

Aug-2017

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Recommended Citation

Simic, Olivera (2017). Drinking Coffee in Bosnia: Listening to Stories of Wartime Violence and Rape. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 18(4), 321-328.

Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol18/iss4/23>

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Drinking Coffee in Bosnia: Listening to Stories of Wartime Violence and Rape

By Olivera Simić¹

Welcome to Bosnia

'This young man, our waiter, graduated from the Faculty of Business and Economics with a high distinction and has now worked as a waiter for the past, — how many years, Jovan?' A young man with deep dark eyes, timidly responded, 'Four, five years or so.' 'You see, Olivera, this is our Bosnia; the country which employs its best students to work as tradespersons, waitresses, salespersons, carpenters,' half-jokingly, half-sarcastically a well-known long term feminist activist, Dragana, told me while gently tapping Jovan on his shoulder. Although sarcasm is not unusual for Bosnians but rather represents 'some kind of "Bosnian way" of dealing with or reacting to the war'², the two had obviously known each other for a long time. This brief exchange between the two of them was the first thing I would hear upon my arrival to Tarnovo.³ Dragana picked me up from the bus station and took me straight to the *kafana* (pub) for a coffee to be made by Jovan, a graduate economist turned waiter. Going to the *kafana* is the most expected and natural thing to do in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bosnia), since drinking coffee with friends and guests is an important ritual to obey, a part of the country's cultural tradition. Coffee in Bosnia is not about drinking; it is the journey of listening and talking to your friends and family, about socialising and taking time to be together. Bosnians do not have coffee in a rush; they take time to *ćeif* it⁴ by gradually drinking small sips of coffee, the breaks serving to allow opportunity to converse and enjoy its aroma.⁵ Born into this tradition, I was prepared to take time and listen to Dragana's stories.

The 'welcoming' story about Jovan, that portrays the country's complete socio-economic fiasco, was not news to me, but it set the scene for all the other stories to come that afternoon. For

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² Nedin Mutić, "Self and Other in Balkan (Post-) War Cinema" in Pal Kolsto (ed.), *Media Discourse and the Yugoslav Conflicts: Representations of Self and Other* (Routledge, 2016), 219.

³ I changed the original names of the people, the places where conversations had been conducted and of the women association to protect people's identity for security reasons. Women that I spoke to still feel afraid to speak up publically about the war crimes. All interlocutors knew that I am a researcher and consented that I use their stories to write publications as long as I conceal their identity.

⁴ The word *ćeif* or *ćef* is of Turkish origin and means joy, enjoyment, happiness, good will and good mood.

⁵ On the importance of coffee drinking in Bosnia, see for example: Tone Bringa, *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way: Identity and Community in a Central Bosnian Village* (Princeton, 1995); Tone Bringa, "Reconciliation in Bosnia-Herzegovina" in Elin Skaar, Siri Gløppen and Astri Suhrke (eds.), *Roads to Reconciliation* (Lexington Books, 2005), 194; Elissa Helms, *Innocence and Victimhood: Gender, Nation and Women's Activism in Postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina* (The University of Wisconsin Press, 2013).

those who follow the post-war life in Bosnia, the life of poverty and corruption, of highly educated young people, intellectuals, working for a minimum wage for often half-illiterate owners of private businesses, is all too common. While we were waiting for our coffee, Dragana went on to tell me about Jovan's parents, originally from Tarčin, near Konjic, who are now trying to survive by buying some fancy clothes in Turkey and Italy and selling them in the city's market place. Jovan's parents, like the majority of people in Bosnia, are making ends meet by clinging to the informal, underground, black-market economy, which has been the main mode of survival for the past two decades.⁶

His mother, Anka—a Croat—was once a chief inspector in a factory which manufactured ammunition in Konjic and his father, Milan—a Serb—also worked in the same factory as a production-line worker. Both of them could probably never have imagined that the ammunition they made would turn against them one day. Milan was detained in the infamous Čelebići concentration camp⁷ during the war and survived severe beatings and torture. After he was released from the camp, he and Anka together with their young son escaped to Tarnovo. 'He [Milan] grows a beard,' Dragana raised her right hand and covered her cheeks and chin, 'to hide the deep scars imprinted on his flesh left after the torture.' She muttered these words, looking quickly around her making sure people couldn't hear us. Then she put her left hand behind her back, 'He has a huge scar across his back too.'

