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Challenging Bosnian Women's Identity as Rape Victims, as Unending Victims: The 'Other' Sex in Times of War

By Olivera Simić¹

Abstract

In this paper I reflect on my attendance of the Women's Worlds 2011 congress held in Ottawa, Canada. I analyze responses of the international feminist audience to the paper I presented during the congress. The paper offered an analysis of the empirical data collected during my fieldwork in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) in 2008 and was concerned with Bosnian women and their sexual relationships with peacekeepers during the war and in post conflict BiH. I argue that because of an almost exclusive focus on mass rapes endured by Bosnian women during the war and a vast feminist literature focused on sexual violence in BiH, to talk about positive sex in times of war has become a challenging and, at times, almost impossible task. This paper is concerned with re-inventing and re-constructing Bosnian women's multiple identities: as marked by victimhood, but also by agency, resilience and utmost courage.

Key words: rape, Bosnian women, victims

Feminist fears and discontents: sex in times of war

Why do many feminists feel uncomfortable talking about consensual sex in times of war? Why is it hard to imagine consensual states of desire during warfare? Is all sex under coercive circumstances rape? These questions haunt me because I know of other stories, other experiences that tell of consensual sex in Sarajevo during the siege as well as in other BiH cities during the war. I have a close friend, who lived in besieged Sarajevo, had sex with her then boyfriend and conceived her son in 1994 – a seemingly unthinkable year in Sarajevo to have sex for pleasure. I know of many other babies conceived and born during the war – babies born from love, not rape. I also know of consensual sex between women and men belonging to different ethnic groups; people who should have been 'enemies'.

All of these stories were on my mind when I attended the Women's Worlds 2011 congress held in Ottawa, Canada. It was truly a wonderful event in which almost two thousand women from ninety-two countries came to exchange ideas, network, 'connect and converse.'¹ It. The congress, attended by women from all age groups and from various social, cultural and economic backgrounds, was the largest international gathering of women to ever take place in Canada. The uniqueness of the first congress in 1981, and of the congresses that followed, lay in bringing together feminist scholars and grassroots activists to participate in an inclusive, non-elitist conference (Song, 2005). I particularly enjoyed the plenary sessions, which featured women from marginalized and under-represented communities – indigenous, transgendered and women with disabilities. In many respects, such a gathering was a historic event since many feminists work in

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isolation, under political and economic pressure and in life-threatening situations. It was an opportunity for women from around the world to come together and to share women's accomplishments but also the struggles and challenges they face in the 21st century.

The conference in Ottawa gave me a chance to meet the women behind articles and books I had been reading. The presence of famous feminist scholars such as Cynthia Enloe and Kathleen Barry meant a great deal to me. Because I come from a country devastated by civil war, because I experienced war first hand and know what it means to lose one's country of birth, to lose family and friends, to be a refugee and to search for and reinvent one's identity,ⁱⁱ being present at an academic conference such as this and presenting my work surrounded by well known feminist thinkers brought me much pleasure, but also revealed many contradictions. My long-term academic interest has been in UN peacekeeping operations and peacekeepers, in particular those who served in the region of former Yugoslavia – the region in which I was born. I was raised in a middle-class family and educated in my hometown of Banjaluka, where I lived my whole life before the war started. I was proud to be a 'Yugoslav girl' and to belong to what I had regarded as a heterogeneous, multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-lingual community of people. At the beginning of 1991, I witnessed my country falling apart and saw first-hand unspeakable atrocities. The pain I have experienced through the loss of my country, of my friends and neighbours, has marked my life and has made me committed to the task of understanding why people act in destructive ways, and the causes and consequences of their behaviour.

My initial research was on peacekeepers and sexual violence, with the focus on the peacekeepers' involvement in trafficking women. However, in my PhD thesis, I examined a different phenomenon. While my thesis focused on UN peacekeeping, it did not concern sexual abuse but consensual sexual relationships between peacekeepers and local women in BiH. I interviewed Bosnian women, who had consensual sexual relationships with peacekeepers during the war and in its aftermath. We talked about their desires, experiences and opinions of the UN 'zero tolerance policy' (ZTP) on sexual abuse, which also 'strongly discourages' sexual relationships.ⁱⁱⁱ Although, the idea of consent in a post-conflict society is complex, I use the idea of consent in a way that links it directly to the notion of women's agency. While I acknowledge that it may be 'reasonable to be skeptical about people's choices' (Phillips, 2001:262) which are 'socially constructed and constrained' (Nussbaum, 2000), I believe that it is possible to give meaningful consent in times of war and in the post-conflict period.

