

Shining Humanity

Shining Humanity:
Life Stories of Women in Bosnia and Herzegovina

By

Zilka Spahić Šiljak

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P U B L I S H I N G

Shining Humanity: Life Stories of Women in Bosnia and Herzegovina
By Zilka Spahić Šiljak

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I dedicate this book to all women peacebuilders
of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

You were born with potential.
You were born with goodness and trust.
You were born with ideals and dreams.
You were born with greatness.
You were born with wings.
You are not meant for crawling, so don't.
You have wings.
Learn to use them and fly.

(Rumi)

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Working on this book, I was given the opportunity to hear some extraordinary stories told by Bosnian women about their paths to peace, their humanity reaching out to other human beings, about their successes and disappointments, their obstacles and the ways they overcame them, their moral dilemmas and choices. I have learnt a lot from their continuous peace adventures and I believe that these life stories will serve as a stimulus for younger generations who seek the motivation and inspiration to act with perseverance and believe that change is possible if one is brave enough to take this step.

Women peacebuilders in this book were brave, but they also had a vision of how to re-establish relationships between friends and neighbors in a divided and impoverished post-war society as well as to establish new ones for the sake of peace and reconciliation. They have enticed many people to walk on the paths of peace as their intents were to bring smiles and relief back to the faces of returnees—women and children who had experienced various forms of violence during and after the war. They wanted to enable women's and young people's political and economic empowerment and to find systematic solutions to gender equality issues through laws, policies and mechanisms in state institutions.

Thanks to the whole-hearted help of the UN Women Project Office in Sarajevo who supported the project "Women, Peacebuilding and Reconciliation in BiH," I was able to document eleven life stories and give my contribution to the history of women which, I hope, will be somewhat richer through this book.

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analyses of a number of transcripts; I thank them with all my heart. My colleague Aida Spahić carried the heaviest burden as she worked with me until the very end of the project, translating certain parts of the transcripts into English as well as parts of the book into Bosnian. I owe special gratitude to Julianne Funk who advised me about the contents, narration and some sources and technically harmonized the references and quotes.

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INTRODUCTION

People are like stained-glass windows. They sparkle and shine when the sun is out, but when the darkness sets in, their true beauty is revealed only if there is a light from within. (Elisabeth Kübler-Ross)

There is a candle in your heart, ready to be kindled. There is a void in your soul, ready to be filled; you feel it, don't you? (Rumi)

Genuine humanity resides in the heart and shows its power and beauty when darkness and fear govern life. Courageous people do not allow the light of humanity to be extinguished. They remind us on the importance and sacred nature of human life. Some women in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) have preserved this light in the face of enormous destruction and the hopelessness of war. They did not vacillate, hoping that the good would prevail, therefore permitting the hidden and forgotten light in other people to shine again. These women dared to imagine a life beyond the imposed boundaries of violence and fear. They accepted the challenge to embark into the unknown; their 'moral imagination' was strong enough to encompass the complexity of circumstances and provide space for new opportunities.¹ They knew that when one comes to the edge "one of two things will happen—there will be something solid to stand on, or one will be taught how to fly."²

The life stories of these women disclose the power of humanity fueled by faith in kindness, love and God. Humanity (ljudskost) is a

¹ John Paul Lederach, 2005, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, ix.

² Barbara J. Winter quoted in Kathe Schaaf, Kay Lindahl, Kathleen S. Hurty, Reverend Guo Cheen, 2011, *Women, Spirituality, and Transformative Leadership: Where Grace Meets Power*, Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Publishing, 11.

conceptual term in much research³ where respondents reflect the light of their humanity, but they also heal, connect, and humanize others. Women in Bosnia and Herzegovina did the same, believing that all people reflect humanity, and they made decisions at critical moments to protect their neighbors, friends, and fellow citizens. Their *weltanschauung*⁴ was to make life easier, at least for the moment; in this same manner George Eliot describes the purpose of life: “What do we live for, if it is not to make life less difficult for each other?”⁵ They tried to give a voice to the voiceless, to help those in need, to promote women’s human rights, to foster dialogue, and above all to provide a “safe space”⁶ for telling stories and healing traumas. These women inspired many to join them on their journey toward peace, even though they are neglected by the media and in the political, national, and religious discourse. Their stories should be told to remind us of what we have forgotten in our life journeys—journeys of becoming human beings.