This is how Dragana and I started our feminist-activist 'dealing with the past' chat over coffee. The day was unusually hot when I arrived to visit the association of women, called *Duga* (Rainbow), which Dragana had established with a few other women almost two decades ago in Tarnovo, in eastern Bosnia. To get to the town, I had travelled for two-and-a-half hours on a bus that did not have an air conditioner. Instead, the driver made a 'natural' climate by opening both doors (the entrance and driver's) to keep us cool. The bus was in such bad shape that I could see the road beneath me through the holes in its floor. My eyes were darting in alert between the floor and bus windows, since the rubber around their frames was completely damaged and hung over the passenger seats. I kept imagining all the fatal scenarios and accidents that might come from either beneath or above me. Miraculously, we arrived in the town in one piece. I hurled myself towards the bus entrance and jumped out. Not even the day's breathless humidity could diminish my relief that this trip was over.

Telling the Stories

Dragana, a long-term and well-known feminist activist, knows and is known by everyone in this small town. *Duga* was one of the very first women's organisation founded in Tarnovo, in 1996. Together with other organisations in the region, it makes a significant impact on the local community. Since its inception, *Duga* has been working on gender equality, empowerment and political education of young girls and women. Their most significant work has been on

⁶ For more on the black market economy and high rates of unemployment in Bosnia, see for example: Peter Andreas, *Blue Helmets and Black Markets: The Business of Survival in the Siege of Sarajevo* (Cornell University Press, 2008); Ana E. Juncos, *EU foreign and security policy in Bosnia: the politics of coherence and effectiveness* (Manchester University Press, 2013), 105.

⁷ The Čelebići prison camp was a prison camp run by Croat and Bosnian Muslim forces in Čelebići, a village in the central Bosnian municipality of Konjic, during the Bosnian War. The camp was used to detain Serb civilians and prisoners of war, rounded up in and around Konjic in May 1992. Prisoners at the camp were subjected to killings, torture, sexual assaults, beatings and otherwise cruel and inhuman treatment. See, the ICTY Judgment, *Prosecutor v. Zdravko Mucic et al.* ("Celebici case") (IT-96-21-A), 20 February 2001.

implementing projects related to women's return to their pre-war homes and their reintegration with the local population. *Duga* has organised series of workshops, round tables, seminars and lectures with an aim to transcend ethnic animosities and build sustainable peace, democracy and pre-war multiculturalism in the eastern Bosnia region.

Tarnovo, although only a small town, has one of the highest numbers of returnees in the country. Dragana spent the wartime in her hometown and witnessed the war first hand. Together with *Duga*, she has helped many women return to their pre-war homes, start small businesses, gain some psychological support, and cross ethnic borders and divisions.

Dragana keeps in her mind and heart many stories women have told her about their ordeals during the war. To me, she truly represents, as do many other feminist activists in the region, a living library of women's stories of pain and suffering, and of their courage and resilience too. While we were sitting and talking about the difficult situation in which women survivors of wartime rape and torture live today, one such woman passed by the *kafana* in which we were sitting. Dragana pointed with her head in the woman's direction. It was Milka, Dragana informed me, a woman displaced from Zenica, who is only in her late 40s but looks like she is in her 60s. Milka is mentally ill; she wanders through the town and talks to herself. People know of her, but not the story hidden in her bodily appearance.

Dragana knows what is behind Milka's strange look and behaviour. She and her two daughters were beaten and kicked out of their home by her violent husband because of her ethnic identity. Her daughters changed their identity and names to those of Orthodox Christians. They do not remember their father and have no contact with him. They both are now married with their own families. Their husbands do not know their past. Dragana lifted up her coffee cup, took a sip and told me another story.

