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What Remains of Srebrenica? Motherhood, Transitional Justice and Yearning for the Truth¹

By Olivera Simic²

Abstract

This article explores the role of the local non-governmental association 'Mothers of Srebrenica' in the complex transitional justice processes in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The association gathers women who survived the Srebrenica genocide in July 1995 and creates an important public space for the crying out of their grievances and lobbying for their goals. The 'Mothers of Srebrenica' also create a space for widows and displaced women to share their concerns and support each other. While the 'Mothers of Srebrenica' use the rhetoric of victimhood and motherhood whenever they speak out, I argue that they, in fact, challenge the notion of passive victims by the actions they have tirelessly undertaken over the last 13 years. With their resilience and activities, the 'Mothers of Srebrenica' have become known worldwide. Their existence and actions have generated a mixture of feelings: respect, regret and shame among not only those accountable for the crimes in Srebrenica, but also the wider international community. Yet, although 'Mothers of Srebrenica' use a variety of approaches to address past atrocities, it appears that their emphasis is on punitive justice which, they believe, is the only means to bring the peace that they have long yearned to their souls.

Keywords: mothers, Srebrenica, transitional justice, reconciliation, truth

*"Justice did not come in the way we expected. We, mothers from Srebrenica, are living witnesses of Srebrenica genocide. We do not want to forget."*¹

Munira, the public representative of 'Mothers of Srebrenica'

Introduction

On 6 March 2008, a newly elected prosecutor of the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia (ICTY), Mr Serge Brammertz in his first visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) met representatives of the BiH government, the State Court officials, representatives of the international community and representatives of the local non-governmental association 'Mothers of Srebrenica' (UN Press Release, 2008). Although his visit was time consuming, since he was planning to stay for only two days in BiH, Mr Brammertz found time to meet with not only the highest representatives of the

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Bosnian government, but also with Munira and other women who were representing the association 'Mothers of Srebrenica' (the 'Mothers'). Munira Subasic, a woman in her sixties, poorly educated but articulate, lost 22 family members in the Srebrenica genocide and is still looking for the body of her 19-year-old son who disappeared in July 1995. She is a familiar face, a well known woman in BiH, and the one who usually gives a voice and a human face to the women in this association.

As a Bosnian woman now living in Australia, Mr Brammertz's visit triggered my curiosity. How come Mr Brammertz, the representative of the most important institution dealing with war crimes in the former Yugoslavia, prioritized a meeting with a group of elderly and semi-literate women on such a short visit? Who were these women whom he wanted to meet with on his first official trip to BiH? Why did they claim his attention? Whatever the reasons for this particular visit he paid to the 'Mothers', it is clear that these women, the 'Mothers of Srebrenica', have captured not only my attention and admiration for their tireless struggle to find the truth about their loved ones who disappeared in July 1995. They now also demand the notice of highly ranked world citizens. The 'Mothers' play a significant role in the complex processes of transitional justice in BiH, while lobbying at the same time for prosecutions, truth and reconciliation. Their struggles and gains are contextualized in this piece of writing with an aim to explain at least some of the reasons why it was necessary for Mr Brammertz to meet with the 'Mothers'.

In July 1995, Srebrenica, a small town in the east of BiH, became the site of a genocide that occurred in just four days, when thousands of Muslim men and boys were slaughtered by members of Serbian forces. Since 1996, when the first reports emerged about allegations of the massacre which wiped out the male population who had sought refuge in this area, the 'Mothers' started to use nonviolent actions to find out the truth about the events that took place in 1995 and bring those responsible to justice. The 'Mothers' use a variety of non-violent methods, such as symbolic demonstrations, peaceful marches and public gatherings and speeches as well as media exposure, to achieve their goals. Similarly to the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo², the Federation of Mothers from Ayacucho³ and the activism of women in Afghanistan (Campion-Smith, 2007), these women demand the truth about the disappearances and murders of their family members, predominantly their sons and husbands. Although, the 'Mothers' explicitly state that they are not feminists who are 'fighting for women's rights' (<http://www.srebrenica.ba>) but mothers searching for their loved ones, these women create an important space for widows and displaced women to share their concerns and support each other. While they use the rhetoric of victimhood and motherhood whenever they speak in public gatherings, the 'Mothers of Srebrenica' in fact challenge the notion of women as passive victims. They demonstrate that while they are victims of the war, they are also survivors (Turshen and Twagiramariya, 1998; Cockburn, 1998; Kumar, 2001). As such, they have been actively engaged in particular forms of political mobilization at a grassroots level, making an excellent use of the ironically and sadly privileged place that they occupy as mothers who lost their families.

Since most information about women's experiences of war and post-conflict life usually focuses on abuses that women endure during war, there is a lack of a record-keeping about the actions taken by women as autonomous actors. This article thus aims to contribute to the historical record of women's strategies to come to terms with the legacy of war, of which they have historically been victims or witnesses. While the

'Mothers', have a history shaped by the traditional roles of suffering women during wartime, by their *public* insistence on their need to know the fates of their loved ones, they have transformed themselves into an active international force that demands attention. As such they represent a contradictory presence in post-conflict society: women victims and women source of agency and change. Perhaps this is a contradiction that must be lived with.

