

**Dragana Gundogan,
Nataša Milićević**

Social Position of Women with Visual Disabilities in the Public and Private Sphere during Socialist Yugoslavia

FEMINIST DISABILITY STUDIES

In this paper, we draw on the theoretical foundation of Feminist Disability Studies, a significant and expanding field of theoretical and empirical research. Theorists within this approach aim to present “disability as a category of analysis and a system of representation deepens, expands, and challenges feminist theory”.¹ It is important to note that feminist disability studies, along with critical disability studies, are not only productive and influential intellectual pursuits with strong

¹ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “Integrating disability, transforming feminist theory,” *NWSA JOURNAL* 14, No. 3 (2002): 1.

ethical and theoretical insights but also hold activist and political roles linked to the Human and Civil Rights Movements. In this way, the Disability Rights movement² seeks to improve the social standing of people with disabilities, fostering a more just, equal, and inclusive society. It is “academic cultural work with a sharp political edge and a rigorous critical punch”.³ This approach closely aligns with the social model of disability and critical disability studies, emphasising barriers, stereotypes, and prejudices, as well as how society constructs boundaries around people with disabilities.⁴ They all share similar perspectives that criticise the ability/disability system, describing it as “a radical critique based on the understanding of disability as a pervasive cultural system that stigmatises certain kinds of bodily variations”.⁵ Therefore, the perception of bodies is not biological, natural, stable, and fixed, but rather deeply influenced by ideology and culture.⁶ In this way, disability is seen as both an identity category and a cultural concept.⁷ Ideas of ability and disability shape all areas of social and private life, including access to social institutions, the definition of personal identities, how individuals perceive their bodies, and how society treats them. Ultimately, the ability/disability system justifies an unequal distribution of resources, status, and power.⁸ In this context, social and cultural factors determine what is accessible, possible, and appropriate for people with disabilities, influencing their life chances and leading to marginalisation, exclusion, and segregation. The intersectionality of different identities – such as gender, ability, race, age, and social class – is a vital aspect of studying disability. It involves considering the various factors and experiences that marginalised people face, which influence their social position and exclusion.⁹ Therefore, it is crucial to consider official socialist ideology, legislation, and culture, which shaped the lives of generations in Yugoslavia, and to examine how different identities and social positions affected women with visual disabilities in both the public and private spheres.

2 Ronald J. Berger and Loren E. Wilbers, *Introducing Disability Studies* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2021), 2.

3 Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “Feminist disability studies,” *Signs: Journal of women in Culture and Society* 30, No. 2 (2005): 1557.

4 See Kristjana Kristiansen, Simo Vehmas, and Tom Shakespeare, eds. *Arguing about Disability. Philosophical Perspectives* (London & New York: Routledge, 2009). David L. Braddock and Susan L. Parish, “An Institutional History of Disability,” in Gary L. Albrecht, Katherine D. Seelman, and Michael Bury, eds., *Handbook of Disability Studies* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001), 11–68.

5 Garland-Thomson, “Integrating disability, transforming feminist theory,” 5.

6 Kim Hall, “Reimagining disability and gender through feminist studies, An Introduction,” in Kim Hall, ed., *Feminist disability studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 1.

7 See more: Guðrún Valgerður Stefánsdóttir, Solveig Ólafsdóttir, and Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, *Disability Studies Meets Microhistory, The Secret Life of Bibi in Berlin* (New York: Routledge, 2024).

8 Garland-Thompson, “Feminist disability studies,” 1557.

9 Valgerður Stefánsdóttir, Ólafsdóttir, and Magnússon, *Disability Studies Meets Microhistory*, 54.

SOCIAL POSITION OF WOMEN AND WOMEN WITH VISUAL DISABILITIES IN SOCIALIST YUGOSLAVIA: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

The period after World War II brought many changes, especially for women.¹⁰ On legal grounds, the 1946 Constitution guaranteed full legal, economic and social equality to women,¹¹ laying the foundation for “the egalitarian socialist legislation”.¹² Due to the processes of industrialisation and urbanisation, new identities, gender constructs, and discourses began to develop.¹³ One notable aspect of the expansion of education in the 20th century was the increase in women’s educational attainment at all levels.¹⁴ Beyond education, many advances in women’s emancipation occurred in healthcare, culture, political participation, and the workforce. Since the state protected marriage and family, many changes occurred in the private sphere, gradually transforming gender roles and partner relationships. However, it is important to recognise that, despite the official promotion of emancipatory and egalitarian ideology advocating gender equality, women did not achieve full equality in the labour force or in political and social participation.¹⁵ Expectably, inequalities in the private sphere were even more persistent because the value-normative sphere was changing much more slowly due to longstanding social norms and values burdened with historically created traditions, stereotypes, and prejudices. Particularly in the private sphere in socialist Yugoslavia, women remained primarily responsible for housekeeping and caring for other family members, reproducing asymmetric gender roles within the family. This was especially evident in rural areas of Yugoslavia, characterised by limited socialist modernisation, the prolonged dominance of private and public patriarchy, and the continued reproduction of gender inequalities.¹⁶ Therefore, during socialist Yugoslavia, it was clear that the interaction between the private and public spheres of women’s lives revealed a clash between modernising trends and the persistence of a traditional, patriarchal system.¹⁷

10 Mari Žanin Čalić, *Istorija Jugoslavije u 20. veku* (Beograd: Clio, 2010), 268.

11 Tamara Ivančević, *O konferenciji “Drug-ca žena”. Nprekidno preplitanje glasova prethodnica i savremenica* (Beograd: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, Befem, 2024), 12.

12 Vera Gudac Dodić, “Gender Policies of the Yugoslav State in the Context of Socialism,” *Tokovi istorije* 29, No. 3 (2021): 199.

13 Anđelka Milić, “A different view on the effects of socialism in the change of social position of women in ex-Yugoslavia,” in Sreten Vujović, ed., *Risk society: changes, inequalities and social problems in contemporary Serbia* (Beograd: Čigoja štampa, 2008), 192.

14 Dragana Gundogan, “Social origin of students in Serbia: inequalities in access and attainment in higher education” (doctoral thesis, University of Belgrade, 2022), 50.

15 Vera Gudac Dodić, *Žena u socijalizmu: položaj žene u Srbiji u drugoj polovini 20. veka* (Beograd: Institut za noviju istoriju Srbije, 2006), 27–52.

16 Milica Jerončić, “Private and Public Patriarchy: Social Position and the Role of Women during the Socialist Period in Yugoslavia,” *Genero*, 19, No. 1 (2015): 26.

17 Vera Gudac-Dodić, “Interweaving of Patriarchy and Modernity: The Impact of Political and Social

People with disabilities faced a similar situation. As emphasised in the report of the Association for “blind” people of Yugoslavia, Yugoslavia abolished class inequalities and laid the groundwork for more humane and equitable social relations. According to official ideology, “blind” people had the opportunity to develop their personalities fully, participate equally in economic, social, and cultural life,¹⁸ secure a place in society, and join the groups of the builders of socialism—this is the greatest wish of every “blind” person, and it is the fundamental goal of the Association of “blind” people.¹⁹ In the literature from that period, there was a prevalent discourse about successful visually disabled women who could serve as role models to other women with disabilities, showcasing “untypical” images to society and thereby challenging prejudices. One example was Bojana Ćirić, president of the NOB of “blind” people and an active courier during wartime.²⁰ Other notable examples included women active in the labour force, such as the best workers or the so-called “*udarnice*” or “shock workers” (like Jelena Đorđević, the first manager of the brushing workshop in Zemun).²¹ Active members of the Association for “blind” people and the Commission for “blind” women were also mentioned, such as Gorica Kotlar, an officer in the Association, and highly educated women like Dara Pašić, the first visually disabled woman with a university degree and a grammar school teacher, creating an image of socially acceptable and desirable image of “blind” women.²²

Despite this egalitarian and emancipatory narrative emphasising success in the public sphere, conflicting stories highlighting the importance of private life were underlined in the context of women with disabilities, while nothing similar was discussed regarding men. Despite many improvements in their life chances, numerous critics of socialist policy existed even during socialism. The authors highlighted the unfavourable position of visually disabled women in society and the family compared to women in general and disabled men alike.²³ As stated in the literature and reports from the Association of “blind” people, authors and activists noted that some substantial resources and support were lacking, recognising that the first twenty years of socialism were more successful than the

Change on a Woman`s Life in Serbia during the Second Half of the Twentieth Century,” in Vladan Jovanović, ed., *Tradition and transformation. Political and social changes in Serbia and Yugoslavia in 20th century* (Belgrade: Institute for Recent History of Serbia, 2015), 299.

