Media reports on the Balkan wars brought for the first time news of widespread rape-practices to the public's attention. By disentangling the heady mix of nationalism, chauvinism, ethnicity and gender construction, Vesna Kesic asks however, how far we really have advanced in our attitudes towards rape and institutionalised violence against women.

Two images have been haunting me since the wars began in the former Yugoslavia in 1991. The first one is of men’s heads (or upper bodies) at round tables, leaning over maps. That image first appeared in the local and international press in 1990 and 1991, during the now almost forgotten series of meetings of the six newly elected presidents of Yugoslav republics who were unsuccessfully trying to find a political solution for the country’s political crisis. (The media called them “the travelling circus.”) Men’s heads also came together at the “secret” meetings between presidents Franjo Tudjman and Slobodan Milosevic, during the wars in Croatia (1991-1992) and in Bosnia (1992-1995), and at the meetings held in Washington in 1994 and in Dayton in 1995. During the war in Kosova, Serbian and KLA leaders did not meet officially, though there was that strange episode of Ibrahim Rugova’s “visit” to Belgrade. But one can just as easily imagine Serbian and Albanian political leaders and war commanders bending over maps and making decisions about borders. International leaders or NATO commanders discussing war affairs can easily be imagined in this pose. Men decided on national boundaries, on territorial borders; they shape the past and future of nations, and they make decisions that affect human lives.

The second image is of women. women refugees carrying the remnants of their belongings in plastic bags; women dragging frightened and exhausted children; weeping women, angry women, women impregnated by rape, traumatized women. Whatever happens, women are depicted as bodies. The few women in combat units, or even one participating at the decision making level, make no difference. Amid all the vicious circles of violence in these wars, this remains constant: Women are bodies in pain, regardless of which ethnic group is at some point recognized as aggressor and which as victim. Croatian women, Bosnian women, Muslim women, Serbian women, Albanian women ... and this is not only in the wars of the former Yugoslavia.
Wars are gendered activities, right from the beginning. Jacklyn Cock states that war both “uses and maintains the ideological construction of gender in the definitions of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’.” [1] Men, she stresses, go to war to protect and defend national values, territories, and borders, and to protect and defend “their” women and children. Women are cast in the role of “the protected” and “the defended,” or, in the words of another woman from another part of the world, the German filmmaker Helke Sander, women are “the liberated” and men are “the liberators.” [2] Liberators themselves, like the Allied soldiers in Germany in 1945, often abuse women. The authors documented that within a month of the Allies entering Berlin, 70 percent of German women were raped. The majority of perpetrators were from the ranks of the Red Army, but the U.S., French, and British soldiers raped as well.

At the beginning of the wars in the former Yugoslavia, Croatian feminists who assisted displaced and refugee women from Bosnia, Herzegovina, and Croatia, regardless of their ethnicity or nationality, wrote: “Women did not participate in making (irresponsible) political or military decisions, and yet war and its misery more and more acquire women’s and children’s faces. [3] We were positioning the sexual violence of war within the larger matrix of patriarchal power relations and patriarchal violence against women. Women’s groups in Belgrade and Zagreb noticed that domestic violence increased during the war and acquired new forms. Disillusioned men and frustrated soldiers attacked or threatened their partners with guns, rifles, bombs, or military knives. Feminists pointed out the congruity between ethnic chauvinism and sexism: In both, differences are exaggerated, “Others” are perceived stereotypically, as of minor human value and as a threat to the nation and masculinity; domination and hierarchy are perceived as natural and worth the infliction of cruelty and violence.

For taking this position, some feminists and women’s groups were immediately denounced as “traitors of the nation,” they were met with rage, exposed to defamation, even accused of betraying women. Rape as a weapon of war was entirely positioned within the category of ethnicity as a part of “genocidal” strategy, and women were turned into metaphors: “A raped Croat or Bosniak woman stands for a raped Croatia or Bosnia.” At the same time, the rapists’ existence as “men” and military figures was obliterated by their ethnicity. Serbs (Croats, Muslims) rape, not Serbian (Croatian, Muslim) militaries and paramilitaries. On one hand, to be a woman in a war zone meant one stood a good chance of being raped. On the other, to be a feminist within the nation provoked political, and sometimes even bodily, threat. I must admit that I was surprised and frightened by such responses, not so much for my life (everybody was in danger), but because I had not expected such heated animosity would be aroused by the feminist attempt to analytically disentangle gender from ethnicity.

