GENDER, CONFLICT AND PEACE-BUILDING: LESSONS FROM THE CONFLICT IN THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA

Maja Korac
School of Social Sciences, Media and Cultural Studies, University of East London, UK

Address:
University of East London
Docklands Campus
4-6 University Way
London E16 2RD
UK
Tel: 020 78218010 (h)
Fax: 020 82233296
E-mail: m.korac@uel.ac.uk

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Abstract:

This paper explores the importance of gender sensitive analysis of conflict constructed as ethnic strife for conceptualising and developing new and more effective ways of intervening in this type of war. It points out that because most of the physical violence and suffering in these conflicts occur at the community level, they generate massive refugee movements, causing not only physical and material devastation, but also the destruction of social networks and local communities. This critically affects the prospects for refugee return, which is central to any sustainable peace agreement and post-conflict democratic development. In searching for an answer to the question of how to address effectively the issue of reconciliation in such a context, the discussion highlights the centrality of acknowledging gender dimensions and dynamics of this type of war, as a way of uncovering and recognising a reconciliatory potential of *women as women* organising and activism that often occurs it these conflicts. By focusing specifically on the initiatives of some women groups during the war in the former Yugoslavia, which aimed at rebuilding trust and broken social networks at a communal level, the paper examines the reasons why women as women often opt for alternative forms of political mobilisation. It argues that this type of activism has an important potential for conflict resolution and should be recognised in a fundamental way in any attempt to build-peace in conflict zones.

Why gender analysis of conflict?

The last decade of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st have been characterised by internal conflicts, constructed as ethnic strife, and attempts to conceptualise and develop new and more effective ways of intervening in this type of war. Goodhand and Hulme (1999: 17-18) point out that '[i]n contemporary conflicts, "the community" represents the nexus of conflict action.' It is at the community level, they emphasise, where most of the physical violence and suffering occurs (*ibid.*). Indeed, that is why current wars generate massive refugee movements, because forcible migration of particular groups or 'ethnic cleansing' of local communities has become a tool in establishing new ethnicised forms of statehood based on the politics of exclusion. Those who shape policies of international intervention in conflict zones, argue that the return of refugees is central to any sustainable and just peace agreement (Koser and Black, 1999; Petrin, 2002; International Crisis Group, 2003). However, Duffield (1997) and Kaldor (1999) point out that one of the highest and the gravest costs of current conflicts is the destruction of social networks and communities caused by the divisive identity politics of new wars. These circumstances affect the process of refugee return in some fundamental ways. By spreading fear and hatred among populations at the communal level, political elites and local warlords mobilise them for support of and engagement in violent conflict, and effectively use ethnicity as a tool of war. Thus, it is often argued that any search for effective reconciliation strategies in war-torn societies has to address problems at a communal level, such as issues of the loss of trust and of broken social networks (Goodhand and Hulme 1999; Kaldor, 1999). Consequently, as Goodhand and Hulme (1999:18) argue, to 'build viable constituencies for peace, a detailed understanding of the "communities" in which they operate is essential.' Central to this analysis is an understanding of sources

of individual identity and how these relate to collective identities, such as ethnicity, religion and gender (*ibid.*: 20).

Although gender analyses have been introduced into the conflict discourse in the past years (e. g. Cockburn, 2001; Jacobs *et al.*, 2000) or acknowledged as its essential element (e.g. Goodhand and Hulme, 1999) the power relations which shape gender identity, gender-based allegiances and behaviours are rarely built into the planning of interventions addressing 'new wars' (Kaldor, 1999) and their consequences. Studies of gender aspects of conflict demonstrate that gender relations of power shape pre-conflict, conflict and post-conflict situations, and shed new light onto the roles of women in waging war and building peace (Moser & Clark, 2001; Giles *et al.* 2003). Women, as these and other studies show, are not simply victims, but also agents, actively involved in violent, military actions, for example in Rwanda (Lentin, 1997) or Sri Lanka (de Mal, 2003), as well as in promoting peace, such as in Afghanistan (Collett 1998), Northern Ireland, Israel/Palestine, Bosnia-Herzegovina (Cockburn 1998) or Sri Lanka and the successor states of the former Yugoslavia (Giles *et al.* 2003). Thus, the introduction of gender into the conflict discourse has been important in deconstructing essentialist notions of women as victims, 'natural born nurturers' and of men as warriors and 'natural born rapists and killers'. In this sense, the discussion in this paper acknowledges that both women and men, as gender actors in specific historic, social and political locations, will respond to conflict in different ways. While some become actively involved in waging or supporting war, others seek alliances across conflict imposed divisions and demarcation lines organising themselves against war. This paper, however, focuses on the latter groupings of women and examines both the conceptual and context specific reasons why *women as women* often opt for alternative political mobilisation in the times of

conflict and become involved in forms of activism that has an important potential in conflict resolution. In uncovering the reasons for this type of mobilisation of women, gender analysis of conflict is an important analytical tool, because it enables our understanding of the internal dynamics of pre-war, war and post-war situations by pointing to the processes of shaping gender identities and by revealing the logic of gender-based alliances.