To explore these ideas, I firstly give a brief history of the region of BiH, an overview of the genocide that occurred there in July 1995 and suggest some reasons why gender played such a tragic role and left the 'Mothers' I dedicated this article to, alive and alone. I then analyse how 'Mothers' were established, an association born as a result of genocide, and its contribution to the transitional justice processes in BiH through their persistent struggles to address the atrocities committed in Srebrenica at a local and international level. I examine how the group evolved from a grassroots association into one that caught the attention of the international community. As a result of these women's collective efforts, 'Mothers' has generated a mixture of feelings: respect, regret and shame among those accountable either as direct perpetrators or as bystanders for one of the worst massacres to occur in recent European history. I also explore the role of motherhood in their struggles, which reinforces the essentialist notions that women are by nature more peaceful and caring than men. Finally, I will raise the contradictory issues of gender and reconciliation; the pursuit of "truth". I argue that the 'Mothers of Srebrenica', while an important actor in transitional justice processes that seek the truth about past atrocities, are advocates of punitive rather than restorative justice. While punitive justice depends largely on the legal systems in place and political will where 'Mothers' hold the least power, restorative justice is a field where 'Mothers' could more actively participate and serve as a driving force for reconciliation processes in the country. However, it seems that 'Mothers' work with the same passion towards both goals: to punish and to restore.

The Fall of Yugoslavia

The Socialistic Republic of BiH was born after WW II with the creation of the Socialistic Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRJ). Six republics⁴ and two provinces⁵ were incorporated within a common federal system, with equal representation in all major governance bodies. In many respects, BiH became a symbol, a personification of multi-ethnic Yugoslavia, and the crossroads of all its differences: cultural, economic, religious and ethnic. The dissolution of the Yugoslav Federation following the death of President Tito in 1980 began with a severe economic and social crisis, exacerbated by a rising nationalism and a more forceful articulation of the ethnic, political and economic interests of its constituent republics, which resulted in the Yugoslavia split (Denitch, 1996). The first multi-party elections in Yugoslavia in 1990 ended in a victory for the nationalistic parties, resulting in Slovenia and Croatia proclaiming independence, followed by BiH in 1992. The same year this newly independent state was plunged into almost four years of internal conflict.

Srebrenica, the town with a the death sentence

Since the beginning of the war, Srebrenica was an isolated enclave in BiH which hosted thousands of Bosniaks⁶ who had fled their homes in eastern Bosnia as a result of attacks by Serb forces. In 1993, the UN Security Council (SC) "demanded" that

Srebrenica should be treated as a “safe area” by “all parties and others concerned” and thus should be “free from any armed attack or any other hostile act” (UN Security Council Resolution 819,1993). During the same year, the SC declared that not only Srebrenica, but also Sarajevo, and other threatened areas and their surroundings, should be treated as safe areas by all conflicting parties UN Security Council Resolution 824, 1993). Despite proclaiming Srebrenica as one of the six “safe zones” in BiH protected by the UN Mission in BiH (UNMBIH), safe areas on the ground proved to be among the most unsafe places in the world (Silber and Little, 1996). Tens of thousands of civilians entrusted their lives to the international community who promised local people that they would be safeguarded. Yet, the SC Resolution was ambiguous about the international commitments to the “safe areas” and it did not guarantee their defence by means of any UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR).

The use of force was explicitly linked to “acting in self-defence” (UN Security Council Resolution 824) if members of UNPROFOR were attacked. Even though the member states were called to contribute in human and other resources for the sake of the implementation of the provisions regarding the “safe areas” (UN Security Council Resolution 836, 1993), none of them offered any additional troops with respect to Srebrenica. At that time, Srebrenica was under the guardianship of 150 Dutch peacekeepers (UN General Assembly, 1999) who were lightly armed and who could not be a possible match for the 2000 Serbs (UN General Assembly) who occupied the town, supported by armour and artillery. On 11 July 1995, after they occupied Srebrenica, Bosnian Serb forces executed between 7,000 and 8,000 men (ICTY, Prosecutor v. Radislav Krstic, 2001). The Trial Chamber of ICTY found that “the physical disappearance of the Bosnian Muslim population in Srebrenica” was achieved by the forced exodus of the female Muslim population and the killing of males (ICTY, Prosecutor v. Radislav Krstic). Serbian forces separated women and children and forcibly transferred them out of Srebrenica, while killing the remaining men (ICTY, Prosecutor v. Radislav Krstic). Dozen of buses took away women and children to the territory under Muslim control, while the Serb soldiers kept the men from ages 12 to 77 for “interrogation for suspected war crimes” (BBC News, 2005). Unfortunately, this so called “interrogation” resulted in a genocide, such as has not been seen during the last 50 years in Europe. Likewise, ten years later in 2005 the worst escalation of violence in Sudan took place after a peace agreement was signed despite the presence of around 300 peacekeepers (Jackson and McCrummen, 2008). Indeed, the international reports compared the fate of citizens of Abyei to the destiny of the Muslims in Srebrenica, who also believed that the UN’s flag would shield them (Jackson and McCrummen, 2008).