Stories are important in our lives, and they can be compelling and powerful motivations for action. They can mobilize our emotions and hearts for the first time, but they can also move us to do heroic work. Everybody has a story, but some of us are better narrators than others. Some peacebuilders in this book were not comfortable revealing their stories without being asked specific questions: “You do not have a question, yet you want me to tell you my life story?” When I answered yes, they usually said something like: Oh dear, I do not know what to tell you (Ah, šta ću ti ja draga

³ The notion of *insaniyyat* or *munashayat* is used in the research of Yasmin Saikia in Bangladesh where survivors used it to interpret the need to humanize other human beings. (Yasmin Saikia, 2011, *Women, War and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971*, Durham: Duke University Press, 24.)

⁴ Philosophy or view of life.

⁵ George Eliot, 1907, *Middlemarch, A Study of Provincial Life*, Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 467.

⁶ Ristin Thomassen, 2006, *To Make Room for Changes, Peace Strategies from Women Organisations in Bosnia and Herzegovina* Johanneshov, Sweden: The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, http://www.peacewomen.org/assets/file/Resources/NGO/kvinna_tomakeroomforchanges_2006.pdf (accessed September 3, 2011).

pričati).⁷ And then they would go on with accounts that took over fifty pages to set down in print.

As Marshall Gantz explains, personal stories are important because they tell us about “journeys of learning to be a full human being and faithful person.”⁸ These journeys require strength, dedication, curiosity, passion, strategies to find solutions when facing difficulties, and making right choices. “We can inspire others and share our own wisdom. Because stories allow us to express our values not as abstract principles, but as lived experience, they have the power to move others.”⁹ I hope these Bosnian women’s stories will move readers to find the right direction in their own personal journeys, enabling them to make decisions that stir the light of humanity, which is often silenced or suppressed by the hardships of life.

Why this Book?

Living in the BiH post-war reality for the last two decades, I feel personally and academically motivated to tell a different story of BiH—a story of humaneness, heroism, compassion, friendship, respect, peace, and reconciliation. The prevailing public media discourse regarding BiH consists of coverage of past crimes and current prosecutions. Both of these problems need to be addressed, but people face other challenges as well, thus the residents of BiH need encouragement to re-build their lives. Media portrayals of everyday Bosnian life focusing on corruption, ethnic tensions, and ethno-nationalistic rhetoric are depressing, and they obscure all the positive developments in peacebuilding and coexistence in the

⁷ Svenka Savić had a similar experience with her research on women’s stories in Serbia and titled her book *Životne priče žena. Ah šta ću ti ja jedna pričati* (2008), Novi Sad: Futura Publikacije i Ženske Studije i Istraživanja.

⁸ Marshall Gantz, 2009, “Why Stories Matter,” *Sojournes: Faith in Action for Social Justice*, www.sojo.net/magazine/2009/03/why-stories-matter (accessed September 3, 2013).

⁹ Ibid.

region. With the stories told here, perhaps a broader audience both within BiH and throughout the world will learn that community life as well as faith in a peaceful future and *suživot*¹⁰ remain in this region, though they are not recognized as important news alongside other narratives. The book may be a useful tool for university teachers and students, especially in the fields of peace studies, history, anthropology, ethnography, sociology, political science, and gender and religious studies. The purpose of the book is also to: help peacebuilding initiatives in BiH and worldwide; to promote the peace and political leadership of women; teach a new generation how to nurture and preserve humanity, compassion, and respect for others, but also how to protect others; to offer women's narratives as a tool in peace education and the empowerment of women locally and internationally; to demonstrate that human beings can overcome all barriers based on identity, because such action was initiated by women from all ethnic and religious backgrounds in a divided BiH; and, finally, to remind us how a person's inner voice can empower him/her to bring change even during the hardships of war.

This book sheds light on the heroines of BiH who have been working on peace and reconciliation issues for the last eighteen years. Initially I wanted to achieve four things: 1) to understand how moral imagination mobilized women to become peacebuilders, 2) to discover through life stories the particular dynamics, values, and norms of the society of Bosnia and Herzegovina in that specific period, and 3) to show what was the role of religion in peacebuilding, 4) to make visible and available the light of the humanity within these Bosnian women peacebuilders to new generations. Among the specific reasons motivating me to launch this research were the following:

¹⁰ Julianne Funk, 2013, "Women and the Spirit of Suživot in Postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina," in Nadija Furlan Štante and Marijana Hacet (eds.), *Spirituality of Balkan Women. Breaking boundaries: The Voices of Women of ex-Yugoslavia*. Koper, Slovenia: Univerzitetna Založba Annales.