'There is another woman living in this building. A young woman, who is not well either. She was raped during the war.' Dragana pointed towards one of the communist-style grey and yellow pre-war buildings behind her back. Many of these women never talked about their experiences with anyone apart from Dragana and *Duga*. Some are seriously mentally ill, and receive neither psychological assistance nor state welfare. Some, as young girls, either witnessed their mothers being gang-raped or were raped themselves. A woman, Tanja, who was only 10 when she was raped, is now married with two children. Dragana said she could not talk and walk for two years after the rape. 'She never returned to school after that. She has only four grades of primary school.' She is in her 30s now with no status of civilian victim of war. She has no health care or any social security secured by the state. *Duga* is assisting Tanja to enroll in a course for hairdressers and start her own small business.

Some women have never returned to their pre-war homes. To them, it is too painful to go back to what has become a 'crime scene', since many of them survived rape in their homes, in front of their children. They also do not want to meet their rapists who have frequently stayed in the communities and have either never been prosecuted for what they did or if so, after serving only two-thirds of their sentences often returned back home.⁸ What came out in some of the stories that Dragana told me, was that some female children were not only witnesses but also victims of sexual abuse themselves. None of these women, according to Dragana, are interested in seeking justice from the criminal justice system. They, in fact, do not want to tell anyone about their experiences. These women are now adults; all have children and families. Why would they come out to tell their stories when all they may face is ostracism and possible divorce?

⁸ On the early release of war criminals see, Barbora Hola and Joris van Wijk, "Life after Conviction at International Criminal Tribunals", *Journal of International Criminal Justice* 12(1) 2014.

Another story related by Dragana:

There was one young woman who told us that her father was taken to a concentration camp during the war and she, her younger sister and mother were detained in their house. Many soldiers, belonging to different military and paramilitary groups, would come in and out of their home and her mother was forced to make pies and other food for them. She and her sister would hide under the table when soldiers would come into the house and she would often cover her sister's eyes so she could not watch when they became violent. She never used the word "rape" to describe their behaviour.

Dragana said that she wanted to take this young woman, Branka, to her pre-war home to see it; to start the process of property return. However, Branka and her family were not even interested in exchanging the property; they simply did not want to go back there, not even for a quick visit. After many months of talks and negotiations, the young woman finally agreed to go with Dragana to visit her pre-war home.

Dragana was driving and everything was fine until they came very close to their house and the young woman suddenly started screaming and shouting. In this state of acute rage, she smashed a car window with her right elbow. Branka was screaming, 'I don't want to see your big cock, I hate you!' The moment of realisation about what had really happened in that house 20 years ago and why Branka never wanted to return, hit Dragana with full force. Dragana was shocked and could not control her. For Dragana, even with many years of experience working with women with trauma, 'This was the first time,' as she told me, 'I saw what it really means to live with trauma.'

Listening to Stories

While I was listening to one story after another, I started to think what should we, as feminist academics and activists, do with the stories that we would never hear if it was not for local feminist activists who gained the trust of women survivors and became the recipients of their shared stories? I asked Dragana if she had ever written down these women's stories. She replied, 'We don't have the time and resources. We don't have the skills. We don't speak or write English, but most of all—we don't know how to do it. That is why I am telling you them. I hope you can document some.' *Duga* has listened to hundreds of such stories over the past 20 years but has never documented even a single one.

What is our responsibility when local activists themselves do not document stories? Dragana and her colleagues who are activists, practitioners working in the field, have—by their own report—insufficient time to document them. Also, many women who tell their stories over coffee may not necessarily want their histories to be repeated publically, or at least not with their names attached. Yet, feminists know how important it is to document women's lives and experiences. Women do not want their identities to be revealed; they are afraid of stigmatisation and ostracism; of their husbands' and families' reactions. However, for many it is important that their voices are transmitted and translated into the public domain. Elisabeth Porter notes that while story-telling is crucial, the quality of listening is too. Articulating truth-narratives is important for women who have been traumatised in order to promote the search for justice and healing.⁹

⁹ Elisabeth Porter, "Women's Truth Narratives: The Power of Compassionate Listening", *Critical Half: Bi-Annual Journal of Women for Women International* 5(2) 2007, 21.

