



University of East London Institutional Repository: <http://roar.uel.ac.uk>

This paper is made available online in accordance with publisher policies. Please scroll down to view the document itself. Please refer to the repository record for this item and our policy information available from the repository home page for further information.

To see the final version of this paper please visit the publisher's website. Access to the published version may require purchase or a subscription.

**Author(s):** Korac, Maja.

**Article title:** Refugee Women in Serbia: Their Experiences with War, Nationalism and State Building

**Year of publication:** 1999

**Citation:** Korac, M. (1999) 'Refugee Women in Serbia: Their Experiences with War, Nationalism and State Building'. In: Davis, Nira Yuval and Werbner, Pnina (Eds.) *Women, Citizenship and Difference*. London: Zed Books. pp. 192-204

**Publisher link:** <http://www.zedbooks.co.uk>

**ISBN-10:** 1856496465

**ISBN-13:** 978-1856496469

Maja Korac

Note: This paper is an earlier version of the chapter entitled: 'Refugee Women in Serbia: Their Experiences with War, Nationalism and State Building' published in 1999 in *Women, Citizenship and Difference*. Nira Yuval Davis and Pnina Werbner (Eds.). London: Zed Books. (p. 192-204).

Problems of Refugee Women in Serbia: Their Experiences With  
New Nation State

The aim of this chapter is to compare state-imposed constructions of the status and role of refugee women in Serbia (Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) with these women's lived experiences, and to explore the complexity of the problems they face in the new nation-state.<sup>1</sup>

An assumption inherent in the politics and policies of exclusionary ethnic-national identifications, exemplified by the recent conflicts in the post-Yugoslav states, is that an ethnic-national collectivity represents an organic wholeness. These collectivities are perceived as 'natural', and membership in them is dichotomized: one belongs, or one does not. This assumption leads to 'political nihilism' (Kaldor, 1993: 108) when claims to power are based on a concept of citizenship in which ethnicity is defined as the primary source of identity and belonging. In such a context no political debate or movement is allowed and there is no possibility for political ideas or political parties to gain real social substance (ibid.: 108-109). As one Serbian 'patriot'<sup>2</sup> stated, 'Let Serbs be Serbs, not citizens' (Vreme, 27 April 1996). This 'political

---

<sup>1</sup> The complex realities of the women's lives as refugees depicted here are based on data collected during my research in Serbia. The sources for the research on Women Refugees in Serbia: Ethnic-National Identity and Perceptions of the Conflict in the Former Yugoslavia, include: observations made during fieldwork, in-depth interview data with 18 refugee women from various ethnic-nationalities, newspaper articles, papers, newsletters and journals. The field work was conducted in the Summer 1994, 1995, 1996. The first phase of this research was funded by the Centre for Refugee Studies, York University, Canada. The support is gratefully acknowledged.

<sup>2</sup> The speaker is one of the Serbian volunteers to the 'White Eagles', Serbian paramilitary responsible for the most brutal atrocities in Bosnia-Herzegovina and in Croatia.

nihilism', thus, embodies a political voluntarism and is easily transformed into an unrestrained power of state bureaucrats in dealing with refugees.

The chapter explores the patterns of state intervention effecting the roles and status of refugee women in Serbia, and the ways in which these interventions have resulted in and reflect an essentialized, male-defined, concept of the nation. The discussion examines state-imposed divisions among refugee women along and within ethnic-national lines and their broader social and political implications.

### **The Political Context: Implications for Refugees' Safety**

Before examining the specific problems of women refugees in Serbia, there is a need to evaluate 'the relationship of the host country to the refugee producing country', since, as Moussa (1993: 177) points out, the reception refugees encounter in the countries where they seek refugee status largely depends on this relationship.