First, women's stories and achievements have not been recorded, and as one Bosnian woman explains elsewhere: "discontinuous memory and ignoring women who performed heroic acts in the historical past keep women in the position of having permanently to fight the same battles."¹¹ I do not want women from BiH to be forgotten. I want to offer their full stories; the hopes and challenges and moral choices they made teach us that we can accomplish so much, as long as we have faith and vision. The women interviewed for this book have not had time for keeping records, because more important tasks, such as the building of relationships, restoring dignity, and providing support to others comes before visibility. When asked if they will chronicle their many successes, they usually reply that they have work to do and there will be time to tell their stories later, that one day, perhaps when they retire, they will write a book or their memoirs. Of course, written records are crucial because they are the best guarantee for preserving information and memories; as Virginia Woolf noted: "Nothing has really happened until it has been recorded."¹²

So far, very little has been written about the work of these women. I found some reports and a few studies about local women's organizations.¹³ The only individual testimonies of

¹¹ Zilka Spahić-Šiljak, 2012, *Contesting Female, Feminist, and Muslim Identities: Post-socialist Contexts of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo*, Sarajevo: Center for Interdisciplinary Postgraduate Studies of the University of Sarajevo, 234.

¹² Quoted in: Nigel Nicolson, 2000, *Virginia Woolf*, New York: Penguin, 2.

¹³ Cynthia Cockburn, 1998, *The Space Between Us: Negotiating Gender and National Identities in Conflict*, London: Zed Books; Cynthia Cockburn, 2013, "Against the Odds: Sustaining Feminist Momentum in Post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina", *Women's Studies International Forum* 37 (March–April), 26–35; Swanee Hunt, 2011, *Worlds Apart. Bosnian Lessons for Global Security*, Durham: Duke University Press; Elissa Helms, 2003, "Women as Agents of Ethnic Reconciliation? Women's NGOs and International Intervention in Postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina", *Women's Studies International Forum* 26.1, 15-33; Paula M. Pickering, 2007, *Peacebuilding in the Balkans: A View from the Ground Floor*, Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press; Ghislaine Glasson Deschaumes and Svetlana Slapšak, 2003, "Žene Balkana za mir. Aktivistkinje prelaze granice" *ProFemina*; Dubravka Zarkov, 2002, "Feminism and the Disintegration of Yugoslavia: On the

Bosnian women who resisted the war and its ethnic divisions can be found in the work: *This Was Not Our War* by Swanee Hunt.¹⁴ Other individual testimonies of both women and men were collected by Svetlana Broz in her book: *Good People in an Evil Time*, but it focuses more on civic courage during the war.¹⁵ I wanted to go further to provide life stories of women who have been working on peacebuilding without a break, not only during and immediately after the war but also today, and who have become respected peacebuilders in their communities. This book is not only about their resistance and courage, but also their peace journeys.

Many criticize the women's NGOs in BiH for being apolitical and distant from feminism. In the first years after the war, as Elissa Helms noticed in her research, women were preoccupied with humanitarian activities and reconciliation efforts and did not declare their feminist identities and political sentiments,¹⁶ but it was also probably the case that the majority of women in BiH knew nothing about feminism. Over time, however, women in this book accepted the idea of identifying themselves as feminists. Most of them had worked long and hard to empower women in politics and public life, and "their feminist identities first emerged through education that was directly connected to activism."¹⁷ However, since these

Politics of Gender and Identity", *Social Development Issues* 24.3; Nejra Nuna Čengić, 2013, "Noise, Silence, Voice. Life Stories of Two Female Peace Activists in BiH," in Renata Jambrešić Kirin and Sandra Prlenda (eds.), *Women Narrating their Lives and Actions*, Zagreb: Institute for Ethnology and Folklore and the Center for Women's Studies 70; Zilka Spahić-Šiljak, 2013, "Do It and Name It: Feminist Theology and Peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina", *Journal for Feminist Studies in Religion* 29.2, 178-186.

