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Activism for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina: A Gender Perspective

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Abstract

Feminist research on peace building in Bosnia and Herzegovina has focused on women's peace activism, so broader efforts taken by mixed-gender civil society groups have largely remained invisible. This article aims to shed light on the joint peace-building efforts by a group of young women and men from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia who have crossed ethnic and gender borders with the aim of working together on long-term sustainable peace in the region. Through the use of multimedia and public seminars, as well as training offered to war veterans and young people from across the former Yugoslavia, [Centar za nenasilnu akciju](#) [Centre for Nonviolent Action] (CNA) has become an important voice in rebuilding peace in the region. The article emphasizes the importance of CNA's work and offers an auto-ethnographical perspective that illustrates the author's use of CNA materials in her teaching on gender, war and peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Australia.

Keywords: gender, peace building, activism, Centre for Nonviolent Action

(CNA), Bosnia and Herzegovina

The challenge of rebuilding societies after war is much more complex and difficult than the task of putting an end to fighting.

(Stiefel, 1999, p. 2)

Building a culture of peace is an important and challenging task that confronts all post-conflict societies, and this includes the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BH). The ways and methods used to build peace often vary, depending on the gender of those involved. Grassroots peace building is usually associated with women's activism. However, initiatives and actions for creating peace should be undertaken equally by men and women of all ages, and men in particular because they often control the resources needed to create peace, such as the media, police and defence forces. Also, they often hold privileged positions in most societies, particularly those affected by conflict. Men's work on peace is directly related to achieving gender equality and prevention of violence, and this can modify their personal attitudes and behaviours as well as mobilize other men to take action on the political, economic and social levels that often maintain gender inequalities.

While there has been much literature examining women's peace-building initiatives (Kumar 2001, Cockburn 1998, Enloe 2002, Cockburn 2007), little has been written about mixed gender groups that have worked towards peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Despite new emerging post-conflict identities, languages and borders, women and men from all sides of the previously warring parties in BH are working together to rebuild sustainable societies. In this paper I would like to emphasize the role of BH women and men, in particular war veterans, in peace building and how this has been used to bring about positive changes which not only benefit women, but the whole society.

This paper examines the active participation and involvement of young men and women in peace building and non-violence work in BH by analysing the work of [Centar za nenasilnu akciju](#) [Centre for Nonviolent Action] (CNA). The CNA is a non-government organization (NGO) that brings together groups of young men and women from mixed ethnic backgrounds who work together on building peace cultures in the former Yugoslavia. Through their work, CNA promotes non-violence and dialogue by focusing on peace

education, video production and publishing. To date there has been little research focused on CNA, particularly their use of audio-visual materials in classrooms. I will directly address this by reflecting on CNA work in the region as well as my own experience as a lecturer actively using their materials when teaching gender and peace and conflict studies.

With this paper I would like to open a broader discussion on mixed gender groups working for peace and what can be learned from them. The paper has three main parts. The first is a brief introduction of gender during the war in BH. The second analyses gender and peace building and the role CNA plays. The third part reflects the author's personal experiences using CNA documentary films in classrooms in BH, Serbia and Australia. It is the contention of this paper that any peace-building initiative that does not seek to include both genders from the outset and within every stage of its activities will hardly challenge existing gender inequalities and stereotypes.

Gender, war and activism in Bosnia and Herzegovina

After the dissolution of the Socialistic Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1992, women's NGOs emerged in all the ex-republics. As Hunt (2004) states, "NGOs have been a new feature of Bosnian civil society since the demise of communism" (p. 259). When civil war became more likely, women spontaneously started to gather throughout the country to protest (Nikolic-Ristanovic, 1999; Zarkov, 2007).

Although women were not drafted during the war, some women volunteered for military units or were drafted as nurses. One of these was Alma, a Bosnian woman soldier who organized women into a veterans group in the area where she lived (Hunt, 2004). She strongly believes that the war in BH would not have broken out if it had been up to women (Hunt, 2004). While small numbers of women took up arms and fought in the war in BH, the large majority suffered as victims of the violence, in particular sexual violence and rape, which feminist research has particularly focused on (see, for instance, MacKinnon, 1993; Nikolic-Ristanovic, 1999; Stiglemayer, 1994).