The central element which crucially shaped the situation of refugees in the recent conflict in post-Yugoslav states was a political context in which almost all of the regional host governments were involved in wars - the exceptions being the governments of Slovenia and Macedonia. By August '95, the effect of these conflicts and the politics of ethnic-nationalism was to uproot every fourth or fifth citizen of the region. A large majority of these four to five million

'ethnically cleansed' persons<sup>3</sup> are refugees in the neighbouring post-Yugoslav states (ISHR, 1994). They fled predominantly to Croatia and Serbia, and to a lesser extent to other post-Yugoslav states. In such a political context, two basic refugee rights - the right to enter a country of asylum and the right to remain - have been breached by host governments acting according to their political objectives. The USCR reports (1993a: 8-9, 21; 1995: 131, 173) indicate that the refugee policies of the governments of Croatia and Serbia were coloured by events in the war zones.

These political conditions imposed a number of restrictions on refugee safety and wellbeing. The problems have legal, social, political, as well as psychological implications for refugees and for their adaptation to new life situations. In such a political context, the position of refugee women is particularly difficult as a result of gender specific issues. Their situation is generally framed, in Indra's words (1993: 763), by an asymmetry of power and voice between the state on one hand, and refugees on the other. However, as Indra (ibid.: 763) further argues, this asymmetry is gender-specific since those who are both refugees and women may be subjected simultaneously to two overlapping silencing processes. How this gender-specific asymmetry originates in relation between

---

<sup>3</sup> The total population of Yugoslavia before the war was 22 million. The four to five million 'ethnically cleansed' persons include refugees, internally displaced persons, as well as approximately 700,000 people who left the country in the last couple of years seeking political asylum in European countries. The data include UNHCR report, July 1995, as well as the instances of 'ethnic cleansing' in Srebrenica and Zepa (Bosnia-Herzegovina) and in the Krajina region of Croatia in July and August 1995 (Nasa Borba, 10 August 1995).

individuals and the state may be explained in terms of Pateman's (1988) analysis of the Western social and political order more generally. Pateman argued, it will be recalled, that the state's construction of relationships in the private domain (i.e., marriage and the family) has determined women's status as citizens in the public domain. Thus, the rise of the notion of state citizenship was constructed in terms of the 'Rights of Man'.

The ways in which this gender-specific asymmetry of power between the state and refugees operate in a particular context will be elaborated below.

### **Ethnically Homogeneous States and Refugees: The Question of Gender Implications**

The point of departure for discussing the particular relations of refugee women with the Serbian state is to be found in ethnic nationalists' claim to ethnically homogeneous territories and states. One of the main characteristics of this form of nation-state building in the region has been the construction of boundaries according to various exclusionary and inclusionary criteria on the basis of ethnic-national divisions. This has clear gender implications, as we shall see. Both women and men participate in ethnic-national struggles and are victimized by ethnic-national ideologies and politics. Nonetheless, there is a difference between their experiences as participants or victims.

Whenever the creation of boundaries between ethnic-

national collectivities involves violent conflict, it is inevitably accompanied by militarization. As Enloe (1993) emphasizes, militarizing transformations are embedded in 'changing ideas about manliness - manliness as it supports a state, and manliness as it informs a nation'(ibid.: 247). These changes in ideas about masculinity imply complementary transformations in ideas about femininity. This interdependency, as Enloe argues, is a social construct that usually privileges masculinity (ibid.: 248).

The critical element of an aggressive ethnic-nationalist ideology is, as stated elsewhere (Korac 1993), the violence embodied in militant masculinity. Violence-oriented masculinity becomes the main means of recruiting individuals who are capable of committing insane atrocities because their masculine militant collectivity is the ultimate determinant of good and evil (ibid). A counter-balance to such violence-oriented masculinity is an emotional, committed, supportive but passive femininity. These differentiated roles of women and men within militarized ethnic-national collectivities result in various forms of violence with gender-specific meanings.

Violence-oriented masculinity, as discussed elsewhere (Korac, forthcoming), does not victimize solely women. It implies forms of victimization of men too, from killing and torture body mutilation. Women are commonly victimized through rape, expulsion and forced migration. This gendered difference in experiences of violence stems from the symbolic significance women bear in the relations between ethnic-national collectivities, as analyzed by Enloe (1989). She points to a

tendency to construct women as precious property of the 'enemy'. As such, they represent symbolic markers of the community and culture to be 'cleansed', and their bodies become territories to be seized and conquered.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, men have a more active role in war and, as a rule, most often enter 'history' as victors.