In the early 1990s, political contention and division emerged among different Croatian and Bosnian women’s groups over the explanation of the mass rapes in Bosnia. Should we emphasize the “gender” or the “ethnic” dimension of this compound violence against
women? The debate took place within a political context of induced nationalism and ethnic hatred. International feminist groups and scholars soon picked up the dispute. As Robert M. Hayden recently remarked: “Within the former Yugoslavia, long-established feminists tended to maintain gender as central to their analyses, seeing rape as a common weapon of war, directed mainly against women.” Hayden, though, simplifies when he categorizes the gender approach of local feminists as a “global feminist view.” This understanding probably results from the fact that the texts and statements of local feminists were rarely translated or considered in their original forms.

In the majority of cases, these texts entered Western scholarly discussion through second-hand or partial references. [5]

In my opinion, local feminist analyses of Yugoslavia’s collapse and its wars of succession were rather complex and well conceptualized. But Hayden is right when he states that the “gender approach” was contrasted with a “genocidal rape” approach that saw the rapes of Muslim women in Bosnia as a unique historical phenomenon, “a rape warfare” conducted by Serbs against Muslim and Croatian women in which rape was a unique form not only of war, but of genocide. That view was first developed and used by local groups, as Hayden rightly points out by quoting Dubravka Zarkov, in accordance with the nationalist governments and the controlled media in which reports of sexual violence, whether true or not, became common propaganda. [6] That view was appropriated and followed by some, but far from all, Western feminist scholars. [7]

The U.S. law professor Catherine MacKinnon became particularly embroiled in the political debates among locals, taking the actively nationalist side. [8] The locally prevailing “genocidal” concept, whose theory and politics MacKinnon supported internationally, still resonates in local discussions. There is an ongoing debate over the “real character” of mass rapes in Bosnia, in which a Croatian journalist, informed by MacKinnon’s main local partners in Croatia, upholds the concept of “genocide by procreation” as the only acceptable understanding of these “unique crimes.” [9] According to this interpretation, Serbs raped with the intention of impregnating Bosnian and Croatian women and forcing them to give birth to little chetniks. [10] Ultimately, their intention was to destroy the Muslim and Croatian ethnic groups in Bosnia. My response to this notion was that the concept of “genocide by procreation” appropriates and reinforces racist ideology, because it accepts that the nation or ethnic group can be destroyed by procreation, that is, by its enlargement through the dilution of “ethnic blood.”

During the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia and the exodus of Kosovo Albanians to neighboring countries, similar messages started to reach the world: Serbs rape to destroy the spirit of the brave soldiers of the Kosova Liberation Army. [11] Women’s bodies, individually tortured and in pain, are transformed into national symbols and presented as symbolic battlefields that embody national values.

Feminist discourse contests the fusing of gender and ethnicity, which, in nationalist rhetoric, works as a homogenizing and hegemonic practice. To Judith Butler’s insight that sex is always already gendered, [12] I want to add that when women become victims in nationalist wars, gender becomes ethnicized, or subordinated to ethnicity, even before it appears as an “autonomous” discourse. Feminist discourse on gender deconstructs the
simple divisions of “aggressors and victims,” “our rights” and “their wrongs,” the
differences constructed as insurmountable, and all the other reductions needed for
waging wars. My hypothesis is that militarized patriarchy and ethnic nationalism
intersected and became enmeshed at the roots of the violence in these wars. This mix of
ethnic and gender representations, symbols, and images has generated extremely violent
practices, particularly in terms of the sexualization of war violence. Men of all ethnicities,
when turned into soldiers and trained in patriarchal institutions to “build” or “defend”
the nation, are prone to rape. [13] The question to answer is: How does sexual desire get
invested into constructions of ethnicity and nationalism? How does it become
“collectivized” and transformed into war violence?

The Indian anthropologist Veena Das, who has studied violence connected to communal
riots between ethnic and religious groups since the Partition of India, claims that the
imagining of nationalist projects already includes the appropriation of women’s bodies as
objects “on which the desire for nationalism could be brutally inscribed and a memory for
the future made.” [14] The magnification of the image of the nation through icons,
rhetoric, and mythology draws its energy from the image of a magnified, patriarchally
constructed, masculine sexuality. When the distinction between “magnified images” of
the nation and of women dissolve, and “the nation becomes a magnified image of the
beloved worshipped in the abstract, it becomes possible to inflict all kinds of violence on
all those who resist this or who create counter images, equally enlarged.” [15] In brief,
the desire for nationalism easily can be metamorphosed into sexual violence, women’s
bodies objectified and abstracted, and their pain and suffering disavowed. To conclude
with Das’s possibly exaggerated but still meaningful insight into the narratives that recall
both Indian and Pakistani violence against women during the Partition of India: “if men
emerged from colonial subjugation as autonomous citizens of an independent nation, then
they emerged simultaneously as monsters.” [16]

