

The gender of coffee: Women and reconciliation initiatives in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Abstract: This article explores the gendering of reconciliation initiatives from the perspective of Bosniac women active in women's NGOs in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina. I illustrate how established patriarchal gender relations and socialist-era models of women's community involvement framed the ways in which some women's NGO participants constructed essential ethno-national and gender differences, in contrast to dominant donor discourses. This leads to exploration of how gender patterns embedded in the institution of *komšiluk* (good-neighborliness), particularly women's coffee visits, provided both obstacle and opportunity for renewed life together among ethnic others separated by wartime ethnic cleansing. Distinguishing between the two concepts, I show how, from the perspective of women's roles and experiences, "life together" may be all that displaced women want or expect out of "reconciliation" initiatives, and that even this may be beyond the capacity of many displaced people to forego talk about injustices and guilt stemming from the war.

Keywords: Bosnia and Herzegovina, ethno-nationalism, gender, NGOs, reconciliation

Women at the forefront of reconciliation

In the wake of widespread atrocities and "ethnic cleansing" during the 1992–1995 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, reconciliation initiatives have been tightly bound to the process of refugee/displaced person¹ return and to issues of justice. In both these areas, women have played a prominent role. In large part this is because women make up a majority of refugees, displaced persons, and those who survived wartime atrocities, men having been targeted for outright killing in campaigns of ethnic cleansing or having fallen

as members of armed units (Carpenter 2003). This preponderance of women is strengthened by foreign intervention agencies² and donors charged with overseeing post-war construction, which look to women and women's non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as "natural" leaders of reconciliation initiatives (Helms 2003a).

Bosnian women's NGOs have thus been core participants in networks of organizations, donors, and local and international officials professing to work on reconciliation. As women's organizations, they have also been drawn into

the overlapping sphere of women's rights and gender equality initiatives. Local NGOs were eager to be part of these circles, not least of all for the funding and other forms of support they received. At the same time, they invested such activities with their own meanings and priorities, which were often contrary to the stated goals of donors and even of the organizations themselves. With close attention to the practices and informal rhetoric of return and reconciliation activists, it was apparent that neither the transcendence of ethnic difference nor social change toward gender equality was the real priority for many NGOs, especially those in rural areas. In fact, members of such organizations often ended up reinforcing rigid notions of ethnic and gender difference in conformity with conservative nationalist and patriarchal ideologies. Furthermore, for women refugees seeking to return to their homes, reconciliation with ethnic others was little more than an NGO buzzword.

This article shows how such conservative worldviews coexisted with reconciliation and women's rights initiatives. These are expressions of women's specific roles in processes of war and peace that are quite different from the usual declarations of women's natural (whether biologically or socially based) inclinations toward reconciliation and forgiveness appearing in discourses of international intervention, women's activism, and academic feminism (e.g., Nikolić-Ristanović 2000; Papandreou 1997; and see Ruddick 1989, 1998; Scheper-Hughes 1996). The article illuminates some of the less noticed gendered aspects of reconciliation processes, which make visible the difficulties in achieving a return to "life together" (*suzivot*) with ethnic others, much less the sort of full trust and respect sought by intervention agencies and analysts. "Life together" can be understood as the coexistence or "thin reconciliation" discussed by Stefansson (this volume), wherein a certain level of day-to-day trust is established by people living in close proximity but the level of profound empathy and dialogue associated with "thick reconciliation" is foreclosed by a determined silence over war-time injustices and suffering.³

In order to explain these processes, the article outlines the gendered logic of two pre-war social institutions still salient in much of Bosnian society: norms of sociability and reciprocity associated with *komšiluk* (good-neighborliness) and patterns of women's community activity originating in Communist Party-affiliated *aktiv žena* (women's "active") groups. In contrast to the ideals promoted by intervention agencies and donors, these institutions entailed a rather strict maintenance of both ethnic and gender difference, distinctions that, before the war, had begun to break down significantly only in urban areas. Such differentiation did not necessarily mean hostility—indeed, those of different ethnic backgrounds could be reliable neighbors and close friends—but neither did it always mean full trust or respect.

As these were primarily rural patterns even when maintained in urban settings, this article focuses on the activities and narratives of several NGOs made up of women from villages and small towns. They are all organizations dominated by or made up solely of Bosniacs (Muslims).⁴ I concentrate most on two leaders of Bosnian displaced women's groups working toward return to former homes in what is now the Republika Srpska, the Serb controlled entity that, together with the Bosnian and Croat dominated Federation, make up the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁵ At the time of my initial research (1999–2000),⁶ the refugee return process had just begun in earnest after several years of political pressure from foreign intervention agencies. Although many of the displaced stayed in their new homes, many others—despite painful memories and losses—were determined to return, either in defiance of those who forced them out or because they felt they had nowhere else to go.

Working on return brought these groups into networks of donors, international officials, and other NGOs engaged more broadly in "reconciliation," a hot topic drawing in NGOs of all sorts. Return, as a way to reverse the ethnic separation brought on by ethnic cleansing, was likewise a major goal of foreign intervention agencies and governments and a major – tangible – part of reconciliation efforts. As women's

groups, the NGOs I discuss were likewise plugged into networks dedicated to helping women and improving gender equality, an enterprise that led back to return and reconciliation through dominant representations of women as peace-makers and innocent victims of the war (Helms 2003a).

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, international institutions and donors have vigorously encouraged NGOs not only as the markers of a healthy civil society but as leaders of post-war reconciliation and a force opposing ruling nationalist parties, especially those that were obstructing the return of refugees, most aggressively in Serb- and Croat-controlled areas. Donors thus heavily emphasized return and reconciliation, a priority not lost on local organizations searching for funds. They knew that portraying their organizations as multi-ethnic and/or professing a commitment to inter-ethnic reconciliation would increase their chances for winning funding. This also held true for emphases on women's or gender issues.

