

Title Slide

Hello everyone! My name is Rebecca Jacobi and the title of my presentation is “Challenging Bosnian Women’s Identity as Rape Victims: The Fetishization of Sexual Violence in Post-Conflict Discourse”

So, essentially what I am going to be talking about today is how the preoccupation with the rape of Bosnian women during the Bosnian War has reinforced the identification of “The Rape Victim” that frames Bosnian females as uniquely vulnerable and “rapable.”

While rape in war is by no means a new occurrence, the international and domestic attention received by this particular aspect of the Bosnian war is extraordinary compared to other genocides and civil wars such as Syria and Rwanda.

Roadmap

Thesis: I argue that while increased scholarly discourse and media representation of rape during the Bosnian war is important, the issue lies in the fact that these representations have been constructed largely without the voices of Bosnian women themselves, or in ways that downplay their agency, leaving intact an Orientalized image of silenced, shamed, and powerless victims of patriarchal, Muslim culture.

Roadmap:

First, I am going to be providing a brief overview of the sexual violence that occurred in Bosnia during the war. Then, I am going to discuss the fetishization of sexual violence and what it actually means to fetishize sexual violence. Then, I am going to talk about the women as victims discourse, specifically with a critique of scholarly discourse and the media. I will then discuss the deviation from victimhood discourse, specifically women as perpetrators. Then I will conclude.

Sexual Violence and Bosnia

The international attention surrounding the widespread and systematic reports of rape in Bosnia led to rape being prosecuted as a war crime before the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) which was a landmark case.

It is estimated that between 20,000-50,000 women were raped during the course of the Bosnian war.

However, the accounts of rape come largely from the victims themselves through interviews with scholars and the media as there has been a stark lack of reporting by the Bosnian government.

According to researcher Nikolic-Ristanovic, “military sources rarely provide reliable information on what they euphemistically call a ‘collateral damage’... thus we do not have reliable statistics on rape and sexual abuse in this war.”

This quote is from Katya Stevens, a former volunteer in a Bosnian refugee camp during the war, who I had the opportunity to interview this December.

She believes that while sexual violence against women served “a duality of purposes, at the root it is men exhibiting their power over women in a way to demoralize men on the opposing side. Women get caught in the middle of male power struggles.”

Fetishization of Sexual Violence

Professor Sara Meger offers an in-depth analysis into what it means to fetishize sexual violence and the three steps that occur in the process.

At the end, this process takes the taboo subject and transforms it into something that becomes a shared experience between victim and the public. I used these three steps as a way to organize my research, using these three steps as a point of analysis and the Bosnian war as a case study.

First, “sexual violence is decontextualized from local/global power relations and from the continuum of violence and homogenized as a discrete.”

This decontextualizing can best be seen with the fact that wartime sexual violence is viewed as exceptional and more egregious than other forms of gendered violence.

Second, it is “objectified as an abject ‘thing’ in media, advocacy, policy, and scholarly discourses, affecting international security agendas and practices.”

Third, the “globalized objectification affects local security actors, perpetrators, and victims, often in unanticipated ways.”

Thus, sexual violence has become a key commodity in the competition among perpetrators, as well as victims, communities, states, NGOs, and academics, for status recognition and resources.

While the fetishization of sexual violence is not something that scholars and journalists outwardly admit to participating in, it is evident in the amount of time and attention that has been given to reporting exclusively on the rapes of Bosnian women.

As historian Ruth Seifert noted, the international community has long ignored the rapes in Bosnia “for only when sexual violence is perceived as a political event, when it is made public and analyzed, can its causes and contexts be probed and strategies to overcome it be considered.”

Essentially, what has happened with Bosnia is that the rapes become commodified, in that these actors mentioned before use them as ways to stand out against their peers

Critiques of Scholars

When describing the experiences of Bosnian women during the war in scholarly work, terms such as “suffering” and “inferior” are too often used to suggest that the women were helpless.

When I first went through my readings, I highlighted these negative verbs and adjectives when they were used in conjunction with Bosnian women, and I averaged around 70 words per book.

These words incite very strong emotions in readers and elicit images of downtrodden women, and some feminist scholars unfortunately contribute to these tropes in their works on Bosnia.