All Bosnian women interviewees, except for one, thought that the ZTP was over-inclusive and overprotective in relation to sexual relationships. They believed that there was no need to protect women from consensual sexual relationships with peacekeepers, but instead it was appropriate to leave the decision to the individuals involved in such relationships. The regulation of sexual relationships was driven by the UN outrage at the apparent rapid growth in sexual exploitation and abuse cases.^{iv} The ZTP makes a number of assumptions about sexual relationships and the rhetorical framework, in which these relationships are represented, is contested. The most fundamental assumption is that of 'vulnerability' and inherent victimhood of local women and of an 'imbalance of power' between them and the peacekeepers. However, there is no empirical evidence to suggest that consensual sexual relationships in peacekeeping operations are detrimental; rather it

seems, according to the interviewees, that the most pressing problem for women is a high rate of unemployment and a lack of income-generating opportunities.

I analyzed the rich empirical data I obtained during my field work and was excited about presenting the voices of Bosnian women to the audience of feminist scholars. When it was my time to enter the conversation, I had to face something I did not expect. The subject of my paper, 'Policing the Peacekeepers' Sex: The Regulation of Sexual Relationships between Local Women and UN Peacekeepers', seemed to disappoint my audience because it did not reinforce the prevailing image of Bosnian woman in wartime – the image of her as a victim. I dared to speak of sexual agency during the time of devastation and loss. I said that the Bosnian women I interviewed told me that they had various motivations for engaging in sexual relationships with peacekeepers, and that these ranged from love to sex for fun. Maybe love could be conceived of as a legitimate reason for entering into sexual relationships, but who could possibly imagine a Bosnian woman having sex for fun during the war? My interviewees were clearly fracturing the image of a Bosnian woman as victim only. As one of them stated, 'The fact is that I was not thinking about responsibilities, obligations, leaving my country or marriage...when we came to the point of talking about it, I ran away from the whole idea.'

Although Bosnian women are a specific cultural group, and caution should be exercised when generalizing from their experiences, at the very least their perspectives show that women 'beneficiaries' are not a homogenous group as the ZTP policy assumes, and that not all women are sexually vulnerable and in need of the level of the protection that the policy seeks to provide. The experiences of Bosnian women also suggest that it may be unwise to make similar assumptions about women in other cultural and geo-political contexts, who engage in sexual relationships with peacekeepers as their relationships may also be motivated by such ordinary desires as sexual attraction, love, friendship and a sense of adventure.

Before I explore this dilemma further, I want to discuss the focus on war-related issues at the congress as a whole. A vast range of topics were explored, but only a handful of them engaged with women and war. Kathleen Barry's sessions on war were in that sense exceptional and organized in an *ad hoc* fashion. Barry conducted solo sessions on a daily basis, in which she invited women participants to engage in a dialogue on violence, militarism and masculinity, on war veterans, the US army and empathy. Barry is a radical feminist, who is famous for her writing on prostitution as a human rights violation (1984). Her new book on the US soldiers came as a surprise to many and signaled a major shift from her previous research (2010). The fact that she organized a solo session every day to talk to groups of us interested in war and gender was a significant decision on her part – an expression of her outrage about war and her determination to confront its varied consequences. I too was trying to extend thinking about gender in war time, but I had a more difficult time because of my personal experience with war. However, with the exception of Barry's sessions and a few others, I was surprised by the fact that the on-going wars and countless women, who either lived or still live under occupation or in a state of siege, did not attract more panels and greater discussion. There were many women at the congress, who had experienced war either directly or indirectly, and I felt that the congress had a 'moral obligation' to make their

voices heard. But their silence was pervasive. I, on the other hand, found it very hard to remain silent about the history that shaped my life.

Bosnian Women: Victims, survivors, agents?

My writing is about war, its consequences and the ways in which people try to make sense of a violent past, face it and move forward. I have been inspired by feminist thinkers, such as Enloe, Otto, Vance and others, who, each in their own way, talk about pleasures and dangers of sex for women in times of war. I know the dangers part very well. Feminist thinking has been an important part of my personal and academic life because of its insights into and its concern for women in war, particularly the victims of the war in my country with its horrendous rape camps. Rape has always been 'a part of war' and BiH is no exception (Brownmiller, 1976).