Cynical critics and suspicious local residents not directly involved in NGO circles tend to dismiss these newly formed organizations as inauthentic and their activists as opportunists who are only after foreign money, travel opportunities, and personally useful connections (Helms 2003a; Pickering 2006).⁷ Scholars, too, have raised serious concerns about the problems produced by strong donor pressure to engage with specific issues and the less-than-transparent manner in which they go about "building civil society" (e.g., Belloni 2001; Sali-Terzić 2001; Stubbs 2007). However, as Paul Stubbs points out, it should not be surprising to find that NGO activities involve "claims-making, opportunities, strategic choices and goals, interests, and resource maximization" (2007: 219–20); a more useful analysis must take the social context in which this happens into account. Keeping this in mind, this article is not an exposure of the fact that many NGO activists do not believe their own rhetoric or that of foreign agencies or donors (that they are actually "nationalists" or "anti-feminists"); rather it is an attempt to understand the activities and narratives of these

activists in the context of the social realities and moral worlds in which they operate.

Furthermore, lest this analysis be read through an orientalist lens suggesting "backward" or "traditional" Muslim society (see Helms 2008; Žarkov 1995), it is important to note that this paper does not address all segments of the Bosnian population, nor does it characterize the women's NGO scene as a whole. Most obviously, I focus only on Bosniacs; issues of return, reconciliation, justice, and gender take on different meanings among Serb, Croat, or mixed groups.⁸ More significant, the gender regimes I discuss, carried over from the pre-war period, are adhered to most closely among people of all ethno-religious backgrounds from smaller towns and villages, or working-class communities in larger cities, from where the women I discuss came. It is also significant that the majority of the women who formed NGOs, especially displaced women and those from smaller places, were in their forties and fifties, of an older generation for which the socialist-era patterns I discuss were part of adulthood. Higher education levels, identification with urban or cosmopolitan culture, anti-nationalist political stances, and younger age tend to correlate more closely with, but by no means determine, a rejection of essentialized gender and ethnic differences. Such a rejection indeed characterizes most members of the small but active group of women's activists, some of whom self-identify as feminists, who openly oppose "patriarchal and nationalist" representations of gender and ethnic difference (see Helms 2003a, 2003b). However, none of these are absolutes; more elements of this ethnically exclusive and patriarchal logic than these progressive, urban activists might like to admit often creep into their discourses and actions.

Gender, activism, and neighborhood before the war

Although women's organizing was profoundly shaped by war-time and post-war international intervention (e.g., Cockburn with Stakić-Domuz, and Hubić 2001; Helms 2003a, 2003b; Pupovac

2005), much of the way it was organized and understood followed socialist-era patterns, starting with the local level *aktiv žena* (women's "active" or auxiliary). Far removed from state-level women's activities that succeeded the more assertive Anti-Fascist Women's Front (Anti-Fašistički Front Žena) of the World War II era (Jancar-Webster 1990; Sklevicky 1984, 1989), but still under the umbrella of local Communist Party cells, *aktiv žena* groups upheld Party policies but avoided political issues (Sklevicky 1989: 103). Instead, they organized charity drives (e.g., collecting toys for poor children), community improvement activities (cleaning up the local park), or women's social events (excursions to other towns or celebrations of March 8th, International Women's Day). Once the war started, it took little conceptual or organizational effort for women to mobilize in support of the needy in their midst, in some places even under the name "Aktiv žena." When the war ended, many such initiatives refashioned themselves into NGOs to compete for donor support (see Helms forthcoming; World Bank 2002).

Another important continuity lies in patterns of gender segregated social activity, according to which it was expected of women to gather together and engage with other women more than in mixed groups (Bringa 1995; Sorabji 1994). Men had their own male-dominated arenas: politics, business, sports, pubs, the military. Women had neighborhood coffee visits, socializing at work, and *aktiv žena* activities as acceptable venues in which to meet outside the home. These patterns contributed to the establishment of many more women's NGOs as simply groups of women than as groups concerned with changing established gender hierarchies, much to the periodic dismay of visiting feminist donors and activists (Helms 2003a, 2003b, forthcoming).

Separate gender sphere ideology underpins both constructions of essential, unsurpassable ethnic difference as well as imaginings of renewed life alongside erstwhile "ethnic" enemies. The prospects for if not reconciliation but at least renewed *suživot* were imagined through the female neighborhood coffee visits, reciprocity and mutual aid – activities central to the insti-

tution of *komišiluk*.⁹ *Komšije* (neighbors) are a source of aid, company, and protection, but also gossip, social control, and obligations (Bringa 1995; Sorabji 2008). Many analysts (e.g., Belloni 2001: 169; Pouligny 2002: 211) have treated *komišiluk* as the secret to pre-war inter-ethnic harmony and even as a key to the post-war restoration of a multi-ethnic state. Indeed, the fact that such relationships were so difficult to restore was a direct and deliberate outcome of the intimate, neighbor-on-neighbor violence that characterized ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bougarel 2004; Hayden 1996; Sorabji 1995). But, as Cornelia Sorabji (2008) argues, *komišiluk* is not primarily, or sometimes even at all, about regulating inter-ethnic relations. In mixed ethnic communities this was indeed a result of *komišiluk* norms and practices. However, the stability thus ensured did not erase ethnic differences but actually reinforced them through frequent observation of differences in customs (performed especially at women's coffee visits; see Bringa 1995: 66–73) and general preference against inter-ethnic marriages, especially in rural areas and among the more religiously observant (Bougarel 2004: 118–42; Bringa 1993, 1995).