18 AJ SSJ 817 u R–33 File: Savez slepih Jugoslavije– rad i postignuća.

19 AJ SSJ 817 u R–3 File: Trideset godina SSJ–referat predsednika Savezne konferencije SSJ na svečanoj sednici SKSSJ održanoj 25.3. 1977 u Ljubljani.

20 Đorđe Vukotić, *Graditeljstvo života. Slepi Beograda od 1941–1981* (Beograd: Savez slepih Beograda, 1984), 90.

21 Vera Gudac Dodić, “Gender Policies of the Yugoslav State in the Context of Socialism,” 205.

22 Jerončić, “Private and Public Patriarchy: Social Position and the Role of Women during the Socialist Period in Yugoslavia,” 12.

23 Vukotić, *Graditelji svoga života*, 109.

subsequent decades. It was acknowledged that many stereotypes and prejudices persisted throughout the socialist period, preventing people with visual disabilities from integrating into society and becoming fulfilled and active members.²⁴

THE AIM AND METHOD

This paper aims to explore the social position and experiences of women with visual disabilities during socialist Yugoslavia. The research questions were twofold. Firstly, we examined the experiences of women with visual disabilities during socialism regarding their participation in the public sphere, particularly in education and employment. Secondly, we will investigate official data and memories concerning the private lives of women with visual disabilities: marriage, motherhood, and housekeeping. In this way, we will present the attitudes, key experiences, and obstacles faced by women with visual disabilities in both private and public life. Women's history in Serbia was entirely marginalised, and women's stories remained invisible to mainstream historiography until the end of the 20th century. Subsequently, this approach developed gradually, adopting an interdisciplinary character.²⁵ Especially, topics related to the history of women with disabilities and their social position are neglected in mainstream historiography,²⁶ sociology and special pedagogy²⁷ in Serbia. For this reason, in this exploratory study, we will present the experiences and attitudes of women with visual disabilities who were socialised in socialist Yugoslavia.

Regarding the method employed in this paper, we relied on two data sets. Firstly, we utilised unpublished archival sources to gather statistical data and trends on the social position of women with visual disabilities, as well as on ideological considerations and discourses. For this purpose, we used unpublished statistical data: *Forms– Members of Associations of “blind” people* and *Questionnaire on activities of “blind women” in Associations of “blind” people in 1982*. In the analysis,

24 Ranko Burić et al., *60 godina rada Gradske organizacije slepih Beograda* (Beograd: Savez slepih Srbije, Gradska organizacija Beograda, 2006), 14.

25 Vera Gudac Dodić, “Once again, on the Development of Women's History in Serbia,” *Godišnjak za društvenu istoriju* 25, No. 3 (2018): 63.

26 See Predrag J. Marković, Miloš Ković, and Nataša Milićević, “Historiography in Serbia. Developments since 1989,” in Ulf Brunnbauer, ed., *(Re) Writing History. Historiography in Southeast Europe after Socialism, Studies on SouthEast Europe vol. 4* (Münster: LitVerlag 2004): 277–316. Predrag J. Marković and Nataša Milićević, “Serbian Historiography in the Time of Transition: A Struggle for Legitimacy,” *Istorija 20. veka*, No. 1 (2007): 145–166.

27 Radomir Arsić and Ljubica Isaković, “Special pedagogy and its development in Serbia,” *KNOWLEDGE –International Journal* (2019): 345–51. Nikola Baketa and Dragana Gundogan, “Inclusion of the Roma in Croatia and Serbia: the institutional framework and its implementation,” in Nikoleta Gutvajn and Milja Vujačić, eds., *Challenges and perspectives of inclusive education* (Belgrade: Institute for educational research, 2016): 119–36.

we will use 83 questionnaires on activities of “blind” women from the municipal Association for “blind” people from all six republics and two autonomous regions (six from Slovenia, 14 from Bosnia and Herzegovina, 20 from Croatia, seven from Montenegro, 17 from Serbia, seven from Macedonia, eight from AP Vojvodina, and four from AP Kosovo), which are stored in the Archive of Yugoslavia. Finally, we analysed minutes from the meetings of the Associations for “blind” people (hereinafter the Association) and the Commission for Social Status and Activities of Women of the Federal Conference (hereinafter the Commission).

Secondly, we analysed narratives from semi-structured interviews with three women with visual disabilities who attended segregated educational institutions and entered the labour market during the socialist period. The socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents are presented in Appendix 1. Our respondents lost their sight at different stages of their lives, and they were born and educated in different decades of socialism. We conducted semi-structured interviews in 2024, enabling us to explore a range of topics and memories while allowing respondents to maintain distance and avoid probing segments of their memories they did not wish to share. We adhered to general ethical standards for research, respecting the full anonymity and confidentiality of our respondents. This approach helped us protect respondents from any risks associated with participation. In the analysis, we employed a qualitative approach and oral history to present the social position of women with visual disabilities from their own perspective. Oral history and a qualitative approach are particularly useful for creating “a space for the absent voices of disabled women”.²⁸ For this reason, oral history from a female perspective²⁹ and involving people with disabilities³⁰ is gaining increasing interest in modern historiography and social sciences.

NUMBER OF WOMEN WITH VISUAL DISABILITIES IN SOCIALIST YUGOSLAVIA

The definition and classification of disability show considerable fluidity and arbitrariness, making statistics on people with disabilities quite unclear.³¹ For this reason, the official statistical data on the number of visually disabled people

28 Jenny Morris, “Feminism, gender and disability” (contribution at the seminar in Sydney, Australia, 1998), 6.

29 Paul Thompson, *Glas prošlosti* (Beograd: Clio, 2012), 22.

30 More in David Turner, *Disability in Eighteenth-Century England: Imagining Physical Impairment* (London: Routledge, 2012).

31 Glenn Fujiura and Violet Rutkowski-Kmitta, “Counting Disability,” in Gary L. Albrecht, Katherine Seelman, and Michael Bury, eds., *Handbook of Disability Studies* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2001), 11–12.

in Serbia and Yugoslavia are fragmentary and incomplete. Usually, statistics focused more on active members of the Association for “blind” people, and sometimes they only covered members of that Association. However, the percentage of members in such Associations was quite high at the time, reaching 95.5% of all “blind” people in 1977.³² In Table 1, we present figures for “blind” people and members of the Association for “blind” people.³³

Table 1: Statistical data on “blind” people and members of the Association for “blind” people in Yugoslavia

Year	Total number of Association members		Total number of “blind” people	
	male	female	male	female
1957	6,615	5,010	8,373	6,521
1977	14,051	9,072	14,653	9,568
1979	14,505	9,750	15,067	10,131
1985	15,309	10,717	15,841	11,063

According to the partial results of the census of “blind” people in the Socialist Republic of Serbia from 1953, there were a total of 4,294 individuals with visual disabilities in Serbia (58% men and 42.3% women),³⁴ even though in the overall population, the situation was reversed. The largest discrepancy between genders was in the group of people who lost sight due to various injuries, including civil war invalids. Based on data from 1963, there were a total of 756 “blind” civil war invalids in Yugoslavia, including 629 (83.2%) men and 127 (16.8%) women.³⁵

The questionnaire³⁶ reported a total of 7,445 “blind” women, whereas in 1987 it was emphasised that there were 11,366 “blind” women in the entire country.³⁷ The highest number of female members – 1,017 – was recorded in Ljubljana, while in Belgrade, the largest city and the country’s capital, significantly fewer were reported: 496. The third city by the number of “blind” female members was Novi Sad, with 301, followed by Osijek and Pula, each with 203. Regarding other centres, Skopje had 102 “blind” female members, while Titograd had 81. No questionnaires or data were available for major cities and republic/regional

32 AJ SSJ 817 u R–3 File: Trideset Godina SSJ – referat predsednika Savezne konferencije SSJ na svečanoj sednici SKSSJ održanoj 25.3. 1977. u Ljubljani.