The massive gendered population transfer in the region of post-Yugoslav states, where over 70 percent of refugees in some regions are women and children (USCR 1993), has operated, I propose, as a crucial symbolic and material element in (re)constructing boundaries between ethnic-national collectivities. Of course, instances of women becoming 'special targets' in conflict and war zones are not new. However, in the context of post-Yugoslav state-building, it has a specific meaning.

In this conflict, uprooted women become symbolically and strategically important in the destruction of opposed ethnic-national collectivities. The role women play in this process is intrinsically related to their role in the ideological production and biological reproduction of their ethnic-national collectivities. As several studies have already pointed out (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989; Walby 1992; Brah 1993; Yuval-Davis 1993), women are conceived as cultural embodiments of collectivities and their boundaries as well as participants in

---

<sup>4</sup> Discussion of the meaning of rape in these wars, and the nation-states' response to this form of violence against women, is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the importance of this issue for a more complex analysis of the relation of women and nation-states is acknowledged. This issue is addressed in 'Ethnic Conflict, Rape, and Feminism: the Case of Yugoslavia' (Korac, 1996a).



ethnic-national struggles. Moreover, Copelon (1994: 207) argues that women who are seen traditionally as caretakers, guardians of their children, men and homes, and hence as pillars of a society in a time called peace, represent these roles even more starkly in a time of war. Hence, a forced migration of women in wars expressing ethnic-national oppositions is both practically and symbolically the most effective way to (re)shape the boundaries of an ethnic-national collectivity. Forcing women to flee their homes is, however, just one of the critical elements in this process. The process of (re)shaping boundaries continues in the place of women's exile.

#### **Divisions among refugee women along ethnic-national lines**

According to the official estimates of the High Commission for Refugees and the Red Cross of Serbia (April, 1994), the total number of refugees in Serbia is estimated at 400,000. 77 per cent are Serbs, nine per cent Muslims, two point six per cent Croats, and eleven point four per cent 'others' (i.e., Albanians, Bulgarians, Hungarians, Jews, Romanians, Yugoslavs, etc.). Women compose 85.2 per cent of the refugee population (aged 18 years and over). (Refugees in Serbia, 1994: 6-7).

Exile in Serbia produced a range of individual, social and political problems for women refugees of minority ethnic-nationalities. Although the government grants a temporary refugee status to refugees who are not of Serbian ethnic-national background, this officially and legally equal

treatment of all refugees, regardless of their ethnic-nationality, is undermined by the everyday problems faced by refugees from minority ethnic-nationalities.

Given the context of the conflict in the region, Serbia/FR Yugoslavia as a country actively involved in a war in which people from 'other' ethnic-nationalities were marked as enemies. Even though these refugees have escaped the immediate danger of the war zone, the host country can hardly be perceived as a 'safe place'. The majority of these non-Serbian refugees are accommodated in 'collective centres'.<sup>5</sup> Nermina,<sup>6</sup> a Bosnian Muslim refugee woman, explains the situation in these centres:

I'm in an environment where the women are traumatized.

They have lost their husbands, children; their husbands are at the front. They take sides, they are nationally oriented, committed. When they listen to the news they comment, they support these stands[...]One of the women said to me: "But you're in Serbia, you must support this here". In other words, I have to support this policy, such as it is.

The experience of second Bosnian Muslim refugee woman reveals an individual strategy that refugee women from non-Serbian ethnic-nationalities commonly use in their struggle to survive in a hostile environment:

---

<sup>5</sup> 'Collective centres' or refugee camps in Serbia accommodate 6 percent of the refugee population. The remaining 94 percent of the refugees are accommodated by families (i.e., relatives, friends, etc.). (Refugees in Serbia, 1994: 6-7).