"Women started this war"

The above-described gender patterns surfaced strongly in the narratives of several women's NGO leaders. Fikreta¹⁰ headed an organization of Bosniac women refugees, now returnees, that had successfully led the return of much of the population back to their hometown in the Republika Srpska. Emira's group was based in a small post-industrial city and described itself as existing for ordinary (read: working-class and rural) women, including some displaced women. Amila headed a small women's NGO in Sarajevo, made up mostly of Bosniacs, which undertook various forms of charity work to help women refugees or widows of Bosnian Army soldiers killed during the war. All of them had formed NGOs and entered the world of intervention agencies and donors during or just after

the war, at the time of the general NGO boom in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Helms forthcoming).

As leaders of women's NGOs, these women had been exposed to the discourses of women's rights and gender equality, as well as those of reconciliation and multi-ethnic tolerance. They had incorporated this language into their rhetoric and won different sorts of funding to implement projects with such stated goals. But the language of tolerance and equality was not incompatible with ideologies of essential ethnic difference, nor with prevalent patriarchal notions of respectable gender roles. As I have shown elsewhere, in Bosnia and Herzegovina the public sphere of politics is associated with men and, especially since the war, with nationalist ideologies, clientelistic practices, and corruption—a not a place for respectable women (Helms 2007). Even when women organized NGOs and pursued “political” goals, they were often careful to cast their activities as apolitical, humanitarian, and connected to women's roles as mothers and wives (Helms 2003a). Here the model of the apolitical, locally based *aktiv žena* fit the bill nicely. So did the idea of the home and *komsiluk* as women's realm, as reflected in Emira's assertion that “women started this war”:

“I don't mean women are guilty for the war in the sense that they wanted war, but because they didn't think about the consequences of their talking. They only thought in the short term. Definitely the ideas from Yugoslavia [i.e., Serbia] were behind the war. But in Bosnia it was purely this provocation (*prepućavanje*) between women and their neighbors. ... If something starts up, some trouble, who is it that runs around gossiping, talking, getting people riled up? I'm not talking about in public life but within the family and we know that's the main cell of society. When it all bursts then women return to their role and the men go off to fight the war. With men it's guns and cannons; with women, talking and blabbing.”

This is a much different vision of women's role in the private sphere than that offered by intervention agencies and major local women's

groups. Instead of being passive victims of male nationalist politics and violence, Emira had women playing an active role in stirring up ethnic hatred. Still, their activity remained a reaction to “ideas from Yugoslavia” (that is, Serbian nationalism), and was confined to the private sphere of the family and the neighborhood.

Women were frequently judged (as were men) according to how well they adhered to this gendered division. Women who dabbled too much into politics or war-related activities, and therefore presumably neglected their duties as mothers, wives, and keepers of the home, were especially criticized. In fact, it was women's role in raising children and influencing husbands that was deemed most important. According to Fikreta, even though it had not been women who had “raped, killed and burned” in the war, they nevertheless shared a degree of guilt, “through their role in upbringing ... Women give birth and raise and feed children. So men aren't the ones most guilty for that.” Amila offered a similar explanation for why she held women most responsible for “nationalism and war”: “they are the ones who bring up the children. If they don't teach their children tolerance, but instead obsession with the past, prejudice and intolerance, those kids, especially boys, will turn out that way.” Fathers, schools, and the rest of the social environment were not insignificant, she acknowledged, but she insisted that the “biggest impact comes from a mother's early upbringing.”

Amila's terminology indicates a distinction between the “tolerance” of Bosniacs based on their general support for a united, multi-ethnic state of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and “obsession with the past,” a clear reference to the importance in Serb nationalist ideology of World War II massacres of Serbs, Ottoman domination, and the great loss at the Battle of Kosovo Field in 1389, which were often evoked in justifications for Serb ethnic cleansing campaigns against Muslims. Fikreta continued in a similar vein about women's roles in guiding children: “Women have the chance to form a person who won't kill but will love—they can sew love rather than death ... So don't give them violent

models, give them something positive to strive for.”

These models also extended to women’s behavior toward their husbands; when men used violence it was because their wives demanded that they be “strong and protecting” while women with “a broad perspective ... would never live with violent men or let their sons be that way.” As Fikreta explained how this worked, it became clear that these two types of gendered behavior corresponded to ethnic differences: it was Bosniac women who sewed love and tolerance, “but among the Serbs, their wives/women (*žene*) simply bring up their children this way [encouraging violence] and they find those kinds of husbands.”

Fikreta continued in the mode of “us” (Bosniacs, Muslims) and “them” (Serbs), explaining that “Serb women learn they should raise their sons for the military and for the state, but we’re brought up to think of family and the home as the most important things in the world.” She claimed that Serbs did not value family in the same way, concluding piously, “For me, children are more important than any state.” In this way, she (re)produced a moral hierarchy of ethnic difference centered on women’s roles as mothers and wives: Serb women were responsible for nurturing a culture of violence and death, allegiance to the state, and (Serb) nationalism. The morally right position, and the Muslim pattern, was to dedicate oneself to the family, away from the state or politics, especially for women.¹¹ When women did get involved, as Fikreta and the members of her organization had, it remained respectable if the goal was to call for peace in the name of protecting their children. But, in her telling, Serb women had crossed the line by publicly cheering on the army. They had become political, precisely the opposite of respectable women’s activities under the *aktiv žena* model. Consistent with the widespread sense of shock with which Bosniacs reported experiencing Serb attacks, Fikreta also claimed that she only realized this when the war started. Before, given that intimate family spaces of the households were mostly hidden even from the scrutiny of neighbors, there was a basis for

claiming ignorance of “their” customs and habits. Thus, the norms of *komšiluk* bolstered Fikreta’s sense of ethnic separation.