It is all too well documented that one of the main features of the BiH conflict was the highly organized and calculated systemic rape of Bosnian Muslim women by the Bosnian Serb army. It has been estimated that in 1993 approximately twenty thousand Bosnian Muslim women were raped by Bosnian Serb men in what were known as 'rape camps' (Thomas and Regan Ralph, 1990:203).^v The rape of women was used as a weapon of war and a deliberate military strategy to spread terror, destabilize the civilian population and reward soldiers (Copelon, 1999, 64). It was also a tool of ethnic cleansing: sexual violence against women, in particular Muslim women, was used to humiliate their ethnic group as a whole (Turpin, 1999:1,5; Copelon, 1999: 63,69). In the *Kunarac* case, the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) found, for the first time in judicial history, that rape was 'used by members of the Bosnian Serb armed forces as an instrument of terror'.^{vi} The recognition of sexual violence as a crime against humanity, and a war crime 'was result of considerable work and lobbying by women's organizations' (Charlesworth, 1999:379). Still, while the ICTY's view of the use of rape in the Bosnian war was groundbreaking and lauded as a great success by many feminists, Engle argues that on some level the ICTY, influenced by feminist thinking, has inadvertently functioned to limit the narratives about women in war, denying much of women's sexual and political agency (Engle, 2008, 942). Engle contends that many feminists treated at least some women as victims only, rather than as people capable of political and sexual agency during the war (Engle, 2005, 780). My research was prompted by the recognition that many important narratives of women's agency in times of war have become silenced and ignored.

I spent several years researching the sexual abuse of women in the wars in the former Yugoslavia, but then I decided to shift my concern to agency and to look at women, who were not victims of sexual abuse but, instead, had consensual sex in times of war. I became interested in the contrasting worlds of consensual sex – sex of desire and choice – and of rape that operated alongside each other in the war-time BiH. I had become overwhelmed with the feminist literature on rape in BiH^{vii} and disenchanted with its dominant image and assumption that Bosnian women were essentially victims. I do not deny the fact that women are being taken advantage of in times of peace and war and that they are vulnerable. At the same time I contend that imagining, positioning and constructing women in war as nothing but victims can be harmful to these same women. What is happening to women during war? Rape, yes, but not only. Too much emphasis on the criminalization of sexual violence tends to diminish our understanding of women's

capacity to consensually engage in sexual activities and to present as impossible consensual sexual relationships between different ethnic groups in BiH, at least during the war (Engle, 2005:808). What is even more concerning is that only a few feminist thinkers have considered negative effects of such criminalization on the recognition of women's agency during the times of war (Engle, 2005:784).

I am not the only scholar to question the totalizing narrative of victimization that grows out of war. Jasmina Husanovic, a feminist scholar from BiH, writes that the central question of feminist politics in BiH is how at the same time to deal with 'loss, rupture, break – mend it, repair it, restore it, repoliticize it, reimagine it, make it creative, politically productive, turn it into the politics of hope, of emancipator politics?' (2009:113). How we can disrupt the script that represents women in a context of developing countries as victims in constant need of rescue and rehabilitation? (Kapur, 1999:354) Studies on sexual violence against women in war have contributed enormously to our understanding of the intersections between gender, sexuality, collective identities and violence. Thus, it comes as no surprise that feminist works concerning Yugoslavia, which were followed in the late 1990s by the feminist engagements with the Rwandan war, focused largely on rape (Zarkov, 2006:231). Zarkov suggests that narratives foregrounding either agency or victimization should be only two of the many possibilities available to us for imagining the experiences of women in a violent conflict. Instead of merely assuming the presence of either agency or victimization, Zarkov urges feminist scholars to ask when and how agency and victimization are prioritized in the experiences and representations of war, what other narratives of women's and men's positioning within the war there are, and how they are obscured or denied (2006:233).

