

Activism in Bosnia: Violence and Feminism

The author takes us on a journey of, not only her unique experiences as a volunteer in war-torn Bosnia-Herzegovina, but also her journey through a self-evaluation of what it means to be a feminist.

by
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Eight years ago I had never heard of Bosnia-Herzegovina. At the beginning of the war in the former Yugoslavia, I was attending a small town high school in Minnesota, active in as many school activities as possible. I went to debates, sports practice and games, band and choir concerts, and studied hard. When home, I flippantly changed television channels looking for popular shows or reruns in order to relax. What I saw about the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina on the news was of a seemingly far away country; some black and white shots of people fighting. I did not know for what or whom they were fighting. I changed the channel immediately. I never imagined that one day I would personally meet and become such close friends with survivors of that war, much less live and work with them. I would have called myself active, but not an activist.

During my early years of college, I isolated myself with studies, late-teen fun, and making friends from similar backgrounds. I did not think about the existence of Bosnia. The words "Krajina," "„etnik" "Ustaša" "Srebrenica" "Genocidal Rape" "Prince Lazarus" and others had absolutely no meaning for me. I would not have been able to immediately point out Kosovo,

Zagreb, Sarajevo, or Zenica, BH (Bosnia-Herzegovina), my current place of residence, on a map without difficulty and time. I knew fairly little about the Balkans.

I arrived in Zenica as a volunteer for BVS (Brethren Volunteer Service) on November 22, 1998, one and a half years after I received my Bachelor's degree from Luther College in Decorah, IA, and moved to Washington, D.C. I wanted to pursue activism, volunteerism, learn about the world through experience, and search for a way to leave the States. I had studied psychology, English literature, and German. I found BVS. When I first arrived, after reading several books about the area, I had sufficient information, albeit on a very simple level, about the war and history of the region. I could recognize Tudjman, Milošević, and Izetbegović. I did not know any of the Bosnian language.¹

At the beginning, most group conversations were, understandably, not translated for me. At night, I studied the language and by day, I watched and observed facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language. I made friends with those who spoke English or German. I helped to translate and edit texts in English.

I listened, but did not question aloud. I was afraid of what the answers would be and

sensitive to the fact that "they" had experienced a war and I had not. I began putting real names and faces to the places I had read about: Srebrenica, Višegrad, Ćepče, Sarajevo, Mostar... I waited and grew accustomed to a daily routine. I was quieter than I had ever been. After a few months, I was comfortable and began to notice our similarities rather than our differences. Life became "normal" and sometimes I would go for a day or more without thinking about what happened here just a few years ago. I began to rely less on body language and more on words again. My friendships grew closer as we talked about borders of suffering, losses and gains, religion, education, feminism... I began to question slowly, but never forced answers.

I woke up one morning in an exceptional mood for no reason in particular. I saw a woman I had met several times before and we made the usual small talk. I looked at her eyes, her smile, and thought, I bet she's a great friend, parent, and/or partner. She too was in a good mood. I asked her whether she had children. Her face went from the smiling, laid-back expression to which I was accustomed to deep sadness in an instant. She said, "I had a daughter. She died in my arms. Her legs were blown off. She looked something like you. Now I'm alone. Completely alone."

Because I was so unprepared for her answer, because her story caught me off guard on that day, I did not know how to respond. I fumbled with "sorry" and stuttered, "I didn't know." I regretted my silent responses immediately and wished I

would have hugged her, asked her out for coffee, anything but mumbling, "I'm sorry."

Medica Zenica Infoteka Project

My transition from full-time student to part-time volunteer to full-time activist and feminist is due in large part to Medica Infoteka, the organization for which I volunteer.