Emira, after speaking of women’s guilt for “talking and blabbing,” was also clear about which women had done this, pointing to incidents during the war when Serb women had lain in the road to block United Nations troops from delivering humanitarian aid to non-Serb populations. But it was traditional, patriarchal gender roles that elevated Bosniacs to a higher moral plane above Serbs, whose women were too visible in politics. As Emira stated, “the dignity of Bosniacs doesn’t allow this kind of display.”

EMIRA: “In Islam it’s the stove for women and politics for men. Look at where [Slobodan] Milošević’s wife is. And then look at Alija’s [Izetbegović] wife.”

AUTHOR: “She’s nowhere to be seen.”

EMIRA: “Exactly. You don’t see women in politics among the Bosniacs. But look at the Serbs. Look at Mira Marković and Biljana Plavšić and others. They had lots of women in politics. Women have lots of influence.”¹²

Although Emira and Fikreta belonged to a circle of women’s NGO activists that often called for increased participation of women in formal politics, these narratives suggest that women’s association with politics still carried a stain of suspicion. Their accusations were selective; they pointed to the most nationalistic Serb women and ignored several highly placed (yet not as prominent) Bosniac women politicians, as well as non-Bosniac women active in politics who were outspoken in opposition to nationalisms and the war. The effect of these narratives is ultimately to establish a moral hierarchy of ethnic difference between Bosniacs and Serbs. It is a hierarchy that precedes the atrocities of the war, and thus bolsters the specific view of inherently evil Serbs and righteous Bosniacs along with the general belief in essential ethno-national differences.

Ethnic difference and (gendered) respectability

Ethnic moral hierarchies were constructed through normative roles for both women and men. Given her involvement in foreign donor-sponsored initiatives to protect women's rights, Fikreta was aware of the negative connotations of the sort of patriarchal values in which she placed her positive picture of Bosniacs. The orientalist way in which Bosnian Muslims have been portrayed in the international media also seemed to be on her mind as she talked to me, a Westerner she knew was interested in gender issues (Helms 2008). She was therefore careful to distinguish between a benevolent patriarchy practiced among Bosniacs and a violent one nurtured by Serbs:

“Muslim families are patriarchal but not in the way they're presented—it's not that women are just for serving and giving birth, etc., but men respected women so much that they didn't let women do any difficult jobs—women couldn't have muscles or veins, they had to remain soft and feminine ... Not that women are seen as being of lower value but she *should* bring him water and things like that. It's the division of labor, there's no connection to male domination. ... Men didn't dominate, they were actually victims.”

Fikreta herself did not serve her husband in the way she described (nor, according to him, did he expect such behavior). She joked about what her father would say of her failure to wait on her husband or even to be home more than he was. She explained this as change due to the recent “fashion of equality,” although the “difficult jobs” were still performed by males, “at least among the Muslims.” Here she returned to the past when “Serb women mostly worked in the fields—male jobs.” This transformed a class and occupational difference into an ethnic one, as rural women of all ethnic backgrounds worked in the fields. Her narrative mobilizes notions of respectable gender roles to draw a sharp distinction along ethnic lines, a move that was reinforced by setting

her claims in the past, adding a timeless, natural quality to differences between Bosniacs and Serbs as peoples in the way that time and gender frequently figure in nationalist discourses (e.g., McClintock 1993; Yuval-Davis 1997).

Working in the fields, outside of the house, cast doubt on Serb women's respectability as women. But there was more: Fikreta asserted that Serb women were sexually aggressive and would “do anything to get a man or whatever they want.” This, she told me, was a result of the particularly aggressive Serb upbringing and “a sign that something's not right at home.” Fikreta contrasted this essentialized image of Serbs with one from her own girlhood as an example of life in a Muslim family:

“My father was fine in this aspect. Of course, with some things, like jobs for females or males, it was normal for women to do the easier jobs, those suited to women. I mean, it's more natural for women to do things in the house than for her to chop wood. Or if there was a dance (*igranka*) somewhere far away that he wasn't sure was a decent place, he'd let the boys [in the family] go but not the girls. He'd say, that place isn't for women. But I'd never even want to go there if it was like that.”

Patriarchal rules were thus not a burden for Muslim females but part of a natural order that, as respectable, sexually demure women, they would adhere to in any case.

In the picture Fikreta painted, it was crucial that Muslim men were gentle, noble, and respectful. They were selfless, even victims, sacrificing themselves in their shouldering of the “hardest, most dangerous jobs” and inherently not aggressive or violent. There was no coercion involved in their authority. It followed then that when Bosniac men went off to fight, it was out of duty to defend their homes and families, not out of any violent tendencies. Furthermore, from Fikreta's earlier statements, it was clear that Bosniac women were to be thanked for bringing up their sons in this manner, in direct contrast to the aggressive and violent ways of Serb mothers, which produced the warmongering nation-

alists and genocidal warriors who had violently forced Fikreta and her neighbors from their homes during the war.

Coffee and kisses

With such a view of ingrained ethnic difference between respectable Bosniacs and violent, nationalistic Serbs, how could organizations like Fikreta's be working on reconciliation as they claimed? And why look to (Serb) women as the key to reconciliation if they were so aggressive and nationalistic? The availability of donor funds for projects on reconciliation was certainly an incentive, and these NGO leaders knew how to speak the language of reconciliation (and gender equality), but there is more to the story. Local specificities play a role: Fikreta and her fellow Bosniacs had already returned to their town, which was returning to its pre-war Bosniac majority, albeit within Serb-dominated territory. But a slightly different scenario played itself out for women's NGOs still beginning the return process, and especially those returning to ethnically mixed neighborhoods.