At this point it might be useful to recall the history of the former Yugoslavia and the events that demonstrate the gendered dimension in the intensification of ethnic conflict and the incitement to violence. Among all the “beginnings” or “triggers” said to have touched off the wars that have now lasted for a decade, one has become obscured with time. Sometime during the years 1986 and 1987, at a time when relations between “Serbia proper” and Kosova (then still a Yugoslav province with political autonomy within Serbia) were already disturbed but not yet violent, a moral panic took hold in Belgrade about “widespread” Albanian rapes of Serbian women, including Orthodox nuns. The alleged rapes were explained as an attempt by Albanians to terrorize the Serbs and drive them out of Kosova. The emphasis was immediately placed on the ethnic dimension of these rapes; facts were neglected and numbers exaggerated. Although it was rather soon proved that Kosova police had registered only one rape of a Serb woman by an Albanian man, and subsequent research showed that rapes in Kosova basically did not cross ethnic lines, the allegations of inter-ethnic rape generated fear and helped form the basis of the future culture of terror. To make matters worse, two Albanian leaders from the “old communist guard” stated publicly that it was only natural that young Albanians obtain some pleasure from Serbian women. These things happen, the leaders claimed, because of the well-known chastity of Albanian women and the fact that Albanian culture forbids sex outside of marriage. Feminists from Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia already at that point demanded that the crime of rape, as the gravest violence against women, be kept separate from ethnic quarrels. But, of course, nobody listened.
When nationalist politicians came to power throughout Yugoslavia in the 1990 elections, women’s bodies became everybody’s business. They were the objects of demands, projections, and restrictions. After the elections, women almost disappeared from national parliaments, where before they had made up between 16 and 30 percent of deputies; many women’s rights, including the right to legal and safe abortion, were threatened. With the onset of war, women were used in nationalist propaganda. Eventually, all of the warring factions committed rapes and other kinds of sexual violence – although not all at the same rate, which certainly makes a difference, politically and legally. Women were tortured and abused in many different ways in war zones: They were systematically raped, gang raped, held as slaves, bodily searched by male militias at check points, exploited by prostitution, or forced into prostitution because it was the only way to survive. Even United Nations soldiers in Bosnia visited the war brothels. The Bosnian Islamic Community pronounced raped women “shehids,” or holy warriors. The Serbian Orthodox and Croatian Catholic churches appealed to women to give birth to more nationals. Indeed, the churches treated women as demographic reservists. Both Orthodox and Catholic churches issued dramatic warnings that the national birth rates of their respective nations were among the lowest in the world, and that they faced the threat of becoming “minorities in their own countries.” The states strongly supported this stance.

In the patriarchal construction of gender, women’s primary role is the biological reproduction of family and nation. In its ideological definition of femininity, a woman’s chastity, her and her family’s honor, are the highest “values.” And her chastity becomes everybody’s business – the defenders’ and the aggressors’. It is only seemingly a paradox that exactly those values – culture, tradition, honor, female chastity – that nationalist warriors defend against “modernity’s nihilism and globalization” are the values that they readily attack and destroy when they belong to others, be they of different gender or ethnicity.

The tragic consequences for women in such militarized, patriarchal cultures extend beyond the battlefield. During the war in Kosova, an article in The New York Times [17] reported Kosova women’s shame, their fear of rejection and expulsion should their experience of rape become known. The meaning of patriarchal masculinity and family honor was articulated in one Albanian man’s statement that he would divorce his young wife even if they had twenty children. Some women reported that they would rather die than be raped. [18] Although nothing as bad as the honor killings” [19] of the Middle East was reported from Bosnia or Kosova, articles like this one painted a traditional picture of an “Oriental” society, where family’s and men’s honor is the only force that moves events. The reporter may have had the best intentions to protect the women, but the real political background and the power relations at work are lost in such representations, which depict events that are not necessarily widespread and not always true.