¹⁴ Swanee Hunt, 2004, *This Was Not Our War: Bosnian Women Reclaiming the Peace*, Durham: Duke University Press.

¹⁵ Svetlana Broz, 2005, *Good People in an Evil Time: Portraits of Complicity and Resistance in the Bosnian War*, translated by Ellen Bursac, New York: Other Press.

¹⁶ Elissa Helms, 2013, *Innocence and Victimhood, Gender, Nation, and Women's Activism in Postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 158-192.

¹⁷ Spahić-Šiljak, 2012, 220.

individuals have been completely dependent on foreign donors who generally do not support organizations with clearly stated feminist agendas, and who also require these organizations to secure a certain percentage of their funding from the state as part of structure of the grant support, women did not wish to emphasize the feminist nature of their organizations. These women also needed continued access to others of their gender in the patriarchal BiH society, in which feminism was thought of like a contagious disease.¹⁸

Second, women are the ones who work on peace issues at the grassroots level, while men handle the negotiations related to such matters at higher decision-making levels. Although women tend to be the key players and peace workers in their local communities, as Elisabeth Porter¹⁹ notes and Ambassador Swanee Hunt confirms in her research,²⁰ they still do not have the power to bring their perspectives to the decision-making table,²¹ and they remain marginal in public life.²² However, as Svetlana Slapšak points out, due to their marginal position in society and politics, women were always more ready to communicate, reconcile, and help and create networks of support.²³ Men are mostly involved in peace activism at the higher levels of power, where they are visible, recognized, and awarded for their work. The relation to power positions in peacebuilding is similar to their power relations in other fields. Many women stood for peace and re-building relationships, but were also determined to share power and responsibility for

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Elisabeth J. Porter, 2007, *Peacebuilding: Women in International Perspective*, London: Routledge, 3.

²⁰ Hunt 2004.

²¹ Swanee Hunt, 2011, *Worlds Apart: Bosnian Lessons for Global Security*, Durham, Duke University Press.

²² Dona Pankhurst, 2009, *Gendered Peace: Women's Struggles for Post-war Justice and Reconciliation*, New York, Routledge, 26.

²³ Svetlana Slapšak, 2001, "The Use of Women and the Role of Women in the Yugoslav War," in Inger Skjelsbaek and Dan Smith (eds.), *Gender, Peace, and Conflict*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 181.

decisions that affected the lives of both women and men. All social issues are women's issues, as they say.

Third is the fact that narrating and listening to the stories of women is a political act.²⁴ Women's stories are important for the creation of women's history and the disclosure of the social, political, and cultural dynamic in BiH and the Balkans, both in socialist and post-socialist contexts. Their stories go beyond personal narratives and help to situate women in society. These women made important choices, and as Kathleen Barry claims, "making choices moves the individual from receiving reality to acting upon it and thus translating received reality into her life."²⁵ Therefore, it is important to write women's biographies in order that their work be remembered—not only their domestic work, but also the courage, creativity, and unheralded heroism that was part of their work outside the home.

Fourth, the accounts of these women's humanity can awaken younger generations who live today in BiH in ethnically homogenized communities. These young people should be exposed to peace narratives and learn that their next-door neighbor might be actively working on peace issues. The work of these women can serve as a model and inspiration for young people to do something by which new generations will remember them and that will provide meaning to their lives.

Fifth, women have the capacity to build peace and reconciliation by creating webs of relationships and networks, establishing very strong and at times unexpected links. This is exactly what women in

²⁴ Cynthia Enloe, 1990, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*, Berkeley: University of California Press; Yasmin Saikia, 2007, "Overcoming the Silent Archive in Bangladesh: Women Bearing Witnesses to Violence in the 1971 'Liberation' War," in Lawrence Skidmore (ed.), *Women and the Contested State. Religion Violence and Agency in South and Southeast Asia*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 68.

²⁵ Kathleen Barry, 1992, "Toward a Theory of Women's Biography," in Teresa Iles (ed.), *All Sides of the Subject: Women and Biography*, New York, Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 34.

BiH did for the sake of their families and communities. They were determined to leave peace as their legacy to future generations because they believe that each generation should leave a pledge for the future, with peace being the greatest wealth and pledge.