Women's testimonies are important for feminist theory of all kinds, which is grounded in the variety of real-life stories that women tell about themselves.¹⁰ Feminist scholars have written extensively about the power of women's life stories to create theory and to establish woman as the subject.¹¹

The listening to truth-narratives also implies bearing 'witness to the testimony' by which 'the responsibility for finding justice is shared'.¹² The documenting and preserving of women's stories are important segments of a larger feminist project which aims to capture women's experiences of war and violence that have been denied, ignored and silenced. Documentation is, if not finding, then seeking justice for women's suffering.

Building Connections

A few days before I arrived in Tarnovo, I travelled through north-east Bosnia and visited a community that was displaced and resettled in a village called Veliki Han, near Kluj. There I met Marija, a woman who was detained in a camp with her three children. The youngest was her daughter Radmila, only nine months old at the time. Her five year old son, Milorad, has suffered from a permanent speech impediment caused by a shock of witnessing her mother being abused. I have known Marija for some years now and closely followed her struggle to obtain some form of justice for the rape she survived during the war. Although I have known her for the past few years, it is only recently that I started to gather the pieces together and gain the full story of what had happened to her and why she has failed to receive any form of legal justice. I have built my relationship with Marija carefully. Over the years, I told Marija about myself and replied to all her questions about my education, job and life during and after the war. This process of building rapport with Marija is important feminist methodology that allowed me to gain access to information that she has hardly shared with anyone so far. Traditional feminist theory has suggested benefits of using engagement, closeness and empathy to build rapport.¹³

I never used an audio recorder in our meetings and always let Marija guide our conversations. I was never in a hurry to find out 'all of it', and did not lead any structured interview with her. I purposely did not want to do so, since I strived to create, as much as possible, a non-hierarchical research relationship between the two of us. I utilised a 'participatory model' that would allow me to overcome separation between the researcher (me) and the researched (Marija).¹⁴

To Marija, and in Bosnia, I am at once both an insider and outsider, and I constantly had to negotiate these positions. I grew up in an urban, middle-class and well-educated family in Bosnia and did not share experiences of life in rural communities before, during or after the war. From this perspective, I had feelings of being an 'outsider' regardless that I was born and grew up

¹⁰ Maria C. Lugones and Elizabeth V. Spelman, "Have we got a theory for you! Feminist theory, cultural imperialism and the demand for "the women's voice", in Susan Archer Mann and Ashly Suzanne Patterson (eds.), *Reading Feminist Theory: From Modernity to Postmodernity* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 25.

¹¹ Mimi Arnstein, "Consciousness Raising: Self-Defining Feminism and the Problem of Postmodern Politics" in Gail Currie and Celia Rothenberg (eds.), *Feminist (Re)visions of the Subject: Landscapes, Ethnoscapes, and Theoryscapes* (Lexington Books, 2001), 160.

¹² Susan McKay, "Gender Justice and Reconciliation", *Women's Studies International Forum* 23(5) 2000, 564.

¹³ Shulamit Reinharz and Lynn Davidman, *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (Oxford University Press, 1992).

¹⁴ Pamela Cotterill, "Interviewing Women: Issues of Friendship, Vulnerability, and Power", *Women Studies International Forum* 15 (5/6) 1992, 593-606.

in Bosnia. As Nancy Naples and Radhika Parameswaran argue, insider and outsider concepts are not binary but rather shifting, fluid and subject to negotiation within the research setting.¹⁵

Marija and many other women survivors that I met, are rural women with little or no education, severely traumatised and yet have been provided with little or no psychological—or any other form of—assistance so far. It is often difficult for these women to articulate their experiences of deeply traumatic crimes, such as rape, in a fully comprehensive narrative. Although I was listening attentively, I needed a few years to connect the dots and understand the whole story that was woven slowly during our sporadic conversations over coffee. In June 2016, when Marija and I met in her home for coffee, Marija handed to me her ‘case file’ with neatly stacked documents about the time she had spent in a rape camp with her children, including their medical and legal documents. These were confidential files that she wanted me to take with me, read through and see if there was anything more she could do to achieve some justice. ‘You know the law. I don’t know where to go anymore, what to do. Maybe you can find something in there that I can use, some facts, something so I can get some justice.’