While working with Bosnian refugees in Zagreb, we have witnessed cases where women needed a long time to come out with “what else” happened to them during the war, because the trauma of rape is usually very deep and the surroundings are often perceived as unsupportive and threatening. But I also know of cases where women talked self-confidently, where their husbands and children knew what had happened, showed their deepest sorrow and compassion, and did everything to help the women overcome the consequences of their experiences.
In any case, almost everybody rightly concludes that victims of sexual war violence suffer twice – first, the torture of rape, and second, the attitudes of a patriarchal community. I claim that there is also a third dimension that has to do with how these rapes are represented and recognized. In the former Yugoslavia (and probably elsewhere), as soon as the rapes were reported, contestations about their character, circumstances, and numbers began. At the beginning, the state, or some political group representing the state, characterized rapes as “genocidal” and exaggerated the numbers. [20]

Data on raped women should be centralized and adequately processed only when “all that” [meaning the wars] is over and it must be done under the supervision of international experts. Until then, every unchecked use of numbers and data we shall consider as manipulation hurting the women (Zbornik, 1994, 121).

For example: In 1992, the Croatian side claimed ten thousand rape victims in Croatia. The Bosnia and Herzegovina State Commission for collecting data on war crimes released the number of fifty to sixty thousand victims by the end of 1992; but some “patriotic” women’s groups set the number at 120,000 raped women in Bosnia and Croatia. All of those “facts” were met with eagerness “to help” and sometimes even further exaggeration from the different actors abroad. Catherine MacKinnon herself helped disseminate these exaggerated figures and ethnically informed explanations. [21]

There is a popular saying that the news from the Balkans has to be checked not twice, but three times. The notion of stereotyped “cultural difference” has been created and scaled through this seemingly reasonable appeal for objectivity and reliability. But how is it that so many intellectuals from the West, trained in the tradition and spirit of “objectivity” and “reasonability,” have fed into this “Balkan irrationality”? [22]

The next phase in gendering the war propaganda was the “counterattack” from the side that was allegedly wrongly accused, which was in this case the Serbs. When the first “realistic” data started to appear, Serbian nationalists and their international supporters started to defend a “Serb cause.” Pointing at the exaggerated numbers, they protested that nothing “really serious” had happened. Only “a couple thousand” women were raped. “The international plot against Serbia” was to be blamed for everything. Often during this third use of “women’s bodies as battlefields,” as Susan Brownmiller would put it, I was glad that the women refugees would be the last to learn about these “wars of interpretation,” which produced yet another dimension of humiliation for the women – from exaggeration to denial.

What is here contested, dispensed with, and instrumentalized for nationalistic, political, military, or other, sometimes “merely professional” (journalistic), purposes are women’s bodies in pain. Because war rapes and other forms of violence against women were so tightly enmeshed within the categories of nation and ethnicity, they could be recognized as a war strategy, subjected to indictments as war crimes, and juridically sanctioned – in short, taken seriously – only if they occurred in large numbers (whatever “large” means), if they were “systematic” and “followed a pattern,” and if they supported the claim of genocide or ethnic cleansing. Even then, if perpetrators were brought to court, it was left to women to prove, argue, and corroborate their crimes.

The media is an important purveyor of representations of war crimes against women. It has been stressed many times that due to the growing number of women reporters and to
the women’s human rights movement, the media has played a crucial role in assuring that war rapes in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda were the first in history not to pass unnoticed or get pushed under the carpet. Nonetheless, it should not be forgotten that the media has its own rationale. Whether journalists are motivated by commercial interests, by the desire to break a good story, or by empathy and a concern for justice can be debated. [23] Regardless, Western media reflect (or create) a particular perception of these “distant events” that happen in the non-West (even if it is a part of Europe that is recognized as both “near,” and thus like “us,” and “far,” and thus not like “us.”) Both of the New York Times articles mentioned earlier – on the doom of women in the Arab world, and on raped Kosova women – present the situation of women in these parts of the world as so exceptional, so different, so exotic that nothing like it can be imagined in the West. “Exceptionalizing” is a way of creating cultural differences, which we still don’t know how to approach; whether to respect and nourish them, because they represent diversity, or to contest and confront them, because they may violate universal human rights.

Sometimes I wonder – without attempting to minimize the harshness of some women’s situations, or to deny that sometimes social, legal, and cultural differences can threaten life – what the so-called West is so shocked about. Is the situation for women in Kosova or Bosnia really so different from the one in the United States or in Western Europe? For how many years has a raped woman been able easily to step into a U.S. or Western European court and testify that she was raped without feeling threatened or ashamed? Without fearing that she will be asked how short her skirt was, or why she was out on the streets so late? And without fear that her husband, boyfriend, even family will reject her, especially if her background is not a middle-class white one, but, let’s say, a Puerto Rican one. It is commonly understood among feminists that Susan’s Brownmiller’s Against Our Will and a strong feminist movement articulated around women’s human rights have made the difference in the perception of rape, its social characterization, and the legal procedures available to combat it. [24] But this means that the changes were achieved in a period of a mere twenty years or less, and the question still remains: How many women have benefited from them?