Women were specifically and deliberately targeted to humiliate, degrade and feminize a particular culture and ethnic group, the enemy. One of the main features of the BH conflict was the highly organized and calculated systemic rape of Bosnian Muslim women by the Serb army. It has been estimated that approximately 20,000 Bosnian Muslim women were raped by Bosnian Serb

men in what was known as *rape camps* (European Community, 1993). However, the number of rapes that can be proved and the number that actually happened may never be known (Thomas & Ralph, 1994). These violations ranged from dehumanisation to mutilation, rape, forced motherhood, forced prostitution, torture and sexual murder, and they were based on both sex and ethnicity. Rape of women was used as a weapon of war and as a tool for *ethnic cleansing*. 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” (*Prosecutor vs. Kunarac et al.*, judgment February 22, 2001).

Since the vast majority of women had not been directly involved in the conflict as combatants and had not carried rifles, Huat and Posa (2001) argue that they are more likely to be accepted by *the other* side because it is assumed they did not commit any atrocities. Likewise, Tickner (1994) argues that since women are “situated far from the seats of power” and are not identified with state institutions, they are “less likely to support war as an instrument of state policy” (p. 43). Thus, despite their different political or religious orientations, women are often the first to cross ethnic, cultural and language borders and work together on building peace. As Cockburn (1998) emphasises, women are “working together in a way that extremists’ strategies have aimed to make unthinkable” (p. 167).

Throughout 1990 and 1991, women’s groups in different parts of Yugoslavia organized and carried out protests calling for the demilitarisation of Yugoslavia and were organisers, participants and leaders of peace movements there (Waller & Rycenga, 2001). Women crossed the borders between warring parties, and under the name *Women for Peace* issued a statement calling for a negotiated and peaceful solution, and a “demobilization of all reserve police units in all republics and provinces” (Cockburn, 1998, p. 167).

The challenge of surviving in the absence of men triggered the expansion of women’s roles, both private and public. Many women became active in their communities. They established small local groups with the aim of providing relief to vulnerable populations, primarily women, children and the elderly. Since men could not move freely because they were in fear of being hunted by military police and sent to the front, much of the public space was left to women (Slapsek, 2000). Women used their traditional invisibility in the public sphere to create space for their activism. While men were fighting or hidden

at home, many women started to work in the non-government sector, trying to provide minimum incomes for the survival of their families. *Medica Zenica* and [Zene Zenama Sarajevo](#) [Women to Women Sarajevo] were among the first NGOs established in BH with the aim of supporting women who had experienced violence. In the middle of the war in 1993, [Medica Zenica](#) was established as a women's therapy centre to assist women victims of trauma and sexual violence. Likewise, *Zene Zenama* brought together women who were willing to support other women who had suffered violence, regardless of their ethnic backgrounds.

However, while the media repeatedly disseminates information describing the abuses that women endured during war, actions such as those described above that were taken by women as autonomous actors are often ignored. As Kothari (2008) argues, descriptions of their living experiences depict women either as silent victims of violence, or are a representation of rape in battlefields (see also Cuklanz, 1996; Mayers, 2004). Women's experiences are used to frame news stories and reinforce stereotyped representations in mainstream media, especially in the case of sexual violence (Kothari, 2008). Images of women as victims and losers can impede awareness and recognition of the unique solutions that women might propose with respect to war and peace building. Portraying women only as members of a vulnerable group narrows the view of what they can achieve and denies their role as agents of peace (Puechguirbal, 2004). As Enloe (2002) 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" (p. 29).

While there has been a lot of information about BH women as victims, there has been little documentation of the immense increase in women's independence and self-confidence that was triggered by the conflict (Puechguirbal, 2003). Indeed, women are victims of the war, but they are also survivors. The BH war changed gender roles in such a way that for the very first time some women found themselves in the traditionally male roles of primary breadwinner or defender of their family (Walsh, 2000).

If women are often portrayed as victims, men have usually been portrayed as perpetrators in the BH war. Many war veterans are seen as war criminals, perpetrators and rapists (Beara & Miljanovic, 2006) or as "spoilers" of peace, and obstructing the peaceful transformation of society (Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2004). They are often dismissed as enemies, representing nationalism and nationalist projects that involve "masculine institutions, masculine processes

and masculine activities” through which they developed militarily masculinised identities (Nagel, 1998, p. 243). While it is true that some men voluntarily joined armies on all three sides of the conflict, many young men were also drafted into the war. They faced compulsory enlistment to fight a war they did not really understand. One ex-combatant stated: “It was a time when you had to answer a call-up. If I hadn’t answered I would have been arrested” (CNA, 2006, p. 133). Some of them said that they were confused, scared and “not mentally prepared for war” (CNA, 2006, p. 133). Additionally, men who refused to be drafted or who fled were despised by the community and regarded as cowards and less manly. Cigar (1995) reports that in 1991 one brigade commander complained about low rates of mobilization, saying that “individuals hide under the skirts of their wives and mothers and it is difficult to bring them in, give them a weapon...and to integrate them into a unit” (p. 513). He also reports that when soldiers were given the opportunity to express themselves, they would say that they did not know why they were fighting and often deserted *en masse* (Cigar, 1996, p. 317). According to [Zene u crnom](#) [Women in Black], a women’s feminist and anti-militarist peace organization in Belgrade, almost 30,000 Serb men of military age went into exile rather than fight a civil war with their friends and neighbours (Zene u crnom, 1994, p. 32). The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) reported in 1995 that out of 18,000 missing persons in the former Yugoslavia, 92% were men.

