women and man have been exposed to changes in many different ways. At the beginning, it was important transit from war to post-war, from armed conflict to a state of uneasy ceasefire and reconstruction. Later, a significant role has been in conversation from a single party political system led by the League of Communists to a multi-party system on the Western model. Continuing the path of political changes transition from a socialist economy, of peculiarly Yugoslav design, was undergoing rapid and forced privatization on the neo-liberal model. All these together influenced on finally on a shift in understanding of civil society involving a rapid expansion of the sphere of free association and a transformation of its nature and purpose. The aforementioned processes are explained more detailed in the text below (Cockburn 1998).

The political transformation in BiH

The political system in BiH has been exposed to three turbulent events in the last three decades. Under the conditions of the communist systems, the BiH as a part of the former Yugoslavia experienced a single party ruled system over the forty years. In the light of the transformation processes, by the beginning of the 1990s followed by failed of the communist block, BiH have started to be ruled by the multi-party system of representative democracy. Still, a significant difference in the political system of the former Yugoslavia in comparison the other countries in the Eastern Block existed. The difference was recognized as less monolithic, and less dictatorial the single-party system from the other Eastern Block countries (Gowan 1999).

However, the political changes started in the 1990s unveiled a different side of the previous system. The first multi-party elections held in 1990 rather became an instrument of the political disintegration over a decade of economic crisis and constitutional conflict than a regular instrument of popular choice and expression of political freedom or transition to a democratic system (Woodward 1995: 118). To that end, the further political transition was followed by awake of the nationalist political powers which forced the national identities and pushed the country in the war in 1992. The war ended in the 1995 with ratification of the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA). According to DPA, previous multiethnic BiH became the constitution of the three ethnic groups: Bosniacs, Croats and Serbs, settled within the two entities - Republika

Srpska (RS) and Federation of BiH (FBiH). The outcome of division is that the RS inhabits the Serbian ethnic group recognize as majority, while the FBiH inhabits by the Bosniac ethnic group as majority and Croats in minority. In both cases the opposite ethnic groups are likely to present minorities. Therefore, it has not been surprising that ethnic division of the country, accompanied with transition from the democratic and liberal peace-building model, has been followed by the increasing national (ethnic) feelings in both entities. The tensions between three ethnic groups have been imposing an atmosphere of the discriminatory position of the national minorities of each ethnic group in the Entity in which people are not the dominant group (UNDP 1998: 22). As a result, the labels of 'others' easily put the Bosniac, Croats and Serbs limited political and voting opportunities (ability) of the minority group to influence the decision-making processes in their municipalities and Entities (OSCE 1999). Furthermore, possibility of being elected in the entity in which ethnic groups is likely to be categorized as 'others' is limited if not completely eliminated. Under these circumstances the power of governance has been remaining in the hands of the dominant politicians of the two entities. Overall the democratic processes in BiH rather remained blurred between the strong political movements of single parties and international authorities.

At the same time, the women positions within these political transformations processes have rather remained invisible. Despite the recommended policies towards the women participation in the politics and governments the percentage of women remains low. The reasons might be searched in the transition from the previous system to the post-war political climate which frequently neglected the issues of gender. As researches show it was noticed that BiH official structures, as endowed by Dayton, are certainly unique in the world, but the political culture that inhabits them has parallels elsewhere – in Northern Ireland, for instance, and Israel/Palestine (Sharoni 1995; Sales 1997; Cockburn 1998). In other words, the characteristic of countries where boundaries are still contested, and national issues unresolved, is a style of political favors combative, destructive ways of behaving in which women feel neither comfortable nor valued. It is also characteristic of the BiH dominant political parties' obsession with constitutional matters to the exclusion of social policy where everyday issues of housing, education, health and welfare that matte related to women are either neglected or treated as a form or party representation just for nationalist interest groups. With the ethnic division the

municipal levels of government are often divided and weak with predominated national rather than local matters (Cockburn et al. 2001). Under these circumstance the Walsh's remark that a massive retrenchment of women from public life, revealed how little women's participation in the former system, had reflected a genuine respect for women in the political arena (Walsh 199: 18).

The economic transformation in BiH

The second important aspect of the transformation processes in BiH over the past decades refers to economy. The forty years of a state-led economy has been changing with familed of the Eastern Block with the following events. As a result, BiH as a part of the FY have started with transition to a neo-liberal free market. Still, in the same meaner as the political system, the concept of the economy in the FY has its own characteristics. The FY had developed its own, and in many terms, a unique system of decentralization, market socialism and self-management. It placed the idea of equal property right for all employ persons and equal participation in managing the property (Woodward 1995: 41). In other words, the idea was that individual workers and citizens, in associations, would govern their workplaces and local communities (called communes). This system of self-determination would than combine local, social and worker self-government (Woodward 1995). However, many aspects of this environment were far from the ideal.

The changes within downturn of the communist block and communism affected the most so called middle-class (Morokvasic 1986). The process of the economic liberalization at the end of the 1980s was accompanied with the 'shock therapy' coming from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The plan to reduce the role of the state and shift the power of the state on the federal republics open a space for enforcing a national feeling. The whole processes of economic transformation became more challenging with the war which happened in BiH. The war exposed BiH in a new economic difficulty followed by the loss of its production and human capital. Although before the war BiH was one of the lowest income ranked countries in the FY, it was still recognizable by its highly educated labour force and a sizable productive capacities. The production of the energy, mining and metallurgy was a main source of export on the Western

markets and the main fields of employment. The international actors once again took a role in recovery and rehabilitation of post-war BiH. Under the program of the Reconstruction and Rehabilitation of BiH, the international donors committed funding a macro-economic reforms and a framework of laws enabling foreign business participation and the liberalization of external trade. However, the war damaged infrastructure and put BiH into a new economic struggles.

Therefore, a new constitution of the country, within its division on the entities, cantons and local levels, accompanied with forced political powers and increasing (national) ethnic feelings, further complicated the economic transformation processes in BiH. A hard living condition which pushed more than half of the population as registered below the poverty line in both entities. For many, the international humanitarian aid and remittances from the BiH population settled abroad enabled to maintain the basic living standards. In addition, the high unemployment rate further challenged the previous times of the economic and social security. It happened that in the overall processes of a turbulent economy, majority of population appeared on the 'waiting time' of non-productive enterprises. That situation worsen through the years, when domestic industry was operating at very low capacity, lack of investments, loss of management skills and collapse of foreign markets. The emerging grey economy prevented people in BiH from 'normal living conditions' such as social protection and security. Emigration once again became the main livelihood strategy for the majority population, particularly young people, and this trend has been continuing through the years ahead.

The position of the women in these overall turbulent economic trends has been difficult. According to the previous Marxist ideology inclusion of the women in the paid work was drawing force in the FY. In many cases women were present on the labour market and frequently benefited from the social protection and maternity leave. However, according to the statistics warned that was a case for one-sixth women in BiH (Cockburn et al. 2001). As a result of lower employment and unequal position on the labour market, even in the communist period women were engaged in the informal economic activities or family farms. Furthermore, lower level of official employment of women in BiH was accompanied with gendered-typed work. In other words, women were mostly employed in the health, financial and administration sector with significant lower wage than man.

To that end, the women have been disproportionately affected by the rising unemployment of the 1980s (Morokvasic 1986), which later got worse in a turbulent war and post-war economy affecting those women on and out of the labour market. This has not been surprise since majority of women in BiH were employed in the state enterprises which were destroyed during the processes of privatization. Consequently, majority of women, who find themselves on the waiting list, lost the social rights for themselves and their children. In a search of maintaining the livelihoods of their families, women were frequently engaging in the small-scale traders on the black market. In many cases, the war also left track on those women who left without their husbands, which shows that today one in five households in BiH are headed by a female (EU and World Bank 1998: 49). In addition, some cases registered that women even deepened economic dependency from man because of lack of contribution to the household income (Prism Research 1998, cited in IHRLG 1999: 161).

The civil society transformation in BiH

The third aspect which needs to be taken into consideration while looking at the transformation processes in BiH is the civil society. In the period of the FY, the civil society functioned through so called 'social-political organizations' which presented a form of associations. The associations have been frequently organized through the work with the groups such as children, youth and people with disabilities as well as particular activities such as sport, culture and leisure. The voluntary work was familiar to all BiH citizens but little practiced since the public provision was addressed to all citizens. However, the transition to democratic society and a new market and liberal system played important role in changes of the civil society. In the reports of the UNDP and other international organization, the civil society (in BiH called third sector) became one side of the coin while the economic development and good governance another side of the transformation processes. Namely, the civil society took over the leading role in the reconstruction and rehabilitation of the post-war BiH.

The women position in the civil society and appearance in the public sphere was changeable over the time. In the communist times, women participation in the public sphere through the civil society was rather low. However, the post-war transition the women in BiH

showed significant interest in establishing the NGOs and engage in various kinds of association. This includes both women as leaders of the NGOs and also as a subject of the work. In the majority cases, women have been initiators of establishment of the NGOs which address the issues of the gender equality and gender politics in BiH. Division of the existing NGOs predominated by the women as issues and leaders include humanitarian, advocacy, campaigning, cross-national, integrative, democratization, dialogue, as well as single identity groups with conservative attitudes towards the patriarchal family. Others associations address issues tackling a feminist politics and a women's movement in the region and worldwide. Specific for most of associations is that they worked has been financed by the international donors. To that end, numerous critics emerging for the work of the international funders, and their presences in BiH, have not excluded the associations working on the gender issue. The main critic refers to the role of the foreign donors to use the NGOs in BiH for their own purposes, which frequently have not be in accordance to the needs or interest of women in BiH.