We have barely begun to uncover the deep origins of male violence against women in the home, on the streets, in offices, in the media, and especially in wartime. Feminist theory has certainly contributed to understanding these origins and to the search for ways to confront them. German historian Mechthild Rumpf argues that the state monopoly on violence, as defined by Weber and other classical theorists of the state, was a myth all along, insofar as it pertains to family and gender relations. [25] Through patriarchal marriage and family structures – which have been regarded as civilizing since the Enlightenment – violence remains structurally anchored in society. “In (state) monopolized violence, the everyday violence of patriarchy went on,” states Rumpf. Similarly, Carole Pateman argues that the sexual contract between men and women, which she believes precedes the patriarchal contract envisioned by Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, gives to the “fraternity” of men rights to enjoy equal sexual access to women and sex. [26] Thus, not all violence comes from the state. Neither, however, does it all come from culture. The violence inflicted by state actors – or by those whose political project is to “imagine” the state or the nation – combined with social-patriarchal violence, should be held responsible for the gender-specific forms of war violence, even in the “Wild Balkans.”
Women still have a long way to go to achieve full citizenship and equality. In the case of the former Yugoslavia, I can entirely embrace Jacklyn Cock’s suggestion from South Africa: Changing gender relations is one of the prerequisites for reducing the risk of war in the future. [27] But “gender relations” are not a simple derivation from “cultural specificities.” They are the fundamental power relation in most existing and historical societies, and this relation is tightly connected to and intertwined with all other power and social relations, including political and economic ones. A “Western approach,” be it by “helpful sisters” or the “well-meaning” media, is not helpful if it fails to address the issue with the same political and theoretical seriousness with which violence against women was discussed in the West itself – nor if it keeps on emphasizing “cultural differences.”

Footnotes


5. Several reprinted documents in Zbornik (see supra note 4) underline that our primary request was that the data on abused women not be interpreted, and thereby opened to nationalist misuse, before "everything ends" and the full picture of what was happening on all sides made available. We stressed the need to pursue research on the concrete circumstances of these events.


10. Chetnik is a historic term for Serbian paramilitaries, dating from the time of the Ottomans, and used for the official units of Draia Mihailovic during the Second World War.


13. This does not, of course, mean that all soldiers rape. Sexual abuses are predominantly inflicted on ethnically or religiously different others. But they also occur in civil wars among members of the same ethnicity, and they are performed by freedom fighters or fundamentalists of all kinds (for example, in Algeria), and within gender-mixed military units (cases of rape among U.S. troops during the Gulf War).


15. Ibid., 74.

16. Ibid., 86.

17. Ibid., supra note 12.

18. This is not a common finding in "civilian" rape cases. Women usually express joy that they survived, no matter how grave the physical and psychological consequences might be, and even if their lives remain miserable for a long time.


20. Some of these numbers were released as official; some were released by officials in unofficial circumstances, for example, at meetings or to the media; some were from unofficial sources, like women's or other groups actually working closely with the
governments, or guided by patriotic or nationalistic motives. However, the confusion over numbers was huge. The Center for Women War Victims, a feminist group in Zagreb that declared its independence and non-nationalistic politics, stated in its founding act, "The Letter of Intentions," in November 1992.


22. The European Community's Investigative Mission, established in 1992, reported in February 1993 an approximation of twenty thousand raped women. The United Nations Commission of Experts collected over 4,500 reports of rape and sexual assault, not all of them equally documented. It rendered an approximation - achieved by extrapolation - of well over twelve thousand victims of rape and sexual assault. M. Cherif Bassiouni, former chairman of the commission, states that the commission's findings lend credibility of the estimate of twenty thousand cases of rape and sexual violence" that was released by the European Community in 1993. The UN Commission also estimated that "the large majority of reported victims were Bosnian Muslims. The second largest group is unidentified as to ethnic background. The third group is Bosnian Serbs, followed by Croats. (M. Cherif, M. Bassiouni, and Marcia McCormick, "Sexual Violence: An Invisible Weapon of War in the Former Yugoslavia," Occasional Papers no. 1 (International Human Rights Law Institute, De Paul University College of Law, 1996), 44, 10, 11.

23. Not to mention already notorious, but not unrealistic journalist's request: "Anybody here been raped and speaks English?"


27. Ibid., supra note 1, x.

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