Clearly, while men and women experience war differently, neither women nor men are solely victims or perpetrators. The fact is that both can be fighters, victims or peace activists, so generalizations about women’s peacefulness and masculine violence can only foster further dichotomies and power hierarchies (Elshtain, 1990). As Tickner (1992) argues, any association of “women with peace gives support to an idealised masculinity that depends on constructing women as passive victims in need of protection” (p. 59). To build peace across borders, it is essential for women to work together and to work with other groups of women across borders. However, devaluing or ignoring men in the process of post-conflict regeneration will not bring sustainable peace when almost every man was drafted into the military and many are now war veterans. Although many of them are perceived only as war criminals, they are also deeply traumatised individuals who have to re-socialize and reintegrate into post-conflict BH. Nevertheless, according to CNA (2006), they are also seen as *heroes* by the communities they belong to and as people who have strong potential to rebuild bridges between various religious and ethnic groups in the former Yugoslavia.

Gender and peace activism in BH and CNA's work with war veterans

"We who were at war understand, for others it is not so easy...Our reconciliation through open dialogue should serve as a foundation for a wider reconciliation movement."

— Croatian war veteran Gordan Bodog (qtd in [OSCE Mission to Serbia](#), 2007).

The absence of men from public view during the war created an opportunity for women to be more politically active. They took on roles traditionally assigned to men and provided for their families (El-Bushra, 2000; Meintjes, 2002). They also came to occupy political and public life, and develop community-level initiatives for peace across ethnic and national identities (Manchanda, 2001; Mladjenovic, 1999).

At the peak of the atrocities and instability women found ways to initiate activities and work for peace and reconciliation in grassroots organizations. Women from all walks of life participated in this informal peace-building work, but their activities were often devalued and disregarded as "charitable" or "volunteer" even when they had a political impact on society (Meintjes, 2002, p. 89). Although they were marginalized, the grassroots organizations were able to mobilize numbers of women and transform individual grievances into legitimate social concern. Some of them worked in partnership with men who refused to serve in the military, and they maintained an extensive program involving public statements, writing and publishing, educational workshops and seminars. From its beginning, Women in Black worked with men who were hiding from conscription or who had fled their units (Cockburn, 2007, p. 85). They provided moral and political support to such men and in this way acted on their feminist and antimilitarist beliefs (Cockburn, 2007, p. 85).

Meintjes, Pillay and Turshen (2007) argue that the war offered women opportunities to transform their images of themselves, their behaviour towards men and their ability to live independently. Women can come out of conflicts empowered and ready to claim change and respect for their rights. Particularly, they can feel they have more credibility, strength and power to demand agendas which will take into consideration their special needs and rights, since they have been deliberately targeted for abuses such as rape, slavery, forced impregnation and the like. In order to be heard, women have to be loud, persistent, constantly aware and ready to push their demands, since patriarchal structures are often quickly restored after war. Women in

BH, both individually and collectively, contributed to peace building in many ways, but their global activism was galvanised by specific offences, particularly the sexual violence against women during the conflict.

Although peace-building activism by women is extremely important, over the last few years there has been growing recognition of the importance of including men in the prevention of gender-based violence and, in particular, peace building work. For example, [Women Peacemakers Program](#) (WPP) recently (2009) issued a call to train male activists to work in the peace-building area and who are “in a good position to reach male participants” and identify with other men”. This organization emphasises that male colleagues in the peace building sector “do not identify with the concept of gender since they perceive it as applying to women only” (WPP, 2009). WPP believes that training gender sensitive males is important as they can act as powerful role models for achieving gender equality. UNESCO’s Constitution, for example, uses words that echo the position of WPP and similar organizations who believe that by excluding half of the population from peace-building activities sustainable peace cannot be achieved. The Constitution states “*since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed*” (UNESCO, 1945).