Only after the massacre in Srebrenica took place did the NATO launch massive air strikes, which soon led to the current fragile peace.⁷ Ironically, the peace was ultimately achieved by two acts of grave violence: the genocide and the air strikes, which collectively resulted in abrupt end to the civil war, leaving the BiH without a winning side.

Gender side of Genocide

Srebrenica is a textbook case of gendercide. While all males were executed, females were forcibly expelled leading to the creation of an ethnically cleansed area. By killing all males who were capable of ‘holding a gun’, the Serbian forces eliminated the

direct threat of young potential future fighters, thus reducing the strength of the rival community (Ghiglieri, 1999; Manson and Wrangham, 1991; Wrangham, 1999; Muller and Mitani, 2005). In addition, eliminating the male population made procreation with the remaining females easier through either marriage or rape (Hartley, 2007). In BiH society, children are born with their father's ethnic identity which makes women particularly vulnerable in a wartime environment. They serve as vessels that pass on paternal identity to their new-born babies (Weitsman, 2008). In addition, women in BiH were not perceived as a direct threat to any conflicting party, since the dominant image of women was based on patriarchal norms that "equate the domestic, private and passive roles with females" (Helms, 2003:16). As a result, the women of Srebrenica were regarded as unworthy without their male protectors and breadwinners. It was perceived that cultural humiliation would follow the women who were punished to live without their men. Indeed, it may be the fact that ironically gender images based on patriarchal norms saved lives of the Srebrenica women.

The genocide in Srebrenica disrupted the gender cast of BiH society by leaving almost 40% of the internally displaced population with female headed-households (American Refugee Council, 2004). Prior to the war, Srebrenica was a traditional town where males were the prime breadwinners and the head of households. War and the post-war situation dramatically changed women's roles. The role of prime breadwinner for the family shifted to women, and for the majority of them, this was a role they occupied for the very first time in their lives. Left without their husbands, women suddenly needed skills and education to be able to take part in a job market in BiH where almost 40% of people are still considered as unemployed (Subotica and Wildman, 2003). Thus, the elimination of the male population had tremendous social, economic and psychological consequences on the women, leaving them to be sole breadwinners while coping with traumatic experiences they had endured and searching for the bones of their sons and husbands. However, despite the challenges they faced these women joined together and left their private sphere of mourning to go into the public domain demanding a series of actions to be taken by local and international governments. In doing so, they transformed their experience as victims into an activism that has attracted international attention and respect, as the meeting with Mr Brammertz demonstrates.

The Aftermath: "Mothers of Srebrenica" seeking the truth

"My life is not a life; my life is a punishment. We, 'Mothers of Srebrenica' were persecuted on 11 July 1995. Since that day we have been serving sentence that I would not wish to anyone. Everything I do is because I want that every mother finds the truth. If our children did not have a right to life, we, mothers have a right to know the truth about our children".

Hatidza Dzidza Mehmedovic, the president of 'Mothers of Srebrenica'
-in *Feral Tribune* (Brailo, 2008)

The memory of Srebrenica's men has been kept alive by their womenfolk, even though the women survivors of the Srebrenica genocide still live scattered as displaced persons in BiH. In Tuzla where the majority of them fled during the genocide, these women established the association of the 'Mothers of Srebrenica'. The association has an

important voice in BiH, demands a complete investigation of the massacre, the opening of mass graves and the identification and burial of their sons, husbands and fathers who vanished in July 1995. Although the 'Mothers' only registered as association of citizens in 1999, their protests and persuasive efforts to bring about justice started back in 1996, when they stormed the Red Cross offices to protest a stalled investigation on the fate of their missing men (Gendercide Watch, 1995). The women established clear demands before the local and international community, which read as follows:

- ✓ "The full facts of Srebrenica should be revealed and publicized.
- ✓ All graves should be exhumed, and the bodies identified without delay.
- ✓ The people of Srebrenica should be enabled to return to their homes.
- ✓ There should be a full and open international investigation into the failure of the UN to protect the "safe area" of Srebrenica.
- ✓ Compensation for the survivors of the Srebrenica massacre should be secured.
- ✓ All indicted and suspected war criminals, and all those complicit with genocide, should be arrested and brought to trial" (<http://www.srebrenica.ba>).