33 AJ SSJ 817 u R– 20 u R–33 File: Zbirni pregled statističkih podataka o slepima i članovima SSJ.

34 AJ SSJ 817 u R u R–3 File: Trideset godina SSJ–referat predsednika Savezne konferencije SSJ na svečanoj sednici SKSSJ održanoj 25.3. 1977 u Ljubljani.

35 Fadil Mučić, *Savez civilnih invalida rata Jugoslavije* (Beograd: Savez civilnih invalida rata Jugoslavije, 2004), 18.

36 AJ SSJ 817 u R–15 File: Uпитnik o aktivnostima slepih žena u organizacijama Saveza slepih Jugoslavije, 1982.

37 AJ SSJ 817 u R–33 File: Jugoslovensko savetovanje posvećeno slepoj ženi, Kragujevac 5.–7. 11. 1987.

centres such as Zagreb, Sarajevo, and Priština.

Furthermore, exact data is available on the number of “completely blind” and “partially blind” women in the Associations, so we could determine the proportions of these two groups. Only two Associations consisted solely of “completely blind” female members: those in Peć and Murska Sobota. These two Associations had similar numbers of female members (Murska Sobota: 50; Peć: 56). They were located on opposite sides of Yugoslavia, which had different economic and cultural characteristics. The percentage of “completely blind” female members in most Associations ranged from 20% to 80%. These proportions varied considerably and clearly influenced the organisation and activities of the Associations, as well as their responses to the questionnaire. On many questions, they specified whether they were referring to “completely blind” or “partially blind” women, since their practices and daily activities differed significantly. For example, the questionnaire included a question about how many “blind” women could walk independently on the streets, either constantly, occasionally, or not at all. Some Associations explicitly stated that there was a notable difference in orientation between the two groups, such as: *“Blind” women do not walk around alone, while women with some visual impairment do* (Vinkovci); *women who have residual vision can move independently. Those who are completely “blind” do not move around alone* (Titovo Užice); *a completely “blind” woman does not go out without a companion, while those with some vision manage well; society accepts them like other people* (Jajce), and *“Blind” people do not leave their homes at all, whereas “partially blind” individuals go out and can handle shopping* (Nova Gradiška). Other Associations did not mention this fact, even though we can assume there were similar differences between these two groups. Sometimes it was unclear whether they referred to both groups or only one, which complicated our analysis.³⁸

PUBLIC LIFE OF WOMEN WITH VISUAL DISABILITIES

According to Article 36 of the 1978 Constitution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, “The social community creates conditions for the training of citizens who are not fully capable of work and for their appropriate employment”.³⁹ In that context of socialist ideology, “special education” for people with visual disabilities developed rapidly in a segregated manner, serving as preparation for labour. Professional training changed several times during this

38 AJ SSJ 817 u R-15 File: Upitnik o aktivnostima slepih žena u organizacijama Saveza slepih Jugoslavije, 1982.

39 “Drugi kongres defektologa Jugoslavije, I deo,” *Specijalna škola* 15, No. 1 (1966): 278.

period, offering opportunities for employment in “modern” occupations.⁴⁰ Even though official ideology and legislation guaranteed economic and educational inclusion, achieving these goals in practice proved difficult. Between 1957 and 1970, 232 pupils completed primary school in Zemun (158 boys and 74 girls).⁴¹ Statistical data from 1986⁴² show that throughout Yugoslavia, there were 22 boys and 19 girls in preschool education; 409 boys and 262 girls in 8-year primary schools; and 149 boys and 103 girls in high schools, highlighting the disparity in access to education between girls and boys.

Previous analysis indicates that respondents often romanticised their time in the educational system.⁴³ They claimed they faced few intellectual or social challenges and received adequate support. One testimony was: *The teachers treated me fairly. I also behaved in a way that showed I didn't expect anyone to give me anything – not grades, nor extra time. I knew I always had support.*⁴⁴ Many had to make sacrifices regarding their choice of study or whether they could continue their education. One respondent was unable to continue her education despite being very successful because her father, who lived in a rural area, could not assist her. As a result, she couldn't apply for university: *I had the option to choose between telecommunications and physiotherapy. I opted for telecommunications. Naturally, I later wished to continue my studies, but due to circumstances, I had to stop my education; my father was no longer willing to assist.*⁴⁵ An especially poignant example is a respondent who enrolled at the Music Academy: *I enrolled at the Music Academy, but I didn't have a mentor. I think I cried in the corridor. I said I would go to the dean, even to the rector. That really hurt me. I said: 'I won't drop out, even if I have to practise on my own.'*⁴⁶ This illustrates that not everything was perfect and that education did not always proceed smoothly. Support was limited due to prejudices, which could cause pupils to drop out. Fortunately, this was not the case for our highly motivated respondent.

Furthermore, training for spatial orientation was a crucial part of education and rehabilitation for people with visual disabilities. Regarding spatial orientation,

40 Dragana Gundogan and Nataša Milićević, “Segregated special education for visually impaired children in socialist Serbia—isolation and/or preparation for life and work?,” *Contributions to Contemporary History* 65, No. 2 (2025): 192–93.

41 Radmila Laban, *Rukama do svetlosti. Sto godina rada škole za učenike oštećenog vida “Veljko Ramadanović” u Zemunu (1917–2017)* (Zemun: Škola za učenike oštećenog vida “Veljko Ramadanović”, 2017), 82.

42 AJ SSJ 817 u R–33 File: Zbirni pregled statističkih podataka o slepima i članovima SSJ.

43 Gundogan and Milićević, “Segregated special education for visually impaired children in socialist Serbia,” 188.

44 Respondent 1, interviewed by authors, Belgrade, Serbia, 30 July 2024.

45 Ibidem.

46 Respondent 3, interviewed by authors, Belgrade, Serbia, on 17 September 2024 and 20 September 2024.

different educational and socialising models for men and women with visual disabilities coexisted, often weighed down by prejudices and stereotypes.⁴⁷ All three female respondents mentioned that men were walking more independently. One respondent said she remembers being punished when she tried to walk alone: *My parents told me they never struck me, but I remember being punished when I wanted to visit my cousins on my own.*⁴⁸ Another respondent recalled: *I regret not starting earlier to learn to walk independently. When I was in high school, my parents didn't allow me to go anywhere alone. 'Absolutely not, you can't go out into the street.'*⁴⁹; and *In 2001, I used the white cane for the first time. We didn't have peripatologists in school. I heard about the white cane, but didn't want to use it. People were telling me 'how girl nicely dressed up to run on the cars'. And now it's so important to me.*⁵⁰ The Association recognised the limitations of the orientation training. Consequently, at the Commission's first meeting, this issue was acknowledged. One of the suggestions was to implement measures to enhance women's spatial orientation, as it was understood that women rarely moved independently; thus, it was deemed necessary to organise training or courses.⁵¹

However, education for girls with visual disabilities had one additional goal: preparing for housework, which was stressed much more for girls than for boys. Female respondents in our interviews also paid more attention to Home Economics courses. *Along with all the skills we mastered, we attended home economics classes where we learned to sew on a button, knit, and prepare simple meals. I remember making mashed potatoes and pudding. In high school, we were already making coffee independently. There was no difference between those who could see better, those with some remaining vision, and those of us who were completely "blind" – we all made coffee, and it was never a problem.*⁵² Home economics was mentioned at the Commission meeting in 1982, when it was reported that the level of instruction in schools had declined, and attention should be given to this issue. They concluded that a recommendation should be sent to the Typhlological Section of the Association to take measures to improve the content and quality of the subject Home Economics, and that school should provide suggestions for its enhancement.⁵³ Additionally, some Associations (such as Zrenjanin and

47 Gundogan and Milićević, "Segregated special education for visually impaired children in socialist Serbia," 190.

48 Respondent 3, interviewed by authors, Belgrade, Serbia, on 17 September 2024 and 20 September 2024.

49 Respondent 1, interviewed by authors, Belgrade, Serbia, 30 July 2024.

50 Respondent 2, interviewed by authors via telephone call on 14 September 2024.

51 AJ SSJ 817 u R-3 File: SSJ, Savezna konferencija, No. 01–26/2, 5. 2. 1981, Zapisnik sa prvog sastanka Sekcije za društveni položaj i aktivnost slepih žena SK SSJ, održanog dana 30. 1. 1981, Beograd.