However, various researches indicated on the increasing role of the women on in the sphere of the civil society. Women were seen as more able to adjust to the rules of the NGOs in terms of writing projects, looking for funding. Moreover, in comparison to the rest of the civil society, the NGOs involved with women and human rights have been among the most successful (Sales 1996: 2).

The city Banja Luka

Taking into the consideration ongoing stage of the economic, political and civil society, analysis of the different ethnic groups to which the women returnees belong needs to be settled in the cultural imaginary of the city Banja Luka. The cultural heritage, and composition of the people in the city, became fragile during the war.³ With increasing Serbian population and

³ The culturally history of Banja Luka dates from the periods of was important center in the period of the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian rule. Majority of today's Muslim population in the city converted on Islam during the Ottoman times, while many today's Croats are decides of the Catholics of the Austro-Hungarian administration. Despite of various forms of the discrimination against Serbs during the Second World War, the city became important university and industry center in the FY. While the city

geographical position of the city in the RS, the ethnic harmony and composition existing before 1990s has been multiple affected. Although the city avoided direct military engagement, such as those happened to Sarajevo and Mostar, majority of Bosniac and Croat population left the city and the religious objects were widely devastated and destroyed. The 'ethnic cleansed' had not happened in Banja Luka, but still majority of the Bosniac and Croat population were displaced from the city in very unpleasant way. First, they were removed from their jobs; second, there were removed from their flats and houses, and third, some were pushed to go to the military. This was particularly difficult for the mix marriages, as many in the city exist.

This caused various nationalist feelings and tension among all three ethnic groups. For example, the Serb nationalist feeling in the entity RS ignored the Catholic culture defining it as alien. Nevertheless, Croat ethno-political aspirations were seen as relatively unchallenging. Croats after all now had 'their own homeland' to loot to. But that was not the situation with Bosniacs who has nowhere else to belong. Increasing tensions came from the political discourses that Bosnia-dominated BiH were seen as a threat and known to aspire to a re-unified. They were the ones whose traces had to rub from the face of Banja Luka and whose return must be made unthinkable.

In the period immediately following the first post-war elections, which confirmed the grip of Serb nationalism on the RS, the entity was punished by the international community for its intransigence, particularly the way is dragged its feet over the return to their former homes of Bosniacs and Croat refugees and displaced people. It received less aid than FBiH, and on all indicators of economic recovery it lagged well behind the rest of BiH. Investments and outputs was lower, unemployment very much higher. The privatization processes here was particularly brutal, with a Mafiosi of corrupt politicians selling of state property to their own profit (Cockburn 1998). The political atmosphere of the post-war BiH was changeable, splited between two leading Serbian national parties.

modernized and new high-rise flats were built, distinctive districts of Muslim, Croats and Serb housing persisted over the times. The city was also important center of the religious object of all three sides, which survived under the communist times thanks to a label of the cultural heritage.

By today, the administration was paying lip-service to the international institutions' injunctions on return. The actual movement of people however was very slow, particularly to the city itself. Minorities were being discouraged from even considering such a move by acts of terrorism carried out by the extremist on the Serb rightwing against both minorities and Serb personalities considered traitors. Between 1995 and 1999, only 609 Bosniak refugees and displaced people returned to Banja Luka. At the later date, the Muslim population of the town was still more than 4,000 (and Bosniacs were more than 1-2% of the Republika Srpska as a whole). The number of Croats who had returned to the city was 326. In the same period 2091 Serbs returned, more than twice as many as minority combined (UNCHR statistics). Until today, the number of Serbs returned increased significantly while the return of Bosniac and Croat population slightly increase. What is more, these days every city in BiH register high level of emigration of each ethnic group, and Banja Luka is not an exception.

Accordingly, due to the war the city suffers from huge changes in the human character. The many thousands of Bosniacs and Croats who had been replaced by an influx of thousands of Serb refugees, some from Croatia and some from areas of BiH under Bosniac or Croat control. A lot of the refugees were people from rural areas, not used to city living. There was resentment on both sides. Banja Luka had always had a proud, perhaps even snobbish, class of 'old Banja Luka' residents who were inclined to look down on these rough newcomers with mud on their boots. For their part, some of the incoming refugees resented the cosmopolitanism of the 'old Banja Luka' who, they suspected, might rather see Bosnians and Croats than us living in Banja Luka!' (Cockburn et al. 2001).

These complexities additionally reshaped a way in which social structures and identities in the women returnees has been created. As previously introduced, any story of the women returnees and their daily lived experiences would be hard to deliver before introducing the main changes taking a place in BiH over the decades. There, the research proceeds by examining these transformations in through the stories of the women returnees in the city Banja Luka.

IV Narratives of the women returnees in the city Banja Luka

Narratives of the Bosnian women returnees

The Bosniac women returnees belong to a minority group of the population in the city Banja Luka. All women presented further in the text returned in Banja Luka after years spent in exile. When the war started these women were forced to leave Banja Luka with their families. In the most cases their displacement from Banja Luka was followed by physically and mentally discrimination. At the beginning they were fired from their jobs, expelled from their houses and exposed to different kind of violence such as insult and discrimination. However, after the years of the exile, all of them return to Banja Luka. For the majority cases the return was forced by the governments of the host countries [mostly Germany]. Furthermore, according to the repatriation programs of the host countries, they initially returned in other parts of BiH populated with the Bosniac majority group or even emigrated in the third countries such as the US. They finally their decision to return to Banja Luka and experiences of return and today's life is based on various feelings settled between responsibilities for their families and nostalgia for the city recognized as 'home'. As a typical middle-class women employed in big firm in the FY and lived average family life of the communist period, the experiences of exile and return has a strong impact on their changes of their social identities and reintegration processes. Some of the stories are presented further in the text.

Mirsada:

Mirsada is a 53 years-old women is a married women and mother of two sons. She has secondary education and she is currently employed in the Government of the RS and at the same time member of the Bosanic nationalist party (SDA). Her work in the civil society is recognized through the organization Fatma, which works on the issues of the Bosniac mothers and children and their reintegration in the societies around BiH. In accordance to these activities, Mirsada return in BiH and more precisely in Banja Luka reshaped her ethnic belonging in various ways. The political transformation processes and discrimination of the Bosniac ethnic group,

considered as a minority, influence on her further reintegration in Banja Luka. First, she returned in other part of BiH where majority is Bosniac population. However, the atmosphere of the small city and her husband, who returned in Banja Luka, were reason for her return in the city after ten years. Second, during her visits of Banja Luka she felt discriminated from her previous fellow-citizens and her finally return happened only after she got a job within the Bosniac ethnic group. And third, her family relations enforced her further attachment to the Bosniac ethnic group. Although upon her return in Banja Luka she was satisfied with her work within the Bosniac ethnic group, a problem appeared with her children who needed to go in the school with the Serbian children.

I worked here with ‘my people’ [Bosniac], but I had to give my children with ‘others’ [Serbs] in the school. They started to face a lot of problems with their studies and I need to think how to help them.

By introducing the problem of her children reintegration in the society, Mirsada reviled a meaning of the place in her case as multidimensional and which carries different identities. Namely, the gender dimension in return and reintegration in the society became the important in Mirsada’s life ever since the period of exile, what strongly influenced on the changes in the family relations. According to her words, after their return her husband started to suffer from depression and he refused to do any kind of work. At the same time Mirsada was on the work all the time and she did not have a time to help to her children. This problem was actually the reason of her engagement with the organization Fatma. Furthermore, it was actually through this organization and engagement that Mirsada opened up herself to the public space and became political representative of the Bosniac nationalist party. Later, her political engagement provided her with the job in the public administration, as she describes: ‘They [the Bosniac politicians] recognized my work and engagement for our people’.

Consequently, how one feel, react or act to the place upon return depends not only on its fluidity but as well as place-based practices of women involve in interrelated set of transformation around body, environment and the economy. For Mirsada with the return on which she reflects as a strong feeling of destiny to be in her country, transformed around her and political engagement as she today considers herself as a potential leader of her people [Bosniacs]

in Banja Luka. With her secondary education competency she managed to have a job in the public administration, despite majority citizens from her ethnic group has not reached that opportunity.

These attitudes changes in Mirsada identity and relationship in the family became evident all through the period of exile onwards. In the times of the FY, Mirsada presented herself a typical woman in Banja Luka who worked in a big firm and had typical family life. Her engagement in the public space was limited on the paid work, and she was more focus on her role of wife and mother with focus on the private sphere:

We had a nice job and I was thinking it cannot be better. There was health insurance, the social system was great, education available, I worked for money. We live a nice and quite family life. I was taking care for children, doing usual women job...