Scully argues that the rhetoric of the sexual vulnerability of women and girls has serious implications for the prospects of women's leadership in post-conflict societies. She raises a number of important questions, including urging us to consider the implications of defining a female subject as requiring sexual protection in the context of building a post-conflict society (2009:113). Her point is that an exclusive focus on sexual violence against women during war and on their vulnerability in post-conflict reconstruction may hinder the pursuit of other human rights objectives (2009:120). Zarkov is also concerned that classical feminist studies of women and war shifted from the conceptualization of agency and empowerment to a theoretically and politically much more problematic conceptualization of sexual victimization and victimhood of civilian women (2006:230). She argues that due to Eurocentrism, racism, and Orientalism there have always been women and regions that have been seen as more empowered and emancipated, with others viewed almost entirely through the prism of victimization. Not surprisingly, women in the Balkan and African wars have been seen as belonging to the latter group and their sexual victimization has been theorized as the ultimate destiny of women from these areas in war (Ibid). As Susan Brownmiller argues, 'Balkan women, whatever their ethnic and religious background, and in whatever fighting zone they happen to find themselves, have been thrust against their will into another identity. They are victims of rape in war' (1994:180).

The ambiguous positioning of BiH, both within and outside of the 'symbolic continent' of Europe, resulted in the exclusion of BiH and the rest of the former Yugoslavia from Europe, which, in turn, affected the way relationships between gender and war in the region were theorized and led to a shift in Western feminist theories on

war (Bakic-Hayden and Hayden, 1992:9). It also explains why there has been virtually no discussion of sexual relationships in war and in the peacekeeping context in BiH. As previously argued, the former Yugoslav feminist scholars and activists have focused on rape and sexual violence instead. While I am acutely aware of this fact, I still was not prepared for the reactions that followed the presentation of my paper.

Talking about sex and war

I presented my paper on the third day of the conference on a panel dedicated to women and post- conflict resolution. I have done previous research into peacekeeping and trafficking of women, and whenever I presented papers on this topic at feminist conferences, I always had the full attention of the audience. My talks about sexual abuse, trafficking and peacekeeping were always welcomed and praised. However, this time while I was introducing myself and my research to a room full of international feminists, I started to second guess myself. I soon became aware of the unease in the room and of eyebrows being raised. I could see many women bewildered and discontent, whispering to each other. It was almost as if my research into stories of Bosnian women making a decision to enter into consensual romantic relationships with peacekeepers could hardly make any sense; it certainly felt 'out of place'. I had never had this feeling before, although I had presented this particular research a few times before to different audiences in Australia. At the time, I tried to shake off my growing sense of discomfort and continued explaining why I had undertaken this work: I was driven to do so by the injustice I felt, which was produced by the UN's ZTP's ban on virtually all sex between women and peacekeepers. While I was saying this, I could not help but think that if I were speaking about sex trafficking and peacekeeping instead of peacekeeping and sex for pleasure, I would not be getting the same reception. Still, I reminded myself that as a Bosnian woman I had a legitimate right to explore sexual agency, instead of just focusing on the stories of victimhood.

Despite this internal dialogue and my determination to stay optimistic, the more I spoke, the less comfortable I felt. While I continued reading my paper, I could see that a few women were expressing quiet anger at what they were hearing. I realized that probably many of my listeners were not used to stories that went against the usual perceptions of Bosnian women. As Engle argues, many feminists tended to portray all women during and after the conflict in BH as potential sexual victims, and the possibility of consensual sex between those on the opposite sides of the war seemed inconceivable (Engle, 2008:942). However, the point of my work was to show that the dominance of the narrative, which totalizes women's experiences to 'war kills everything', including sexual desire, serves to further dehumanize women and men, who are already victimized. My work, in other words, was shattering the fully embraced image of Bosnian women as only victims of rape and trauma. I was trying to show that, even during time of war, some Bosnian women had sexual agency, which entailed a freely expressed sexuality and a greater sense of bodily integrity than had been previously understood. I even 'dared' to say that some women had told me that they had wanted 'only sex' and nothing else from their encounters with peacekeepers. This revelation seemed like a revolution – something utterly unimaginable and unacceptable.

How could we imagine Bosnian women during the bloodiest war in Europe since the Second World War desiring sex under the bombs and the bullets? Even as I said these

words to the participants gathered in the room, I heard my words 'with their ears' and in this moment could understand why the idea I was proposing sounded unreal, distorted, even insulting. To imagine something so intimate in times of suffering and destruction is hard, but it, nevertheless, is a fact of life. The desire for love and sex does not stop with the beginning of war; rather desire and war can become fused, intertwined. Lepa Mladjenovic, a well known feminist activist from Serbia, writes in her 1998 letter to Women in Black activist Joan Nestle:

