

**Elissa Helms.** *Innocence and Victimhood: Gender, Nation, and Women's Activism in Postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013. 348 pp. \$26.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-299-29554-7.



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**Commissioned by** Sarah Mak (Bowdoin College)

Nuanced, comprehensive, analytical, theoretical, challenging, and carefully constructed—this book takes on nationalism, feminism, gender, ethnicity, and faith as the author addresses the history of the recent Bosnia-Herzegovina war and its varied impacts on a range of social actors. This complex interaction is illustrated specifically with the politics of victimhood and the gendering of nationalism.

Elissa Helms's work is based on fifteen years of ethnographic research, part of which was her doctoral work. Methods included not only the usual interviews with major actors and observation of groups, but information gained from traveling in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Her goal was to examine the relationship between victimhood and nationalism through the lens of gender. She argues “that in postwar BiH affirmative essentialisms placed limits on the range of acceptable and possible spheres of engagement for women by failing to fundamentally challenge conservative gender norms and stereotypes,” especially

those that relate to motherhood and innocence (p. 8).

Most of us can remember the images of this war, especially of women, particularly those who had been raped, who were presented as passive victims and women's bodies as conquered ethnic territories, invoking moral righteousness. Helms contends that these images are deliberately strategic, political, cultural (specifically, orientalism in non-Western societies), and patriarchal. These images, Helms argue, deny women's agency and represent a deliberate misuse of suffering. This she calls the logic of competing victimhoods.

After the war there were groups who framed its events to their own ends and shaped narratives in ways that overlooked the complexities both of the war and its aftermath. This work particularly focuses on women's NGOs as they dealt with feminism, nationalism, collapse, reconciliation, and recovery of the nation(s). Feminism in many cases was strategically avoided, and the newly powerful nationalisms specifically por-

trayed women as passive victims, used to reinforce nationhood, which was often constructed without the voices of Bosnian women. This framing exposed nationalist violence and called attention to women's suffering, "if only certain women and certain nationalisms" (p. 44). These fluctuated depending on politics, public/private expression, and the audience being addressed. This was particularly used to associate victimhood with innocence.

Helms calls attention to the fact that the story is far from that simple. There were many differences between urban and rural areas, and among elites and others. International women's NGOs in particular claimed the story, often ignoring the reality of patriarchy and religious tenets, and the total lack of power of many women, especially those in isolated areas. She points out that there were many forms of gendered suffering, including gender violence against men, and male prisoners being forced to sexually abuse other male prisoners. Not all rapes were considered as ethnic violence (thus defining what was and was not a "real" rape). Essentialist narratives, particularly those of Western eyes and those of orientalism, represented women as passive victims, and this framing was used to clean up the "whore of politics."

Women's NGOs, though striving for good works, often participated in this framing as well. Most of the advocacy was on behalf of the victims, not by them. The rapes were constructed as a crime against the nation. Women were represented as martyrs whose honor had been lost. This also accentuated the gendering of politics and women's differences from men (all of whom were portrayed as viral and strong), and reinforced patriarchal assumptions as well as ethnic ones.

This story is complex, with many interrelated variables (and some torn apart). Helms has done a superb job of addressing, unpacking, and questioning the discourses of nationalism, identity, gender, and religion.

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