As the skills of war are predominantly learned by men, it would be ideal if peace-building skills could also be taught to them. However, the challenge is that the art of war and the art of peace require totally opposite characteristics. While warfare includes dehumanising and killing, the art of peace building requires more delicate qualities involving patience, constructive dialogue, non-violence and empathy. Nevertheless, the productive reintegration of war veterans into civilian life and the building of peace has been recognised by some grassroots post-conflict organizations such as CNA.

During the first few years of the war only women were able to organize themselves into groups and work towards peace in an organized and transparent way. The men were either drafted or were in hiding, so they were absent from political grassroots activism. However, two years after Dayton Peace Agreement was signed, in 1997, CNA established its first office in Belgrade, Serbia. The founder of this office was Nenad Vukosavljevic, a peace activist from Belgrade who also produced films on peace and reconciliation in BH. His goal was to promote nonviolence and peaceful approaches to conflict in the region (Fischer, 2006). In 2001, CNA opened its second office in Sarajevo, BH. From the beginning its staff was ethnically mixed and included both genders. There were two males and two females in

each office of Serbian, Muslim, Croatian, and Montenegrin descent. CNA's main goals are still to involve youth and NGO activists in "social activism" built around nonviolence and intercultural communication (Hasanbegovic, 2001).

Three fundamental activities that CNA undertakes are peace education, dealing with the past, and the promotion of peace building (Rill et al., 2007). In the last few years the team has also produced films that present the personal stories of people who survived the war. The films all aim to promote reconciliation and peace building. The first film, *Traces* (2004), tells the story of four war veterans from BH, Croatia and Serbia and people close to them. It shows their motivations for joining the war and their views of this experience from their current perspectives. Three documentaries were produced as a series named *Simulated Dialogue*. The first in this series, called *It Cannot Last Forever* (2006), addresses the relationships between Bosniaks and Serbs 10 years after the war which is, as CNA puts it, "still present in hearts and minds of many" (CNA, 2009). This film in particular addresses issues such as whether reconciliation is possible and how people in BH can overcome feelings of hatred, mistrust, and pain. The second film from the series, *All Wish To Cast A Stone* (2006), is a self-critical reflection by war veterans and ordinary citizens on their violent past. The last film, *Not A Bird To Be Heard* (2007), records Croats and Bosniaks as they speak about the war, how they deal with the past, and what their hopes are for the future.

CNA not only has a gender balanced office team which provides the majority of the training, but it also has a gender component as part of its training program (CNA, 2005). They promote the human rights of women and also men, in particular war veterans whom they want to reintegrate and involve in reconstruction and conflict prevention. CNA argues that the soldiers are a key part of the constituency to be engaged in dialogue. They state that between 1991 and 1995 half a million people were part of various military groupings in the former Yugoslavia (*Traces*, 2004). The CNA activists (2004) have articulated why they are targeting former soldiers:

From the perspective of building peace, former soldiers represent a significant potential because many of them, in fact, have a need to contribute to the building of a more just society and feel the responsibility for all that happened and is still happening in our midst...[Their experience,] at the same time, offers a direct opportunity for confronting the motives, fears and

ideals which prompted people to become actors in the war. (p. 32)

As Beara and Miljanovic (2006) argue, many of the war veterans feel rejected and abandoned by the community they thought they were fighting for. One veteran said, "It would suit the state much better if we had died, then it wouldn't have any responsibilities. You feel helpless, rejected by everyone. And we fought because they asked us. It's not like I wanted to go to war" (p. 148).

CNA is the first organization that aims to include this group in its peace-building work, recognizing the importance of their voices and contribution because it believes that war veterans have both political and social power. The credibility these people have in their societies is significant, in the sense that in war they were fighters for the *national interest* and because of this people believe them more than they would others who were not involved in battle (CNA, 2004). Although their numbers are huge, their involvement as social actors in any public discussion in the past has been limited, or even nonexistent (Wils, 2004). As a result of their traumatisation, but also because of the lack of public interest and empathy, some war veterans are interested in taking part in activities which might enable them to communicate their experiences to the wider public (Wils, 2004). CNA has provided this opportunity for communication through films and video productions which stimulate dialogue and personal reflection. I have taken this opportunity for communicating with my own students through the use of CNA's films and video productions in the classroom.