“From the beginning of wars in this region from '91 I felt that I have to invent Ten thousand ways to let my lesbian desire breathe. At some moment during the last 8 years it was not easy for me to put in words how do I feel when making love with a woman and in the back there is a radio with the news of war. Killed, or expelled or other fascist acts. In my room, I would not be able to stand up from the bed, leave the desired bodies and switch off the news, also because I thought the respect to the killed I will show by not switching off the radio.^{viii}”

This powerful excerpt from Lepa's letter to her friend tells us that war is destructive but it does not stop lives being lived. The living continue to have ordinary sexual desires. In times of war people have an even greater desire to live, and they often learn to appreciate and not take for granted every day they get to experience. In 'A woman from Berlin', an anonymous diary kept by a German woman during the fall of Berlin in 1945, we find these words:

“There is no doubt that the threat to life enhances the will to live. I myself am burning with a more intense and larger flame than before the war of bombs. Each new day of life is a day of triumph (Anonymous, 1955:27). “

As the day at the Women's World 2011 congress progressed, I began to understand more the complexities and problems illuminated by my paper. In my paper, I quoted a few of the Bosnian women interviewees. One of them highlighted the importance of her relationship as an outlet for feelings and desires that were suppressed during the war. She referred to the post-conflict context as an important factor in her decision-making about her sexual relationship. After spending almost four years under the siege in Sarajevo, she felt that she needed this outlet and the connection with 'someone who was not from here':

“In the period after the war I thought it was a strong emotional and passionate journey for me. I felt that I wanted a change in my life and that four years [of war] suppressed a lot of energy in me that I needed to let go. I needed that communication with other people, with someone I could connect with and that he was not from here, from this context where I live, was very attractive in that period...”

I told the audience in the room that the Bosnian women interviewees identified a range of reasons that they thought might motivate Bosnian women to enter into sexual

relationships with peacekeepers, including sex, money and love. These women clearly articulated their sexual and political power and challenged the dominant feminist narratives, often told about Bosnian women in war. During the question time, one woman from the audience asked me whether I included any analysis of trauma and victimhood in my work on Bosnian women. I answered,

“Yes, I know that the vast majority of Bosnian women were victimized and many raped during these times. I am not trying to deny that, but I am trying to explore other moments as well, to see if moments of agency can exist in such a place and time and what we can learn from this. Can these women, despite their trauma, have consensual sex in times of war and its aftermath? Does the fact that the vast majority of Bosnian women are victimized and many of them raped diminish the expression of their agency?”

I was struck by this exchange, because I had never before seen Bosnian women only through this lens of victimhood. Maybe this is because I am Bosnian, and I don't see my friends and other women as primarily victims. I know many of them are, but they are also courageous women, who keep on struggling to make a life for their families, to keep on loving. Why is it so uncomfortable to talk about Bosnian women as women, who made decisions to have sex with peacekeepers or local men, and some of them not for long-term commitment but just for pleasure? I believe that we need to allow these 'other' stories to be heard as well. Who are we to disavow and deny sex as a pleasure for a certain ethnic, race or cultural group? As Engle argues, war is not an exception to interethnic, interpolitical, or interracial sexual liaisons (2008:956).

Another woman in the audience showed me just how deep these questions ran. She commented that European women were 'certainly different' from African woman and that African women needed 'more protection.' Are all African women victims? Where does the discussion of agency enter this conversation? Are we going to homogenize all women on the African continent as victims who need protection or at least more protection than European girls and women? Are we going to compete for the victimhood status on a racial and cultural basis? Of course, women do need protection from sexual violence, but not from consensual sex. I am not convinced that European women are 'less vulnerable' than African women in times of war and that their experiences are so vastly different when it comes to consensual sex, but, in the end, only more research and thinking outside of the box of victimhood can give us better answers to these pressing questions.

As Kapur argues, the exclusive focus on victim subjects has taken feminists back to a protectionist and conservative discourse (2002:5). While this discourse did invite feminist scholars to analyze the lives of women as un-emancipated and universal subjects, it also, at times, resulted in an imperialist view of women in the developing world, within which they were often represented as 'authentic victim subjects' (Kapur, 2002:11). Kapur is concerned that international feminist legal politics has reinforced the representation of Third World women as disempowered, victimized and brutalized, and in doing so, it has recreated the imperialist image of native subjects as backward, ignorant, illiterate and different. She is concerned that this view prolongs the colonial

rationale for intervening in the lives of native subjects and justifies the rescue operations advocated by Barry and other radical feminists (2002:11, 12).