On the 28th of December 1992, Monika Hauser, a German gynecologist, traveled to Zenica from Cologne, Germany. She knew that this city had already taken in tens of thousands of refugees. Monika met committed women who were already actively helping refugees and they immediately began creating a center for gynecological and psychological care of women, specifically in response to the massive war-related rape. Medica opened as early as April 1993. Women making up the Medica teams were and still are from different backgrounds: Bošnjak, Bosnian Croat, and Bosnian Serb (although most of them are Bošnjak.)²

Medica consists of a medical clinic, psycho-social support staff, daycare center, two separate accommodations for women and children (Medica 1 and 2, both located in Zenica), workshops for education, a political and research wing (Infoteka), and now a hotline for women and children victims of violence (SOS Telephone). All of its services are free of charge to women and children and are available to the public at large as need arises.

Most of my time is spent in Infoteka, the team that established and maintains networks

with other women's and service organizations to share information. Infoteka works for long-term change of the aspects of society that contribute to violence and war and is an advocate for issues relevant to women. Medica has close relationships with many government and non-governmental organizations within BH, as well as Europe. It has remained an active supporter of The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in the Hague in recognizing rape as a war crime, and in the campaign to protect witnesses. Presently, it is working on a campaign against domestic violence.

In Medica 2, fifteen young women live and receive support while they complete their secondary and higher education or Medica's courses (weaving, sewing, furniture upholstery, knitting, and hair styling). Many of these women were unable to attend school for the duration of the war and have just now been able to re-enroll. I spent several months getting to know these young women through English lessons for them and Bosnian lessons for me, or informally over coffee-strong and sweet the Bosnian way. Lessons have technically ended, but the friendships have not. Many of these young women are from Srebrenica or other parts of Eastern Bosnia and are now fatherless; brotherless, and/or have significantly fewer male friends and family members as a result of the ethnic cleansing, which took place there in July of 1995. Srebrenica was the enclave where the largest massacre during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina took place. Approxi-

mately 7,000 men and boys were killed, and thousands of women and children were expelled. It was this massacre that led the international community to design a more feasible end to the war.

The daycare center in Medica, Kid's House, is open to all children in the community. The children are cared for in a supportive environment in which they can begin to make a recovery from their traumatic experiences, or if they simply need a place to go while their parents are at work. I work in the daycare center a few days per week.

In December of 1998 and January of 1999, the Kid's House hosted children from Kosovo/a. Most came with their mothers from refugee camps in or near Zenica. Some of my most memorable experiences and conversations are from this time as I listened to the mothers and older children explain how life in Kosovo/a had been for the last few years and why they had to leave. One 12 year-old boy had been a Kosovar soldier before they came to Bosnia. Mothers came for coffee and for a brief break from life in refugee camps, and their children had some time away from the adults in their own kid space. Some of the children and mothers provided translation from Albanian for those who did not speak Serbian/Bosnian. We encouraged communication and cooperation among all children in our daily activities. Some of these activities included a large New Year's celebration. Children from Kosovo/a participated in the program. Some of them sang

revolutionary songs. There was also a visit from Santa Claus and a gift for every child. One mother cried when she saw her children receive gifts, as she explained to me that of all years, she hadn't thought it would be possible this year.

From March until May 1999, during the bombing of Yugoslavia, children from Sandžak, an area in Serbia where a majority of people are ethnically Muslim, came to the Kid's House. During this time, I taught English to 12 children between the ages of 10 and 14. With the help of my father, a middle-school counselor, I arranged for these children to write kids of their same age in Minnesota. (I translated the letters.) The letters were moving as the children from Sandžak explained that they are refugees from Yugoslavia. Mostly they talked about their friends and their favorite music and sports. One 14-year-old girl wrote that she would like to visit the United States and that she would love if her pen pal could visit her in Yugoslavia one day, when she returns.

"Bajram and the Bombs"

I began to participate in conferences about women, feminism, and youth. I started to travel, including to the International Women's Day conference in Belgrade, Yugoslavia. I was there in early March, just two weeks before NATO. I met feminist activists who had protested the war in Bosnia and other wars around the world. We spoke about feminism, racism, classism, non-violence, militarism, and peace ini-

tiatives around the region. While there, I had no problems as an American, a representative of the West, those threatening to bomb FRY (the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia). But the Bosnian colleague I traveled with was not as fortunate. One night we took a taxi. I was not listening to the conversation between my friend and the driver. We left the cab before we reached our destination. She paid him with visibly shaking hands. I asked her why. The driver had had a Serb nationalist symbol tattooed on his hand and when she told him she was from Bosnia he said that Bosnia does not exist. Bosnia is not a country.