Analyses of gender and conflict have made sound arguments about why some women become actively involved in the grassroots work of keeping lines of communication open in wars constructed as ethnic, religious and communal strife. Cockburn in her analysis of women's 'bridge-building' projects in Northern Irland, Israel/Palestine and Bosnia-Herzegovina (1998: 44) points out that feminism understood as anti-essentialist and democratic, that is – inclusive of women differently situated in ethnic, class and other structures, tend to 'immunize women against regressive constructions of ethnic and national identity. If you pick a non-primordial gender card you are less likely to reach for a primordial national card.' She further argues that such a gender critique reveals the seductive notions of the words 'community', 'country' and 'people' invoked in nationalist discourse, which hide within it gender and class inequalities. Cockburn goes on to explain how anti-essentialist and democratic feminism helps (some) women to reveal the contradicting nature of the seemingly innocent notion of 'home' that conceals confinement, divisions, oppression and violence, and points out that such women are 'the more likely to be sceptical of "homeland". 'If you see home as a "golden cage" you may suspect that homeland too has its contradictions.'(Cockburn, 1998: 45). For these reasons, she concludes, a feminist analysis 'makes women question the pursuit of political movements by violent means.'(*ibid.*). This and other similar feminist

analyses emphasise that women are not 'natural peacemakers'. Rather, because they have not been exposed to masculine socialisation, women may be better positioned than men not to accept the values of a male-dominated society and to formulate a transformative, non-violent vision of conflict resolution (Carter, 1996; Women in Black Belgrade 1994, 1997).

This paper examines some aspects of women's organising against the divisive politics of war in the successor states of the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s, and explores their *potential* role in the process of peace-building and reconciliation. By focusing specifically on the work of anti-war women's groups in the region with refugee women and women survivors of sexual violence in war, my analysis aims to offer insights into possible albeit missed opportunities to achieve a more just and sustainable peace in the Balkans.[1] I argue that a number of women's groups in Serbia (e.g. Women in Black Belgrade, and Autonomous Women's Centre Belgrade), Croatia (e.g. Centre for Women War Victims Zagreb), and in Bosnia (e.g. Medica Zenica, and Women for Women, Sarajevo) represented at the time some of the very few 'islands of civility' (Kaldor, 1999). Kaldor explains such groups as being engaged or having the potential to engage in alternative forms of political mobilisation in the context of current conflicts that are characterised by identity politics of exclusion (1999: 120). The work of these women's groups in the successor states of the former Yugoslavia was aimed at (re)establishing trust in the 'other' side and thus could have been critical for (re)building social networks in the war-torn region and its communities. As such, I argue, it had an important reconciliatory potential, which should have been recognised and supported as an important peace constituency at a grassroots level. This in turn, could have brought about a more stabile and lasting

peace in the region by opening up a space for genuinely democratic processes and re-integration of returnees into their communities.

Kaldor (1999) emphasises the importance of identifying groups that oppose the politics of exclusion by promoting inter-group connections and civic rather than ethnic politics and political engagement in conflict zones, and the centrality of providing them with support so that they can become important political forces for change. Women's political initiatives and their organising against war and politics of exclusion in the successor states of the former Yugoslavia went almost unrecognised. The STAR (Strategies, Training, and Advocacy for Reconciliation) Network, established in the late 1994, in response to a meeting of women NGO leaders from the successor states of the former Yugoslavia, held earlier that year, was the only internationally recognised initiative aimed at supporting non-nationalist, democratic women's groups.[2] The initiative, funded by USAID, is meant to build the capacity of women's leadership and women's NGOs in the region, it is particularly developed in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and its specific focus is on building networks between women's groups in Bosnia, but also within the region and beyond (Gagnon, 2002). Anti–war women's groups relied also on the support of a wide range of small women NGOs and feminists internationally.[3] Although important, this type of support was piecemeal and could not alter the marginalised position of anti-war women's groups within the 'mainstream' or male-dominated alternative political initiatives in the region as well as internationally. Consequently, these groups and their work remained at the time only a small drop of hope in the big ocean of spiralling violence and hatred. However, they did receive 'attention' and 'acknowledgement' from the ruling nationalist political elites, which reacted oppressively by setting up propaganda

campaigns portraying these women as 'traitors'(Boric and Mladineo-Desnica, 1996; Korac, 1998a).