Therefore, during these times her attitudes within the family and society were limited on the locally defined agency in the socio-cultural context of the FY. She was working for salary but very little engaged in the public life, while her husband was rejecting to do take care for any obligations due to his male role in the family and society. Furthermore, with the beginning of the war he refused to go to the military and very soon both were fired from their jobs. Without no money and various discriminations coming from the Serbian population, they were forced to leave their house and Banja Luka. First, they went in Croatia and later in Germany. They remained in Germany six years. During this period Mirsada experienced various changes in herself and in her relationship with the family:

The war in BiH was really strange. The worst part is that it has destroyed families. And families are so important in our lives. We here simply live for family. First, upon our arrival in Germany my husband became depressed and he rejected to do any kind of job. He couldn't imagined himself working in the construction or some other low level jobs.. It was so stressful for me not to be able to travel freely in Germany and see my family settled in other republics. But I think the worst happen to my sister who got seriously sick because since she was the youngest and couldn't cope with

the situation. Then I have to take responsibility for everybody, my husband, my children, my sister... I worked all kind of jobs like cleaner or other jobs which we, refugees, could get. Important for me was to get a money. When woman has money she is more stabile, more comfortable. But I was also the first one who took a course of the German language and who open up to the German society. You learn a lot there. You see how women's position is different than ours patriarchal. In my case I was the one who started to lead the family and he [her husband] was just following.

While performing economic role in her family, even through the work in the low skill jobs, Mirsada achieved a certain level of agency in her personhood and family relations. This was not a case of her husband who, according to her, took the passive role not only in the exile but as well as on their return. In the time of return he rejected further engagement in the society with excuse the fear because of his Bosniac origin. Again, the all responsibility was on her. But interesting for Mirsada the transformation in her identity in a way rather remains limited on the custom and institutions persist through time. In her words women can never be as a man. Although she has been active in the organization working on gender issues, she strongly criticized them. The gender centers emerging in the post-war BiH has nothing to do with women's position in the society and herself, while the experiences from the emigration (exile) are important:

I never was discriminated as women. For me the women's position depends on how much she managed to be respected. The same was in Germany, I was one who started with the course of German and everything. But when woman is financially stabile, she feels stronger. The same was on my return here. I've started to work here. My husband just followed me. In this situation the main point is (kako se ko snadje). In the majority cases it was women who handled better with all things. They are one who fights, who initiated their families and they don't want to give up. They have that spit [inat – kapriv] and don't want to back down. At the same time you have always to take care on your behavior, your character... Well, yes I learned a

lot [prosirili su mi se vidici] on the West. You see how women are more protected there [ipak su zasticnenije]... You become a little bit stronger. Before, our mothers, their mothers, we lived in a kind of patriarchal families – suffer [trpi trpi] all you have take on your back Now no.. Women don't want to suffer now. Everybody wants to manipulate with you. But now women what to go out of the house... They want in the public space.. For me today, everything is politics..

Again, Mirsada position in Banja Luka is closely link to the gender relations lived through the ongoing economic and political transformation processes. Her political engagement appeared through her belonging to a minority ethnic group appeared as a consequence of a change of her role in the family. Through the everyday practices, she sees politics in everything. In other words, she has been practicing ongoing political transformation processes more than she has been resisting them:

If you don't practices politics – politics practice you [Ako se ne bavis politikom, politika se bavi tobom.]. In her words politics indirectly influenced even on her memories of the city: . To tell you [she refers here to me] everything here is politics just people don't get it. Look at just now it is terrible and tensions are everywhere. We are afraid of everything - to lose our jobs, to rise our voice... People want to eat each other. Every day e new problem, new stress, I and the rest of the people here needs to think just how to survive. There is hardly any person here who doesn't have a problem. The problem with finance, or with children, or with parents... If somebody looks as happy, I called that virtual happiness [prividna sreca]. Maybe I look like happy person but how can I be happy when I always one salary goes on credit. You think about illness, you are not young anymore, and for all that you need money.. What bothers me the most is what I am leaving to my children? I see us just as an hireling [najamnik] of some rich Russians or Germans... Vrbas [the river in the city] is wonderful, many beautiful things

here, but when existence is the only thing you have take care for then you don't even have a time to remember how good it was one here..

Zemka:

Zemka is a 60 years-old Bosniac and she is married to a Serbian man. As a consequence of his participation in the military in BiH, he is disable person today. They have no children and they live in her family house in the center of Banja Luka. They were separated for almost 15 years while she was in exile and emigration in Germany and later the US. Her return in Banja Luka was followed by nostalgia for old times and unsatisfied life the US. However, her return in Banja Luka is has not offered her what she expected. In contrary, she feels very unsatisfied with the life in Banja Luka. She identified herself as a part of 'old Banja Luka citizen'. She is not involved in any political and civil society life in Banja Luka. As for her economic needs she is forced to engage herself in the temporary migrations and illegal jobs in Germany, in order to sustain the living standards for herself and her disable husband. She could not obtain her pension in BiH, while incomes of her husband are not enough for covering his medical treatment:

After almost 15 years of exile and emigration here and there, I return in Banja Luka but the life here is becoming a suffer. I was unsatisfied with the life in the US, and before all struggles in the exile in Germany.. Then, when he got sick in 2001, I came here to spend some time with him [her husband]. I left again for US, but his conditions get worse and I decided to take off from the job and spend with him more time. My family in the US thought that I will be back after half of year but I didn't. I had obligation here [her husband]. I needed to pay to someone to take care for him. I wasn't happy with life in US. I couldn't make any friendship there. Then nostalgia for 'my city'. I was born here, my mother was born here, her mother, and this is always 'my city'.. For all these seasons 'I accepted my return in Banja Luka'.

Zemka never considered the ethnicity as an issue which has a strong impact and importance on her return or further engagement in the life in Banja Luka. She rather display day-to-day struggles to create new meanings in her life in the US and a way of resisting, coping and forging identities sustained her return in Banja Luka. In addition, her return was also influenced by a mutual obligation within the family, and more precisely her husband. But the return for Zemka became ambivalent and challenged by her relations to the social transformation of the place. Her relations to the place and Banja Luka, based on feelings of belonging to the place through her ancestors and her urban background, has been affected by the political and economic transformations. The imagined socio-spatial associations conditions by the social relations have strongly influenced on her perception of the 'community' she used to belong. As a social middle-class woman the old friendships referent as 'old Banjalucani' [stari Banjalucani], the social relation has been particularly important for her. Although she faced a lot of problems on her way out from Banja Luka, she was still hoping that the things has changed on better and her return will be return in the pre-war situation. The war was finished years ago and she thought people have forgotten many things. But she faced the opposite. She realized that ethnicity has been introduced in a way different than her:

I think war still hasn't stopped for many, and that is so bad so bad. I don't know if that is happening in all parts of BiH.. I have a felling this is just to wash our brains. Many years pass since 1993 and many things changed. After my return people started to avoid him [her husband], and I am sure that I am guilty for that. People were attacking me telling this is not a place where I should be, I should go back from where I came.. The poverty is big and just money counts... Honestly, it is not the city I left, and I am disappointed mostly with the people. I don't know what happened with the people. People just talk about and 'look' what you have, what you buy in the shop, what you eat.. They just care if you have more [materially] than they or others. And gossip.. I don't have anybody to drink a coffee, to praised myself to cry to simply talk.. People became so evil [pakosni]. This is not the city I knew. I don't even communicate with my old friends. When the war started they turned us their back [okrenuli sun am ledja], and I never

talked to us anymore. The same as it was in the times of the war when we tried hard to survive while being fired just because of being Muslim, but our friends, in who we believed would help us, done nothing to help us.

Despite the ignorance from her city-fellows and nostalgia for old days, she strongly argues that she could not left her husband alone and without care. At the same time the feelings of isolation predominates in her reintegration in the political and economic life in Banja Luka. In the following of political and economic transformation processes, Zemka rejects to be involved in any kind of public life in Banja Luka. In her opinion all these activities are highly corrupted and with strong impact on the life in the city, friendships, jobs or help. Considering herself as a woman from urban life and she does not feel like asking for help:

I never went in any humanitarian organization and I never asked for help, although I had rights.. You cannot just go like that and ask for money... they will cheat you one two years. By this I am not saying that I am different and that I don't want to be considered as others refugees. This situation was more triggered by the fact that if I go there 'they' will say, look at her she came here to ask for help and her family works in the US. The truth is far from that I did return her thanks to help of my family in the US.

While raising the issues of social transformations in Banja Luka, Zemka constantly raise issues of 'us' and 'them'. For her this difference is based on the place and division between rural and urban people. In her thoughts the ethnicity, which she never considered as an important what she showed with her marriage with the Serbian man, was not the most important thing for today's situation in the city. For her 'they' are frequently those who moved from rural areas, and influenced on the social transformation on the city by their behavior According to her, a parson needs to be in her/his city:

Wherever you go you are refugee. Now if I go to Sarajevo that is not my city. I was born here, my whole family.. I cannot go just like that 'anywhere' – that will not be my city. I call it today my city, however it is... All these people who came – Banja Luka will never be 'their city'. They are

occupying Banja Luka while singing the songs about Glamoc [the place of their origin in RS].. But why they don't return to place of their nostalgia? I returned here because of nostalgia. I am having a feeling that those who never lived in the cities and mixed societies cannot adjust to the city. They heard for another religion, customs after the war, so how can they understand the meaning of common life.. they came with no-culture [nekulturom] and what left of the city. The city lost its soul and human side, and there is nothing more here. They can build whatever they want but there is nothing here anymore.