My last words to the new friends I met in Belgrade were "I hope NATO doesn't bomb." We laughed.

I had never felt so "American" than during the NATO bombing of FRY. Approximately 85% of Zenica's population are Bošnjak, including several thousand displaced people from Eastern Bosnia who were ethnically cleansed by Serb soldiers. As I walked around this city, I saw cars displaying small United States flags. I saw larger American flags hanging in apartment windows. I think of that first weekend as "Bajram and the Bombs." (Bajram is the Bosnian word for the Islamic celebration of the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. It was coincidentally during this holiday that the bombing began.) Almost everyone in Zenica was overjoyed and I felt as if I was in the only place in the world that not only was supporting NATO's militarism, but was even celebrating it.

It is due to my personal

experiences and contact with people from Bosnia, Kosovo/a, and FRY (Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) that I struggled during the bombing. For the first time in my life, I knew people who were being bombed. Unlike the war in Bosnia, I was not hearing the stories after, but actually during the event. After hearing the experiences of how my Bosnian friends survived and are still surviving, I could not completely condemn the bombing as an action against the regime that had attacked Bosnia. I could not help but share in some of their gratification and feelings of compensation.

People in Bosnia are still surviving their war. They are still waiting for peace of mind. Economical, physical, and emotional challenges have not disappeared since the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995. The most difficult aspect was explaining to myself, my colleagues here, and my family and friends in the States that I supported neither NATO nor Milošević. I spent a lot of time searching for ways to talk about this with my Bosnian friends, ways that would not awaken terrible memories or provoke analysis of our differences. Our similarities outnumber our differences many times.

Some people in Bosnia did not want to talk about Kosovo/a at all. They said they had been through and heard enough about war and they were tired of it all. After hearing stories of rape and missing family members, in many cases at the hands of Serb soldiers, I did not need an explanation. But I did question, and most of

the time their answers were that they do not support violence in general, but that in some cases, in the case of Milošević and his followers, it is necessary. They wanted the citizens of Serbia to feel what it was like to hear those planes flying overhead, to not have electricity, heating, food, medicine, or security. They did not want all Serbian people to die. They wanted them to know what Bosnia had suffered for almost four years, to feel the fear that some had to die.

One local man, who works for an international organization in Zenica, and I began speaking about the bombing after it had ended. He continues to be the only local person I know who openly asserts that NATO did not bomb Serbia for humanitarian reasons, but that NATO, and more specifically the United States, is slowly buying the Balkans and its people. He feels that NATO bombed in order to have an army base in the Balkans. I was relieved to hear this new perspective from a Bosnian and encouraged him to go on. He then stated that "Americans are smarter than Bosnians." The group around us laughed as I strongly asserted, "We are not!" I wasn't trying to be humorous. He then said, "From my perspective, Bosnia is the most beautiful country in the world, with the stupidest people...I would love to be a slave to America." When I tried to explain the attitude of this man to my Bosnian friends, they once again stated emphatically, "We don't care why

NATO bombed, we're just glad they did."

I was at once furious, sad, confused, and frustrated that so many people were toasting the NATO airplanes, which flew over Zenica night and day. I wrote family, friends, and my local newspaper in Minnesota condemning the bombing. I encouraged them to write letters or at least to speak to people about the bombing, that there were alternatives. I wrote about the activists in Belgrade and Kosovo/a who had been protesting their militaristic regime for years and that perhaps more acknowledgment and assistance to these groups earlier or immediately could have eliminated the need to bomb at all. I received several responses, most of which said they respected the work I am doing for "the poor people of Bosnia." They explained that they were not following news about bombing and they hoped I was safe, and they hoped that the bombs and fighting would not spread to Bosnia.