Two concerns are raised by critiques of dominance feminism. The first is its emphasis on the commonality of women's experience, which un-problematically brings together women from different historical and political contexts to argue that violence is a universal phenomenon (Kapur, 2012, 10). The second concern focuses on how violence renders women as thoroughly victimized – passive, abject, incapable of exercising any agency or will. Such a framework leaves no space for the examination of agency or for the articulation of sexuality and sexual desire as positive and life-affirming (Ibid). Drawing on my own experience with the paper I presented, it is obvious that both of these concerns still need to be fully addressed and more feminist work needs to be done to deconstruct these prevalent discourses of women's victimhood during conflict and in its aftermath.

I understand I am walking that famous tightrope between pleasure and danger spoken about in Carole Vance's classic anthology (1984), but I did not think that talking about agency would be heard and felt as an attempt to diminish the trauma endured by Bosnian women during and after the war. I was learning that it sounded almost indecent to talk about these women as something other than victims of rape. Some of the feminists, who were there when I gave my paper, were not used to or perhaps had never heard anything else about Bosnian women except the reiteration of the history of their victimization. Indeed, Bosnian women have since the start of the war been used as an example of 'raped women' while BiH as a country has become a textbook example, a reference point and, essentially, a synonym for genocide and destruction. As people from a war-torn country, Bosnian women have become the subjects with no 'subjectivity or autonomy' (Anghie, 2004:113), positioned with 'a limited ability to articulate their aspirations and concerns' (Charlesworth, 2007:245).

As I have indicated previously, there is a huge body of scholarly literature on Bosnian women as victims and, in some way, it is this literature and its privileging of only one particular image of a Bosnian woman – that of a victim – that has helped to narrow down and impoverish the terms of the debate. Within the commonly accepted framework, the body of a Bosnian woman is exclusively constructed as victimized, precarious, unstable and pained; a body that does not know of pleasure and intimacy. In essence, sexual pleasure and Bosnian women are set up in oppositional terms, while sex is articulated through the discourse of violence. Any attempt to shift the discussion could easily be seen as potentially rude, offensive and damaging; while the insistence on the need to 'unpack' the construction of the Bosnian woman's identity becomes a dangerous and thankless task. This is why it is important to continue questioning the many hidden and precious layers of Bosnian women's identities; I'm convinced that this questioning will shed an important and necessary light on these women's agency, resilience and courage in the face of horror, loss and destruction.

Bosnian women are victims, but they are also survivors, and this acknowledgment needs to be embedded in the feminist discourse on sexual violence and rape in BiH. There is a definite need to take responsibility for understanding the complexity of debates surrounding sex in war and its aftermath. As Otto in her analysis of the development of international law, and its achievements and failures to address sexual violence in times of war, argues, 'the agent/victim dichotomy' should be rejected (2010:117). Rather, the

capacity of women, who survived sexual violence, to be 'agents of social change' must be acknowledged (Ibid). Women have to be treated with respect and their voices taken into account in any discussion that has a direct impact on their lives. Stories told by women of their sexual power in times of war and its aftermath have been largely excluded, suppressed or ignored in dominant narratives despite feminist calls to attention to their voices (Engle, 2008:951). The women I interviewed challenged the dominant narratives about war and sex. Their stories revealed how marginalized sexual expressions in the times of war do not have to be *dirty*: they can also be intimate, affirming and pleasurable. Although Kapur makes references to post-colonial India when she writes about the importance of 'recuperating and theorizing desire and pleasure' as an important political project to be taken on, I believe that those working on BiH should embark on such a task as well (Kapur, 1999:353).

Re-thinking sex and war: Don't be sorry for me!

On the last day of the conference, I was attending a session about BiH, Somalia and the subject of rape. At the end of the session, a woman sitting in front of me turned around, took my hand in hers, looked me in the eye and said, 'I am sorry for you. I am sorry for what had you been through'. I was bewildered and then realized that she may be thinking that I was a victim of rape too. She seemed rather taken aback when I told her that I was not raped or sexually assaulted during the war. She was clearly both surprised by my response and embarrassed by her assumption. I was shocked to consider that this woman, and probably others in the room, thought of me as a possible victim of rape only because I had introduced myself as a woman originally from BiH at the beginning of the session. But, probably, I should not have been that surprised. As Engle argues, feminists tended to treat most Bosnian women as victims and 'at some level, all Bosnian Muslim women were imagined to be raped' (Engle, 2005:794). The woman, who imagined that I was raped, probably had assumed which ethnic group I belonged to.