Why women become involved in bridge-building projects?

Women's organising against divisive politics and war violence in Serbia and other successor states of the former Yugoslavia started quite early on, before the armed violence began. Feminism has a long history in the region, and feminists were the first to initiate an organised women's resistance to nationalism, violence and war.[4] The emergence of nationalist politics and discourse left women increasingly 'displaced' from participation in the labour force; it 'planted' them back into the family and household. These developments were coupled with a decrease in woman's political participation.[5] As women were loosing out in economic, social and public life, and when their reproductive rights and freedoms came under attack by nationalists who saw women as biological reproducers of their nations, previously loosely linked women who called themselves feminists have begun to organise. Although these groups were small and coming from the political margin, they were among the first to voice publicly their opposition to nationalist politics, their tactics of spreading fear and hatred and to the process of militarization in the region.

One of the groups these women formed in Belgrade was 'Women in Black against War'.[6] These women were publicly protesting against the Serbian regime, nationalist politics and war, and were pressing for creative diplomacy and arguing for a voice for democratic women's groups and other non-governmental organisations in negotiating a cessation of hostilities in the country. The first vigil of Women in Black (WIB) Belgrade was held on October 9, 1991, and it remained the only permanent anti-war public protest to this day. This was not the only anti-war and peace initiative started by women. In fact, women launched almost all the early peace initiatives in

Belgrade and Serbia (Mladjnovic, 2003). Mladjenovic (2003: 41) argues that the reasons for women making up the majority in the early peace initiatives were threefold. Their gender position made it safer for them to act against the regime, as men were under threat of forced mobilisation. Further, their experience of doing unpaid work in the household made them more open to engagement in unpaid, volunteer work in the peace movement. Finally, and I would argue most importantly, their knowledge of 'making do with less' facilitated their engagement in horizontal, non-competitive activities.

The emergence of women's organising against war and nationalist politics is not surprising given the growing importance of ethnicity in political discourse at the time. Some women, primarily those who called themselves feminists, immediately recognised the danger of such identity politics, which assigns women with 'honourable' roles as 'Mothers of the Nation' and 'Symbols of the Nation', who are in danger and have to be protected, or as the critical transmitters of culture and traditional values (Yuval-Davis and Anthias, 1989; Walby 1992). These women were aware from the outset that this kind of labelling leads to women's further subordination and victimisation. As the predominant concern of local nationalists was cultural and religious 'authenticity', women - whatever their actual ethnic background, were regarded as 'caretakers' and guardians of their children, men and 'hearths', and thus central to producing and maintaining cultural and group identity. Women became increasingly seen as precious property to be controlled and 'protected'. With the growing process of militarisation and the subsequent violent conflict, women indeed became specifically targeted because of these roles. The increase in violence, justified as the 'defence' of the 'engendered' ethnic collective, transformed women into symbolically important targets. As women were considered

as the precious property of the 'enemy', their bodies became territories to be seized and conquered (Korac, 1998b). Sexual abuse and rape became powerful 'ethno-markers' (Meznaric, 1994) as well as did forcible displacement. As I argued elsewhere (Korac, 1999 and 2004), forced migration of women in conflict constructed as ethnic strife is both practically and symbolically an effective way of (re)shaping boundaries of an ethnic collective. Forcing women to flee their homes is, however, just one of the critical elements in this process. The process of reshaping boundaries, as my research documents, continues in the place of women's exile and, I argue, is central to further consolidating nationalist projects of ethnic division. As such it is critical for the formation of new states based upon essentialist notions of belonging.