52 Respondent 2, interviewed by authors via telephone call on 14 September 2024.

53 AJ SSJ 817 u R-3, File: SSJ Savezna konferencije, No.01–1/3 15. 2. 1982. Zapisnik sa sastanka sekcije za društveni položaj i aktivnost slepih žena SK SSJ, održanog dana 25. 1. 1982. godine, Beograd.

Novi Sad) proposed paying greater attention through formal education to training women for “life in marriage”.⁵⁴ One of our respondents agrees that mastering these skills is important: *Everyday life skills should have been taught in school. Today, there are everyday life skills workshops at the Association for the “blind”, but they are organised so that I cannot attend because I work. I didn’t like that I wasn’t taught how to do some things I should have learned, so I had to learn them later.*⁵⁵

Association members had many suggestions and recommendations regarding lifelong learning. Some of them were concerned with household chores and household management (5). Other topics included spatial orientation (3), courses and workshops for handicrafts (2), and significantly fewer adult literacy courses in Braille. We note here one excerpt from the **questionnaire**: *We believe that more attention should be given to “blind” women, primarily through education, followed by a variety of lectures and seminars to teach them about different aspects of daily life, such as hygiene, cooking, sexual and other diseases, handicrafts, family upbringing, home organisation, and modernising their knowledge. All of these should then be showcased at suitable events, exhibitions, and through publication in public media (Smederevska Palanka).*⁵⁶ It highlights the importance of lifelong education and training for Associations and women with visual disabilities, as well as how they perceive the role of education and which activities they regard as relevant, often prioritising practical housekeeping training. It was rooted in patriarchal attitudes and cultural norms that led to the exclusion of women from the public sphere.

During the relevant period in Yugoslavia, in accordance with socialist ideology, physical, industrial, and paid labour outside the home formed a cornerstone of economic independence, female identity, and emancipation.⁵⁷ For individuals with disabilities, the primary aim of their education was rehabilitation and preparation for work, which would support their economic independence and social integration. In an interview, one respondent emphasised the importance of financial independence: *And I felt so good when I had my own money. That independence... It saddens me when I hear that some parents keep their children’s money, even when those children are adults around 30 years old. My parents never*

54 AJ SSJ 817 u R–15 File: Upitnik o aktivnostima slepih žena u organizacijama Saveza slepih Jugoslavije, 1982.

55 Respondent 3, interviewed by authors, Belgrade, Serbia, on 17 September 2024 and 20 September 2024.

56 AJ SSJ 817 u R–15 File: Upitnik o aktivnostima slepih žena u organizacijama Saveza slepih Jugoslavije, 1982.

57 Francisca de Haan, “Introduction: Toward a Global History of Communist Women,” in Francisca de Haan, ed., *The Palgrave Handbook of Communist Women Activists around the World* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023), 3.

*did that – and I wouldn't have allowed it.*⁵⁸ However, in reality, the biggest problem during the entire period of socialism was finding employment for people with disabilities. It was not easy in the existing economy to secure suitable jobs for all individuals with disabilities, due to both economic and cultural reasons (such as stereotypes and prejudices). In the report “40 Years of Successful Work of the Association”, it was stated that there were 4,419 employed persons, or 17.26% of all members, while over 12,000 members were over 60 years old, and 8,449 were pensioners.⁵⁹ Statistical data show that in 1986, in the industry and agriculture sectors, 1,119 men and 494 women were employed, and in the “social activities” sector, 1,796 men and 993 women were employed, highlighting the gender disparity that contributed to the economic and social dependence of women with visual disabilities. There were 266 men and 181 women who were rehabilitated but unemployed.⁶⁰

As expected, the highest number of employed “blind” women was in the cities with the largest populations of “blind” women: Ljubljana (208) and Belgrade (72). Skopje, the capital of Macedonia, ranked third with 31 employed “blind” women but had the highest percentage of employed “blind” women (30.39%) compared to Ljubljana (20.45%) and Belgrade (14.52%). Meanwhile, Novi Sad had only 7.97% of employed “blind” female members. The highest percentages were recorded in the Macedonian cities of Kavadarci (5 individuals, or 50%) and Ohrid (8 individuals, or 30.77%), which, however, cannot be compared with larger cities with bigger populations of “blind” people. Unsurprisingly, the most common occupation was telephone operator, and 63 Associations reported this as the most frequent occupation for “blind” women at that time. Additionally, eight Associations listed it as the second- or third-most common occupation. The second most frequent occupation was physiotherapy (33), followed by packaging workers (18), cardboard production (7), plastic production (4), education (8), industry (9), and dactylography (2). No obvious differences in occupations were observed between the republics.⁶¹ The presented data shows that there were limited choices for “blind” women to find employment, considering the number of available positions and occupations deemed appropriate for “blind” women. Official reports from Associations⁶² mentioned similar occupations.

58 Respondent 2, interviewed by authors by telephone on 14 September 2024.

59 AJ SSJ 817 u R-15 File: 40 godina uspešnog rada – govor predsednika SSJ na svečanom sastanku SK SSJ, održanog 25. 6. 1986, u Zemunu.

60 AJ SSJ 817 u R-33 File: Zbirni pregled statističkih podataka o slepima i članovima SSJ.

61 AJ SSJ 817 u R-15 File: Uпитnik o aktivnostima slepih žena u organizacijama Saveza slepih Jugoslavije, 1982.

62 AJ SSJ 817 u R-3 File: Trideset godina SSJ, referat predsednika savezne konferencije SSJ na svečanoj sednici SKSSJ održanoj 25. 3. 1977 u Ljubljani.

The same report emphasised that laws guaranteed employment for “blind” persons in professions proven to be accessible to the “blind”. In those professions, “blind” persons were employed in greater numbers. Consequently, in 1969, all republics and provinces adopted laws guaranteeing employment for telephone operators.⁶³ However, in practice, legal regulations were often circumvented. The difficulties in implementing these regulations were highlighted in the following narrative: *The main challenge for “blind” women is finding employment, as the Law on the Employment of Blind Persons is not respected by the relevant institutions. In the Socialist Republic of Croatia, there is the Law on Mandatory Employment of Disabled Workers and Blind Persons (“N.N.” No. 12/79). Under this law, all work organisations and institutions were required to align their self-management general acts with it within one year. However, to date, in our area, not a single work organisation or institution that should employ “blind” individuals has done so, and they avoid employing “blind” members by all possible means (Šibenik).*⁶⁴

The interviewees described their personal experiences of finding jobs and working life in socialist work organisations. They shared memories and experiences of the obstacles and problems they faced daily, beyond legal regulations and ideological proclamations. The respondent, who already held a university degree, could not find a job, not even as a telephone operator. Employers consistently found some excuses to avoid respecting the law and employing people with disabilities. *I couldn't find a job. They simply didn't want to understand that I was capable of working. I applied for a telephone operator position at the City Hospital, and they told me: 'Our telephone operators have to carry patients.' They come up with things like that when they don't want to hire you – just nonsense. Then they ask you how you would even get to work.*⁶⁵ Another respondent stated she had to sue the state company to get hired. *I waited two and a half years for a job – that was a very challenging period for me. Unfortunately, I had to go through the courts. The Association and I sued the state company. Before me, two people who were also “blind” had worked there. They kept saying, 'We're not a social institution,' but in the end, they had to employ me.*⁶⁶

Regarding the difficulties faced by women with visual disabilities in the workplace, 23 Associations reported no issues, particularly when they had some remaining vision. Therefore, it is unclear which group they had in mind, and we do not know how many women with complete visual disabilities were employed. We can assume that more women with partial disabilities were employed.