She wanted me to read them all carefully and tell her if she still had a chance to receive some form of legal justice. She trusts me. But, we had travelled a long way to get to this point—to me being invited for coffee in Marija’s house. I had never been invited previously nor met any of her children. I was privileged and honoured since I knew what a long time it had taken Marija to gain that confidence in me. She knew I would not share her confidential files with anyone. But, it had taken four years of knowing each other to reach that place.

Over a few late nights, I read Marija’s documents carefully and I realised I needed to find a way to tell her that unfortunately she should not waste her time, funds, and health battling an already lost battle with the state. Her sister Jovana, who had also been detained and raped in a camp with her two children, died of a heart attack two years ago. She died just when the first legal proceedings for the rapes of Serb women in the Posavina region started before the State Court in Sarajevo. Jovana was to have become one of its key witnesses.

Marija’s sister was in a poor health already, but her heart betrayed her once the case was opened and proceedings started. ‘She was happy when she learned that the proceedings against rapists would start. We had been waiting for this moment for 20 years, but her heart could not cope with it all,’ Marija told me. Jovana was excited, but also afraid for her children’s wellbeing and future once the trial took off. She told Marija that she often felt fear of riding her bike alone through the nearby woods, as she expected that someone may attack her for bringing the rapists to trial. Her husband had left her a long time ago, once she went public with her story of gang rape in 1992. At that time, they were both young women in their late 20s and with young children when they were detained and gang-raped.

Marija also had a heart attack last year, but luckily survived it. She thinks her daughter, who was with her when she had the attack, was the one who saved her life. ‘She called an ambulance and took me to emergency,’ Marija told me. Her heart, as with her general health, was already weak. But once she finally lost the battle with the administrative system and laws in Republika Srpska, which did not want to recognise Marija’s two children as civilian victims of war—even though they were also detained in camp with her—her heart betrayed her. After several

¹⁵ Nancy Naples, *Feminism and method: Ethnography, discourse analysis, and activist research* (New York, Routledge, 2003); Nancy Naples, “The outsider phenomenon” in Carolyn D. Smith and William Kornblum (eds.), *In the field: reading of the field research experience* (Praeger, 1996), 139-159; Radhika Parameswaran, “Feminist media ethnography in India: Exploring power, gender, and culture in the field”, *Qualitative Inquiry* 7 (1) 2001, 69-103.

years of battling with the system, appealing its decisions, appearing in front of various commissions which determine the status of victims, and telling her story numerous times in front of her children, Marija lost her administrative battle for good. Her children, although with her in the camp, will not be recognised as civilian victims of war.

To gain the status of civilian victim is important since it provides access to a monthly pension, which although very low (60 euros) would provide at least some means for survival. Both of her children (now adults in their 30s) have no employment and have each two children of their own. The reason why they did not gain the status is that they did not reach the extremely high threshold level of 60% bodily damage, according to the law.¹⁶ Her children could not prove 60% but only 40%. No logic, no justice behind these numbers.