Since its establishment, the 'Mothers' have been pushing the BiH government for stronger cooperation with the ICTY, as well as demanding accountability from the Dutch peacekeepers and the UN for their failure to protect their loved ones. After several years of marching, writing, speaking and cooperating with the ICTY and using peaceful means in seeking the truth about the events that took a place in July 1995, the 'Mothers of Srebrenica' finally got worldwide recognition and response. In November 1999, the Secretary-General issued a report before the General Assembly on the fall of Srebrenica where he acknowledged the failure of the UN to protect the Muslim population in Srebrenica (UN General Assembly, 1999). On 2 August 2001, the ICTY delivered its first genocide conviction against Serb General Radislav Krstic who has been sentenced to 46 years in prison for committing the genocidal atrocities at Srebrenica (ICTY, Prosecutor v. Radislav Krstic). At the same time, a number of reports were released by international agencies and human right organizations describing the Srebrenica atrocities and the faith of Bosniak population (Human Rights Watch, 1995; International Crisis Group, 2000; Amnesty International, 2000).

The 'Mothers' enjoy high respect and recognition from the Muslim part of the government and the Muslim population in BiH. Although the Bosnian Serb government has officially apologised for the genocide, the majority of Serbs still deny that a genocide happened. In particular, they often dispute the number of victims that are presented in the official statistics.⁸ The 'Mothers', often in public speeches underline how crucial it is to bring to justice those responsible for the genocide in order to avoid a sense of collective responsibility on behalf of and hatred towards the Serb ethnic group to which the perpetrators belong. Ajsa Bektic who lost her son, husband and father in Srebrenica said that "it is wrong to think that all of the Serbs are guilty for the massacre. I don't know who killed my son, husband and father, but I cannot blame every Serb for it" (Hadziosmanovic, 2004). Therefore, the 'Mothers' seek the truth and the names of those individuals who were directly involved in the crime. Thus, while they encourage the

reconciliation between Muslims and Serbs in BiH, some women believe it can only happen once the war fugitives have been arrested and put on trial (BiH Forum Arhiva, 2005). As Mark Amstutz argues, retributive justice is based on the belief that community can be sustained “only if perpetrators are prosecuted and punished, since only if offenders are held accountable can a community advance its future well being” (Amstutz, 2005: 67). However, this might not happen in a near future in BiH. In a few generations, some of the war criminals may be put on trial, but certainly not all will face prosecution.

That is despite some gains in bringing those responsible to the ICTY, one of the two main suspects, Ratko Mladic indicted in 1996 for crimes against humanity committed in Srebrenica, is still on the run. The fact that Mladic still enjoys freedom demonstrates that a sole reliance on punitive justice is not enough and that it might take a very long time to prosecute all those who are accountable for the genocide. The ‘Mothers’ are well aware of that and, while their priority is a lobbying for more efficient prosecution, they engage in lots of other activities keeping alive the memories of the Srebrenica tragedy and seeking the truth about events in July 1995.

The ‘Mothers’ have worked hard to make their voices heard on the international stage. They have strong support from around the world for the promotion of justice and peace. One of their biggest actions is organizing the commemoration of the Srebrenica massacre on July 11 each year. On that particular day, the ‘Mothers’ draw the attention of the media and resurrect the painful memories of the country’s past atrocities with a strong message that they should not be forgotten. In 1999, “Srebrenica Justice International” was established as a network of 18 European and American organizations, all of which share the common aim of supporting the victims of ethnic cleansing in BiH (Srebrenica Justice Campaign). This group increases the effectiveness and transparency of the ‘Mothers’ activities abroad, by facilitating the exchange of information and the co-ordination of lobbying activities on a national as well international level. As a result, the ‘Mothers’ have become known worldwide and have supporters who take part in peaceful marches in order to demonstrate their sympathies regarding the Srebrenica genocide. In January 2004, the ‘Mothers’ also created a foundation called “Children of Srebrenica”. Its purpose is to collect money for children who lost one or both of their parents in the Srebrenica tragedy and who are encouraged to express themselves through art. Money from these exhibitions is primarily used for educational purposes, such as buying school books for the orphans of Srebrenica. The ‘Mothers’ have realized that while seeking punishment for those accountable for crimes committed they can also create a space of hope in their war-torn community and thus deny the notion of solely being victims by being active agents of change.

The ‘Mothers’ also use public forums to sell postcards with drawings by orphaned children from Srebrenica. One of them has a white dove carrying an olive branch but its wings and the country it flies over is shattered. Yet it still carries the message of hope written by primary school child from Srebrenica: “In my heart, there is still a place for love. That’s the message that I’m carrying”. This and similar messages are powerful tools for reconciliation in the war-torn BiH bringing positive sparks for a brighter future. However, such actions are in contradiction with the other campaigns of the ‘Mothers’. Their persistent demands for the punishment of perpetrators promote a forum of punitive justice rather than reconciling spirits. Lobbying simultaneously for reconciliation and retributive justice makes the work of these women highly conflicting and complex.