According to Zemka these differences addressed through the people from the rural and urban area was something she faced even during the exile. In her opinion the people from urban areas lived a nice life including economic and social security. They were participants in the numerous social events what has changed during the exile and nostalgia for old days followed by wish for return became common for a number of BiH refugees. At the same time the opposite was happening for the women from rural areas for who the exile became 'paradise'. These women now work for salary and have a place in the public life:

These women now work and get money. They have driving lesson and they never had better lives. But for me, I couldn't get on life there. I worked in a great firm, I traveled a lot before the war and then I suddenly was doing any kind of job to survive. In Germany was a little better but in US was terrible. You work all day for what? You want to save some money to come 'home' for vacation. At the end, I reject also their citizenship..It was so hard there...

All these social transformations influenced on the isolation from the city life. Instead of using the possibilities offered to the returnees, she prefers sustaining the living costs for herself and her husband through the temporally migration. For these reasons she continues looking for an alternatives to earn some money and she goes in Germany frequently to work illegally even in her sixties. Ever since her life has been divided between her family and her husband. She does not have her own children, her brothers and sisters and their children were the most important for her:

I also go in Germany sometimes to work on black and earn some money. I clean a little bit, take care of some old people, buy and sell some stuff.. Just afford to two of us some distant life. Her pension is very small and he needs a lot of medicine. Well, I just came from Germany one month ago. I am satisfied with money I brough. We will see how long it will last. I got used on this kind of jobs. Before the war I worked in Cajevac [the biggest firm in Banja Luka]. After I was fired because I was Muslim. Than all the problems. I didn't have the money so I was smuggling [svercovala] the stuff [cloths] from Turkey. You know you dress several trousers on yourself and cheat on the border.. After my family was expelled from their houses we decided to move. Actually we didn't have any other choice. After everything I had to go. It was such a big pressure, and lot of physical and discrimination [maltretiranje]. We didn't have anything to eat and nobody wanted to go in the war. We sold everything in order to get some money and pay for our transports. Terrible times for all. My husband didn't want to go out with us and I decided to go with my family. Where one goes we all follow. Since I know for myself, it has been always like that with my family.. We went all in Germany and spend there three years. Ten of us in a small apartment...we were managing somehow [snlazili smo se nakako], worked illegally all kind of jobs. Again you have to start from spoon [kreces od kasike, ponovo sve].. There were such a hard moment. You left the full house to finish like that. But the worse was when we finally managed ourselves somehow, we had to leave again. Germany cancelled our stay and we went in the US. We preferred to for somewhere there already a member of family lives. Ten years of the life in the US was enough to decide to return in Banja Luka.

She could not imagine what Banja Luka will become. She does not see anything positive and hope for things to move further. Since the beginning, the return in Banja Luka was followed by various feelings of lose and gain for old times, nostalgia for her friends and at the same time

strong feeling for her family who remained in the US. The main reason is her struggle to find an old life in the city which she constantly calls 'her city':

If just people are somehow normal.. Everything scramble, everything... And that is so bad so bad.. You cannot get used on this harm and all bad things which are around. A man gets a little bit disappointed after return when you realized this is not what you left. And friends are not what you used to have. And then you feel disappointed, asking why I came back and to live in my city. It has been hard from the beginning. If I maybe knew that it will be like this, maybe I will never return. But he is still my main worry. What he will do, what will be with him... He was always such a good person and he also saved our house during the war [he got married – we lived in my family house]. But I think the worse is because they [her family] are not here, and I miss that the most. The big love is between us. Before I had nostalgia for Banja Luka and now I have nostalgia for them... But you have to accepted somehow [Moras se pomiriti].. Life enforced us to move forward, and close our eyes on many things...

Mubera:

Mubera is a 52-years married Bosniac women and mother of two sons. She is currently employed in the in the local organization in the city Banja Luka. She is a member of a Serbian political party (SNSD). She has been intensively engaged in the civil society work by working on the gender issues. Moreover, she described the work within these organizations as one of the main features in her reintegration into the society and BiH after return. At first, she was not able to return in Banja Luka and she lived in other two cities which belong to the Bosniac part of BiH. However, she was not satisfied with the life there as she thought about return in Banja Luka as an opportunity to effectively shape her destiny and became active agent who can promote and contribute to the social and political transformation in the city:

I think we never even fight to stay in Germany or go further. I always have something in the soul and heart that if I apply in Banja Luka everything I have learned in Germany, I might achieve a lot. Well, we went in the world, and you know how is life on the west and how it was in our country. A man go to work, came back home, you serve the lunch, when on the west is not like that. We started to live that 'western style of life'. But, I also have with me two old women, mine and my husband grandmother, who wanted to die in their country. So I put all that on the paper, and ignore the needs and wishes of my children. I decided to return. Luckily we adopted a new way of living in Germany, and I agree with my husband that we will do any kind of work to manage and to 'proved' ourselves – [da bi se dokazali]. We started with the women associations to show that we don't think bad about anybody. We organized the agricultural production, doing later this and that. Finally we realized Kljuc is wonderful place but we don't belong there and I need to go to my 'home' to Banja Luka. You know, while I was in Federation they were telling me why you want to go in RS, and in RS they kept asking why I came back. But I was child of the FY, and I all care for was my city.

For her return to Banja Luka had no meaning in the terms of the new establish minority and majority relationships. Mubera and other women used an opportunity offered in the civil society sector and work on gender issues as important to rebuilding the society again what it once was. According to Mubera, importance of the associations like this was high. She refers to the situation before the war when women were not asked for anything [nisu vazile za nista]. Although she does not neglect that some women were employed, she insist on their oppression as their voice was not important. With the associations like her, the women according to Mubera gain a lot but not enough. The main problem was that usually all programs reinforced some woman's traditional jobs like agriculture work or some traditional knitting staff [again traditional and female jobs]. As she refers to this jobs as 'nothing big and nothing important... we go again back to tradition, to our suffer!'

In the meanwhile her husband got sick. He was not able to return on his old job or neither to find a new one. At the beginning he was trying to earn some money while going back to Germany on some seasonal jobs. However, that was not enough and for him place, and Banja Luka itself, rather had a meaning of customs and institutional structures where man has to be head of the family. Although against his will, a new adopted relationships between Mubera and her husband, once again predominated in their daily lives in Banja Luka. Namely, despite of her claims about adopted 'the western style of life', in the period of their life in Germany she faced difficulties with her husband understanding changes in their relationships. While he wanted to maintain his role as a head of the family, Mubera wanted to maintain the living standards of her family. The issues of 'normal life' required more than one salary as well as changes in attitudes in their family relations. Her husband took more responsibility for housework and children. But the problem became when this started to be a practice. Suddenly, 'the western style of life' became threaten to their family relations:

At the end when all that became practice and when we realized that life on the west might destroyed us as a family [family unity] and we might become someone we don't want to be, we returned..

The return itself entailed difficulties which required Mubera's active role in their family relations. Therefore, the importance of the shifts in Mubera's identity and active position in the period of exile and return provided her family with possibility to take over in sustaining her family. Still, agency as a universally capacity to act has its socio-cultural context and as it happened in Mubera case requires adjustment to the ongoing transformation processes:

Return as return was hard. Nobody of the leaders in the local municipality didn't care for us [both returnees and women]. I remember there was humanitarian aid addressed on us, but nobody knows where that ended up. There were days when we woke up in the morning and think how to survive a day. In the beginning, my husband continued going in Germany to work and send us some money to live here. In the meanwhile he was trying to find any job here but without success. All that situations affected him a lot, and he became depresses and seriously sick afterwards. After a while I

realized things cannot go like that and I looked for an alternative. We (women) especially those who returned from the EU courtiers, gather together and decided to work. So we were thinking, we could start with some parties, socials activities.. At the beginning, I think women had a fear and not enough courage. But there are some leaders always, one or two, who can activate others.. Again, I was the one who reunited the women and we started our own small business – one was doing that, other that, etc.

In accordance to the ongoing political and economic transformation processes, Mubera engagement in the civil sector was a step to her further activism in the political life. She became aware of the fact that in order to succeed in reintegration in her local municipality and provide a ‘normal life’ to her family she has to be more close to the political circles. This act strongly impact on not only on her social identity but as well as on the relationships with other women in her associations:

There were some women in my associations, with who I managed for our voice to be heard in the local community [mjesna zajednica]. And in the local community they saw us as an asset for the local elections... So first they put us on the paper, and we get involved in the election. That helped to both of us – we got some kind of place and we open our mouth [progovorile smo]. This was important for me in many terms. I am not ashamed any more to sit with men, to talk open to men and to give my opinion... what was not the case before. Although I worked before the war, at least I am from the family where ‘that’ was important – with who you will sit, with who you will talk, what leads to silence isolation. I don’t think that I became more intelligent but I have more ideas and I am simply more useful to my family, my children, my community... I simply changed today, and I am happy..

The continual process of becoming a subject results from a complex interplay between the phenomenal processes of lived experience and social structures of power and inequality (McNay 2004). As Mubera kept promoted herself as a leader of her local community who might balance between local authorities and people, she also became a subject of judgments. The social

transformation of the place entailed a new power relationships emerging from the ongoing economic and political transformation processes, and she obviously has becoming a part of it:

However, that hadn't last for a long.. I became a target of judgments [optuzbi]... We started to split [djeliti] in organization. Maybe it was my mistake because I tried to make everyone happy. Instead, I was always the victim at the end. Then I became tired of people's stories. There are people with no education, I can say that after I achieved a lot of results. I don't have faculty degree but I had a lot of experience. I was initiator of all activities, one who fight for all.. But other women didn't care for that. They just though I am leader of the association and I getting the money. Nobody wants to see the true! So we simply started to split..