<sup>6</sup> a pseudonym

I only had some minor problems with a woman here (she moved out recently) over the national issue. She kept on raising it, although I never raise it in my conversation. She provoked me a little, she even told some people here I hated Serbs, Milosevic [president of Serbia] and other things. Which is completely untrue: I don't hate Serbs and Serbia. I don't hate them, but I don't like Milosevic[...]I don't agree with his politics.

Women refugees from minority nationalities tend not initiate discussions of sensitive political issues. Given the context of their flight, their very presence represents a 'grave breach' of the aggressive Serbian nationalist cause for war. They have to silence and suppress their political views and beliefs, unless absolutely necessary: they tend to make themselves 'invisible'. This 'strategy of silence' is a common strategy of women's resistance to 'gendered workings of power' (Enloe, 1993: 246) in 'a time called peace.' However, as social and political power shifts radically, this strategy becomes a central form of resistance both between and within genders. Consequently, fear endures and a real problem remains in dealing with a collectivity to which these women represent a demonized ethnic-national group. In this respect, the place of exile carries the characteristics of a war zone.

#### **Divisions Among Refugee Women Within a Single Ethnic-Nationality**

The politics of ethnic nationalism produces yet another set of problems, this time for women refugees of the majority ethnic-nationality. Although ethnic nationalists should, in theory, treat all refugees of the same ethnic nationality 'naturally', the pragmatic interests of the state cause internal differences and struggles over boundary definitions of ethno-national collectivity. Hence, even the rights of the refugees who are of the same ethno-national background as the majority population in their host country are seriously threatened.

For example, Serbs born on the territory of one of the new 'Serbian states' in Croatia or Bosnia-Herzegovina do not have the right to citizenship in the FR Yugoslavia. Moreover, since the government wanted to ensure a sufficient Serbian population on these 'liberated' territories once the war had ended, the government imposed restrictions on maintaining refugee status in Serbia (FR Yugoslavia). As of the Spring of 1994 (USCR, 1995: 173) these refugees became ineligible for refugee status in Serbia and were being forced to return to their 'liberated' territories, though not necessarily to the homes they had lived in before their flight.

In this move, which the Serbian government considered imperative for 'national security', it was crucially important, both materially and symbolically, to force women to return. A Serbian refugee woman explained the problems these women faced:

They called me, it was April 19, 1994, to report to the Red Cross. I got there, one young person and an old woman were there. 'Where are your papers, your

refugee I.D.[...]Where do you come from?', she asks. I said Sarajevo. 'Would you live in Srbinje?'<sup>7</sup> I didn't need to hear any more[...]I said: Where's that? 'Formerly Foca,' she said. And then she went on to tell me what state that's in, that it's the Bosnian Serb Republic. Where's that, I asked. In Africa?[...]And on whose bloody door-step were you thinking of settling me? 'Well, Madame, the mujahedin killed the Serbs.' Wait a minute, you can't talk to me like that[...]How dare you, a clerk, settle me in a state I don't belong to[...]'Well,' she said, 'Mira's<sup>8</sup> your name.' So what if my name is Mira? 'Well you're Serb.'[...]Then I went mad. Me? Dear Lord, no. 'What are you?' Jewish. 'Oh, sorry'[...]And then I quarrelled with her. And they took away my refugee I.D. and pushed this in front of me and said: 'Here are your papers and go to room 16, they'll put a stamp on them and report every fifteen days.' That's the way it was then and that's the way it is today.

Although the majority of refugee women in a similar situation whom I interviewed were not as vocal as Mira, and were not usually prepared to argue directly with state bureaucrats, they do resist the oppression in as many ways as possible. The

---

<sup>7</sup> A town in Eastern Bosnia-Herzegovina, formerly Foca, with a majority Bosnian Muslim population before the war. Currently, it is a Serb held town, called Srbinje. All Bosnian Muslims in Foca were 'cleansed'.