For example, scholar Konstantinovicic noted that during the war, “highly educated women refugees are in particularly bad shape. They are completely confused and cannot find themselves.”

This statement makes it appear as if educated women suddenly lost their intellect and were so overcome with stress that they were unable to do anything but wait for something to happen to them.

Also, a majority of scholarly work utilizes interviews with victims as primary evidence

Although the interviews are coming from the Bosnian women themselves, scholars ask questions only in reference to violence.

In the interviews I read, if the women themselves were not affected directly by sexual violence, they were asked if they had any anecdotes of family members or friends who had been assaulted.

By doing this, scholars are unintentionally representing female survivors of the war through a lens of victimhood in which the only stories worth telling are those in which sexual trauma is present.

Scholars have also accused other scholars of continuing the victimhood trope and silencing certain women whose stories are not sensationalized enough to be interesting for their studies.

Elissa Helms, who is the author of the book “Innocence and Victimhood” has criticized other scholars for “only occasionally naming the women” and for not having their interviews published for fact-checking reasons.

Instead, these “feminists’ appeared to speak for them, even though some of the Bosnian women rejected their feminist ideas.”

When this happens, these scholars are silencing the voices of Bosnian Muslim women and picking and choosing which snippets of the hours long interviews that they deem sufficient for their purposes.

It is up to the historians and scholars to tell an intersectional truth about Bosnian women; one that respects the past and does not sensationalize it.

Since the end of the Bosnian war, there has been an influx of scholarly research conducted on Bosnian women and their trauma, particularly by feminist scholars who seek to “tell their story.”

However, there is a tension that exists between presenting memory and mourning and reinforcing the gendered stereotypes that were very much at the crux of the logic that rationalized the sexual violence in the warfare.

Critiques of the Media

Various criticisms have been leveled against the way that journalists and media outlets reported on the sexual violence in the Bosnian war.

According to scholar Nikolic- Ristanovic, the “media’s appetite for raped women sobbing out their tales of sexual violation has resulted in a new kind of violence against them and new suffering for these women.”

For example, Katya Stevens recalled foreign journalists’ way of approaching women in refugee camps, that were usually followed by the question “Anyone here who speaks English?” means that there is a clear discord between wanting to hear a woman’s story in her own language and vocabulary and wanting to hear it sensationalized by someone who knows what the journalists want to hear.

Stevens also recalls multiple reporters and journalists coming to the refugee camps and “asking to speak with any woman who was sexually assaulted,” and this aggressive and invasive reporting style leads to dramatized stories in which the woman’s trauma is used as click-bait for foreign readers.

Zejevic, a Bosnian woman interviewed by Helms, added that she blamed local media as much as foreign outlets for the perpetuation of the image of oppressed rural women: “All they show are poor Bosnian women with nothing but suffering in this patriarchal world of the village.”

Because the everyday person is more likely to get their information about what is going on in the world through a news article or television news, it is very important to be aware of the types of images that is being produced by media outlets.

Additionally, reports on wartime sexual violence seem to compete for ever more graphic and outrageous stories of the brutality of sexual violence, focusing on the scale of the violence (for example, how many hundreds, thousands, or hundreds of thousands of women have been affected).

There are clearly delineated “good guys” and “bad guys,” paints the war as black and white.

Though highlighting the scale of sexual violence brought the issue to the attention of governments in the first place, the intent of these reports has been to present sufficiently brutal and descriptive stories of the violence without considering its underlying causes.

Women in Conflict Discourse

Women are a heterogeneous group of social actors, who on the one hand are determined to take on certain positions and roles in conflicts, but on the other hand deliberately choose to fulfil certain roles based on their strategies and goals.

Women must thus not only be seen as passive victims of armed conflict, but also as capable actors as well.

Historical accounts show that women have been a part of warfare since the beginning, and the Bosnian war is no different.

While the exact numbers are not known, the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Bosniak-led wartime force “had 5,360 women in its ranks; some were engaged in logistics and some were fighters.”

However, because these women are not written about, their lives have been erased from the collective narrative and understanding of this conflict.