During this particular session, I was aware that whenever I spoke, women would look at me with empathy, understanding and the sort of silent 'respect' we tend to show to victims. However, to assume that I may be 'one of them' – one of the victims of rape – merely by a virtue of being a Bosnian woman was something I could not possibly comprehend. Another woman sitting next to me expressed embarrassment at her own origin after I introduced myself. 'I do not have such an exotic background', she said, 'I come only from Toronto.' While everyone else in the room giggled at this remark, I felt very uncomfortable, as I always do in such situations. This was not the first time I had heard people say they felt less worthy because they had not experienced war and the destruction it brings. One of the paradoxes of experiencing violence first hand is that it can give an almost unconditional power and authority to one's voice. On the other hand, people who don't have these experiences may end up feeling like they have nothing worthwhile to say.

War is an industry as is post war recovery and reconciliation. We organize seminars, conferences and workshops to talk about war. We receive grants to do research on war, rape and women. We talk about places such as Srebrenica and Kigali that we would not have heard of if there had been no genocide. Tour buses regularly take tourists, who have 'an appetite for the darkest elements of human history', to sites of genocide (Lennon and Foley, 2000). We write papers and PhDs on these histories and build our

careers as experts on places we may never visit. It is difficult to escape from the prism of victimhood and be seen as more than a victim. I do not exist in a vacuum and it is not enough that I don't see myself as victim. I may decide not to identify as a victim, but I cannot stop others from viewing me in this way.

The role of victim is also a convenient role. You receive compassion and understanding from strangers because of your origins, place of birth and, of course, your history, which may or may not be as traumatic as people imagine. I have seen people abusing or playing this role, profiteering from it, advancing their professional life because of it. I too may call myself 'an academic war profiteer' since so much of my academic career up to now has been built on my writing about personal experiences of war. I may be a victim of bad political decisions made in my homeland, but I want to be seen as something else. I want Bosnian women to be imagined as something more than creations of the war, overwhelmed by the sense of victimization and over determined by the trauma they experienced. I respect our victimhood, but at the same time, I want to dismantle the prevailing power of this image and to show the complex lives that it often conceals.

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ⁱ Women's Worlds 2011, see <http://www.womensworlds.ca/>.

ⁱⁱ I have written elsewhere about the effects war had on my life. See for example, Simic, O. (2011). Speaking the Unspeakable, Remembering the Wished to be Forgotten. *International Feminist Journal of Politics* Vol. 3 (2), 248-256.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Secretary-General's Bulletin, Special Measures for Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse*, ST/SGB/2003/13 (9 October 2003). Sec 3.2 (d): 'Sexual relationships between United Nations staff and beneficiaries of assistance, since they are based on inherently unequal power dynamics, undermine the credibility of the UN and are strongly discouraged'.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Secretary-General's Bulletin, Special Measures for Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse*, ST/SGB/2003/13 (9 October 2003). Sec 3.2 (d): 'Sexual relationships between United Nations staff and beneficiaries of assistance, since they are based on inherently unequal power dynamics, undermine the credibility of the UN and are strongly discouraged'.

^{iv} Sexual exploitation allegations continue to present problems that need to be dealt with by the UN, particularly the Department for Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO). Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS), 'Statistics: Allegations for All Categories of Personnel Per Year (Sexual Exploitation and Abuse)', 13 April 2012
<<http://cdu.unlb.org/Statistics/AllegationsbyCategoryofPersonnelSexualExploitationandAbuse/AllegationsforAllCategoriesofPersonnelPerYearSexualExploitationandAbuse.aspx>>.

^v See also, The European Community Investigative Mission Into the Treatment of Muslim Women in the Former Yugoslavia: Report to European Community Foreign Ministers. UN Doc S/25240, annex I, 3 February 1993.

^{vi} *Prosecutor v Kunarac et al*, Case No IT-96-23, Judgment, 12 June 2002.

^{vii} See generally, Stiglmayer, A. (ed). (1994), *Mass Rape: The War against Women In Bosnia-Herzegovina*. University of Nebraska Press.

^{viii} The email correspondence between Lepa and Joan on the file with author.