Women's groups mentioned at the beginning of this article were among those very few alternative political voices in the region, which recognised quite early on the centrality of maintaining old and developing new connections across ethnic lines and boundaries of the new ethnicised states. The process was not problem-free and it caused at times internal tensions and divisions.[7] The spread of war, distraction and various forms of victimisation of different ethnic groups in the region were new experiences for these women. During the early years of the conflict, they found them almost impossible to share. Their first meetings with women from 'the other side' marked the beginning of a painful, yet an overall successful process of reconciliation of differences embedded in 'relational positionality' of these women (Stasiulis, 1998). Relational positionality, as Stasiulis (1998: 16-17) points out, is a concept which refers to

> the multiple relations of power which intersect in complex ways with position of individuals and collectives in shifting and often contradictory locations within geopolitical spaces, historical narratives and movement politics.

Although the tensions and divisions resulting from women's differentiated positioning and experiences of war and violence have become more widely/internationally known, their courageous and persistent initiatives to keep communications across ethnic divide were left largely unacknowledged. However, connections across the ethnic divide did not only survive, but also grew with the escalation of war violence and the growing numbers of refugees in the region; refugees who were overwhelmingly women and children.[8]

The email link 'Z*a mir'* (For Peace), which was almost the only means of communication within the war-torn region during the years of armed conflict, was one of the important ways of exchange among these women. It enabled women activists to share experiences and newly acquired knowledge concerning their work with refugee women and survivors of sexual violence in war. It also facilitated the establishment of new contacts and friendships, as well as nurturing of mature ones. Moreover, Women in Black Belgrade were involved in establishing a wider network of anti-war women's groups, consisting of women from the region as well as internationally. This has resulted in an annual meeting of women's solidarity against war, nationalism and violence. Between 1992 and the early 2000, this international meeting was held every summer in Serbia, each meeting followed by a published report entitled *Women for Peace*. During the years of the armed conflict (1991-1995), participation at these meetings was highly risky for many women coming from territories directly affected by armed conflict. It involved not only a laborious process of obtaining travel documents, but also long, exhausting and often dangerous journeys. Moreover, these women were regarded as 'disloyal' and subversive to the political interests of their 'countrymen' and the state, because of their participation at these meetings. Thus, they were often in danger of being socially and politically stigmatised in their places

of origin and of loosing their jobs (personal communication with participants of the
6th Annual Meeting of Women's Solidarity Against War, Nationalism and Violence,
held in Novi Sad, Serbia, August 1997).

**Why anti-war women's groups focused on work with refugee women and women
survivors of sexual violence in war?**

The awareness of the centrality of inter-group connections across the ethnic
divide for conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction, prompted anti-war
women's groups to embark upon work with refugee women and women survivors of
sexual violence in war. As these women have been the most violently affected by the
exclusionary politics of ethnic nationalism in the region they were in the greatest need
of support to overcome their experiences of victimisation as an ethnic 'other'. They
were also those who, as it was then hoped, would eventually return to their homes and
thus actively engage in re-building their communities, most of which had a long
history of multi-ethnic ties and life.[9] The work with women who were subjected to
sexual violence was particularly important because of the social and political
implications of sexualized forms of violence in conflict, constructed as ethnic strife.
In this type of war, rape of women represents an important element in a patriarchal
construction of the ethnic-national cause and it becomes a powerful tool against the
'enemy' (Korac 1996; 1998b). It is an effective implement of territorial 'cleansing',
for men will not return to the places where they have been 'humiliated' by the rape of
'their' women. Furthermore, by focusing almost exclusively on the ethnic
membership of the rapist and of a possible foetus, and thus by treating the body of a
raped woman as an 'occupied' territory, the local nationalists rendered the raped
woman and the crime committed against her invisible. Consequently, women who

were subjected to sexual violence in war(s) in the region were further victimised by aggressive politics of their governments and their media machines.

In their response to the victimisation of women by the politics of division, fragmentation and the associated processes of 'othering' members of different ethnic groups, anti-war women's groups put emphasis on establishing multi-ethnic self-help groups for exiled women. This was regarded as critical for their overall well-being as it was considered that coming to terms with individual traumatic experiences is importantly linked to the process of group reconciliation. By implementing this approach they combined provision of humanitarian assistance with psycho-social and political work with victimised women. Women activists did not only aim to provide support by collecting and delivering aid, such as food or clothing, or by helping these women to find work and by offering them legal advice. Rather, the work of anti-war women's groups put strong emphasis on the importance of re-establishing destroyed connections across ethnic divide, which they considered a critically important source of individual and group identity formation. This work demonstrated that women of different ethnic backgrounds and diverse experiences of victimisation could establish and maintain relationships of mutual respect. This was considered a starting point in (re)developing relationships of trust, which is a critical, first step in overcoming divisions and fragmentation caused by nationalist politics of war (Boric 1994; Cockburn 1998; Korac, 1998a).