The increasing tensions between Mubera and other members of her local community, push Mubera into the thinking about her further engagement in the local community appearing under a new social construction of the place. The difficulties within the work of the associations putted lot of pressure on the Mubera's further engagement in the local community but as well as her personal life. She was questioning all the relations in the city through her previous experience. She condors that all people willing to change something to good are easily eliminated from the 'others' [here she refers to all population without emphasizing ethnicity]. She thinks about herself as a woman who does waste her time by goes around drinking a coffee and gossiping [this is usual custom among women in BiH]. She is rather one who works for her family and who sacrifices herself for 'others' [she refers to women and other members of her local community]. Therefore, the social transformations influenced on her relationships among people which simply reinforced her thoughts to leave Banja Luka once again. Banja Luka is not a place where she imagines herself but more useful to her family:

Banja Luka – a true about Banja Luka is that it is far from the place it was one once. Banja Luka does not have the soul which used to have. There is no more harmony, connection between people, will to help to each other... To sit and have a coffee to spend some time together. People don't want to know for each other anymore. Simply, this is not what I think it will be.

This is not what I want. As one of the first returnees I tried everything. Nobody of the local officials is interested in people anymore. We, people, are trying to survive day by day... And we don't have an idea what is preparing for us. We are just trying to complicate lives of each other without solidarity for better life. Maybe I could still succeed here if I became a member of 'vehabija' movement or done something wrong! But I am simply one normal family, mother and wife. My final decision now is to go in the US. I am going to try once again.. And I am doing this time for my children.

At the end Mubera relates all relations to the material aspects of transformations. One who live good wants all the time more. The class division is more and more visible and there is no space for people like her in Banja Luka anymore. While she imagines herself out of the city she reminds on the meaning of 'home' as something that lost the meaning:

Banja Luka as 'home' has no meaning to me anymore. I realized it is important that my family is happy. I have a man who loves me, and that was the only which matters. Banja Luka was important as well. We lived here totally different life than in others parts of BiH. I lived in other parts of BiH, I spent time with all people but I always thought nobody was like Banjalucanin. I think that was something I and similar to me trying to return through the years, but I don't think we made it and we ever will. I can't do anything for my children here and I want to go further... This time I want to move just because of my children.

The narratives of the Serbian women returnees

The women returnees within the Serbian ethnic group belong to the majority population in the city Banja Luka. The common for all of the women returnees included in this research, is that all were emigrating during the war and afterwards. The women returnees presented in the text, but as well those included in the research, were born in Banja Luka. Due to different life circumstance they moved several times in different periods. Their movements were driven by different reasons but mostly economic one. In the majority cases the women were forced to go abroad in order to earn the money or to protect their children or husbands because of economic and political transformation processes. First, due to the economic transformations many of the women lost their jobs as well as their husbands. And second, as their husbands were forced to go in the military, the women were usually the one who had to take the responsibility for their families. The period of absence as well the return challenged their relations to the place as the transformation processes in BiH has been shifting the societies in different directions. At the same time, the women were changing through the emigration processes as well. To that end, Banja Luka which became the center of the Serbian political and economic power was likely to provide various opportunities to the Serbian return population as majority. But the experiences of the Serbian women returnees revealed how these opportunities might change into the obstacles and influence on their feelings for the city they once perceived as 'home'.

Stana:

Stana is a 58 years-old married women and mother of one female and one male child. She is self-employer and she produces the Serbian traditional cloths. She has primary education and she lives in Banja Luka, where she was born. Due to the different circumstances she moved several times in her life before her return in Banja Luka. In most of the cases her emigration was followed by the family reasons as for marriage (she got married in her seventieth), and later as reunion with her husband or children, but as well as because of the war. Each period of emigration entailed different experiences which has strong impact on her personal and professional life. From housewife she became entrepreneur and breadwinner in her family. Today, she is particularly proud on her production of the traditional cloths in what she strongly

believes that is something she has in her soul and she has to share with other people. However, this believes and work have not been recognized and supported in her city, where she still hoping for understanding from the local authorities and women organizations:

Everything here is about corruption. Look at the local agencies. They invite you to set on some round tables, give you some juice, talk, maybe help you once and that is all.. But my biggest disappointment is gender organizations. I tried to connect with some here in Banja Luka and I trusted them [other women] as a woman to woman [her she talks about]. But it always ends up to use me as much as needed, either as refugee or ethnic belonging, and take all price for her. And I have been naïve, I trust all the time. Now, I would close all that agencies, associations, everything... All the time I thought somebody will recognized my work and appreciate what I am doing with my ten hands and this work is legacy from my mother and her mother.. It is our tradition. But nothing..

Stana strongly argues that no interest in the city exist for people who want to work and contribute to the society. The economic downturn in the country and Banja Luka, influenced on the overall relationships between the people and therefore a new ethnic composition has been used in a different ways than it should be. The meaning of a new social structures emerging in the place took over the ethnicity. In other words, human construction is what makes place and an effort to access the relationship between self and place should pint not just too reciprocal influence but to consecutive co-ingredience (Casey 2001). Within this construction she perceived herself as someone who is different and better. She explains that before the war people have a good life, so they did not have to show other 'face' they have [nije nam bila sila]. Now people are opening their souls and she is not sure how to call that envy, curse, but she thinks this soul of the people has to come from 'home' [for her home is family described through the gender relations]:

That 'soul' in people - that is what people has to bring from their homes. You are born as women/man but upbringing [odgoj] is big and important. Means if I bring up my child today like this, child is like sponge – absorb

all!!! The same is for your family. I don't think there have been any changes for women. That only depends from a person.. You will arrange all things immediately. Woman is the head of family and if she does not command and direct that life is broken down. But that is with those who are strong in their souls. Not to do something just for defiance [inat].. I do not appreciate women who do something just because my husband wants opposite.. One can say that women in the city gained all rights, but there are places where women has all rights and man doesn't, and that is not good as well.. There should be equality in every aspect of the life. All should be equal in the soul! If I haven't arranged [posloziti] my family and valued who done what – he done his I done this... It is only question of a person, how she will direct herself, how she will talk in home and outside, in order to prevent some 'stupid' things. I simply took position – if my family is happy I am happy too! Their happiness leads me through the all struggles over the past decades.

But then she continues explaining the meaning of this happiness of her family and how she has been motivating herself in the life as women and mother to achieve that level of happiness. She moved in her life several times, which turned up to be always for the family reasons. First, she went with her family in Croatia where her husband got a job. They bought the land and build up the house there. She reflects on these periods as the best times of her life. She could not work in the firm because her children were small and she had to take care of them. However, she started to work from home. She bought herself knitting machine and observed one firm with knitting stuff. But things changed when the war started in Croatia in the beginning of the 1990s. She sent her children on the safe place to their grandmother back to BiH, while she remained in Croatia in order to accompanied her husband and protect their property. After when the problems started for her there, she returned to BiH and join to her children. Her husband remained in Croatia while continues coming through Austria to visit them. They though the war will stop and all of them will return in Croatia. However, this never happen and finally they decided to change their house from Croatia for another place in BiH. After a short time the war

started in BiH and they were again forced to move. In the 1995 they returned in Banja Luka and Stana called this period of life here 'hard labour' [robija]:

We didn't have a place where to stay.. We return here, no house, no job, nothing... Living in a kind of 'hovel' [supa], and moved from place to place was worst nightmare.. If I would have to go back in that life now, I will not make it.. But then, something was giving me energy.. Some positive energy and hope for better days.. It was very hard to survive but I was fighting. My husband couldn't work and it was only me who was bringing some money in family. I worked on the market taking the sugar and oil on 'tick' [veresija] from one man at one part of the market, and selling it on another. If you were lucky you could earn some money. In all that craziness my son got a child and I simply have to think about everything. Step by step, by husband got a job, my son and daughter as well. I also started to work in Blik [the production of cloths]. But I was not happy. But living in 'foreign houses' was far away from what I want..

In the case of Stana the return was rather an issue of the socio-economic context as well as her expectation from the place she aimed to belong to. Despite to the difficulties she faced through the periods of exile, her identity has changed in comparison to the periods when she was just a housewife. Her decision to move alone in the place with the majority Bosniac population was settled between her own needs of the symbolic representation of herself as a strong woman and responsible for happiness of her family. She missed as she putted in her words: 'a warmth of the home; something clean and mine!' At the same time, this was only possibility to sell the house and gather money to buy one for all family in Banja Luka. The hard living conditions brought retained the meaning of the 'happiness' through material achievements:

After a while I decided to return our house in other part of BiH. I simply wanted to go there because it was mine, it belongs to me!! I didn't care because I never lived there [at first they could not exchange their house for Banja Luka] and the place was predominated by the Bosniac group. I just wanted to be on the place which is mine! But before I left I needed to

become stronger [morala sam ojacati]. You are new in the city, you are Serb, I was thinking.. But everything I find there was opposite.. People accepted me so friendly and helped me with many things.. Afterwards, my daughter came to live with me, and my husband started to come more often. I felt indiscernible happiness. I finally had home and felt the household's warmth [domacinska toplina - here she refers to her house in Kljuc]!