In explaining her attitude toward local Serbs, one woman survivor from Srebrenica, who lost her husband, son, and other male family members in the massacre, told me that she considered Serbs from the nearby town of Bratunac to be the "most evil" for their role in the fall of Srebrenica. "I would maybe drink coffee with Serb women in Banja Luka [capital of the Republika Srpska], but never in Bratunac," she declared. Banja Luka was far away from Bratunac and she was unlikely to find anyone there who had participated in the Srebrenica atrocities. Fikreta also enacted social sanctions against Serb women she did not trust by declaring that they were not welcome in her house for coffee as they once were before the war. Another woman return activist, Zahida, was adamant that she re-establish good relations with her "first" (closest) female neighbor before she could think about returning to her former home; this would happen when she could comfortably drink coffee with her neighbor.¹³

The coffee drinking these women were imagining was a marker of normal(ized) relationships, implying a level of communication if not trust. As Zahida's comments especially suggest, the coffee-drinking relationship among women was crucial, embedded as it was in wider patterns of neighborly relations and mutual aid, those relationships most violently and physically disrupted by ethnic cleansing. Although Zahida did not name *komšilik* as an institution, she stressed the importance of strong relationships with female neighbors with reference to all its classic features: codes of *komšilik* were common sense to her.

Zahida was the leader of an organization of mostly Bosniac women refugees working to return to Srebrenica and nearby towns in the eastern Republika Srpska.¹⁴ Members of this group had ample reason to be bitter toward local Serbs. They had all lost husbands, sons, and other loved ones and had been forcibly expelled, either during the ethnic cleansing campaigns of 1992 in Bratunac and other nearby places or during the 1995 fall of Srebrenica. Zahida, who had been expelled from Bratunac after her husband was murdered, was not going to forget what had happened. She assured me she made this clear to local Serbs, saying, "Don't think we're fools that we don't know what you did, *what you women did to us*. We all know that our men were killed, that we were kicked out of here without firing one bullet. We know what you did but we didn't come to talk about that" (emphasis added). She addressed Serb women specifically because, as she explained, it was natural, and also because engaging with men would have made their activities political. As she continued, it was clear that she felt she was on morally superior ground: "Muslims are returning with heads held high. We don't have blood on our hands, we didn't do evil to our neighbors, but we want to have a life like we had before. Those who bloodied their hands are afraid that we'll want to return to them what they did to us but we won't. Our faith doesn't allow it."

This was an essential superiority that stemmed from Bosniacs' religion. But it also rested strongly on the feeling, shared by many displaced Bosni-

acs, of moral superiority as direct victims of Serb attacks. Nevertheless, there were also tactical decisions about what to mention and when to remain quiet, or what Cynthia Cockburn has described for feminist activism as “crucial choices about silence and speech” (1998: 262). Such choices rested on local specifics and individual relationships as well as on the women’s own goals and strategies. Zahida would not emphasize this moral superiority too much, especially not in front of Serb women, because she was serious about reestablishing a life in Bratunac.

Some of the other women in her organization were too bitter to put this aside. Many did not plan to return; thus, they saw no reason to reach out to any Serbs. They accused Zahida of prostituting herself by trying to communicate with Serb women. But Zahida was firm:

“In April we went to Bratunac in five busses to vote.¹⁵ In the bus I said if [people say] we’re whores then I’m a whore, too. I’m going! [to talk to the Serb women]. I visited four or five houses to show women in the bus how normal it was. The Muslim women said, ‘screw them—you’re kissing them and they slaughtered our children!’ (*jeb’la te one—ti se s njima ljubiš a one nam djecu poklaše*). But I don’t want to live alone. I want to know who my neighbors are. For this you have to kiss and kiss and kiss.”

Zahida’s goal was not just the physical act of return but a return to her former life in which she had relied on her network of female neighbors for support. She could only move back to her ruined house if she could re-establish good relations with her women neighbors, her *kone* (sing. *kona*, from *komšinica*, female neighbor): “I can’t live in a place where neighborly relations aren’t reciprocal, the way we used to live. If I have a *kona* with whom I can’t share the good and the bad, then I don’t want to live in a place like that.” She talked nostalgically about how her *kone* had been there for her before the war, pleading:

“Oh, please let me have that kind of life [again]. It’s true I’ve been hurt and I did lose my hus-

band and our wealth, but that’s our tradition to live in a neighborhood (*komšiluk*) like that—that you have someone to go visit for coffee, that she comes to your house for coffee, that you help her out when she’s working in the garden and then afterwards you sit and have coffee. Or when it’s time to bring in the hay, that you call your *kone* and they come and help you. So you could just say, ‘I’m coming over, is the coffee ready?’ (*eto mene, je’l gotova kafa?*) or, ‘Come in, coffee’s almost ready’ (*haj’ uđi, eto kafe*). That’s the kind of neighborhood I want to live in, not just living side by side.”

The most important relationship in this sort of neighborhood was with one’s first neighbor, who, in Zahida’s case, was a Serb woman. Zahida said she had evidence that it was the husband of this neighbor who looted and burned Zahida’s house after she and her children had fled Bratunac. It would be difficult to re-establish, but because this relationship would be crucial to her eventual return, Zahida refused to even visit her house until this neighbor agreed to have her to coffee. When I saw Zahida again in 2002, she told me about how she had reconciled for a time with her first neighbor, who had begun having her to coffee whenever Zahida came to town. But the relationship soured when Zahida refused to be completely silent about what this *kona*’s husband had done during the war and after. Zahida was still holding back, however; she even recognized a few of her old things in her neighbor’s courtyard, but she didn’t say anything about that.