When scholars seek to understand female perpetrators in times of intense and bloody conflict, the questions that frequently come up are “does women’s violence expose feminism’s weaknesses? Or does it provide another area for the application of feminism’s strengths?”

Because violent women go against strict gender norms, historians, scholars, and journalists alike have been hesitant to accurately and adequately report on these women.

Yet, men who engage in wartime violence get reported on daily in multiple mediums of print with no hesitation.

An underlying factor for why scholars sometimes have a difficult time grappling with the idea that women can be rapists and murders is that women are still viewed as the “purer” and more virtuous gender.

In actuality, women are violent people, who, like all people, violent or not, live in a gendered world.

Women as Perpetrators of Wartime Violence

Although the ICTY has indicted a fairly large number of alleged war criminals in connection with the Bosnian war, women are rarely mentioned as having played a political or military role

However, there are multiple case studies of women who have been tried for war crimes during the Bosnian War.

Bilijana Plavsic, a former member of the presidency of the Republika Srpska (serp-ska), has been described as “renowned throughout the 1990s as an uncompromising apologist for ethnic cleansing.”

As a former Dean of Natural Sciences and Mathematics at the University of Sarajevo, Plavsic “used her knowledge of biology in order to support ethnic extermination arguments”

Plavsic is a prime example of a woman who committed terrible and cruel acts against humanity and yet still was covered in the media through a feminine lens.

This picture of Plavsic was used in many Western news articles that discussed Plavsic’s trial. In this photo, she looks akin to a grandmother, and the soft purple outfit feminizes and humanizes her. The cross necklace is also very prominent, and this picture is a stark juxtaposition from images used of male perpetrators of violence.

Even though Plavsic's toughness is often emphasized in media coverage of her behavior during the Bosnian war—for example, most articles point out her nickname of “iron lady”—her femininity is always present in accounts of her personal and political choices.

Most of the articles about Plavsic call her ‘Mrs Plavsic,’ despite the fact that the titles of both ‘Doctor’ and ‘President’ would be used if Plavsic was a man, former president and possessor of an academic doctorate.

Thus, even when the world acknowledges that a woman is a violent person capable of acts akin to a man, the media still feminizes her and does not put her on par with men.

It is worth noting that Plavsic was the only woman to be indicted and convicted by the ICTY.

There are several examples of women being convicted by domestic courts

Maja Bjelos, associate researcher at the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, explained that “most women did not have command and political responsibility.”

Because “they were mostly serving as ‘boots on the ground’ and in special units, providing logistical support, et cetera,” they had a better chance of escaping undetected from prosecution.

One of the few women to have been tried for war crimes was Azra Basic, a former member of the Croatian Defense Council.

Basic was sentenced to fourteen years in prison for crimes against Serb civilians in Derventa in 1992.

During the war, Basic had nicknames such as ‘Azra Two Knives’ and ‘Bloody Azra’ bestowed for the cruelty of her crimes.

Survivors from camps under her command testify that Basic made them lick blood from the military boots of a detainee who had been killed, eat Yugoslav banknotes, kiss the Croatian flag and crawl over glass on the floor.

According to one testimony, she also engraved a cross and the letter ‘S’ on [prisoners’] backs and foreheads with knives, put salt on their wounds.

Cases such as Basic's clearly show that women are more than capable of committing unspeakable brutality during wartime.

However, these women are viewed and treated as an anomaly

Purpose is not to say “look woman can be evil too” but to show how women took on a variety of roles and had positions of power

Conclusion

Overall, the main takeaway from this presentation is not that scholars should not be discussing sexual violence in Bosnia or that the media should not report on it. On the contrary, sexual violence is rarely reported or researched in times of war, which is what makes the Bosnian case study so interesting.

I believe that the issue with how sexual violence during the Bosnian war has been framed is that it has been done largely without the voice of Bosnian women themselves. Instead, in the name of seeking to “tell their story,” scholars and journalists have presented a narrative that focuses solely on the sexual violence faced by Bosnian women while ignoring the other roles that they played.

There are problems with celebratory accounts of women as victims in a society emerging from armed conflict.

The main takeaway is that only discussing Bosnian women in terms of their sexual assault victimizes and enhances the invisibility of women in post-conflict discussions