Activism for peace in the classroom

As a citizen of BH and someone who was born, grew up, and lived there for a good part of my life, I became aware of CNA activities from their very beginning. As a participant in one of their first peace-building training programs in 2001, I had an opportunity to see how they work in the field. It was my first encounter with peace-building work in the region, but also the first time I met with young people from other former Yugoslav republics after the conflict. From then on I closely followed their work and made personal, and later professional contacts with the team in Sarajevo. I also attended one of their public seminars, *Four Views*, in my hometown Banjaluka and I found it fascinating to be part of these first public hearings where war veterans spoke about their often horrendous experiences during the war. Although I

have been living in Australia for the last few years, whenever I visit the region I take part in some of CNA's events, such as launches of their publications and films. Also, over the last few years I have met with Tamara, a CNA staff member, in Sarajevo to discuss challenges to peace in our country and to update myself first-hand about CNA work. Since my visits to the region have been mainly professional, I invited Tamara to come to my seminar on Gender, War and Peace Building that I teach in Sarajevo. I wanted her to talk about CNA work, particularly in relation to reconciliation and gender. The CNA team is well known in BH and it is not unusual for some of my students to have heard about them and watched some of their films.

I have used CNA films for educational purposes in several school settings in BH, Serbia and Australia. I use them as an alternative and additional tool in teaching peace and conflict studies as they offer specific contextual explanations, insights and understanding that textbooks or lectures alone can't provide. The complex Yugoslav wars, and especially the processes of reconciliation after the bloodshed that are on going in BH and Serbia, are often difficult to grasp for outsiders such as the students I teach in Australia. It can often be hard to imagine that any reconciliation can take a place after such a war, in particular among war veterans. The CNA films play an important part in breaking down prejudices and hatred among all people in the former Yugoslavia.

CNA has very clear policies about using their films. They prefer their full length to be shown rather than excerpts since, as they explained to me, there is a danger that some scenes and statements may be taken out of context and misinterpreted. Although they prefer that individuals like me should show whole films, some clips from their films can be found on YouTube as they want as many people as possible to see them. I often show students the film *Traces*, which I have found to be the most appropriate for viewers outside BH since it is the least contextualized of all CNA films. I have found that students in both the former Yugoslavia and in Australia react with great interest to the stories of war veterans and their family members. The music, the images and narrative flow of the people who talk in this film is deeply moving, very intimate and personal. Although those in the film speak in the *lingua franca* that all citizens of BH and Serbia understand, the film is sub-titled in English.

Last year, I showed this film for the first time to a group of students at the Nis law school in the south of Serbia as a part of a day-long seminar on gender, war and peace building. In many respects this seminar, the first of its kind at this law school, was an eye-opener for me as well as for the students. I had

suggested showing the film at the end of the seminar and although it was quite late to start a film which would keep students in the school for one more hour, they insisted on watching it. This generation of students was very young when the war started in BH and they don't remember the events that took place. However, they had very strong opinions about *the others* that they had gathered from the media and their families. The majority of them have never been to BH, nor do they plan to go. Some students expressed fear of going there because they heard that "something can happen to them when BH people learn they are from Serbia".

During the film and afterwards I could see they were surprised that war veterans are ready to talk and that they do not express much hatred. As Adnan Hasanbegovic said with respect to war veterans, "When ex-soldiers talk about peace and non-violence, people listen" (cited in Terichow, 2006). They liked the film and said they had not known what peace-building initiatives were going on in BH and that the film took them by surprise.

CNA films bring human suffering, trauma and pain into the classroom and force students to face war the crimes committed by their fellow citizens. They demystify the war veterans who are often represented as criminals and aim to show the human side of former soldiers who try to make sense of their war experiences and articulate them to the wider public. These films also encourage ordinary citizens to talk about their feelings and in this sense they are a form of narrative therapy which can enable the process of reconciliation. There are no professional actors in these films, only ordinary people who send strong statements that peace-building work by BH citizens is personalised. It also educates the public that each person should take responsibility and act, rather than wait for someone else to solve the problems her/his country is experiencing.

Through use of their films, I aim to inform the public about peace building activities in my home country, but also to promote CNA's important work. In contrast to the huge coverage of acts of violence, in BH the media rarely give attention to peace-building efforts. This was the practice during the war, and it continues in the post-conflict transitional period. Since BH has a global image as a country where human suffering, rape and torture took place, showing something different, some positive thinking from its people, is very important. CNA also breaks the gender stereotype that all men are perpetrators and all women peace makers by insisting that both women and men are key agents of change who should work together.

As I have argued throughout this article, both men and women have the

potential for peacemaking and the responsibility to build and keep the peace. Mixed gender groups, such as CNA, perhaps can serve as an example of how to work together and overcome gender, ethnic and religious borders in order to achieve long-term peace in this part of the world. Finally, academics and activists need to cooperate, learn from each other and use each other's specific experiences and knowledge to improve their work in the field and in the classroom. My experience suggests that peace education that combines an activist and academic approach can be a useful way not only to engage both genders in the wider discussion about peace, but also to generate empathy and demystify *the other*.

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