Reconciliation or aggravation?

Such “choices about silence and speech” extended into the realm of Zahida’s NGO work, which she was pursuing in order to be able to return to her home. When her group organized a meeting in Bratunac in 2000 with donors and Bosniac and Serb women’s NGOs from the region, Zahida made every effort to prevent the discussion from getting ugly. As donor representatives (both foreign and local) called on

women to unite in their desire to rebuild a peaceful community, local women took turns invoking sites of wartime atrocities and suffering of their own ethnic groups while others muttered to themselves in the audience about who had been guilty for what and who had suffered the most. One speaker, a Serb woman from another region of Bosnia and Herzegovina, who had spent the war as an activist with the pacifist, feminist organization Women in Black in Belgrade, appealed to the audience to recognize and come to terms with “our own Auschwitzes.” From the comments that followed, however, it was clear that the women only wanted to speak about the “Auschwitzes” in which members of their own ethnic group had suffered rather than where they had been perpetrators as the speaker had meant.

Bosniacs were looking not only or necessarily for renewed communication but for the Serb women to acknowledge the injustices that had been done to the Bosniacs. It was important to hear this from Serb leaders on a larger scale, but it was on the local level where the most significant steps were expected.¹⁶ At the same time, the Serb women in this area had also suffered great losses at the hands of Bosniac forces and desperate civilians from Srebrenica who had attacked Serb villages, killing both soldiers and civilians in their attempts to expand the enclave or to find food (see e.g., Duijzings 2007; Sudetić 1998). There was thus a sort of competition of victimhood between the two groups, each seeking recognition of their own suffering.

Given the presence of the donors especially, all the women were careful to frame their remarks through images of women as peacebuilders and mothers, and to talk about “concrete proposals” dealing with the present. Still, the Bosniacs clearly felt that part of reconciliation was to air their feelings about what happened during the war. As one put it, “We have to know what happened to *everyone* to make sure it never happens again. I don’t think I’ve said anything insulting here. We should say these things. It’s hard especially if you feel any guilt yourself. If we couldn’t do anything at that time, then we can do something now.” But this ap-

proach was clearly upsetting to one Serb woman from Bratunac, who told the group, “It hurts me a bit that you asked us, maybe unconsciously, to admit guilt for 1992. We’re victims, too, not killers as you portray us. If that were true, my child would have a father today.”

As the discussion threatened to breach its delicate veneer of talking in generalizations, the participants grew restless, glancing hungrily at the buffet table visible in the next room, and the organizers pressed the meeting to a close. Zehida explained afterward that she had deliberately not stopped for lunch even though it was late, “so that there wasn’t time for things to go too far.” Her goal was to convince the donors to support projects that would contribute to the return of Bosniac refugees. Too much visible tension could undermine that effort.

During lunch and on the car ride back to Sarajevo, it became clear how much the Bosniac women had held back. They analyzed and criticized everything the Serbs had said, dismissing them as only interested in donor money because their standard of living had sunk so low, not because they had any interest in accounting for wartime injustice. One very bitter Srebrenica survivor dismissed the Serb women’s attitude as, “screw [talking about or seeking justice for] war crimes, hand over the money! (*jebesh ratni zlocini, daj pare!*).” The women fumed over the presence of one Serb woman who they said had taken part in letting Bosniacs die in the hospital during the early days of the ethnic cleansing campaigns, blaming another Serb women’s NGO leader for having invited her to the meeting. Given their experiences, many of the Bosniacs remained unprepared to put aside the pain of their losses in order to reconcile with Serbs. These were the women who had ruled out return. One such woman from Srebrenica sitting at our lunch table explained through tears, “There’s no reconciliation. I feel nauseated when I hear that. How can I reconcile myself with the fact that my husband is gone and my children are all screwed up? ... I can live next to you but there will never be trust or real communication between us. ... I can never reconcile with Serbs.”

This rejection was the only context in which reconciliation was mentioned by the Bosniacs outside the formal venue (where Serbs and donors would hear them). Although I was not with the Serb women participants, given what they had revealed in their public comments, it is likely that they had similar harsh words among themselves about the Bosniacs for having talked so much about war crimes and Serb guilt. They too seemed to be searching for acknowledgment of the suffering and injustice they had endured. For both groups, any empathy they might have had for one another's pain was obscured by their own enormous grief.

Zahida and her closest friends, including the three Serb women members of the organization who had never left Bratunac, seemed quite satisfied with the meeting. Their goal was simply to facilitate Bosniac return. The process of re-establishing contact had begun and the donors were aware of their intentions. Indeed, over the following few years, Bosniacs began to slowly return to the area under strong political pressure and monetary aid from intervention agencies. None of these women were worried about the tensions that had come out, even though they had tried to keep them hidden. Working toward the kind of return that Zahida was after with her *kona* would take a long time—a lot of kissing and a lot of coffee.