63 Ibid.

64 AJ SSJ 817 u R–15 File: Upitnik o aktivnostima slepih žena u organizacijama Saveza slepih Jugoslavije, 1982.

65 Respondent 1, interviewed by authors, Belgrade, Serbia, 30 July 2024.

66 Respondent 2, interviewed by authors via telephone call on 14 September 2024.

The relationships with colleagues were emphasised as especially important. Examples of statements: *They maintain very good relationships with their colleagues and are appreciated as workers* (Zadar); *They do not encounter problems, and if they do, they resolve them with the help of sighted colleagues* (Kragujevac); and *A rehabilitated women face no difficulties at the workplace, apart from the need for special aids* (Skopje). The most frequently mentioned difficulties (13 times) were commuting to work and returning home. In this regard, they noted that women experienced challenges with workplace orientation, navigating the work environment, and going to breakfast and during breaks (7). Examples of testimonies include: *There are difficulties because they need guidance to get to work, and moving around the institution requires assistance* (Ivangrad); and *Going to work, returning home, using public transport, and moving around the factory is also challenging* (Pančevo).⁶⁷

Furthermore, there was a notable lack of understanding from the surrounding work environment and colleagues (5): *There is insufficient understanding in the attitude of sighted people towards “blind” people* (Čačak); and *Assistance from factory workers to people with disabilities* (Postojna). In interviews, we find narratives demonstrating that women with visual disabilities faced obstacles and did not always receive help or understanding from their colleagues. For example, one negative experience was described as follows: *It was my night shift and a van came to pick me up. There were two other colleagues as well. The van stopped nearby. One colleague told a new female colleague to go out ahead of me and simply lead me inside. The woman said: “I’m not going to lead ‘blind’ women”. Like that wasn’t her job.*⁶⁸ It was reported that women with visual disabilities had difficulties making contact with people: people pity “blind” people, which reflects a lack of understanding driven by prejudice (11). The following statements illustrate this: *Difficulties arise if citizens are unkind or inconsiderate toward a “blind” person* (Slavonska Požega); and *There should be greater public awareness about how to interact with “blind” people, which could reduce communication difficulties* (Karlovac).⁶⁹

Furthermore, Associations reported that more typhlotechnical aids, workplace adaptations, and Braille literature were needed (4). Only one Association (Leskovac) reported problems with involvement in social, political, and self-management organisations, indicating that insufficient attention was paid to this aspect of their lives. Although employment was a significant issue for all visually disabled people in socialist Yugoslavia, only four Associations suggested helping

67 AJ SSJ 817 u R-15 File: Upitnik o aktivnostima slepih žena u organizacijama Saveza slepih Jugoslavije, 1982.

68 Respondent 1, interviewed by authors, Belgrade, Serbia, 30 July 2024.

69 AJ SSJ 817 u R-15 File: Upitnik o aktivnostima slepih žena u organizacijama Saveza slepih Jugoslavije, 1982.

their female members with employment, highlighting that this was beyond their scope of activities. Here is a rare statement regarding this issue: *Activities related to the employment of rehabilitated women should be improved. "Blind" women should be trained for professions with better employment prospects. Retraining rehabilitated women for other professions to facilitate their employment should be encouraged. Five "blind" women completed training for certain professions, but they live on social assistance or with help from parents and other relatives because they were not given the opportunity to find employment after completing their education or training* (Livno).⁷⁰

During socialism, a significant shift occurred in social care for "blind" women who finished their education but struggled to find work or accommodation. A notable example of interwar social policy was the estate *Moja volja*, which provided permanent housing and asylum for around 30 "blind" women living monotonous and difficult lives. Due to their unstable economic situation, many were forced to beg.⁷¹ After 1945, the socialist government and AFŽ (Women's Anti-Fascist Front) restructured the organisation.⁷² It became a centre for economic activities as part of "Štediša" entrepreneurship for women with visual disabilities, organising various workshops in traditional crafts.⁷³ Official documentation details how daily life was organised, serving as a testament to the challenging material conditions.⁷⁴ Additionally, the new management sought to organise cultural activities to offer them "a decent life".⁷⁵ The socialist government aimed to reshape daily life and used this institution as a model of social care. This reflects the coordination among diverse institutions, care for internal organisation, and social concern for users' quality of life and personal growth, all grounded in socialist ideology.⁷⁶

PRIVATE LIVES OF WOMEN WITH VISUAL DISABILITIES

In Association reports and literature, great emphasis was placed on the private sphere of women's lives because authors aimed to show how women with disabilities can overcome all obstacles based on the stereotypical perception of visually disabled people as passive and dependent. They sought to present

70 Ibid.

71 Vukotić, *Graditelji svog života*, 15. Ljubomir Savić, *Istorija slepih Srbije* (Beograd: Savez slepih Srbije, 1964), 262–65.

72 AJ SSJ 817 u R–25 File: Dom slepih devojaka, 1945–1949.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid.

75 Vukotić, *Graditelji svog života*, 119.

76 AJ SSJ 817 u R–25 File: Dom slepih devojaka, 1945–1949.

“successful women” as examples on one hand, but on the other hand, they reproduced the patriarchal model of (“blind”) women. Especially in the reports from the Association for “blind” people, the family was depicted as “still the safest place for ‘blind’ women”, “the only place she can fulfil her full role and be fully protected”, “the problem of loneliness and alienation can be addressed within the family”, and “an ideal environment for her to feel like a functional and equal part of her surroundings”.⁷⁷ Similarly, marriage and family were portrayed as “the most optimal social and individual forms of existence because they allow the fulfilment of the full range of needs, from practical, everyday ones to the most subtle human needs”.⁷⁸ Family life was presented as ideal for women with disabilities, and authors were aware that many prejudices and stereotypes about women with visual disabilities limited their family life.

When discussing women with disabilities, we consider how their gender, bodily identities, and sexuality are influenced by patriarchal and ableist models.⁷⁹ Feminist disability scholars agree that women with visual disabilities are stereotypically imagined as “asexual, unfit to reproduce, overly dependent”,⁸⁰ which fosters disability oppression⁸¹ linked to ideas of “tragic loss, weakness, passivity, dependency, helplessness, shame, and global incompetence”.⁸² In the Yugoslav context, there was significant research on the marriage and family life of “blind” people in the urban areas of Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1978/79. The author examined how rapid industrialisation and urbanisation affected mobility, the social care of people with visual disabilities, and their prospects for marriage and family formation.⁸³ He found that tradition, customs, and a sedentary lifestyle limited “blind women” more than “blind” men from establishing emotional connections.⁸⁴ The same research documented prevalent negative generalisations, such as the belief that people with visual disabilities cannot recognise objects, have limited mobility, and require constant guidance. Additionally, respondents feared that blindness was genetically inherited. Furthermore, 84% of the overall population felt uncomfortable around “blind” people, 92% expressed pity, and only 8% offered help. Negative stereotypes associated with people with disabilities included pessimism, dissatisfaction, frustration, deprivation, neglect, aggression,

77 AJ SSJ 817 u R-25 File: Jugoslovensko savetovanje posvećeno slepoj ženi, Kragujevac 5.–7. 11. 1987.

78 Tonči Marković, *Specifičnosti braka i porodice kod socijalne grupe slijepih u BIH* (Sarajevo: Zajednica, 1981), 81.

79 Nirmala Erevelles, “Thinking with disability studies,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 34, No. 2 (2014).

80 Garland–Thompson, “Integrating disability, transforming feminist theory,” 17.

81 Hall, “Reimagining disability and gender through feminist studies, An Introduction,” 4

82 Susannah Mintz, “Invisible Disability,” in Kim Hall, ed., *Feminist disability studies* (Indiana University Press, 2011), 75.

83 Marković, *Specifičnosti braka i porodice kod socijalne grupe slijepih u BIH*, 60.

84 Ibid., 80.

depression, and self-destructiveness.⁸⁵ Overall, these generalisations contributed to the prejudice that marriage with visually disabled individuals was a significant sacrifice for sighted people.

