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How does gender affect the way war and conflict are experienced and remembered? Studies have attempted to answer this question in relation to many different historical situations. What distinguishes Elissa Helms’s study of Bosnian women’s NGOs in *Innocence and Victimhood: Gender, Nation, and Women’s Activism in Postwar Bosnia-Hercegovina* is the sustained engagement with the category of “victim” and its gendered, but also ethnicized, dimensions. As an outcome of many years of collaboration with organizations in Sarajevo and the small town of Zenica, Helms discusses how categories of victimhood become deployed as foundations for making claims to the state and ethnic others, but also as labels that constrain how women can act in the public sphere.

The organizations included in Helms’s study offer psychosocial care and political advocacy for women who were displaced and/or sexually exploited as a result of the Bosnian war. They differ in size, degree of professionalization of their services, ties to foreign donors or local (sometimes religious) organizations, and the way they position themselves towards designations of feminism and political activism. Some are oriented toward facilitating refugee return, others toward providing psychological and occupational therapy to women who experienced wartime rape. All activists work in a discursive field structured by the distinction between men as aggressive, competitive political actors and women as conciliatory and collaborative peacemakers whose work is not political per se. As one activist, quoted in the book, aptly summarizes, the assumption is that “Women smooth out what men have messed up” (175). In a very sensitive and respectful analysis, Helms shows how this distinction between women as victims and men as (potential) perpetrators emanates from ideas about separate men’s and women’s spheres. These ideas predate the breakup of Yugoslavia, but were charged with new significance through different gendered experiences of the war, where men were expected to go to fight and women, predominant among the civilians who stayed behind, experienced displacement and sexual violence. In the aftermath of Bosnian independence, the distinction is sustained by discourses produced by the women’s organizations themselves, as well as by donor expectations.

Although some of the NGO activists decry the limitations imposed by the image of women as victims and peacemakers, they also make use of it to portray themselves as non-threatening and not motivated by hidden or selfish aims. To describe this relationship to categories such as victim or womanhood, Helms uses the term “affirmative essentialism” (7), an adaptation of Gayathri Spivak’s “strategic essentialism.” Helms’s formulation is meant to denote a less instrumental relationship to an identity label than the term “strategic” implies. In Bosnia, “[t]he identity category of woman was meaningful to [the activists], a fundamental part of their own sense of self, rather than a knowing construction of political strategizing” (8).

As Helms points out, victim as a discursive category functions in similar ways as discourses of virtuous motherhood, which constrain, but also enable women’s participation in public activism. This is particularly true in settings where political expression is constrained or strongly gendered.
male. What distinguishes victim discourses in the Bosnian case is a phenomenon Helms calls the “nationing” of gender (129). This took the form of a tacit assumption that victims were female and Bosnian, and perpetrators were male and Serb, making it difficult to thematize wartime abuse experienced by Serb and Croat women in Bosnia-Hercegovina as well as domestic violence and sexual violence within one community. Sexual violence against males, though it also occurred during the war, became virtually a taboo topic, showing how women and men respectively were made to represent the vulnerability and the heroism of the Bosnian nation. Gender was also “nationed” through heightened attention on the part of donor organizations to the ethnic composition and evidence of interethnic collaboration of funded NGOs, forcing activists to privilege these aspects in their work. Though attempting to exercise feminist solidarity with partners in Belgrade such as Women in Black, the NATO bombing of Belgrade during the 1999 Kosovo war became a test case to women’s ability to transcend this “nationing”.

In her analysis of how women’s NGOs negotiated this difficult terrain, Helms deftly combines insights drawn from her ethnographic presence in the day-to-day work of organizations with a wider awareness of Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav feminist debates. The historical contextualization of how issues of gender and ethnicity were viewed before, during and after the Bosnian war greatly enhances the depth of analysis, as does the discussion of competing conceptualizations of the roles of gender and ethnicity in wartime rape. Helms also draws many parallels with other situations of wartime gendered violence, pointing to a foundational paradox of contemporary warfare: although soldiers are seen as the only legitimate casualties of war in terms of international law, war conducted with modern weaponry tends to cost more civilian lives than those of soldiers. Civilians, often glossed as women and children, cannot be thought of as anything else than innocent bystanders. This simultaneously obscures female aggression and makes male victimhood inadmissible. This comparative awareness makes the book an excellent choice for classes on sexual violence or gender and war, as well as on the Balkans or post-socialist Europe.

What remains elusive in the study are the lives of women activists outside their NGO work. It is clear that all of them position themselves as mothers, sisters, spouses or widows, and responsible leaders of households rather than isolated individuals acting in the political sphere. How does their civil society engagement fold into the work of supporting families in economically and politically unstable times? How do Bosniac women interact with Serbs as neighbors and not just as partners in NGO work? As Helms’s analysis shows, one of the differences between discourses of virtuous victimhood and those of virtuous motherhood is that no one wants to be identified as a victim all the time. A widening of the ethnographic lens beyond NGO work would let the reader see the other social identities inhabited by these women, allowing the author to complicate even further the problematic link between femininity, victimhood, and innocence.