Retribution asks for punishment and reflects a belief that perpetrators deserve blame otherwise, they not only inflict pain but also diminish victims without a remedial response (Minow, 1998:12). Through retribution, the survivors reassert the truth of the victim's value by inflicting a publicly visible defeat on the perpetrator and regaining their former moral status (Amstutz, 2005:68; Minow, 1998:12). Unlike retributive justice, which focus on prosecution and punishment of perpetrators, restorative justice emphasizes the restoration of common bonds and the transformation of subjective factors than can harm community such as resentment, anger, and desire for vengeance (Amstutz, 69). Restorative justice, also emphasize the direct involvement of both victims and perpetrators (Galaway, 1996:3). It is a "process of active participation in which wider community deliberate over past crimes, giving central stage to both victim and offender in a process which seeks to bestow dignity and empowerment upon victims" (Quinn, 2004:404). What makes complex the role and actions of the 'Mothers' is that they incorporate "both ways"; that is elements of retributive and restorative justice. However, as Kathleen Daly (1999:6) argues, the restorative justice should not be viewed in opposition to retributive justice as they can blend and embrace elements from both traditions into one. The 'Mothers' are certainly example of such case; they are concerned with punishing past atrocities but also changing future.

Ripples of the 'Mothers' actions in national and international policy discourses

Although the massacre in Srebrenica is often referred to as the biggest mass murder since WWII, it took a long time before Srebrenica materialized in world politics as a grave incident (Rijsdijk, 2004). Srebrenica genocide was not part of global discourse when it occurred. As result of the 'Mothers' actions, peaceful protests and demands for an investigation into massacre, the Srebrenica genocide has started to gain the attention of the UN and the broader international community. The 'Mothers', with their constant peaceful pushing for truth and for the accountability of those responsible for the crimes, has fostered an important discourse on both national and international policy levels. Their actions have gained enough power through the media and social pressure, to cause the Dutch Prime Minister and his whole cabinet to resign because of the failure of its peacekeepers to protect unarmed civilians.⁹ The same national response did not happen in Rwanda where the Belgium peacekeepers were in the same position as the Dutch. However, Belgium did not admit the same feelings of blame and guilt as the Dutch for having withdrawn their troops and fleeing the country. This demonstrates the power of the action by the 'Mothers' to hold accountable all who are directly or indirectly implicated in the crime. Although the Dutch could not do much without support from the UN and its alliance, the 'Mothers' still strongly believe that it was their duty to act and not passively watch the massacre. They have recently published a collection of 104 testimonies on the UN and Dutch implications in the genocide (Women of Srebrenica, 2008).

The tenacity of the 'Mothers' strength is seen in how they pursued Dutch attention. In 2004, the families of the Srebrenica victims, led by 'Mothers' handed Dutch authorities a proposal for an out-of-court settlement, but in 2005 the Dutch government rejected their share of responsibility (Alic, 2007). Two years later, in July 2007 'Mothers of Srebrenica' filed a complaint in The Hague against the UN and the Dutch government. The suit alleges that although the Serbs' murderous intentions were known, neither the

Dutch, as a protective power, nor the UN, as the organization providing the mandate, took steps to save the local population (Forum Sarajevo, 2007). This is a precedent in international jurisprudential history, since - for the first time ever - the court in The Hague allowed a lawsuit against the UN (Forum Sarajevo, 2007). It is also important to note that the lawyer for the 'Mothers' said that their goal was not financial but rather "satisfaction" of holding the UN and Dutch government accountable for the crime (International Herald Tribune, 2007). It is obvious that, for the 'Mothers', justice plays an important role and they want and are determined to fight for accountability for the crime committed. Although the Dutch rejected this sort of accountability, the Dutch government has accepted "political responsibility" for their mission failure and has been giving 20 million dollars in aid to BiH annually with one third of this amount going to rebuilding projects in Srebrenica (International Herald Tribune, 2007). The memorial center in Srebrenica is also funded by the Dutch government and they have on-site representatives who provide tours for scholars and other visitors to the genocide site. These initiatives and projects are implemented as a result of the 'Mothers' persistent lobbying of the Dutch government and their demands for Dutch accountability.

The 'Mothers' with their activities and lobbying shifted a rock of resistance and denial in national and international consciousness regarding the Srebrenica massacre and subsequently moved things forward. They have also crossed the borders and worked jointly with Serb mothers searching for their disappeared sons and husbands and cooperated with women in Croatia and Women in Black in Belgrade and Kosovo (SBS Radio, 2006). The Bosnian Handcraft is one of several non-governmental organizations who bring together Serb and Muslim women from BiH, who lost their husbands and homes, to hand make various garments which help impoverished women to become economically independent and reconcile with each other (Hadziosmanovic, 2004). Women who participate in such projects underline how important they are not only to earn a living but also to keep their sanity (Hadziosmanovic, 2004). The 'Mothers' crossed these borders, embracing all women who suffered and lost loved ones. They embrace women from the "other" ethnic groups in the former Yugoslavia realizing that the pain of all women and mothers is the same no matter what ethnic community mothers and women belong, as all mothers "have the same hearts" (SBS Radio, 2006). Through their victimhood, the 'Mothers' express an agency to act and demand accountability demonstrating the growing voice of women who refuse to be quiet. They become victims, agents and survivors, playing all these different and -- confrontational roles -- at the same time