In comparison to Banja Luka, the local context has changed Stana's feelings for the place, but this time for Kljuc which she was never before related to. Namely, it was actually in Kljuc where Stana achieved her first business success. She started run a small business there. As a returnee she obtained donations and started with the production of the mushrooms. At the beginning she had a problem of selling the mushrooms and she received help from her Bosniac neighbor. A neighbor made declaration of the mushrooms with his and Stana's name to encourage people to start to buy them. Slowly, the production of the mushrooms became family business, which they extended on other parts of BiH. Despite being absent away from her family and husband, who live at that time in Banja Luka, Stana refers to these days keeps with strong feelings of the happiness and gain: 'I forgot all drama and hard times.. everything suddenly disappeared...'.

This emigration even within the BiH borders, where Stana presented a part of minority ethnic group, provided her with experiences which influenced on changes in her identity and agency. However, once again needs of the family and their 'happiness' prevailed upon her needs and achievements. Her son insisted on her return. In order to gather together with her family and respect her family obligations she returned in Banja Luka. At the same time they got an opportunity to sale the house in Kljuc and buy one in Banja Luka. This time Stana imagined return to Banja Luka as finally reunification with her family but as well as a new opportunity for 'their happiness to be achieved'. She imagined Banja Luka as a place where she should achieve her role of altruistic mother who can combine her family obligations with her own interests and ambitions (Asis 2002). Stana though she will benefit from her new business [after the mushrooms she started with knitting traditional cloths] and new skills developed in the period of

emigration. But the situation was opposite. She faced various obstructions coming how she calls 'her own community' [first Serbian neighbors] as well as local authorities:

I still have problems with finalizing purchase of my house. The neighbors simply complicated things and we were forced to go in a new debit and take a loan. And I was imagining, 'we' in the neighborhood we could have great life just if we just cooperate with each other. Like in Kljuc.. Once produce one things, others something else.. We support each other by buying each other products. But it is far from that.. My neighbors go on the market just to avoid buying something from me.. I ask, what people are we.. Trust me [she refers here to me] I don't feel I belonging to this people [she refers to Serbian group and her community, and BiH overall]..

While she continues struggling for happiness of her family, she is losing any feeling for Banja Luka. According to Stana, this deprivation [iskvarenost] is coming from the economic downturn and social transformations which influenced strongly on the social structures and relations in the city. In these processes the strong division between a new 'us' and 'them' is emerging. For Stana this division is based on the new power and inequality relationship. However, importance and happiness of her family remains in the center of her imagined future:

I remember Banja Luka as a 'beauty'. But now for me Banja Luka is nothing. It is just another place where I have to live. Well.. the worse thing is that I don't feel warmness from the people. Well, you [here she refers here to me a person who was born here], don't misunderstand me.. Do you know how I see people here now? They look cold and 'dead'.. Like why I should care for someone.. I don't want to be refugee or returnee. I want to be a citizen of Banja Luka or any other city. If I decide to live here I want to feel 'free'. I am fighting through the life and I want to go further. But here [in Banja Luka] people just look how to cheat you [kako da te prevarim].. People contact you just if they need something... And 'we' who are not that 'kind' we are fighting against these feelings.. I just feel I am happy if I can do something for you, if that makes you happy.. I took this position in my family – if my

family is happy I am happy too! Their happiness guides me through all struggles over the past decades. I don't know if people are born with that or it comes from God, or from our family.. But all this feelings I am not seeing in Banja Luka... But I still hope that I will succeed.

Branka:

Branka is a 50 years-old married woman and mother of one male and two female children. She is self-employed and she runs production of sweets. She has secondary education and today she is actively involved in the civil society through work on the issues of the gender rights. But that was not a case before the war. During the war she was housewife who was taking care for her children. As for her engagement in the public space, he was doing some seasonal jobs in the shops but she was not permanently employed neither active in the civil society. However, the first changes in her identity before the war when her husband was fired from his job due to the privatization of the enterprise he worked for. At the same time she was pregnant with their third child. After her husband lost his job, she also lost all social rights and benefits from the state. It became difficult to maintain living standards of her family as her husband has a difficulty to find any other kind of job. The hard living conditions encouraged her to take the responsibility for the family on herself, which continued to be a practice in the following periods. Furthermore, when the war started she emigrated in order to earn the money for her family but as well to safe her husband from the military:

My husband was fired at the beginning of the war and I didn't have permanent employment. I was at home with children and in the meanwhile I got pregnant. I remember a moment I got first idea for my job. I was standing in the line pregnant to by some groceries for backing. I was waiting in that conditions for three hours and half, and I realized that I should start to work with production of the ingredients for pie [jufke za pitu]. I didn't have permanent employment before the war. Just some temporally and seasonal jobs, mostly in the restaurants. My husband worked in the truism and we could cover our expenses with his salary. But when the economic

crises happened just before the war, he stopped receive salary regularly. It was hard with two children and one on the way. This was the start of my business.. I open a small shop, and the business was growing. I lived in the neighborhood with all Bosniac population who traditionally used these ingredients for cooking. But the war started, my Bosniac neighbored left the country, and I had to close my shop.

Shortly afterwards, the war started and economic situation get worse. Furthermore, the all male members of the families were recruiting in the military. Her husband did not want to go in the war but he also could not also leave the country since he could not cross the borders. Therefore, they decided to split. Branka went in Italy with the youngest daughter to earn some money. Her husband remained in Banja Luka with other two children. They thought that nobody will recruit in military a single parent. However, the war in BiH was not a matter of choice:

The situation was hard because the war was about to start. After both of us were out of the work we needed to think how to survive. The problem was also that my husband didn't want to go in the military and we decided that the best will be to go in Italy [where I have family] and earn some money. We though to go in Italy together and stay there. But my husband couldn't cross the border and we agree that he will stay with two older children home and I will go with the youngest in Italy. So I went.

However, the situation in Italy was not what she expected. She was not happy in Italy as though she will be. The life there was different to what she imagined. On the one side it happened that while performing her economic role in a foreign country, her experience changed in her personhood and her relation to the place. The feelings of loss and belongingness to Banja Luka, and more precisely the meaning of the 'home' as something more material and socially symbolic, prevailed in her decision to return:

I worked in a flower shop but I hardly could earn some extra money. I also felt undervalued in that environment. You have to do all kinds of job, you are least paid, nobody cares for you, you are simply nobody.. I never imagined life in Italy to be like that.. When my family was coming in visit, I

was thinking they are living high standard of life. But that might be a case in the countries such as Germany or Switzerland but not in Italy. My experience in Italy was different. I was sleeping on the wooden sofas and I couldn't afford myself almost anything or even save some money.. I thought to myself what to do there.. I have my house, my property and I thought about myself as a example of successful woman and a potential leader of my community [she refers here to her neighborhood and Serbian ...] And I returned after two years.

At the same time, her husband was recruit and her other children lived with her family. Since her struggles to create new material possibilities and meanings of their lives (Barber 2000), coping and forging identities to sustain them through migration journey encourage her eventual return home. In other words, the emigration experience related to her kinship obligations, childcare encourage her decision to return in Banja Luka. The time dimension in Branka's case became important in her professional achievements and associated to the social changes back home. The two years of living were enough for her to understand how to benefit from the transformations going on in BiH:

After my return from Italy, I was again alone with three children and no money. I needed to feed them, and I started to work in one shop but at the same time I was making the same ingredients as before and sell it 'on the black market'. I was trying to feed the family [snalazila sam se]. The war was going on, I need more money... I rented a place for sales on the market. I started to work on the market but the competition was increasing as well. Again, I got the idea for a new small business – baking sweets.

At the same time her husband was in military and away from home. The responsibility for family from that moment onward was on her. Namely, upon the end of the war and his return home, he was depressed. He could not find a job neither he could return to his old employment. He has had difficulty to adjust to a new political and economic transformation processes taking a place over the country. In contrary, Branka was only thinking how to arrange her business under the new conditions and used an opportunities offered through the economic transformations.

However, although she considers herself as successful women still she finds hard to make a business for woman in Banja Luka:

It is not an easy task because of the overall economic situation in the country, but as well as a lack of education for women. I consider myself as a very successful woman and potential leader of my community [she refers to local neighborhood and the Serbian group]. People recognize my work, my spirit, my potential. But we need to reunite and work together..

However, her experiences and engagement in the civil society presents a typical need to understand agency as the capacity to act according to the demands of the socio-cultural context which comprises the complex interaction between the local and a variety of wider national and global forces (Malmstrom 2013). She thinks that future of woman like herself and overall empowerment of women position in city Banja Luka is through the civil society and women's education. She strongly believes in the possibility of new organizations for gender rights and their ability to encourage equality between man and women. What worries her are the relationships between women themselves:

We need to change something in our 'community'. We, women, need to collect money and we cannot do that by ourselves alone. We need to act together, as bigger group. The unemployment is high, and women are particularly affected. We need to get some money and then decide how we will invest it further, one should to this, another that etc. I think that women should be honored to be in one associations, to go out of the home, to have access to internet.. I really don't know other way to fight against inequality, or not to be oppressed in family and community.. I am sure that there are lot of possibilities with organization which work on the woman empowerment. But the problem is always remains when it come to issues of solidarity in the group. How to arrange the division of the work or money so everybody might be happy... In my previous organization our leader, who was Croat, but we accepted her as one of us [she refers her to Serbian ethnic group], she didn't care for any of us.. After other women noticed that she is taking the money

for herself, majority left the associations. This was the reason why our previous association got in the problems.