Statistical data from 1965⁸⁶ show that there were 6,436 married people with visual disabilities without children, 7,538 married couples had children, while 243 married couples were both “blind”. In 1982, it was reported that 3,007 married “blind” women, 480 divorced, and 1,797 widowed women with visual disabilities lived across Yugoslavia. Concerning difficulties in family life, 15 Associations reported no issues in family relations. However, other Associations noted cases of misunderstanding, neglect, and limited help from family members (6), as evidenced by the following statements: *There are a few cases of neglect, which lead to intervention by Associations* (Križevci); and *Difficulties in finding a marital partner, as well as a lack of understanding from the partner* (Smederevska Palanka). Two organisations mentioned a poor financial situation, inadequate housing conditions, or lack of personal resources, such as: *A “blind” woman still struggles for equality within the family because she lacks her own financial resources* (Murska Sobota); and *They cannot manage various errands at different institutions and offices because they do not have their own companions* (Maribor).⁸⁷

Despite emancipation, educational success, employment, attachment, and identification with family and motherhood in socialism remained unchanged, as an “important part of the socialist ideology”.⁸⁸ Therefore, women were burdened both with formal employment and unpaid housework and family obligations.⁸⁹ In traditional societies, it was a common narrative that women were the primary caregivers in the private sphere. Feminist writers have shown that women are exploited in patriarchal societies through their unpaid and unrecognised work within the family, as well as their emotional resources and caregiving (such as time, emotions, and support).⁹⁰ In literature from that period, even experts frequently explicitly advised family members caring for children with disabilities on how mothers should care and what actions they should take.⁹¹ The presentation *How to help the family enable a “blind” child to overcome developmental crises* was specifically dedicated to mothers, demonstrating that “rules for socio-emotional development emphasise that an adequate relationship with the mother and a

85 Ibid., 41–42.

86 AJ SSJ 817 u R–33 File: Zbirni pregled statističkih podataka o slepima i članovima SSJ.

87 AJ SSJ 817 u R–15 File: Uпитnik o aktivnostima slepih žena u organizacijama Saveza slepih Jugoslavije, 1982.

88 Gudac Dodić, “Gender Policies of the Yugoslav State in the Context of Socialism,” 207. Milić, “Different view on the effects of socialism in the change of social position of women in ex–Yugoslavia,” 195.

89 Jerončić, “Private and Public Patriarchy: Social Position and the Role of Women,” 16.

90 Gudac, “Interweaving of Patriarchy and Modernity,” 305.

91 See more: Dragan Stanojević, *Novo očinstvo u Srbiji* (Beograd: ISI, 2018).

positive family atmosphere are important for a sense of security and readiness for inevitable frustrations”.⁹² It is questionable how much this discourse has changed even today, as contemporary literature shows slow progress in gender roles related to housework and parenthood.

This accepted and normalised role of female family members contrasted with prejudiced and stereotypical images of visually disabled women as passive and dependent on others. Similarly, the same issue appeared in foreign literature: “As women, part of our return to ‘normal’ life is often a return to the pressures of looking after other people. Aids and adaptations which are supposedly about helping us to be [physically] independent are in fact often about enabling others to be dependent on us for the tasks which keep a house clean and a family fed”.⁹³ Participants in Yugoslav counselling aimed to alter the perceived image of “blind” women as inadequate, asserting that they can do everything solely through their “maternal instinct” and maternal love. The following statements exemplify this: *They are considered to have an innate ability to be homemakers and mothers, without requiring additional training or guidance;*⁹⁴ *She has the same abilities, talents, problems, ideals, habits, and shortcomings as other women; and What has been lost is not of decisive importance if what remains is used, and there is always enough of that.*⁹⁵ They conclude that *It is more difficult for “blind” mothers, but with maternal instinct, everything can be achieved.*⁹⁶ In that way, they reproduced the patriarchal image of women. The socialist system offered solutions through the socialisation of domestic labour rather than through emancipation and the creation of more egalitarian and symmetrical family roles.⁹⁷ The socialisation of domestic labour could not be fully realised due to economic constraints, so care-giving remained the “woman’s job”.⁹⁸ A similar solution was proposed by the Associations for women with disabilities: *For every “blind” woman, house-keeping, being a housewife, and raising children are significant burdens. Part of that burden should be shifted to social organisations* (Bugojno). The respondents also mentioned the lack of children’s day care institutions (Loznica) and stated that children of “blind” parents should have priority for admission to nurseries and kindergartens (Karlovac).⁹⁹

92 AJ SSJ 817 u R–33 File: Jugoslovensko savetovanje posvećeno slepoj ženi, Kragujevac 5.–7. 11. 1987.

93 Morris, “Feminism, gender and disability,” 52.

94 AJ SSJ 817 u R–33 File: Jugoslovensko savetovanje posvećeno slepoj ženi, Kragujevac 5.–7. 11. 1987.

95 Ibid.

96 Ibid.

97 See more in Olivera Burić et al., *Porodica i društveni sistem* (Beograd: Institut za socijalnu politiku, 1980).

98 Marina Blagojević Hjuson, *Sutra je bilo juče* (Novi Sad: Zavod za ravnopravnost polova, 2015), 155. Burić, *Porodica i društveni sistem*, 381.

99 AJ SSJ 817 u R–15 File: Uputnik o aktivnostima slepih žena u ogranizacijama Saveza slepih Jugoslavije, 1982.

If we tally all reported women with visual disabilities who had school-age children in socialist Yugoslavia in 1982, the total comes to 1.104 women with visual impairments. There were 418 reported single mothers throughout Yugoslavia.¹⁰⁰ It is important to note that some Associations reported more single mothers than the total number of mothers of school-age children, so caution is needed when analysing the data. Perhaps they included children of all ages when counting the number of single mothers. Respondent 2, a single mother, said: *I never got married; I had my daughter out of marriage. Back when I was in Zemun, I already had the desire and openly talked with my friends about wanting to have a child; I wanted to fulfil myself as a mother. However, I saw that it would not work with that man.*¹⁰¹ She decided to raise her daughter by herself. Official statistics show that in Serbia, from 1950 to 2008, the share of extramarital births increased 2.8 times (from 8.0% to 22.8%).¹⁰² The principle of equal treatment for a child born out of wedlock and a child born in wedlock was introduced by the Constitution in 1946, and full equality was achieved by the Constitution in 1974.¹⁰³ Still, single-parent families usually face economic and social challenges, encountering discrimination, prejudices, and rejection from their families and the wider society.¹⁰⁴

The challenges of caring for children can be categorised into two main groups based on the child's age. The first group pertains to babies and toddlers. Women with visual impairments faced various obstacles: feeding, preparing food, maintaining a child's daily hygiene (washing clothes, bathing), and dressing (15). It was physically demanding when the child began crawling and walking (2), and lifting and supervising children was difficult due to limited mobility (3). Here are some statements: *Feeding the child in the first months after birth, taking the child out for walks to get fresh air* (Titovo Užice); and *They cannot see whether their children are clean; they cannot feed them properly* (Đakovica). Furthermore, they mentioned the inability to monitor the child's health condition, especially when the child was ill (3). Another set of challenges related to school-age children included assistance with schooling and the costs of educational materials (16). As an example, we present the following accounts: *Help with learning, because the school curricula are very demanding* (Murska Sobota), *Showing school subjects and other forms of monitoring children's schoolwork* (Split), *Attending parent-teacher meetings and helping school-age children with their studies* (Pančevo); and *There*

100 Ibid.

101 Respondent 2, interviewed by authors by telephone on 14 September 2024.

102 Ljiljana Stanković and Goran Penev, "Trends of Extramarital Births in Serbia in the Second Half of the 20th and at the Beginning of the 21st Century in the Wider European Context," *Stanovništvo* 48, No. 1 (2010): 1.

103 Ibid., 5.

104 Vera Gudac Dodić, "Single Parent Families: Social Practice and Daily Life in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century," *Tokovi istorije* 21, No. 3, (2013): 215–20.

is occasional interest from Associations regarding financial support for children's education (Križevci). Moreover, ten Associations claimed that women with visual disabilities had assistance from family members. Examples of relevant statements: *Relatives help them, so they are satisfied with that as well* (Bihać); *“Blind” women cannot raise children without the help of family members* (Slavonska Požega); *Most of them rely on the help of another person* (Kraljevo); and *Difficulties occur where both spouses are “blind”* (Zrenjanin, Novi Sad).¹⁰⁵ These narratives highlighted their reliance on and assistance from other family members and their inability to handle all parenting responsibilities, revealing the persistence of ableist stereotypes. It indicated that for women, the loss of sight often entailed the loss of autonomy and recognition, in both public and private spheres.