In helping victimised women to come to terms with their traumatic experiences, some women's groups introduced discussion groups and writing workshops. This was regarded as yet another way of initiating a gradual and often painful process of (re)establishing respect and trust in the 'other' side of ethnic divide. In these workshops and discussions refugee and non-refugee women talked about

family, friendship and other social ties in their communities. They remembered inter-ethnic links they had before the war, as well as those forged during the conflict, their flight and its aftermath. In doing so they actively explored the issues of loss, anger, hatred and guilt. An activist of the Women in Black Belgrade explained, 'the women have every right to their bitterness towards people from other ethnic origin', and that is why the exploration of their feelings was so important (personal communication, summer 1995). However, the discussion groups and written accounts were typically characterised by emerging stories and memories of life as it was before the war, and would gradually lead to the recognition of good and trusted neighbours, friends, and relatives whom the war turned into enemies, some real and some imagined. This practice was invaluable because it enabled the women to create a social space in which they were *allowed* to remember good and trusted people at the other side of the ethnic divide. This was regardless of their traumatic experiences and despite of the political context that promoted hatred and fear of an 'other' defined as a member of the opposing ethnic group. This process proved to be critical for many of the victimised women in dealing with their feelings of hatred and bitterness. It led to questioning issues of identity and belonging, as they were shaped by the divisive politics of conflict as well as their war experiences.

Through this type of 'identity work' both refugee and non-refugee women started developing positive and constructive approaches to crises, and created spaces for mutual understanding and ongoing productive exchange. One of the women active in Autonomous Women's Centre Belgrade explained how each and every one of the women involved in this process aimed at building trust in the 'other' side through their willingness to hear what the other side had to say, and through their trust that the other side is equally willing to hear them. In this sense this type of women's

initiatives are politics - the politics of everyday life (personal communication, summer 1995). It is politics that reflect the facts of life. In order to move on with their lives, people need to come to terms with their losses by revisiting their past and present experiences, identities and loyalties which were severely affected by the divisive nationalist politics and the resulting war(s).

The politics of everyday life created spaces in which women were positioned in a compatible way and where the nationalist discourse of 'right' and 'wrong' ethnic belonging did not exist. Through this kind of communication they became engaged in what Italian feminist activists termed 'transversal' politics. In developing this strategy of feminist/women's politics, Nira Yuval-Davis (1997: 130) emphasises the centrality of the processes of 'rooting' and 'shifting'. This implies that participants in a dialogue are rooted in their own membership and identity, while at the same time they shift in order to put themselves in a situation of other participants in the dialogue, who have different membership and identity. This practice and strategy enabled these women to accept their diverse positionings as sites of 'unfinished knowledge' (Yuval-Davis, 1993). Yuval-Davis (1993: 194) defines this as knowledge that is continuously redefined in relation to the different life situations of women and their differentiated relations to power. Through the practice of 'transfersal politics' these women embarked upon the creation of social links and alliances regardless of their ethnic background. This process was based upon their realisation that refugees of other ethnic backgrounds were also victimised. A refugee woman from Bosnia, of Serbian background, explained this process:

> No one approaches us from the human angle, except for these women's organisations and movements [anti-war women's groups][…]We were very mistrustful of them [in the beginning], thinking that they too would leave, and we'd be left with our problems. But they were persistent, and came again [to the collective accommodation], and they have come many times since[…] They gave us a chance, I won't say illusion, of some kind of life[…] 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 [the local population] 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.

Women's experience of exile and their involvement in work organised by anti-war women's groups in the region exposed the hollowness of essentialist beliefs in the 'common destiny' of ethnic collectives and related narratives. The experience of multi-ethnic self-help groups and other forms of work initiated by women activists in Serbia and elsewhere, allowed for the creation of counter-narratives of belonging of many of the exiled women. Although these counter-narratives of women's belonging and open social communication across the ethnic divide were not widespread at the time, I argue that they represented a potential for the (re)creation of multi-ethnic social networks in communities destroyed by war. Thus, these counter-narratives of women's belonging resulting from their experience of war and exile, as well as their work with anti-war women activists should have been regarded as critical in the process of building lasting and sustainable peace.