Difficulties with Motherhood

Recently I have been listening to Munira from 'Mothers of Srebrenica' on the SBS radio where she was a guest while touring in Australia in December 2007. She said that the 'Mothers' had a good relationship with the former ICTY prosecutor Carla Del Ponte, explaining that "women can do more than men since they have specific feelings towards justice" (SBS Radio, 2006). This was not the first time that I heard such gender essentialist rhetoric coming from the 'Mothers', but this time Munira's voice made me think more about their complex identities. Since the 'Mothers' are often used as symbol of peace and presented as those who "posses the special peacemaking skills" (Forcey, 1993:363) consciously or unconsciously, the 'Mothers' have framed their identity as

primarily 'mothers' and as secondarily women. As such, the 'Mothers' have become the symbol of sacrifice and suffering that only mothers can gain in patriarchal communities by sacrificing their sons lives for the greater good of their nation land.

The 'Mothers' reinforce the essentialist notion of women as more peaceful, more nurturing, more caring and thus better peacemakers than men. They are also the ones who bear the unique pain of losing a child. Not only men but also childless women and mothers whose sons deserted the war, as my mother would put it "can ever understand the pain of losing a child"¹⁰. Thus, the 'Mothers' enjoy attention and respect foremost as mothers whose sons and husband died for the country and secondarily as women who fought their own struggles in the war and post-war situation. In fact, we know very little about these women's lives except that they lost their male family members. What happened to them during the war except that they lost their male member families? How were they struggling to survive? What were their thoughts, pains and fears during the war? It seems the whole identity of the 'Mothers' is embraced in motherhood, as if they do not exist out of it. In the SBS radio program interview, the journalist asked Munira "is your whole life today focused only on searching for the bones of your family? Is there anything else in your life?"(SBS Radio, 2006). Munira did not have an answer to this question but made a comment unrelated to the journalist's question, that "Bosnian people must not forget what happened to BiH and to Srebrenica" else in your life?" (SBS Radio, 2006). It is a crime that must not be forgotten and the 'Mothers' role is to remind people of it and preserve the memories of the tragedy whilst lobbying for justice.

The 'Mothers' own emphasis on victimhood and motherhood conflicts with a call from some feminists that women should not be seen only as victims but also as autonomous actors. As Enloe argues if the men in power continue to perceive women primarily as victims, war widows, or heroic mothers, we have little room for post conflict social transformation (Enloe, 2002). But the 'Mothers' do not aim to challenge a patriarchal system that legitimizes militarization and war as natural nor do they aim to disrupt the old script that each conflict leaves behind men in the power and women in tears. The 'Mothers' employ motherhood in a biological but also a social context. They claim that they are 'Mothers of Srebrenica' meaning the mothers of the whole town, but the reality is that while they are the mothers to their disappeared sons, they are also the widows and thus former wives of the men who died in the Srebrenica massacre. They employ their reproductive role in a social context, thus representing themselves as the mothers of *all people* who died in the Srebrenica genocide. They are the mothers to their sons, but also to their husbands, relatives and neighbors, since they embrace them all as their 'lost children' under their motherhood claim. As Yuval-Davis argued, women are not only actual but also symbolic reproducers of the nation who secure their position within the nation by mothering the sons for or of the nation (1989, 96). Indeed, over the last few years, the 'Mothers' have moved from the private to the public and from the biological to the social domain and raised the complex issues of their identities and the societal roles that they play.

However, the implications of 'mother-activism' as a political strategy on the broader feminist movement remain a controversial issue in feminist discourses. While 'mother-activism' can work as a progressive political strategy, which can build important coalitions around similar interests, it has to be careful not pray to the manipulation of the pain and suffering of mother's by governing elites. The 'Mothers' are aware of the

common use of their name and pain for commercial and elite purposes by some of the BiH leaders who take advantage of their suffering to obtain foreign aid or votes during the election campaigns (O'Connor, J, 1997). In addition, some feminists are wary of the fact that women who use motherhood, their reproductive function, as their main reference demonstrate that their "action is as patriarchal as the insult against they act" (Zarkov, 2007:73). Thus, similarly to the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, "Mothers" both reflect the values of traditional, patriarchal and religious Bosniak cultural history while at the same time challenge the role of the silent and suffering mother.¹¹ In her analysis of the relationship between motherhood and ethnicity in the former Yugoslavia in early 1990s, Dubravka Zarkov suggests that if motherhood was associated with ethnicity then it was defined by feminists as "patriarchal and manipulated" and dismissed (2007:73). By using a rhetoric of motherhood and victimhood and being an association which gathers mothers of one ethnic group in BiH, the 'Mothers' runs a risk to be dismissed by some feminist organizations in the former Yugoslavia as well.