<sup>8</sup> A pseudonym.

methods of resistance depend primarily on women's education, age and place of residence before the flight.

Better educated, matured, professional women, from urban areas such as Mira are more likely to have skills and resources with which to demand protection of their rights. The experience of a Croatian Serb refugee woman demonstrates the use of these skills

They [the state bureaucrats] said I didn't have the right to stay in Zvezdani Gaj [a collective centre in a Belgrade suburb] any longer, that I had to return [to 'liberated' territory in Croatia], and that I was not a refugee but an economic immigrant. I asked them to put that in writing. I said, 'I cannot deal with you any longer, I will hire a lawyer, pay someone to represent me, and let him fight you, I can't anymore. Put it in writing that I am an economic immigrant. I, with a seven-year-old child, don't have to be the first to return.'

A number of refugee women have become politically conscious and bitter when faced with knowledge of others' victimization. In such a context, the opportunity to return home seems incomprehensible because of this new consciousness. A refugee woman from a Serbian controlled town in Croatia that is one of the towns most devastatingly destroyed in the war - described her sense of revulsion:

I can't live in a place in which so many people were killed...How can I pass by that kindergarten where[...] that Italian journalist[...]filmed all

those slain children in nylon bags. When I pass by that kindergarten, I freeze, I can't even look at it, let alone live there [...] I don't want to go to the Bosnian Serb Republic. Why did they banish the Muslims from there? It's awful what's happening[...]Let those who liberated, who razed, let them be there, live there.

This political consciousness, however, can hardly be translated into an articulated political action. The social ideology which 'naturalizes' the ethnic-national collectivity and constructs women's roles does not tolerate a social space for women's autonomous political agency and mobilization. Instead, the ideology of ethnic nationalism values a 'natural' (that is biological) role for women and thus imposes restrictions on their space of action. Whenever women fail to meet these criteria they are redefined as 'traitors' to their ethnic-nation.

### **Women as Traitors**

The 'naturalization' of the ethnic-national collectivity thus has clear gender implications. It rests upon the naturalized role of women *qua* mothers and upon the institution of motherhood which defines the 'appropriate' social role of women vis-a-vis the family and the nation. Accordingly, the state imposes policies facilitating this institutionalization and controlling women. If they transgress these roles they are typically seen as traitors or potential traitors to the nation.

If a refugee woman of the 'right' ethnic-national background has children in an ethnically mixed marriage, she cannot pass on her citizenship (i.e., the 'proper' nation-state membership) to her children unless they first give up their 'improper' citizenship inherited from their father. This particular intervention by the new nation-states is intended to return 'women-traitors' to their nationally important role as bearers of culture or to exclude them from the ethnic-national collectivity and the nation-state.

Refugee women who wish to resist giving up their children's second citizenship thus try to resettle in a third country. Although they may have a better chances for a normal life in one of the countries of resettlement, in this context resettlement represents one of the strategies of the new nation-states to create further 'ethnic cleansing' and to strengthen the ethnic-national homogeneity of their collectivities.

The state's promotion of divisions along ethnic-national lines is easily translated into popular discourse in which 'women-traitors' are stigmatized. This is commonly accompanied with the woman's rejection by her family, creating a situation where women suffer all the more. One Serbian refugee woman, born in Serbia, who lived in Sarajevo for eleven years after marrying a Bosnian Muslim, revealed:

Some neighbors and friends blame me, they say "go to Alija"[Izetbegovic, president of Bosnia-Herzegovina, [...]"take your Muslim children away," "You should all be slaughtered, killed" and more[...]It even went



so far that my parents said "let your husband die," or "we wish him dead." That hurt me a lot.

In a social and political context where state officials prefer to govern the 'Serbs as Serbs, not citizens,' the line which differentiates between 'good' and 'bad' Serbian women (or women-traitors), is rather fragile.

In sum, it is clear that uprooted women, once exiled in a new nation-state, continue to be marked by their ethnic-nationality in a rather ambiguous way, an ambiguity stemming from the essentialist definition of the nation-state.