Through this type of activism the resistance to war that emerged initially among a rather small and marginal groups of middle class women who considered themselves feminists, has been gradually, yet crucially shaped and empowered by the experiences of refugee women who have been victimised by war in various ways. Their joint and successful efforts in organising multi-ethnic self-help groups remained a unique attempt in developing elements of a culture of reconciliation in the region. Through this work they were creating prospects of reconstructing the post-conflict societies of the successor states of the former Yugoslavia into communities of ethnic tolerance. It can be argued that the conflict had, in fact, contributed to the emergence of a number of new women's groups in the region. Women who joined these new

groups as volunteers had not necessarily ever considered themselves to be feminists. Their awareness about particularities of the position of women and gender dimensions of war and violence grew out of their work with women who were victimised the most by the conflict.

Why the work of women's groups was never transformed into a strong voice for change?

The work of anti-war women's groups, although highly political in nature, was never transformed into a strong political movement or voice. It remained politics of *small steps*, regardless of the fact that many women involved became more politically conscious of the dangers of the politics of exclusion. Anti-war women's initiatives described in this paper are all about the politics of 'small steps, almost imperceptible', the kind of struggle that 'cannot change things as much as it can set them in motion', as a woman activist from Women in Black Belgrade explained (personal communication, summer 1995). The politics of everyday life is indeed politics of 'small steps' requiring time, particularly in war-torn, non-democratic societies. A detailed discussion of the many reasons why these politics of 'small steps' were never transformed into a strong alternative movement for change is not within the scope of this paper. However, it is important to mention that the reasons for this failure were threefold.

The first set of reasons concerns the legacy of socialism and the political space occupied by feminists during that period, many of whom later became anti-war activists involved in work with refugee women and women survivors of sexual violence in war. Feminism in socialist Yugoslavia was on the political margin, as that was the only available space for women's autonomous organising. This has contributed to the creation of a socially and politically marginalised feminist

community with its own alternative, but isolated 'culture'. Their politics during state socialism can be described as 'anti-political politics', to borrow Havel's (1986) term, in a sense that feminists did not attempt to conceptualise their political activism as a potential part of the socialist state. This attitude has remained the main characteristics of women's organising during the transition from state socialism to ethnic nationalism and war.[10] Through the framework of 'anti-political politics' they have entirely separated themselves from the mainstream political avenues and as a result, at the time of the disintegration of state socialism, autonomous women's groups lacked genuine links with wider socio-economic groupings of women. Consequently, most of their early protests against nationalism and its politics remained rather isolated from society at large. They were unable therefore to confront the 'patriarchal backlash' of the nationalist politics and discourse and the subsequent process of militarisation in any socially and politically significant way. However, at the time of the major violence and distraction, during the first years of the war(s), anti-war women's groups were for the first time gaining a wider social base and support from women from all walks of life. Regardless of this important shift, their public anti-war protests remained marginal as was their quite remarkable success in keeping lines of communication open across the ethnic divide despite the exclusionary politics of war.

This brings my discussion to the second set of reasons for the failure to transform the work and political activism of anti-war women's groups into a strong political movement or voice. At the time when essentialist notions of ethnic identification were informing the nation and were central to the claim for power, any form of trans-group coalition was seen as a challenge to the existing power structure. The nationalist oligarchies reacted strongly to anti-war women's protests and mobilised the media propaganda machine to prevent further development and spread

of the anti-war women's protests. At the moment when political power in Serbia and other successor states of the former Yugoslavia, radically shifted along ethnic lines, the state-imposed 'othering' of anti-war women groups and of refugee women with whom they worked, rapidly became part of a wider public discourse and resulted in women's stigmatisation. A particularly telling example of this process is the public attack on several Croatian feminists, prominent writers and journalists, orchestrated by the Croatian authorities.[11] These women, who were openly opposing the divisive politics of local nationalists and the process of 'othering' women, were attacked in the Croatian media as 'witches' and 'traitors' of their nation.

Nationalist oligarchies also embarked upon imposing ethnic division among exiled women through the refugee policies they pursued and by erecting structural and other barriers to settlement of refugees of minority ethnic backgrounds, most of whom were women. This move was strategically important for consolidating newly established ethnicised states. These circumstances played an important role in undermining the potential of the 'identity work' initiated by ant-war women's groups. Consequently, for women refugees of minority ethnic backgrounds, the place of exile carried the characteristics of a war zone. Refugee women, both those involved in work with anti-war women's groups as well as many more of those who did not have the opportunity to be part of it, found themselves in a social and political context in which they represented a demonised ethnic group. As a consequence, many of them tried to resettle in third country searching for safety and 'a minimal condition for some kind of democracy of selves' (Cockburn, 1997). The state policies and practices were, in effect, furthering ethnic cleansing by the strengthened the ethnic homogeneity of newly-created nation states in the region.