Meetings with the 'Mothers'

"Until I can talk I will talk about what had happened. All children have to know what had happened so that to them or to anyone else in the world something like Srebrenica never happens."

Hatidza Mehmedovic

I met with the 'Mothers of Srebrenica' in several different settings: public ones such as conferences and forums but also more private ones in their office, when I was interpreting for an international agency who wanted to find out more about their work and also with a group of scholars who visited the Srebrenica graveyard two years ago (Sivic, 2008). These moments were incredibly important for me but also uncomfortable and painful. I often felt anger and helplessness, which was absorbed and muted by the pain I felt everywhere around me. However, no matter where I met them, the 'Mothers' message was always the same: "Until we find out perpetrators of the massacre, in the eyes of every Serb we will see a potential killer of our sons and husbands." This message, though, contradicts with the earlier messages of the 'Mothers' that they "know that not every Serb is a killer". If they know "this" then, why so they still see in every Serb a potential killer? There is a clear urge to put a human face to perpetrators otherwise, the 'Mothers' warn us, a whole ethnic group will be alleged as a perpetrator, and the 'Mothers' have made it clear at other times, that this is not what they want. But, what about me: where do I belong: to victims, perpetrators or 'border-crossers'? As a Serb woman present in these meetings, I had mixed feelings: admiration for the power of the 'Mothers' hunger for the truth, but also anxiety: where can this rhetoric, which is sometimes full of contradictory impulses, lead. To whom do *my* eyes belong? Shall I lower *my* gaze until justice is done and the actual perpetrators are brought to the trials? Or should I open my eyes, my thinking and feeling eyes, as wide as possible to see both sides of this historical tragedy while still remaining the part of the community that gave me life? Does this history, '*my* people', define me or do I define history and the people that I am a part of? How do we open up a space for historical positioning which will allow for new historical meanings about ourselves? To even begin this conversation is a

complex, painful and scary intervention which demands bare honesty, which needs some kind of safe space to explore a complex truth and allow such a conversation. By crossing the borders of ethnic divisions in my homeland and sitting at the same table with women who survived a genocide committed by men folk belonging to *my* ethnic group, I feel like a living, walking network, crossing the borders of human division with all who wish to understand all these histories and reconcile all sides implicated in the Srebrenica saga. I can see no future without this effort, regardless of the cost it may take; this mutual discomfort we feel in spaces where these conversations take place. With this small intervention, I am trying to create a space where these often uncomfortable but extremely important conversations can take place.

In spaces like these, where borders are crossed, I think about the thousands of Muslim children who will be brought up on the stories of their fathers, grandfathers, brothers and uncles slaughtered by Serbs. I am fearful about how it will be possible to raise future young leaders of BiH who will look at the past not as a stumbling block but rather as a base to a meaningful and reconciling future. It is an extremely hard task facing the 'Mothers' to find a way in between remembering and forgetting; in between looking back and at the same time moving forward. The 'Mothers' and BiH have to find a middle ground between retributive and restorative justice, between the reintegration of the former perpetrators and the compensation and acknowledgment of the suffering of survivors.

The recent meeting of the 'Mothers' with the Dutch peacekeepers who were stationed in the UN base in Srebrenica in July 1995 and who, as I have said before, have been heavily blamed for taking no action to prevent the genocide, represents another sign of the courage and hope to move on, understand and forgive (Emric, 2007). The Dutch peacekeepers have expressed a wish to come and meet with the 'Mothers', eye to eye, after all these years; to return to the places to which "special and difficult memories are attached" (Srebrenica Genocide Blog, 2007). In the wake of this meeting, Hatidza Mehmedovic, the head of the 'Mothers', stated: "I don't know how I will survive the meeting with the Dutch soldiers" (Srebrenica Genocide Blog, 2007), revealing an anxiety, fear and honesty on behalf of the women at the prospect of sitting and talking to those who, according to them, could "do something" to prevent genocide. The willingness of the 'Mothers' to meet with peacekeepers, to face all their painful memories and tell each other their difficult stories of survival after the genocide certainly demand bravery. That meeting hopefully also implies that although the 'Mothers' have been firm in their message that they "do not want to reconcile" and will "never forgive" to those implicated in the genocide, they did come together and communicate with Dutch peacekeepers. Restorative justice which aims at restoring victims, restoring offenders, and restoring communities (Brown and Polk, 1996) is invoked in this case. The 'Mothers' came together with alleged bystanders and tried together to resolve how to deal with the aftermath of genocide and its on going implication for the future. This is a process of healing, but also of forgiving, apologizing and learning. Thus, while the 'Mothers' truly support the punitive justice embodied in the ICTY and said they "will never forgive or sit down with those who killed their sons"¹² they met with Dutch peacekeepers whom they blame for the genocide almost equally as Serb military forces. Despite their criminal justice rhetoric, they seem to be open to listening to those who were implicit in the genocide and who came to ask for forgiveness. Any effort of forgiveness on behalf of the

'Mothers' is a step forward and marks a change in how they feel about the persons who inflicted the injury, not change in the actions to be taken by a justice system (Murphy, 1990:162).