In April, I applied to go to Albania to work with refugees. I later decided to stay in Bosnia, despite the feeling I had had that I wasn't "doing enough." I'm glad I stayed. I heard about and felt my friends' frustration that the West helped Kosovo/a faster than it had helped Bosnia. They felt that the world had forgotten about them. I also witnessed ongoing email and telephone conversations between women in Croatia, FRY, and Bosnia. Women in Belgrade constantly updated us on their work and communication with women's groups in Kosovo/a. My colleagues did support the bomb-

ing, but they did not abandon their friendships with people in Yugoslavia and Kosovo/a. They simply wanted an end to Milošević and his militaristic regime, just as the activists and many civilians in FRY did. The telephone conversations with their Belgrade colleagues (the same women who had been calling my colleagues to support them during the Bosnian war), using their unbelievable black humor, asked how it felt to hear those planes. Jokes are a source of strength in the Balkans. Before an event is completed, a joke is made to describe it. During the war, a group of comedians made a pun on name-brand tennis shoes with regard to outrunning snipers. No subject is taboo for joke making, including war, hunger, and suffering in general. Especially during the war, new jokes were made each and every day. Dark, witty humor and conversations with coffee and cigarettes are a common form of therapy.

It was during the bombing of FRY that Medica Kosova, with the help of Medica Mondiale in Germany and Medica Zenica, was established first in Albania and then later moved to Oakova, Kosova.

Practicing Feminism

Bosnian patriarchy is visible everywhere. It's present in reactions of the community to Medica's programs; to strangers who very often ask me if I have a boyfriend or whether I will get married and stay in Bosnia, as though not getting married is not an option; to the young boys on

the street who make fun of girls and women who pass, shouting comments about height, weight, hair, clothing, and anything else. I see significantly more unhappy marriages here than happy. It is a boxed-in world. And people, like members of Medica, take great risks when they step out of that box and challenge the traditional male roles. While Bosnian feminism has not developed independently from the world around it and there is not yet a "feminist movement," the women I work with are certainly pioneers, and they are feminists in the only way possible, in the Bosnian manner.

Furthermore, "feminism" in BH is often associated with lesbianism with anti-patriarchal values (i.e. anti-society in general). Homosexuality is not visible in Bosnia. Although it does exist, there is no gay movement. There is an underground gay movement in Croatia and FRY (more specifically in Zagreb and Belgrade), but this movement has not, and probably will not, arrive in Bosnia for some time. Due in large part to Medica's friendships and activism with women from these regions and others, they are very accepting of homosexuality and rights for homosexuals. They laugh when people assume that they are lesbians because they are feminists.

My supervisor, the coordinator of Infoteka and President of Medica, Duška Andrić-Ruzičić often speaks about feminism in Bosnia. She explains...

"We had a goal: to support women. The only thing we can say is that we have simply been responding to the most urgent needs—where we recognized them. And we recognized them almost always

more quickly and more clearly than society and the state, preoccupied as they were with the "higher goals." Their perspective of "higher goals" allows for a perception of women exclusively through roles; that is, she is always someone's mother, sister, daughter, wife or "woman soldier" (who is also always someone's mother, sister, daughter, or wife).

We are asked if we are a feminist project. Have we always been in the feminist movement? This is something we cannot answer. Our Rada Stakić-Domuz, once wrote about feminism in our country, saying that Bosnia and feminism are poles apart. I would like to add that an acknowledged and public feminism and Bosnia are poles apart.

Every woman more or less carries feminism inside herself—this is her woman's nature. My mother will never say that she is a feminist, but I have learned from her much of what I recognize today as being feminist theory and practice. The women of Medica are feminism in practice...By doing what we did, we understood that feminism is just what we have been doing: women for women, women to women, women because of women..." (Ruzičić, 1996)

Feminism is present in Bosnia but it is still a relatively new concept with many of the connotations I mentioned above. The feminists that I know are concentrating on equality with men, the elimination (or at least a significant decrease) of violence against women, trafficking of women, and patriarchal values in general. Infoteka's campaign about violence against women is phenomenal (the only program in BH) which includes educating women (those who work in governmental institutions especially), as well as men, in how to combat and handle gender-based violence.