In her opinion, in the future increasing solidarity among women themselves should be achieved through the women's education. In the meanwhile, Branka continues arranging her solidarity in the community by using benefits of the credits offered to returnees. She is about to start with a new business and she could get a credit in case she employs the returnees from the minority groups:

There are now credits for women entrepreneurs, but the condition is to employ some returnees from the minority ethnic groups. I am thinking now to open a small restaurant. One Bosniac woman recognized my work and she told me about this credits. We agree to find some 'nice' Bosniacs women returnees so I can get the credit. I hope this business will work. You know, I employed all my children and husband through this business... But other women can benefit as well.. I just hope we will have our rights and be stronger!!!

The narratives of Croatian women returnees

The Croats women returnees belong to a minority group of the population in the city Banja Luka. Although the Croats group represents a minority even before the war, it has been important for the cultural and ethnical mixture of the city. Moreover, the specific position of the Corat population not only in Banja Luka but as well as BiH overall was in their relationship with Croatia. All citizens in BiH with Croat ethnicity have been awarded with dual citizenship. Therefore, the majority of them have no difficulties in traveling around the EU and world. The situation has also been a slight different in comparison to the Bosniac group when it comes to the beginning of the war. The Croats were also forced to leave Banja Luka but in majority with less physical and mental discrimination than the Bosniac population. In all cases their first stop was Croatia, from where they frequently moved further. Not many Croat population, including the women, return in Banja Luka. However, there are still those who decided to return after long time of absence. Their return after the years of exile and decision to return in Banja Luka was based mostly on the feelings of belongingness and nostalgia for the city. They experiences of return and today's life has a lot of differences as well as similarities with the other two groups of women.

Sanda:

Sanda is a 45 years-old Croat single woman. She has university degree and she works in the private company. She lives with her mother in their family house in Banja Luka. She left the city during the war and she returned after ten years of exile. During these ten years she emigrated several times. First, she went in Croatia where she spent several years. Afterwards, she decided to move further and she went in Germany. She has some friends there and she also speaks German language. At the same time, her parents were living in another part of BiH. They could not remain in Banja Luka, and her father refused to go any places far away from Banja Luka. While Sanda find a life of her dreams in Germany, she was not thinking to remain there. In contrary, for Sanda return to Banja Luka was just a matter of moment:

Something always was telling me to return in Banja Luka.. I was always thinking that I will be back here, even when I met a German family and my life became fairytale.. I had everything there but simply 'that feeling'.. I want to go back to 'home'. Simply, in my head Germany was something temporary and occasional. When the war stopped and my heart was just repeating go back – go back – go back...

Having these strong feelings of nostalgia Sanda decided to return home and more precisely, to her family house in Banja Luka. In her though the family house meant final reunification with her family, mother and father. Initially, they could not return in the house because it was occupied with other refugees. In that period she was living with her pre-war neighbors while her parents were still in another part of BiH. When finally she returned their house, the family was reunited again. However, a way she sees that women in general if given adequate opportunities can effectively shape their own destiny and help each other (Sen 1999), and can be active agents who can promote and achieve social and transformations:

My first goal upon return was to return our family house and my parents from other part of BiH. We split at the beginning of the war. I was already outside BiH when the war started. I left the country before due to some health problems, but my parents remained. Afterwards, they decided not to go abroad, so they just went in another city in BiH. My father got sick and it was hard for him to adjust on the new place. At the same time my mother took all the responsibility for their well-being. She got a job while my father couldn't work. He was just suffering for Banja Luka and our house. Thanks to her they could sustain their living costs since I couldn't help them at that moment. This was a kind of a new situation for my family since my father was one who always care for family.. But I generally think that something happened to the women from BiH during the war. I saw so many examples of transformation in women's life.. I think that Bosnian women became much stronger through the exile.. Some of them really managed to achieved a big goals like having employment, going out of the house.. Mostly the

women from rural areas benefited from that. But again, in some cases that caused the opposite and destroyed families.

The same she feels transformations in her identity which provided her with acquired skills to distinguish herself from the local and renegotiate her position in society in novel ways (Casarrino 2004). Although she the exile was not an easy task for her, her education provided her with new possibilities. When she first left Banja Luka she was in Croatia. She spent there several years but unsatisfied with the life there she decided to move further:

After a few years in Croatia I decided to move to Germany. They simply treated you all the time as refugee and I didn't like that. I had a friend in Germany who hosted me in for a short period. In the meantime, I looked for a job and found that I had sufficient knowledge of German to cope. After a while some strange things started to happen to me. I found an announcement in a newspaper for a cleaning job and sent an application. Somehow I misunderstood the date of the interview and arrived a day too late. The lady had hired another person. Well, for me that was bad luck so I went home. When I got back to my friend's house she told me that a woman had just called and asked for me. It was the lady I had just gone to see about the job. I called her back and she told me I could have the cleaning job. She explained that when I had visited her something strange had happened and that she just simply had to give me the job. From the very beginning my relationship with that lady was strange and special. She was curious about my life and talked to me during my breaks when I first started to work for her. Afterwards she told me that she also had suffered from cancer and was operated on twice. For that reason, even now, she is a volunteer in the medical department for patients who suffer from cancer. After one month with our morning talks she came up with the idea of giving me another job as her companion. I moved into her house and my life completely changed. I travelled around the world with her and had all the luxuries that I could dream of. It was two years of life which might be described just as fairytale, but I wanted to go 'home'.

For Sanda the 'home' and return has meaning of the kinship obligations and social networks. At the same time the return was much easier as in her case the transnational context was also present. For her the family, the memories on the life in Banja Luka and old contact prevailed upon the possibilities opened through a new space:

I am not sure if I can explain what feelings exactly were pulling me to return in Banja Luka. In Germany on the one hand you have everything, on the other you don't have anything. Parents, friends, neighbors, I think all that was the reason for return. You simply came and feel the city you belong to. My pre-war friends also helped me to get all I need. They helped me to return out family house, they also helped me to get a job, there is nothing I should complain about.

However, today's Banja Luka has not been something she was looking for. Although she does not complain on her life in Banja Luka today, she does not see many positive things going on at the moment. For her the local politicians are again inviting on the nationalistic feelings due to the economic problems people face in BiH. She does not relate these feelings to religion and ethnicity as she had the similar experiences even in the exile:

There were people who were asking me why I returned.. But you know, I drink a coffee with who I want [ja pijem kafu sa kim ja hocu]. The evil and bad people exist everywhere. How our people would like to say – I hope just nothing good will happens to you [Ne daj Boze da ti krene u zivotu]. I sow that very well during the time of exile and before I find the German family. People were doing such baseness to each other even in the camps... There wasn't any difference and I was relating very much that situation to the geographic area.. People from some rural areas and small cities..

Within these experiences she tries to relate the changes taking a place in the city today.

I was hoping I would never come across on the same things in Banja Luka. My city could not become like that. But unfortunately people changed. I don't see now any importance in religious or ethnic belonging.. I see more

this geographic differences and envy who was were and how etc. I simply though the situation will get better for all population here, and than maybe this difference will not be as much as visible as they are now. I am honestly not sure any more if all this situation is a consequence of the economy or now the post-war syndrome.. The truth is that situation is now to worse than it was after the war. What is the worse, I again started to hear all the war things. This is like a syndrome of the Bosnian war which local politicians use for their own purpose.. It is easy for them but normal people.. So many questions, and how to reach the answers. I simply see our situation as a global problem...

In the meanwhile, Sanda became a member of one associations for the women returnees. She is in charge for a creative workshop while she would like to engage more in the projects related to the returnees:

I have my small world here and my mother to take for.. My health is fragile as well and I don't think to move again somewhere.. I learn to life here in my own way.. I am not sure what to think about Banja Luka anymore. But also my friends are coming from abroad, and I don't see them happy as well.. Again, how to answer on all that.. But they have children and families which change a lot.. I have to admit that I am not sure if I would ever think about return all I am talking about if I have my own family. What children would do here.. For them there is not future here.

Katica:

Katica is a 53 years-old Croat woman. She is married to a Bosniac man and she has daughter and son. She has secondary education and she is currently employed in a microcredit organization. Before the beginning of the war Katica went to live in Germany. She has an opportunity to work there. And just before she got the permanent residency Germany decided to cancel the residency to all BiH citizens. She returned in BiH but not in Banja Luka. The decided

first to settle in Sarajevo, as it is capital, and where they children can have the best education. However, the things in Sarajevo were not as she expected and she returned in Banja Luka. today she lives with her husband in their family house while her children lives in Sweden with their cousins. She sent her children in the secondary school to live in Sweden since she could not see any future for them in Banja Luka and BiH:

I couldn't first return in Banja Luka so we went in Sarajevo. We could return anywhere since I had the savings but we decided to go in Sarajevo. I thought, if I cannot go back to Banja Luka then I should be on the best place for my children. They need the best education. But nothing was as I imagined. I was just facing the walls in Sarajevo. Where I went they were telling me – if you are from this city you might get something like returnees but in these circumstances that is not possible. The worse was when they told me that I cannot be register if I don' have somebody to guaranty for me!! I was shocked. I was thinking that I actually refugee in my own country. With the help of people we resolve that problem. But then my children... My daughter could not adjust to the life there in any way. Since she came in Sarajevo she was rejecting any kind of communication. She was moving only between school and home. The worse was the language and corruption in the school. Afterwards, there was a chance for both children to go in Sweden and live with my husband family. I will go if I could. But I couldn't, but I decided to send them. It was too much for me, but I haven't seen any other possibility for my children here... The simply had to go.