(No) Justice for Women

I read all Marija's documents, all the administrative decisions and legal judgments that had freed her rapists because there was not sufficient evidence that *these men, men that Marija is accusing* were the rapists. All four defended themselves by claiming that they were not in Bosnia at the time of the alleged rape. And while not negating that women, including Marija, were raped, the judges concluded that there was not enough evidence that these four particular men were the rapists. Marija was shattered by this decision. 'I need to see some justice. I invested all my life into this. If they could at least get one year in prison, only one year, I would be satisfied. But to release them, I cannot accept that,' said Marija to me. I was speechless. What was I supposed to tell her? That there is justice but she just needs to be a little bit more patient and wait? For how long? She has already waited 20 years to hear that the highest institutions of justice do not trust her and that her rapists were family men with children, who were *allegedly* in Germany and Switzerland with their wives when the rapes occurred. This was what the rapists told the court, what was confirmed by their wives, and what the court decided to believe in.

The rapists had been released and were back in their community; a community which is only half-an-hour's drive from Marija's house. Marija wholeheartedly believed in the Bosnian justice system and declined the offered witness protection. 'I have nothing to be ashamed of. They are the ones who should be ashamed. I did not have protection in 1992 and I don't need protection now.' She went public with her story, her children and community know it. She exposed herself and her children to the great risk of not only being ostracised, but being threatened by those on the rapists' side. In March 2016, three months after the rapists had been released, a car pulled up in front of Marija while she was walking home from the market. A man, who was sitting next to the driver, tried to pull her in. She fought with him and managed to run away while he sped off. She called the police but she could not remember the car registration number and the driver was never identified.

Marija has been living in a fear for the past 20 years. After her heart attack, her heart now beats at only 38% capacity and she is on daily medication. Marija, a petite woman with bright blue eyes is only 53. She lost the battle with institutions, with a corrupted system that does not take care of women. The criminal system is rough and merciless. It raised the hopes of women such as Marija that it would provide justice, but then left female witnesses and victims on their own. It

¹⁶ "Law on the protection of civilian victims of war in the Republika Srpska", *Official Gazette*, no. 25/93 of 30 December 1993, with amendments published in the *Official Gazette* no. 1/94 – Special edition, 32/94, 37/07 and 60/07.

offers little or no support to those, such as Marija, who decide to pursue justice. Marija had to cover her own travel expenses to the court and received little to no legal aid.

The prosecutor did not prove the identity of the rapists, so they walked free and returned to their community—the community in Marija’s neighbourhood. I agonised over the necessity to tell her that she would be better off investing her fragile strength, energy and life elsewhere, away from the state and its institutions. Where should Marija seek justice 20 years after her hopes for justice had been raised? After she had repeated her story of torture and rape countless times before various state organs, hoping that it was worthwhile re-traumatising herself over and over again since someone may finally listen to her, take her story seriously and trust her—where? She feels betrayed, untrusted, her story misused and reinterpreted as a false accusation with even the possible motivation of revenge—as it was argued by the defense, since her husband was killed two weeks before she was raped.

Writing Women’s Stories

Stories of Milka, Tanja, Branka, Jovana and Marija are exemplary stories that represent so many untold, buried accounts that risk never to be documented in feminist archives; but to stay part of a living feminist-activist and experience-based practice knowledge—of a ‘theory which walks’. After many years of listening to women’s stories, I find it more and more difficult to employ traditional, empirical, qualitative-research methods and think it is more ethically responsible to listen to women stories, as narrated by feminist activists who listened and vividly remember what women survivors have told them. I could not bear to sit down with women survivors for an interview and ask women a set of questions. I had planned to do this, but in my six weeks travelling through Bosnia, I could not bring myself to do so.

I simply could not stop the natural flow of women talking over coffee and turn it into formalities. I felt it would be disrespectful; it would be invasive and unethical. I spent lots of time thinking about methodologies and concluded that my traditional methods of non-structured interviewing no longer made sense. I wanted women to tell me what they think is important for them to share. I did not want to give them false hope that with my research I could change their lives for the better. They were betrayed by their government so many times and had their hopes raised high, only to have them fall again and again, with no support apart from what they occasionally receive from each other. I decided my work is to listen attentively, to write carefully, and to bring these stories to the public eye—your eye.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the editor of *Jiws*, Diana J. Fox and the peer reviewer for their feedback on the previous draft of this paper. I would also like to thank all the women for sharing their stories.