How could I not think about being a woman as I hear,

read, and speak about genocidal rape and domestic violence every day? One day a fellow BVS volunteer called me from Mostar (a town in Southwestern BH). He and a colleague (also male) had been badly beaten up by a group of about eight men. They were on the wrong side of Mostar at the wrong time. My first thought after I hung up the phone was the unlikelihood that this could happen in a group of all women, that eight women would emerge from a restaurant and beat up two other women. While women contribute to patriarchy and violence, they are not usually the violent perpetrators that men are.

Feminism is practiced differently in Bosnia than what I was accustomed to. As an American feminist, I carry a very different intellectual and psychological perspective and history. In Bosnia, I wake up every morning reminded that here, especially, I am first a woman, second an individual, and last an American. I was told by feminist colleagues, especially at the beginning, to wear more short skirts as my "legs aren't bad," to color my hair, to wear more make-up. They analyze my face, my figure, and my clothing. I have started wearing significantly more black clothing and began smoking cigarettes, neither of which I did much of in the States, in order to conform to at least some parts of this culture. In a positive way, Bosnian feminists challenge me to constantly think about what it means to be a woman.

In the States, however, I

considered myself an individual first, a woman, second. I was a feminist and a supporter of women's rights, choice, and equality. I never took to the streets demanding these rights. I lived as I chose, for the most part, and did not think about gender as the most defining characteristic of my person. Most of my activism was for environmental and minority rights. I discovered while working with individuals in these organizations that many of them, like myself, were also feminists, pacifists, or at least advocates for non-violence, and conscious of classism.

Although I was a feminist in the U.S., I became an "active feminist" here in the Balkans, and for this I credit the women of Medica Infoteka as well as those whom I have met from FRY and Croatia.

Maggie Humm (1995) writes that, "A fundamental goal of feminist theory is to understand women's oppression in terms of race, gender, class and sexual preference and how to change it." (p.xii) This sentence sums up the feminist background from which I come, adding non-violence to the list. It is because of this perspective that I do believe in an inclusive movement, one that questions privileges and power on the basis of race, class, and gender.

A constant complaint that flits around Medica is annoyance with journalists, international journalists, who have been coming to or calling Medica since the beginning looking for a good story or statistics. They want an accounting of women who were

raped during the war or who had babies as a result of the rape (although I know that men were raped as well, I do not know of anyone addressing this issue, yet). They ask if there is a woman in Medica with "this, this, and/or this qualification that they could photograph/interview?" Members of Medica explain to them that 1.) patient information is confidential and 2.) numbers are not the whole story, that beneath those numbers lie entire lives of suffering and survival and that we are concerned with the individual and not her number. Also, it is impossible to give correct answers for these questions. No number would be correct as no one knows the number of women, men, or children raped during the war. Many of the journalists respond tersely "Thank you. I will call someone else."

Writing this article has been difficult for several reasons. Namely, I have gained the trust of my friends and colleagues and it is because of these friendships that I have excluded some things in this account. I have not written about my Bosnian friends' or colleagues' "personal war stories," about the specific horrors they are still surviving. Listening has been the single most important activity and one which has affected me the most here. It is enough to say I am proud to know them for their strength, humor, and activism. □

¹ "Bosnian" was part of what was known as Serbo-Croatian before the war. Most people now refer to this language as Croatian, Bosnian, Serbian, or even the local language. There are a few grammar and vocabulary differences between them, but they are basically the same.

² During the war, "Bošnjak" replaced the term "Bosnian Muslims." It is an ethnic and cultural term, not a religious one, as not all Bošnjaks are practicing Muslims.

Humm, M. (1995) *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory*, PrenticeHall/Harvester Wheatsheaf: Hertfordshire, Great Britain.

Ruzicic, D. (1996) 'Women's Self-Organizing in Bosnia: Feminism from Necessity, or Necessity from Feminism,' in *Women and the Politics of Peace: Contributions to a Culture of Women's Resistance*, Kasic, B (ed.), Centre for Women's Studies: Zagreb, Croatia.

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