This was hard decision for all family, but Katica still thinks that she done the best for her children and their future. Furthermore, she also considers going back abroad. She recognized herself as being stranger to all places she lived in BiH upon her return. In her case the time and space dimension of her emigration played a significant role. Time for instance, include such aspects as the influence of the duration of stay abroad, professional achievements and associated social change in the home country as crucial elements. Space refers to the impact of the local context in the home country on the returnee's expectations as well as high expectation from

family and friends (Cassarino 2004). Katica first emigrations happen before the war, when she left on working visa in Germany. She went alone, without her husband and children. She considered that was a good opportunity to earn some money and make a better living conditions for her family:

I went before 1990s in Germany to work as a cook. I later brought all my family with to live with me. First, my husband came with my daughter and son. Later, my mother and sister came. It was so nice. Such as great experiences in every term. We all became familiar with the place, people.. Children liked the school. My mother and sister were also happy.

However, for Katica things get totally opposite on her return. Taking into account her previous life in BiH, and Banja Luka, as well as those in Germany, in her thoughts the return in BiH, and this time, in Sarajevo was something she considered as the best option for all. The ethnicity was not important for her as it was a possibility which Sarajevo was likely to give to her family, in particular to children. She did not perceived herself as a classical refugee since she has her savings which she could invest further. They bought house in Sarajevo, but that was not what she wanted to have.

I simply couldn't cope with my life in Sarajevo. I go on the street nobody knows me. I don't know the city, the people etc.. I am walking on the streets nobody is even noticing me. I was in Sarajevo for 6 years I was feeling just like a foreigner there. There were 'us' and 'them' – refugees and natives. You couldn't received any help, if I am in my hope I couldn't get anything. 'The natives' are getting donations, and 'we' foreigners are had to buy apartments. Luckily, I had the money but I needed to start to work. Again struggle, I couldn't find a job and neither my husband. After all that years of struggle, we decided to return to Banja Luka.

For Katica, return to Banja Luka was nothing than 'a new procedure'. She needed again to take care for the house, as the old one was damaged. In the meanwhile, her children left in Sweden, and until now she does not see any much sense of the place and her return.

Our family is sending us the money as they were doing that all the time. But I needed to work. I got used to have my own money and financial independency from my husband is important to me. That was the reason why I firstly went in Germany.

While telling the story of her first emigration in Germany, she also addresses many aspects which changed her attitudes in the society. In Germany she was offered various kind of help but for her that was degradation. She could not take any help from the state, while she preferred to work illegally in order to earn some extra money. Later on she performed the same while she was offering any donation in BiH. She also stressed that she found the job by herself. She works in the microcredit organization and she is even more disappointed with the situation on the ground through the things she sees every day:

I am not sure if anybody here is more against this state than I am. Everything is wrong here, everything. I look people's suffer every day. And I look myself suffering here. Where ever you go it is just corruption, it is just 'us' and 'they', nothing works and nothing will. I have my friends, I travel abroad to visit my children, I have a great relationships with my husband but I don't care for this place at all. My only dream and wish is to leave it as soon as possible. I don't see any light here, and I lost all my hopes. I hope some miracles will happen and I will soon be out of here, probably with my children in Sweden...

Conclusion

The broader goal of this research has been to examine the ongoing economic, political and social transformation processes in the post-war and post-communist BiH over the past three decades. The period of three decades tackles the times of communism, war and independency of BiH; in other words, it addresses transformations that have been influencing everyday life in the post-communist and post-war BiH. In this short period and under the pressure of economic and political transitions, BiH has been exposed to various changes, including those of identity, social structures and social relations. The studies of these changes are particularly interesting in light of the previous ethnically and culturally mixed societies, existing specially in urban areas.

Therefore, to provide a better understanding of the changes in identities and social structures in relation to the transformations of BiH, the narrow goal and framework of the research focuses on the studies of gender relations of the women returnees to the city of Banja Luka. Banja Luka presents one of the previously highly culturally and ethnically mixed societies, which, with the time, became a center of the Serbian ethnic group and a potential place of development for the strong nationalist feelings. To that end, Banja Luka imposes a new society of 'us' and 'others' forcing the majority and minority relationships between the Serbian on the one and Bosniac and Croat on the other side. However, examining together the place, return and gender, the definition of the place with its history, facts and symbols might be questioned in various ways. Namely, settled between its multidimensional and various layers of the character, and customs and institutional structures which clearly may persist through the time (McDowell 1999), a place provides understanding of the changes of the identity and social structures - of the women returnees and gender relations - from the wider aspects than just ethnicity. First, the women returnees from all three ethnic backgrounds are perceived as different in their own values. Second, the gender relations lived through the everyday life of exile and return are perceived through their potential influence on the women's identity and the women's agency. And third, the women's practices of their agency further question the socio-cultural mediation of the locally defined agency. It is within this understanding of the place, as fluid and contested space, through which the stories of the Bosniac, Serbian and Croat women returnees are examined in their constructed, represented and narrated terms.

Within this framework, the research focus on how political, economic and social transformations processes have influenced the everyday life of the women returnees seen through the lens of gender relations delivers different stories. They all emphasized the importance to link the return and gender to the place such as Banja Luka, because the return might have a strong influence on identity and gender while providing a certain level of agency. However, the stories of the women returnees from all three ethnic groups are diverse among themselves as much as they are diverse between the groups. To that end, taking into account the complexities of the research issue seen through the narratives of the women returnees, the research does not take as general claim for the overall situation on the ground both in BiH and Banja Luka. It rather takes the empirical as well as its theoretical framework as a way for further investigation of everyday life in BiH, in particular, in its urban areas. Consequently, the answers to the main research questions: how have gender relations been changed for the women returnees upon their return in post-communist and post-war BiH within different ethnic groups; what is the relationship between the exile/emigration/return experiences of the women returnees with the ongoing economic, political and social transformation processes in BiH (the city of Banja Luka); and how do women feel, reflect, intend and act on their return within the particular social relations and historical contexts in which they live their lives?; indicates not only on new acknowledgments but rather emerged new questions addressed through the findings of the research presented below.

Firstly, each woman presented in the research has different exile/emigration and return experience in accordance with her social identity such as age, education, class and family status. At the same time, they all share a certain level of agency gained through the processes of absence from Banja Luka. The Bosniac and Croat women returnees were in exile, while the Serbian women returnees emigrated mostly due to the economic and political difficulties in the city. But the common point is that all women, by performing their economic roles, took certain level of responsibility for their families during exile/emigration experience. In comparison to the communist times and their rather passive role in the family and society, the experiences of exile/emigration played an important role in women's identity, personhood and relationships.

Secondly, upon their return the women returnees from three ethnic groups appear to be responding to the expected gender roles of altruistic wives, mothers and daughters, while at the same time combining their agency within the newly established family relationships. According to the changes of their social identities, the women returnees took an active role in their families in comparison to, in their opinion, a man's passive role.

Thirdly, the practices of the women's agency have been in accordance with the ongoing political and economic transformation processes. In other words, the agency of all three groups of the women returnees is settled between the local and a variety of national and global forces, addressed through the economic, political and social transformation processes. Their active roles perceived through the women's everyday practices of performance as politicians, entrepreneurs or resistance to any of the public activity, open a space for the women returnees to become part of the social construction of the place as much as they create these constructions themselves. The Bosniac women returnees became political activists due to needs of sustaining family standards and creating better living conditions. However, their stories clearly indicate how everyday practices make them as political subjects in the local context. In other words, they became a subject of the social structures of power and inequality among the Bosniac ethnic group as well as wider society. Unconsciously perceiving themselves as leaders in the society, through their everyday practices, the women returnees impose new power relations among women themselves and the rest of the society. As one of the Bosniac women returnees strongly emphasized: 'If you don't practice politics, the politics practice you'. The similar observations are noticed in the case of the Serbian women returnees. In addition to the political activism, the Serbian women engagement in the entrepreneurship and civil society appeared as a practice of achieving certain level of living standards in their families but as well as their needs for power. While combining their family obligations with their own interests, through their work in the civil society, either as leader or subjects, they are becoming a part of the new gender ordering and inequality in the local contexts. At the same time, the Croat women returnees as well as some from the other ethnic group, rather resist any of the aforementioned activities. They continue performing the economic roles in their families through the seasonal emigration and isolation from the society as they consider being a part of 'old Banja Luka' but not of a new one or some other space.

Finally, it is between these social constructions forced by the ongoing political and economic transformations that the women returnees have been settling their feelings for the place. Imagining themselves to be in or to have a place through the complex feelings of loss and gain, the women returnees entrench a sense of belonging or rupturing to the place through disconnecting claims, entitlements and longings for it. Within this framework, the place becomes more than forced relationship between 'us' and 'others' defined as majority and minority ethnic groups. In other words, the ethnicity should not be neglected in relation to the place, but rather question further through our understanding of the circuits which frequently still might reproduce heteronormative assumptions of gender lived through family structure and relationships to the local area (Taylor 2000). The emerging issues of power relationships between the women returnees themselves, including those who remained and those new settlers, as well as the role of the man in the return looked through the lens of politics of place should be taken further into account.

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