The process of 'othering' women, and refugee women in particular, affected also those of majority backgrounds. Refugee women of majority ethnic backgrounds who were in mixed marriages were particularly stigmatised and they too, often tried to resettle in a third country. The following testimony of a refugee woman from Bosnia is a particularly telling account of the scope and the character of the process of stigmatisation. This woman of a Serbian background, married to a Bosnian Muslim, had lived in Bosnia for years, before fleeing to Serbia and finding a 'refuge' in her parents' home in Belgrade. She said:

> Some neighbours and friends here in Serbia blame me, they say 'go to Alija' [Izetbegovic, the then 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.

Orchestrating public pressure on those who are in mixed marriages is not surprising if we note that they have a genuine interest in rebuilding inter-ethnic ties in societies affected by war constructed as ethnic strife. They can have an invaluable role in conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction in their places of origin.[12] Their declining presence reduces the prospects of reconstructing these post-conflict societies into communities of ethnic tolerance. Both processes had far-reaching consequences for peaceful conflict resolution and the establishment of sustainable peace in the region.

These processes of strengthening the ethnic homogeneity of the successor states of the former Yugoslavia were encouraged by the wider international political context. During the years of conflict the diverse political powers embarked upon political negotiations with the nationalist political elites (with a single exception, entirely male), which had the effect of bolstering the power of local nationalists and of sharpening the importance of ethnic divisions. In so doing, they effectively neglected alternative 'voices'. In the process of negotiating the cessation of hostilities

in the war-torn region, the 'voices' of anti-war women's groups and other local groups involved in civic initiatives were effectively silenced. In such circumstances, the peace-building potential of the work of anti-war women's groups in the region was further weakened. These women and their work were never acknowledged and supported as groups involved in developing important alternative systems that are central to overcoming the consequences of the divisive politics of war. Consequently, anti-war women's initiatives remained a unique, yet rather limited force in the struggle to re-establish political inclusion and social integration in these war-torn societies.

The lack of such a recognition and support is first and foremost the consequence of a still ambivalent acknowledgement that gender sensitive approach has to be an integral part of any search for local capacities for peace in conflict zones. Looked through a gender lens, it becomes clear that the establishment of ethnicised states through the process of militarization and war requires a substantial marginalisation and subordination of women, which is often accompanied by their severe victimisation. Enloe's (1993:247) analysis of militarisation of nationalist movements emphasises that the militarising transformations involve changes in ideas about masculinity and manliness – 'manliness as it supports a state, and manliness as it informs a nation.' The process also implies complementary transformations in ideas about femininity, the interdependence which, as Enloe (1993: 248) argues, is a social construct that usually privileges masculinity. Thus, the analysis and understanding of the 'gendered workings of power' (Enloe, 1993:246) that led to the war(s) and the formation of new states, if it had been applied, could have pointed to the likelihood of emerging alliances among (some) women in the region. Such analyses would have helped recognise women as alternative forces for change, because (some) women are

likely to challenge the nationalist notions of 'homeland', 'nation' and 'people' as male-centred constructs that subordinate and victimise them. If that kind of approach had been in place, anti-war women's groups in the successor states of the former Yugoslavia would have been seen as having potential for alternative political mobilisation and as the groups deserving support. With such a support they could have developed further and broadened their important work with exiled and otherwise victimised women. They would have gained prominence and would have become more powerful if they had been recognised by the international players as important constituencies for peace.

From setting things in motion to social and political change: The gap

International players involved in humanitarian interventions are not prone to recognise and encourage the politics of 'small steps', which are inherent in many grassroots movements and initiatives, and particularly in women's groups. Current humanitarian responses to new wars are oriented toward 'quick fix solutions' or momentary peace-making, rather than long-term peace-building approaches, which are central to addressing humanitarian, socio-economic and political problems of new wars and their aftermath. The problem is embedded in the divide between relief versus development responses, and immediate life saving versus social approaches to intervention and conflict resolution. As Duffield (1997: 206-207) points out the problem is that the international humanitarian response to new wars is based on relief strategies and concentrated on short-term physical inputs, rather than on their social, civil and political consequences, which are immense. The problem, he argues, is embedded in the fact that 'new wars' and the level of destruction they generate are made to appear irrational, whereby the logic and political economy of this type of conflict are largely missed (Duffield, 1997**:** 206). While the importance of the

immediate life saving inputs cannot be underestimated or undervalued, the long term social, civic and political goals are critical for the process of building sustainable peace in societies affected by conflict, constructed as ethnic strife. However, humanitarian interventions are usually accompanied by immense pressure from donors and the media to demonstrate rapid implementation of intervening measures and their immediate impact (Gagnon, 2002; Williams, 2002). Neither the process of rebuilding of social networks and systems, nor the politics of 'small steps' as a way of developing trust, can satisfy these criteria. These are long-term and not always readily visible efforts.