Conclusion: Women and reconciliation

In the cases I have outlined in this article, patterns of gender-segregated socializing through women's neighborhood coffee visits, apolitical community service and organized outings, as opposed to men's gatherings in bars, political meetings, and the like, were maintained and reproduced through assumptions that women should work with each other in their way while men work separately in *their* way.¹⁷ The gendered distinction between public and private was thus reproduced, along with related divisions between political and humanitarian/social, violent and peace-loving, nationalist and anti-nationalist. This was generally so when the sub-

ject was women's roles, despite the fact that, as Jansen shows (this volume), men also pursued cross-ethnic communication through claims to apolitical, peace-loving, and nurturing positions, which remained firmly within dominant constructions of masculinity. Although these patterns were generally less rigid among the more highly educated or urban populations, in my interaction with women's NGO members from all over Bosnia and Herzegovina, it was clear that men's and women's activities were at least being represented, if not also carried out, largely in separate spheres. Although many women activists subscribed to this framework, those who did not were still compelled to work within it in some ways, even as they slowly tried to challenge its foundations.¹⁸

Despite a number of initiatives to involve women in higher levels of decision making and for women activists to be more visible in political debates, the expectation, therefore, especially among people from small towns and villages, conformed to the model of the apolitical *aktiv žena*. This notion, buttressed by donor discourses of women as apolitical peace-makers, provided a space in which women could use their identities as women to bridge ethnic divides. But what is seldom noticed, and what I have tried to highlight here, are the ways in which narratives and assertions about gender were also used to construct ethnic difference and therefore perpetuate mistrust. Through normative ideas of gender roles and respectability, a hierarchy of ethnic moral status was constructed: the innocent, respectable ethnic self versus the deviant, aggressive, and morally inferior ethnic other.

The ways in which these differences were produced were not uncommon in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina, nor are they surprising, given the character of the war violence. My point is not to condemn my informants but rather, based on an account that contextualizes their positions, to problematize dominant assumptions and representations of Bosnian women and the post-war NGO scene. When an organization declares that women are the key to reconciliation, whether because they are more

prepared for dialogue and forgiveness or the opposite, because they bear responsibility for the war through faulty upbringing of children, the underlying insinuation may well be that certain women (“we”) are prepared for dialogue while other women (“they”) want to continue living in hatred. Thus, the Serb women in Bratunac who came to jeer the busses of Bosnian women traveling to Srebrenica in the days before any Bosniacs had returned there would have understood that the T-shirts worn by members of one refugee women’s NGO did not refer to “women” in general but were directed at them. The shirts read: “World Peace starts right here. I will not raise my child to kill your child” (Helms 2003a: 21). Such statements also carried a message about normative gender roles. Those whose children grew up to kill or whose husbands joined nationalist causes—and here this was generalized to include all Serbs—had clearly failed in their roles as mothers and wives. This was a far cry from female solidarity across ethnic lines as portrayed and called for by many donors, women’s activists, and feminists.

Portraits of Bosnian women as peace-builders and campaigners for change (e.g., Cacace, Menafra and Miozzo 1996; Hunt 2004) should thus be recognized as overly generalized romanticizations. This is especially so considering that some very conservative statements about gender roles as well as some of the more hostile statements toward Serbs discussed in this article come from a woman who is profiled in one such collection, Swanee Hunt’s *This was not our war* (2004) as one of many Bosnian women “reclaiming the peace.” As the title suggests, the book praises women as an antidote to the violence, destruction, and hatred imposed on society by men. Having the courage to return to sites of ethnic cleansing now controlled by a hostile ethno-national group is portrayed a priori as working toward peace. Given the incentives to reproduce donor-speak, public statements in support of reconciliation or gender equality cannot always be taken at face value or as proof of women’s greater inclination toward reconciliation. Neither should we assume that women as a group are removed from the production of

nationalist ideologies and the perpetration of violence, or that they are automatically interested in challenging patriarchal norms (see Lilly and Irvine 2002; Žarkov 2007).

What then of reconciliation? Clearly, not all return activists had the same intentions vis-à-vis their former neighbors. Among those indicating a willingness to restore relations, Zahida’s story is instructive. In describing the activities of her organization, she used the word meaning reconciliation, *pomirenje*, frequently (along with the terminology of women’s rights and equality). But when explaining her vision for return, she talked mostly about restoring *suživot* through a workable neighborly relationship as *kone* who would “share the good and the bad.” In order to accomplish this, she was willing to mute her talk somewhat, and to cut off the discussion at the NGO meeting before too much was said. Stoic restraint and the maintenance of dignity for all involved—even when one does not approve of a neighbor’s conduct—is after all a central feature of *komšilik* relations (Sorabji 1994, 2008). But renewed relations with her *kona* ultimately broke down as Zahida was unwilling to stay completely silent about what her neighbors had done. Perhaps in this way, she was pushing the face-saving boundaries of *komšilik* too far. As Sorabji points out, the conventions of *komšilik* may actually work against neighbors’ willingness to accept ethnically “other” returnees; her Bosnian interlocutors worried that “if they [Serbs] come back we will be obliged to be their *komšije*” (2008: 109). Evidence suggests that ethnically “other” returnees, whether Bosniacs to the Republika Srpska (Stefansson 2006, this volume), or Serbs and Croats to Bosniac-dominated areas (Pickering 2006, 2007), were not being summarily reintegrated into *komšilik* relations, though some returnees who consciously offered gestures of reciprocity to their neighbors had begun to reintegrate. Zahida’s perspective suggests that women’s roles—especially that of making and serving coffee—are crucial to this reestablishment of *suživot* in multi-ethnic neighborhoods, but that actual *pomirenje* may be beyond the grasp of those concerned with the injustices of the war.

Fikreta was concerned even more than Zahida with justice: she insisted on confronting local Serb women with questions about their war-time behavior. As a victim, she expected them to change her tainted opinion of them and said so publicly. However, she had less incentive than someone like Zahida to mute her accusations, having already returned to what was now a strongly re-established Bosniac community. Fikreta and Zahida were both buoyed, individually and as Bosniacs, by the moral status of victimhood and the intense desire for justice. Still others, like the Srebrenica widow quoted above, were too bitter to even consider living again among Serbs, just as the perpetrators of violence had intended. Recalling her words, she is explicit that physical proximity (“I can live next to you”) is not the same as reconciliation (“trust or real communication between us”) because of what happened. In other words, to her the “thin” reconciliation of living together may not be a type of reconciliation at all. These women’s refusal to compromise their stance as proud victims seems to promise little in the way of restored communication and trust with Serbs in the sense of “thick” reconciliation. But if coffee visits could be restored and maintained, they would carry with them a host of social obligations and expectations, including the imperative not to call attention to your neighbor’s dirty laundry. In time, the repetition of these performances could conceivably lead to a healing of wounds, or a sort of “thin” reconciliation. However, if we listen to the women discussed in this article, this will more likely be a healing based on silence and forgetting than on forgiveness and trust, even among “naturally forgiving” women.