### **Ambiguities of Women's Ethnic-National Belonging**

The new nation-states construct the roles and status of women through ideological discourse which promotes 'the centrality of gender hierarchy in processes of identification and group reproduction' (Peterson 1996: 7). The public/private dichotomy in both popular and policy discourse, therefore, strengthens and shapes gender distinctions within and between ethnic-national collectivities. The ambiguity of woman's ethnic-national identification as a result of gender hierarchy is revealed by the words of this young refugee woman from an ethnically mixed family:

I think I'm Serb, I don't "think", I know. My father is, so I am, and that's it, no getting around that[...]The most important thing is not what I am, it's that I was very close to my mother's side, to relatives. We were closer to them than father's

side.[...]If I thought long and hard about it, I don't know where I'd get to. Where would I go? My father has very strict views, he held the reins[...]When I left I didn't decide who I was, what I am, where I'm going.

New nation-states promote this hierarchy through ideological discourse. The narratives of ethnic-national belonging and identity constructed and imposed by states are based, as we have seen, on essentialist ideas of 'common origin' and 'common destiny'. Even further, the essential relationship *between* such imagined communities (Anderson, 1983) is seen "to be one between irreconcilable polarities, as a relationship between 'right' and 'wrong', 'superior' and 'inferior' competitors" (Korac, 1996b: 141). As members of ethnic-national collectivities and as participants in ethnic-national struggles, women tend to take part in and to further generate these narratives. However, the ambiguities of their ethnic-national belongings as well as experience of their exile may render women refugees' locations debatable.

This contested location of refugee women is indicated in an interview with Vera,<sup>9</sup> a Bosnian Serb refugee woman. She expressed a profoundly strong sense of ethnic-national belonging, as well as a certain moral justification of the 'Serbian cause for war':

Well, my place is somewhere where Serbs live. I would never ever again go, God forbid. Never, d'you understand the meaning of a word? Never.

---

<sup>9</sup> A pseudonym.

However, minutes later Vera continued:

Here [in exile in Serbia] one runs into all sorts of things every day. D'you understand? We weren't aware until the war broke out. D'you know that literally nobody helped me?[...]Serbs didn't help me. If I'd gone to a Muslim, I would've got accommodation easier than from those at the High Commissioner.

Experiences of exile expose the hollowness of essentialist beliefs in the 'common destiny' of ethnic-national collectivities and related narratives, creating counter-narratives of women's belonging. These counter-narratives challenge the totalizing, overwhelmingly male-defined, and reifying boundaries of the ethnic-nation and construct alternative imagined communities. A Bosnian Serb refugee woman explained:

There are refugees [in collective accommodation][...]from various regions. There are Serb, Croat and Muslim women[...]We're linked by a common fate[...]I share a much better understanding with Croat and Muslim refugees than with the people here [in Serbia]. I live here, if this can be called a life. They don't understand me, I don't understand them. There are frequent disputes and I think that I prefer to talk to refugees of any nationality, that we understand each other better.

I do not want to argue that all refugee women have articulated their experience of exile and belonging in the same way. Here is a contrasting account of a Bosnian Muslim refugee

woman, married to a Bosnian Serb:

Masses of refugees cannot understand me. If I were here with my mother, my sister, if we were the same nationality, maybe I'd view things differently too[...]Everyone says our fate is the same. But I can't say it's been the same for everyone[...]This war has only limited me, narrowed me down, reduced me to merely my children, my husband and his family. And it separated me from my mother, sister. I really feel I've been damaged a lot in this war, as a human being. I'm not aching for those things I had, I'm only aching for the people.

These accounts convey that experiences around belonging cannot be fit to a single mould, but rather that 'all identity is constructed across difference' (Hall, 1987: 44). However, in a political context where essentialist ethnic-national identification based on patriarchal right is informing the nation and is central to the claim for power, any form of transgroup coalition is a challenge to the power structure. What emerges in this context is the political significance of divisions among women along seemingly explicit ethnic-national lines. By contrast, women's multiple and fluid identifications and transgroup solidarities among them tend to disrupt singular identification with an essentialized, male-dominated group: the nation.