The 'Mothers' also play a role in educational processes in BiH and actively participate in the education seminars that cover the themes of war crimes, memories and genocide in the former Yugoslavia. In these forums they meet with students coming from different ethnic backgrounds who are growing up in post-conflict, newly independent states. Hatidza Mehmedovic who lost a husband, two sons, two brothers and other male relatives in Srebrenica genocide has been recently invited to talk to the participants of the seminar "War crimes, genocide and memories: roots of the evil-I want to understand" about her experience (Brailo, 2008). Although BiH does not have a truth and reconciliation commission, women's testimonies and oral histories such as Hatidza's are encouraged by local non-governmental associations and academic institutions as a part of the national efforts to establish the truth about the past. In this recent seminar, Hatidza sent the participants a message that it is better to negotiate for a hundred of years than have a one hour of war: "Evil is evil and it spreads like weeds. We have to work very hard to prevent its spreading. If we do not do it on time, the roots of weeds will spread deep all around, and then it will be too late...If our leaders from Yugoslavia negotiated longer, no matter how long it would take, we would not have so many victims today...Not so many mothers would pass away not knowing where their loved ones are" (Brailo, 2008). Thus, the 'Mothers' also act as anti-war campaigners urging young generation not to use weapons but to sit and settle any conflict by negotiation. They paid price of a war carried out in their name and their aim is to warn future generations to not allow the same to happen to them.

Conclusion

The 'Mothers of Srebrenica' are an example of how women can reinvent their role in post-conflict society and become active agents of change. They have achieved astonishing results due to their persistent, peaceful and patient struggle to find out and spread the truth of what happened to their missing loved ones in Srebrenica in 1995. With very little education, no access to power and decision making bodies, the 'Mothers' enjoy respect and recognition by local and the international community, personified by the recent visit by Mr Brammertz. Although there are yet no answers for the contradictions posed by the 'Mothers'; (their conflicting roles of victims and agents and their rhetoric which demands a punitive justice as a condition for a feasible reconciliation), one thing is certain: these women are brave, strong and influential. They made men in the position of power to sit down, listen to them and recognize their existence, pain, determination and the threat to dominant power - certainly a transformative moment.

However, there is still a long bumpy road before them. One of the chief commanders of the 1995 massacre still enjoys freedom, as do some of his fellows. As long as those responsible for the genocide walk freely and until missing sons and husbands are discovered, identified and buried, Srebrenica will remain the city of ghosts and the 'Mothers' will not be able to find the truth and the long lasting peace they desire. But despite all these challenges, the messages of hope sent by the children and the 'Mothers of Srebrenica' will remain and remind the world that there are hopes for a brighter future in this war-torn country.

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Footnotes

1 Youtube, “Munira Subasic”, You Tube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AsG5ElhGBIU>. Munira is the public representative of the ‘Mothers of Srebrenica’. She comments on the recent ICJ decision, delivered on 26 February 2007 that Serbia is not guilty for genocide in Srebrenica.

2 Association of mothers that pressed its government to learn the fate of their children who vanished during the 1976-83 dictatorship in Argentina.

3 Association of mothers established in Peru in 1980.

4 Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro, Macedonia, Slovenia and BiH

5 Vojvodina and Kosovo

6 Bosnian Muslims

7 In December 1995, the Dayton Peace Agreement was signed and war was over. I called the peace “fragile” since I believe that still a lot needs to be done in BiH in order to have a ‘positive peace’ environment where the citizens can fully exercise their social, economical and political rights. However, this discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

8 The government of Republika Srpska said that it “sympathises with the pain of relatives of the Srebrenica victims and expresses sincere regrets and apologies”. Only in November 2004, an official Bosnian Serb report admitted for the first time that more than 7,000 men had been killed. See BBC, “Serbs Sorry for Srebrenica Deaths” November 10, 2004, <http://www.globalpolicy.org/intljustice/tribunals/yugo/2004/1110srebrenica.htm>.

9 All 29 cabinet ministers in the Prime Minister coalition resigned following a crisis meeting. See CNN News, “Kok wins praise for resignation”, <http://edition.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/europe/04/17/dutch.government/>.

10 During the war time in BiH, my mother would talk about the pain only mothers can feel when they loose their child. Duing this time, my family did not know for months about my brother’s whereabouts.

11 For analysis of the argenitan Madres de la Plaza de Majo, see Sarah Radcliffe, *Women’s Place/El Lugar de Mujeres: Latin America and the Politics of Gender Identity*. In Keith, M. and Pile, S. (Eds) *Place and the Politics of Identity*. London: Routledge.

12 The ‘Mothers’ made this statement this during the conference on truth and reconciliation in 2006 in Sarajevo where I was one of the participants.