We previously noted that a primary activity of the Commission for “blind” women involved demonstrating household tasks at their Association gatherings to show how their members carried out domestic work. Therefore, this aspect of their lives was highlighted, rather than their intellectual abilities and achievements. Likewise, in questionnaires, they focused heavily on this area of their lives. It was emphasised that the main problem faced by “blind” women in doing household work was either a lack of adapted household appliances or difficulty handling modern devices that make household tasks easier (14). Due to a low living standard, it was particularly difficult to provide adapted electrical appliances in economically less developed regions such as Kosovo and Macedonia, resulting in fewer appliances and less knowledge of their use. Conversely, in Slovenia and Croatia, they had more household appliances and a greater understanding of how to operate them. That fact was stressed in the questionnaire responses, for example: *A “blind” woman can perform household tasks using appliances she knows how to operate* (Slavonska Požega).¹⁰⁶ Similar differences were observed during discussions at Commission meetings, where a Croatian representative opposed a Montenegrin representative and stated that female comrades in Croatia use assistive devices, especially scales.¹⁰⁷ This highlighted the gap in economic and organisational status of Associations from different republics, affecting the social standing and knowledge of women with visual disabilities.

In the programme of the Commission for the position of “blind” women, it was emphasised that the Association should ensure complete and regular information to all republican and provincial Associations on assistive devices, especially those used in households, and that a letter would be sent to all factories

105 AJ SSJ 817 u R-15 File: Upitnik o aktivnostima slepih žena u organizacijama Saveza slepih Jugoslavije, 1982.

106 Ibid.

107 AJ SSJ 817 u R -3 File: SSJ Savezna konferencije, No.01-1/3 15. 2. 1982. Zapisnik sa sastanka sekcije za društveni položaj i aktivnost slepih žena SK SSJ, održanog dana 25. 1. 1982. godine, Beograd.

in Yugoslavia producing household appliances, requesting that their products be adapted for use by visually impaired and elderly persons.¹⁰⁸ Associations indicated that the following appliances were necessary: washing machine (18), dishwasher (5), iron with bell (3), refrigerator (3), vacuum cleaner (3), electric heater (TA stove) (1). They also mentioned many appliances for cooking, mostly stoves but also other kitchen utilities: cooking utensils, additional kitchen aids, mixers, and protective gloves (13). In particular, the Braille scale (21) was noted as both useful and necessary, along with cooking utensils for preparing liquids such as milk and tea (6), slicers for onions, bread, cheese, meat products, and parsley (4), thermometers (9), can openers (1), and liquid measuring devices (1). Furthermore, they mentioned sewing kits, especially sewing needles for “blind” people (16) and measuring tape (8). Devices for orientation and communication were less frequently mentioned, such as a cane or glasses (6), a high-quality wristwatch (10), a cassette player, a tape recorder (4), and a telephone (1). The audible light indicator (or sound-emitting light device) was mentioned by only two Associations from Slovenia.¹⁰⁹ It is noteworthy that, unlike in socialist countries, many modern appliances were available in socialist Yugoslavia in the early 1960s. Until the late 1980s, mass consumption of household appliances met the European standard of that time.¹¹⁰

Difficulties in performing various domestic chores were frequently mentioned: cooking (12), cleaning the home, housework (9), washing and ironing clothes (5), and sewing or making handicrafts (4). Four Associations highlighted problems with inadequate housing conditions, such as poor-quality homes and layouts, as well as urban planning and housing solutions that are not suitable for “blind” women. Some Associations claimed their members faced no difficulties and managed well (6). One reason they could handle household tasks easily was the availability of appliances, along with help from other family members. There was a distinction between partially and fully disabled women, as well as differences related to age. However, some Associations (6) reported that most members relied on assistance from others; due to their age, care was usually provided by sighted family members, and “blind” women typically lived with relatives.¹¹¹

When we spoke with our female respondents, these topics of domestic chores and family life emerged spontaneously, even without being asked. They were more willing to discuss these matters than the men we interviewed. Men never

108 Ibid.

109 AJ SSJ 817 u R-3 File: Jugoslovensko savetovanje posvećeno slepoj ženi, Kragujevac 5.-7. 11. 1987.

110 Milić, “A different view on the effects of socialism in the change of social position of women in ex-Yugoslavia,” 193. Radina Vučetić, *Kola-kola socijalizam*, (Beograd: Službeni glasnik, 2023), 354.

111 AJ SSJ 817 u R-15 File: Upitnik o aktivnostima slepih žena u organizacijama Saveza slepih Jugoslavije, 1982.

explained how they washed clothes, cooked, or performed similar tasks, whereas women were more open to discussing them. Respondent 1 lost her sight at age 14, which gave her the experience that later helped her in life. She only needed to adapt certain aspects of her household. *I was actually independent even before that. I knew how to do all sorts of things around the house, even while I could still see. When I got married, I already knew how to do all that. I just needed to adapt certain things.*¹¹² Other respondents emphasised that parents often tended to overprotect their children with visual disabilities: *Usually, parents who have “blind” children tend to overprotect them. It’s not that my mom doesn’t know how to explain things to me; someone else who is “blind” would explain certain things about cooking differently. She often won’t even let me do things. She’ll show me, and then say: ‘I’ll do it now.’ It annoys me when people say, ‘You can’t do that.’*¹¹³ This statement illustrates family relations and broader social constructs for women with visual disabilities, often exacerbating gendered expectations and reinforcing dependency and social marginalisation rather than challenging them.

The second issue they raised was going shopping, difficulties in buying and choosing groceries in stores and markets, especially fruits and vegetables (13). Here are some statements: *The arrangement of goods in self-service stores, and insufficient assistance for “blind” women* (Loznica); *The women are bothered by the attitudes of able-bodied people in shops and by how goods are presented: for example, some shop assistants and the need to handle goods by touch* (Postojna); and *Purchasing and shopping for groceries, selecting items, and checking measurements and payment of goods* (Pančevo). It relates to the most significant problems faced by women with visual disabilities when walking in the street and their inability to move independently (19), as illustrated in the following statements: *Few of them go out to the street or shops; these tasks are handled by their family members. They also go out on the street accompanied by their family* (Ivangrad); and *They rely on accompaniment because, as most of them say, they feel embarrassed if they inconvenience someone* (Istok).¹¹⁴

112 Respondent 1, interviewed by authors, Belgrade, Serbia, 30 July 2024.

113 Respondent 3, interviewed by authors, Belgrade, Serbia, on 17 September 2024 and 20 September 2024.

114 AJ SSJ 817 u R–15 File: Upitnik o aktivnostima slepih žena u ogranizacijama Saveza slepih Jugoslavije, 1982.

CONCLUSION

This paper explores the social position of women with visual disabilities in socialist Yugoslavia through a feminist disability studies perspective, focusing on education, labour, and private life. By combining archival sources and personal narratives, it shows how gender and disability were not just personal conditions but socially constructed roles, shaped by ideology, institutions, and everyday practices. Although socialist Yugoslavia declared legal equality, lived equality was uneven. Structural inequalities persisted beneath constitutional promises, and emancipation was often partial and conditional. While the socialist era expanded opportunities for visually disabled individuals in social, cultural, and economic spheres, women with visual disabilities continued to face layered forms of exclusion. The paper examines the persistence of ableist and patriarchal stereotypes, noting that for women, losing sight often meant losing social status, autonomy, and authority within family and society. These exclusions were most evident in underdeveloped rural areas, where conservative and religious norms reinforced control over women's bodies and lives. From a disability studies point of view, this highlights exclusion as a political process sustained by prejudice, silence, and institutional inertia rather than by disability itself. Associations of visually disabled persons voiced clear, informed, and repeated demands for material, legal, and institutional change, showing that women with visual disabilities were not passive recipients of care but active agents of critique and knowledge. Yet, their voices alone were insufficient to break down deeply rooted barriers. As an exploratory study and initial intervention within the Serbian and Yugoslav academic context, this research urges further work that centres on lived experience, identity, embodiment, and resistance. Documenting these histories is not only an academic exercise but a political act—one that demands visibility, challenges exclusion, and reclaims women with visual disabilities as active subjects of history rather than marginal figures.

SOURCES AND LITERATURE

Archival sources

AJ - Archives of Yugoslavia:

AJ SSJ 817, Savez Slepih Jugoslavije.

Literature

Arsić, Radomir, and Ljubica Isaković. "Special pedagogy and its development in Serbia." *KNOWLEDGE–International Journal* (2019): 345–51.

Baketa, Nikola, and Dragana Gundogan. "Inclusion of the Roma in Croatia and Serbia: the institutional framework and its implementation." In Nikoleta Gutvajn and Milja Vujačić, eds. *Challenges and perspectives of inclusive education*, 119–36. Belgrade: Institute for educational research, 2016.