#### **A Concluding Remark: Alternative Politics**

The discussion in this chapter has aimed to reveal the complex realities of women refugees at the moment when power in Serbia radically shifted along unified ethnic-national lines. This movement was buttressed by state policies, the public media, and education, all of which defended the power structures supporting a male-centred conception of the nation in which the control of women became a priority. In this context, the state-imposed ethnic-national division among exiled women, combined with their own diverse experiences of conflict and war, tended to reduce the differences among them based on age, class and place of residence before the flight, and to overshadow similarities of their lived experiences regardless of their ethnic-nationality. This analysis, I believe, has a potential to uncover 'gendered workings of power' (Enloe, 1993) in similar context of violent nation-state building, and has wider implications than the region of post-Yugoslav states, as ethnic nationalism reasserts itself worldwide.

The analysis has also aimed to identify potential spaces for a transformation of the totalizing, male-defined, and reifying boundaries of the ethnic-nation. Refugee women, marked by ambiguous ethnic-national identifications, have the potential, I have suggested here, to become catalysts for change. This potential is realised through women's organized effort to form coalitions "in which the differences among women are recognized and given a voice, without fixating the boundaries of this coalition in terms of 'who' we are but in terms of what we want to achieve" (Yuval-Davis, 1994: 189).

Seeds of this organized politics are already extant in the political and humanitarian efforts of some local women's groups. These women's groups were active in anti-nationalist and anti-war campaigns from the very beginning of the conflict which erupted in what once was Yugoslavia. Women's groups have also initiated and established centres to work with women refugees and women who were vere victims of sexual violence in war. The process and outcome of this effort are explained by a woman activist, a Bosnian Serb refugee:

They [refugee women] have every right to their bitterness[...]However, in some of those talks, I would talk about my friends who were of other nationalities, we'd read a letter from Sarajevo which we got from a Muslim woman. In time they got used to being able to talk about neighbours of other nationalities - because they came here thinking they could never talk about them, that they have to say that "they are genocidal", that "they should all be killed," in order to make some friends here. Then, in time[...]out of the blue friends emerged, daughters in law, neighbours, they all emerged out of the blue, who didn't exist up to then.

This politics of the local women's groups has lead to a bridging of the differences between women, as well as to a process of healing. A Bosnian Muslim refugee woman, who became a volunteer in the Autonomous Women's Centre in Belgrade, explained the context in which other refugee women in the collective centre accepted her:

It took me a long time, but they've accepted me finally. I think, I might be wrong, but since I've started working here in the Centre, they treat me differently, because they've seen that other women respect me.

A real potential of this politics of local women's groups, and consequently, a threat to the power relations within and between the new nation-states, is best illustrated by the words of a Bosnian Muslim refugee woman who fled to Croatia:<sup>10</sup>

The Centre for Women War Victims of Violence became my Embassy. And when you say that, that means that someone is representing you, that it's yours. The Centre became my Embassy. The Embassy of Bosnia-Herzegovina wasn't mine at all. I was there a couple of times and I got so angry with them, and I sent them to hell[...]. At the Centre I really feel that I am on my own territory, those 70 square metres became my lost homeland.

This politics and effort challenge not only the notion of generic 'woman' but also the notion of ethnic-national 'sameness' stemming in large part from a male-dominated discourse. They enable women to stand and speak up for themselves as women and as the female representatives of their nation, rather than solely as mothers, sisters and wives of men

---

<sup>10</sup> This interview was given for a documentary 'A Balkan Journey', directed by Brenda Longfellow, Canada. The documentary was filmed in Belgrade and Zagreb in the Spring of 1995. The permission to use the interviews is gratefully acknowledged.

who represent the nation.