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Notes

1. Both refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) were referred to colloquially as refugees (*izbjeglice*). Although most of the women I discuss here were officially IDPs, some had previously been refugees in other countries. In this article I use “refugee” and “displaced” interchangeably to reflect informal local usage.
2. Stef Jansen (2006) has proposed the term “foreign intervention agencies” as an improvement on the common but misleading “international community,” despite the fact that it remains a collective term for what is in fact a diverse group of actors and interests. I adopt the term here with the further caveat that the “foreign” designation reflects more the ways in which these agencies were seen and sought to portray themselves than an objective reality (as Jansen also acknowledges), because these foreign-based organizations, agencies, and individuals were well integrated into local and regional networks and interests, employing locals at many levels (see Lendvai and Stubbs 2009; Pugh 2003).
3. Such silencing and outward forgetting also figures in the decisions made by war survivors about sharing their experiences with their own families and members of the same ethnic group (Sorabji 2006).
4. “Bosniac” has been the official name for Bosnian Muslims since 1993 but “Muslim” in the ethno-national sense, rather than purely religious, continues to be used in everyday speech.
5. Many other refugee associations did not even consider return and/or were focused on securing aid for their often destitute members and on achieving justice through the location of victims’ bodies and the prosecution of war crimes perpetrators.
6. My material comes from ethnographic research on a range of women’s NGO activists conducted mainly between 1999 and 2000 (Helms 2003b) and between 2005 and 2007.

7. The satirical guide, “Ubleha for idiots,” captured the prevailing cynicism toward “civil society building and leading projects” with a glossary of terms needed to pull off the untranslatable *ubleha* (something approaching empty, self-interested fakery). Among them were “reconciliation” and “gender”: reconciliation is “realized when 2 or 3 representatives of local tribes from the ranks of the ordinary people meet in a luxury hotel and, under the wise direction of a dozen internationals [foreigners], play nine or ten games from the NGO handbook.” Gender “automatically lends a project higher value. ... Currently the trend. The ideal type target group is physically handicapped (around 80% is best) women, members of ethnic minorities, of which at least one has actively mastered the language of *ubleha*” (Šavija-Valha and Milanović-Blank 2004).
8. This is by no means an argument for the cultural specificity of the Bosniacs, especially in terms of gender, but to point to the different political logics of victim identities and refugee return vis-à-vis the (gendered) dynamics of the war and stances toward the state, especially in terms of its ethnic composition.
9. Men also participate in *komšiluk* activities such as building and repairing neighbors’ houses, as well as more limited and often mixed-sex neighborhood house visits (Bringa 1995).
10. All names of women activists are pseudonyms. All translations from the Bosnian language are the author’s.
11. This position has obvious roots in the socialist period, especially for religious families and those not connected to the Communist Party like many of the residents of Fikreta’s town. It also recalls the anti-politics movement in the 1980s among dissidents in many socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which extolled the relative autonomy possible in the sphere of home and family. As Joanna Goven (1993) argues, this withdrawal from “political” life was imagined in male terms, as an oasis where men could once again be in control as heads of households, that is over women and children.
12. The late Alija Izetbegović, former president of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, is considered the father of the Bosniac national cause. Biljana Plavšić was a prominent Serb nationalist and former president of the Republika Srpska before her conviction at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia for crimes against humanity. Mira Marković, the widow of Serbian president Slobodan Milošević and head of her own political party in Serbia, was widely accused of goading Milošević into extreme nationalism and ruthless violence.
13. The importance of ritualized coffee drinking to cross-ethnic communication also emerges from Tone Bringa’s documentary *Returning home* (2001), which depicts Bosniac returnees and displaced Croats—mostly women—drinking coffee together and emphasizing for the camera that this signals friendly relations and a return to “normal life.”
14. I have written about Zahida and her organization elsewhere (Helms 2003a, 2007). At the time of my fieldwork, the organization counted three Serb women in Bratunac as core members but more joined later as more Bosniacs returned to the area and the NGO began implementing income-generating projects.
15. Election registration was organized according to the last available census, that of 1991, meaning that the displaced had the option to vote in their pre-war places of residence.
16. Isabelle Delpla (2007) observed this importance of the local level, specifically the municipality, in her research on victim associations’ expectations of justice. Victims were not satisfied with indictments and convictions of war criminals who had committed crimes in other parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina, even when against the same ethnic group. What mattered was that local perpetrators were brought to justice.
17. Male participants who sometimes attended meetings of women’s NGOs often spoke of what “you women” needed to do to help repair society, as if men were merely spectators to a separate women’s activity. For example, a young man who attended the Bratunac meeting said: “I’m glad we’re here and talking about joint [cross-ethnic] activities ... *Women should* make a plan for a project at the break on the subjects of women against war, life together (*suživot*), two-way return, etc. *You* need to get out into the public with this, through radio programs and tribunals and get the politicians going. Now we even have a good number of women there [in politics]” (emphasis added).
18. The “folk logic” of gender-separate spheres converges with the strain of feminism that favors women organizing on their own with and for

women away from patriarchal structures and men. The Sarajevo feminist NGO *Žene ženama* (Women to women), for example, operates on this premise.

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