Berger, Ronald, and Loren Wilbers. *Introducing Disability Studies*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2021.

Blagojević Hjuson, Marina. *Sutra je bilojuče: prilog društvenoj istoriji žena u drugoj polovini 20. veka u Jugoslaviji*. Novi Sad: Zavod za ravnopravnost spolova, 2015.

Braddock, David L., and Susan L. Parish. "An Institutional History of Disability." In Gary L. Albrecht, Katherine D. Seelman, and Michael Bury, ed. *Handbook of Disability Studies*, 11–68. Edited by Gary L. Albrecht, Katherine D. Seelman, and Michael Bury. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001.

Burić, Olivera, Vesna Pešić, Anđelka Milić, Milosav Milosavljević, Sreten Vujović, and Miloš Nemanjić. *Porodica i društveni sistem*. Beograd: Institut za socijalnu politiku, 1980.

Burić, Ranko, Nataša Vukelić, Tihomir Nikolić, Sanja Gligorić, Vesna Todorović, and Dušica Nikolić. *60 godina rada Gradske organizacije slepih Beograda*. Beograd: Savez slepih Srbije – Gradska organizacija Beograda, 2006.

Čalić, Mari Žanin. *Istorija Jugoslavije u 20. veku*. Beograd: Clio, 2010.

de Haan, Francisca. "Introduction: Toward a Global History of Communist Women." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Communist Women Activists around the World*, 1–30. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023.

Drugi kongres defektologa Jugoslavije. *Specijalna škola: časopis za pedagoška, socijalna i medicinska pitanja dece i omladine ometene u razvitku* 15, No. 1 (1966): 278.

Erevelles, Nirmala. "Thinking with Disability Studies." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 34, No. 2 (2014).

Fujiura, Glenn, and Violet Rutkowski–Kmitta. "Counting Disability." In Gary L. Albrecht, Katherine D. Seelman, and Michael Bury, ed. *Handbook of Disability Studies*, 69–96. Edited by Gary L. Albrecht, Katherine D. Seelman, and Michael Bury. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001.

Garland–Thomson, Rosemarie. "Feminist Disability Studies." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30, No. 2 (2005): 1557–87.

Garland–Thomson, Rosemarie. "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory." *NWSA Journal* 14, No. 3 (2002): 1–32.

Gudac Dodić, Vera. "Gender Policies of the Yugoslav State in the Context of Socialism." *Tokovi istorije* 29, No. 3 (2021): 199–228.

Gudac Dodić, Vera. "Interweaving of Patriarchy and Modernity: The Impact of Political and Social Change on a Woman's Life in Serbia during the Second Half of the Twentieth Century." In Vladan Jovanović, ed. *Tradition and Transformation: Political and Social Changes in Serbia and Yugoslavia in the 20th Century*, 299–315. Beograd: Institut za noviju istoriju Srbije, 2015.

Gudac Dodić, Vera. "Once Again, on the Development of Women's History in Serbia." *Godišnjak za društvenu istoriju* 25, No. 3 (2018): 63–82.

Gudac Dodić, Vera. "Single Parent Families: Social Practice and Daily Life in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century." *Tokovi istorije* 21, No. 3 (2013): 207–32.

Gudac Dodić, Vera. *Žena u socijalizmu: položajžene u Srbiji u drugoj polovini 20. veka*. Beograd: Institut za noviju istoriju Srbije, 2006.

Gundogan, Dragana, and Nataša Milićević. "Segregated Special Education for Visually Impaired Children in Socialist Serbia—Isolation and/or Preparation for Life and Work?." *Prispevki za novejšo zgodovino / Contributions to Contemporary History* 65, No. 2 (2025): 179–201.

Gundogan, Dragana. "Social Origin of Students in Serbia: Inequalities in Access and Attainment in Higher Education". Doctoral thesis, University of Belgrade, 2022.

Hall, Kim Q. "Reimagining Disability and Gender through Feminist Studies." In *Feminist Disability Studies*, 1–10. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011.

Ivančević, Tamara. "O konferenciji 'Drug-ca žena': Neprekidno preplitanje glasovaprethodnica i savremenica." Beograd: Befem, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, 2024.

Jerončić, M. "Private and Public Patriarchy: Social Position and the Role of Women during the Socialist Period in Yugoslavia." *Genero: časopis za feminističku teoriju i studije kulture* 19, No. 1 (2015): 1–26.

Kristiansen, Kristjana, Simo Vehmas, and Tom Shakespeare, eds. *Arguing about Disability: Philosophical Perspectives*. London & New York: Routledge, 2009.

Laban, Radmila. *Rukama do svetlosti: Sto godina rada škole za učenike oštećenog vida "Veljko Ramadanović" u Zemunu (1917–2017)*. Zemun: Škola za učenikeoštećenogvida "Veljko Ramadanović", 2017.

Marković, Predrag J., and Nataša Milićević. "Serbian Historiography in the Time of Transition: A Struggle for Legitimacy." *Istorija 20. veka*, No. 1 (2007): 145–66.

Marković, Predrag J., Ković, Miloš and Milićević, Nataša "Historiography in Serbia. Developments since 1989." In Ulf Brunnbauer, ed. *(Re) Writing History. Historiography in Southeast Europe after Socialism*, 277–316. Studies on South East Europe vol. 4. Münster: Lit Verlag 2004.

Marković, Tonči. *Specifičnosti braka i porodice kod socijalne grupe slijepih u BiH*. Sarajevo: Zajednica, 1981.

Milić, Anđelka. “A Different View on the Effects of Socialism on the Social Position of Women in Ex-Yugoslavia.” In Sreten Vujović, ed. *Risk Society: Changes, Inequalities and Social Problems in Contemporary Serbia*, 181–98. Beograd: Čigoja štampa, 2008.

Mintz, Susannah. “Invisible Disability.” In *Feminist Disability Studies*. Edited by Kim Q. Hall, 75–92. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011.

Morris, Jenny. “Feminism, Gender and Disability.” Paper presented at a seminar in Sydney, Australia, 1998.

Mučić, Fadil. *Savez civilnih invalida rata Jugoslavije*. Beograd: Savez civilnih invalida rata Jugoslavije, 2004.

Savić, Ljubomir. *Istorija slepih Srbije*. Beograd: Savez slepih Srbije, 1964.

Stanković, Ljiljana, and Goran Penev. “Trends of Extramarital Births in Serbia in the Second Half of the 20th and at the Beginning of the 21st Century in the Wider European Context.” *Stanovništvo* 48, No. 1 (2010): 1–24.

Stanojević, Dragan. *Novo očinstvo u Srbiji*. Beograd: ISI, 2018.

Thompson, Paul. *Glas prošlosti*. Beograd: Clio, 2012.

Turner, David. *Disability in 18th Century England: Imagining Physical Impairment*. London: Routledge, 2012.

Valgerður Stefánsdóttir, Guðrún, Sólveig Ólafsdóttir, and Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon. *Disability Studies Meets Microhistory: The Secret Life of Bibi in Berlin*. New York: Routledge, 2024.

Vučetić, Radina. *Koka-kola socijalizam*. Beograd: Službeni glasnik, 2023.

Vukotić, Đorđe. *Graditelji svog života: Slepi Beograda 1941–1981*. Beograd: Savez slepih Beograda, 1984.

Oral sources

Respondent 1, interview conducted in Belgrade on 30 July 2024.

Respondent 2, interview conducted by telephone on 14 September 2024.

Respondent 3, interview conducted in Belgrade on 17 September 2024 and 20 September 2024.

Respondent 1: female, born in a village in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1956, lost her sight at the age of 14 as a reaction to medication; completed the final year at a special elementary school in Zemun and a lyceum in Belgrade; graduated from the Faculty of Philosophy, Psychology at Belgrade; worked at the National Library; engaged with the International League of “Blind” Esperantists as its president.

Respondent 2: female, born in a village in Western Serbia in 1966, lost her sight completely at the age of 3, completed special elementary and secondary schools in Zemun; worked for a state-owned company in Užice, and was involved with the local Association for “blind” people.

Respondent 3: female, born in Belgrade in 1974, “blind” from birth, preborn; completed special elementary, secondary, and lower music schools in Zemun and an integrated music school; graduated from a Music academy; works as a piano teacher at a music school.