The organized support of the local women's groups and the success of their efforts to communicate and work across ethnic-national lines is essential in initiating a process of reconstruction and change of the nationalistic politics of exclusion in post-Yugoslav states. The forms of women's organized work and help to refugee women, discussed in this chapter, represent the ways in which women gain subjectivity and can become more autonomous political subjects. If successful, these efforts can become the avenue to more inclusive or gender sensitive notion of citizenship.



## References

Anderson, Benedict. (1983). *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso.

Brah, Avtar. (1993) 'Re-framing Europe: En-gendered Racisms, ethnicities and Nationalisms in Contemporary Western Europe', *Feminist Review*, 45.

Copelon, Rhonda. (1994). 'Surfacing Gender: Reconceptualizing Crimes against Women in Time of War'. Stiglmeier, Alexandra, (Ed.). *Mass Rape: The War Against Women in Bosnia-Herzegovina*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press.

Enloe, Cynthia. (1993). *The Morning After: Sexual Politics at the End of the Cold War*. University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London.

(1989). *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*. London: Sydney, Wellington: Pandora.

Hall, Stuart. (1987). 'Minimal Selves'. *Identity, the Real Me*. ICA Document 6, p. 44-6. London: ICA.

Indra, Doreen. (1993) 'Some Feminist Contributions to Refugee Studies'. Paper presented at Gender Issues and Refugees: Development Implications Conference at York University, Toronto, Canada, May 9-11. Conference papers, Vol. II, pp. 757-766. Toronto: Centre for Refugee Studies.

International Society for Human Rights. (1994). Human Rights Worldwide, Vol. 4, No. 1, March. Frankfurt: ISHR.

Kaldor, Mary. (1993). 'Yugoslavia and the New Nationalism'. New Left Review, 197.

Korac, Maja. (forthcoming). 'Ethnic-Nationalism, Wars and The Patterns of Social, Political and Sexual Violence Against Women: The Case of Post-Yugoslav Countries'. Identities - Global Studies in Culture and Power

(1996a). 'Ethnic Conflict, Rape, and Feminism: the Case of Yugoslavia'. In B. Wejnert and M. Spencer eds. Women in Post-Communism. Research on Russia and Eastern Europe, vol. 2. Greenwich, London: JAI Press Inc.

(1996b). 'Understanding ethnic-national identity and its meaning: questions from woman's experience'. Women's Studies International Forum. Vol. 19. Nos. 1/2, January-April, p.133-145

(1993). 'Serbian Nationalism, Nationalism of My Own People'. *Feminist Review*, 45

Moussa, Helene. (1993). *Storm and Sanctuary: The Journey of Ethiopian and Eritrean Women Refugees*. Dundas: Artemis Enterprises Publication.

Pateman, Carol. (1988). *The Sexual Contract*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Peterson, V. Spike. (1996) 'The politics of identification in the context of globalization'. *Women's Studies International Forum*. Vol. 19, Nos. 1/2, January-April, p. 5-17.

Refugees in Serbia. (1994). Nos. 17/18, April. Belgrade: High Commissioner for Refugees of Serbia.

Nasa Borba, 10 August, 1995, Belgrade daily newspaper.

U.S. Committee for Refugees. (1995). *World Refugee Survey*. Washington D.C.

(1993). *World Refugee Survey*.

Washington D.C.

(1993a) *East of Bosnia: Refugees in Serbia and Montenegro*. Issue Paper, September. Washington

D.C.

Vreme. 27 April 1996, Belgrade weekly magazine.

Walby, Sylvia. (1992). 'Woman and Nation'. International Journal of Comparative Sociology, vol. XXXII, nos. 1-2, Jan-April, p. 81-100.

Yuval-Davis, Nira. (1994). 'Women, Ethnicity and Empowerment'. Feminism & Psychology. Vol. 4, No. 1, p. 179-197.

(1993). 'Gender and Nation'. Ethnic and Racial Studies, vol. 16, no. 4, October, p. 621-632.

Yuval-Davis, Nira and Anthias, Floya (Eds.). (1989). Women-Nation-State. London: Macmillan Press.