There is an obvious gap between the momentary peace-making approaches to current conflicts and their resolution and the need for long-term peace-building initiatives that should critically involve identifying and supporting local capacities for peace. The currently prevailing search for 'quick fix solutions' to conflict constructed as ethnic strife, engenders a rather simplistic understanding of the causes and consequences of 'new wars'. It neglects one of its fundamental characteristics and components – the issues concerning the identity politics that are central to these conflicts both to their making and their resolution. Moreover, as my discussion in this paper aimed to demonstrate, a full understanding of the identity politics of 'new wars', their logic and mechanisms, requires the acknowledgement of their gender dimensions as critical for the establishment of new ethnicised forms of statehood. If the 'gendered workings of power' underlying the logic of 'new wars' are left uncovered and unrecognised at the outset and in a fundamental way, interventions and assistance addressing this type of conflict will remain partial and unable to bring peace based on democratic values and the processes of inclusion. Furthermore, only timely and structural changes in the planning of interventions can address gender

relations of power that shape and are shaped by pre-conflict, conflict and post-conflict situations. Without changes in approaches to intervention and assistance, *post festum* efforts to address gender dimensions of conflict, such as the ones we are witnessing in many troubled regions of the world today, will remain initiatives limited to assisting so-called 'vulnerable groups' associated with either gender specific victimisation or groups with 'special needs'. The fundamental aim should be, however, to recognise both men and women as gender actors who engage in and are affected by this type of war in different ways. As gender actors, indeed (some) women in specific historic, social and political locations are going to be among those very important potential sources of alternative political mobilisation leading to conflict resolution. This potential has to be acknowledged in a fundamental way if it is to be transformed into a powerful force for peace.

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Notes:

[1] This paper is based upon my earlier research bout gender aspects of the conflict in the former Yugoslavia. Some findings of this study are published in a book entitled *Linking Arms: Women and war in post-Yugoslav states* (Korac, 1998a). See also Korac (2003). Most of the primary data on which this paper is based refer to the work and experience of women's groups in Serbia. The discussion and analysis, however, refer also to the work and experience of similar groups in Croatia and Bosnia, which is primarily based on secondary data.

[2] For detailed information about the STAR project see Gagnon (2002).

[3] Examples of different forms of material/practical and symbolic support they received from feminists internationally are numerous (for more on this issue see Korac, 1998a: 47-50). I mention here only the Women in Black International Peace Prize awarded jointly to: Women's Lobby Zagreb, Centre for Women War Victims (Croatia), Women in Black Belgrade (Serbia), and Medica Zenica (Bosnia-Herzegovina), in 1994 (Boric and Mladineo-Desnica, 1996).

[4] For more on the history of feminism before the conflict see Benderly (1997); Korac (1998a); Papic (1995).

[5] For more on how women were losing out in economic, social and public life see Milic (1996) and Korac (1998a).

[6] 'Women in Black against War' started in Israel/Palestine in the late 1980s, and quickly spread to Italy, and on to Belgrade, London, Toronto and other centres. By the late 1990s, it had become a worldwide network of anti-war and anti-nationalist women.

[7] For more on the issue of internal tensions and divisions see Benderly (1997) and Korac (1998a: 35-46).

[8] Data demonstrate that over 70 per cent of refugees in some regions were women and children (USCR 1993)

[9] For more on ethnic composition of the former Yugoslavia see Woodward (1995: 33-35).

[10] During this period, there was only one, unsuccessful attempt to form Women's Party in Serbia, before the first, multi-party elections in 1990.

[11] For more on these events see Tax (1993: 624-625).

[12] Mixed marriages were one of the significant demographic and cultural characteristics of the Yugoslav society. Approximately two million people from the region, totalling approximately 22 million before the war(s), are either in mixed marriages or children of ethnically mixed families. For more on this see Korac (1998b: 162-163) and Kaldor (1999).