Women's peace efforts in BiH have been supported by many international donors, including UN Women (formerly UNIFEM), which in the last twelve years, using the UNSCR 1325 resolution on women, peace, and security as an additional tool in the existing human rights legal framework, has been present there to help women pursue gender equality, justice, and peace.

Selection of Peacebuilders

The research for this book included the life stories of eleven women, leaders, and peacebuilders who come from varying ethnic backgrounds, both religious and non-religious. The group is made up of women who declare Bosniac, Croatian, Serbian and Jewish identity. Most of them declare their religious identities, while some say they are agnostics. They have been active over the last two decades in peace and reconciliation efforts in BiH. It was not easy to single out those women who were finally selected from among the dozens of activists who have been working on the peace and reconciliation process in BiH, but I managed by setting a number of very important criteria with my research assistants.²⁶

First, recognition by the community—The “Baseline Study of Women and Peacebuilding in BiH,”²⁷ conducted in fifteen cities of BiH,²⁸ consisted of field and web surveys that helped identify women in local communities who were acknowledged as prominent in the peacebuilding effort. Such acknowledgment, however, was

²⁶ Research assistants: Aida Spahić, Elmaja Bavčić, Sedžida Hadžić and Natalija Petrič.

²⁷ Spahić-Šiljak, Aida Spahić and Elmaja Bavčić, 2012, “Baseline Study on Women and Peacebuilding in BiH,” Sarajevo: TPO Foundation Sarajevo, www.tpo.ba.

²⁸ Ibid.

not the only criterion for selection, but it was useful in locating possible candidates for interviews. Second, I also looked into the scope of the work for which local communities recognized these women, including a broad spectrum of activities such as conflict resolution, education, humanitarian aid, protection from violence, psycho-social work and therapy, peace research, and human rights activism in the widest sense. Only one woman in this book is not mentioned by name in the Baseline Study, but I have included her because of her extraordinary accomplishments in the city of Mostar (Story 11) that were recognized also by many civil society activists. Third, the ethnic and secular, or non-religious, activities of the women were also considered. My thesis is that women of all backgrounds were involved in peace work, and that it was their essential humanity that was the key to their overcoming considerations of identity and division. The fourth criterion was geographical distribution. Although some women from Sarajevo received more coverage in the Baseline Study than did selected women from other cities, my assistants and I did not want to interview only women from the capital of BiH. Our goal was to include women from other, smaller communities who had to cope with more challenges in their peacebuilding work than women in urban centers. The fifth criterion was about leadership traits. All women in this book possess some of the personality characteristics necessary for community leadership that will be discussed later. It was important to choose those who acted as leaders in their communities.

The selected women live in six cities/towns/villages of BiH: Sarajevo (Rahela Džidić, Jadranka Miličević, Besima Borić, Amra Pandžo); Banja Luka (Nada Golubović and Lidija Živanović); Zenica (Sabiha Husić); Bosansko Grahovo (Danka Zelić); Bijeljina (Radmila Žigić); Bratunac (Stanojka Tešić); and Mostar (Jasna Rebac). Most are active in women's organizations and carry a high profile as women's human rights activists.

Religion as an Argument in Peacebuilding

Although the Balkans region faced the de-secularization²⁹ of public life in the late eighties, women's peace activism in the post-socialist and post-war BiH context was not initially motivated by religion, and religion was not a conversation starter in the first civic initiatives.³⁰ Peace actions of these women in BiH were driven by "care ethics and feminist ethics of justice and compassion," by the still-existing socialist ethics of unity and equality, and by the universal human rights norms integrated into the legal system of BiH through the Catalog of International and European Human Rights norms and standards.³¹

Most of the peacebuilders in this book are religious, but they acted as agnostics, particularly at the beginning of their work. Religion came into play later, but only as one of many equally important and relevant arguments in their peace work. Some peacebuilders used religion in psycho-social therapy, while others used the religious ethics of care, solidarity, and compassion to initiate dialogue across the entity borders within BiH.³² Some used religion to protect women from violence.

There are many reasons for excluding religious arguments in the peace work of secular nongovernmental organizations in the years after the war: the politicization of religion, the involvement of religious authorities in blessing war criminals, the silence of religious authorities about crimes, and the close collaboration of

²⁹ Peter Berger (ed.), 1999, *The Desecularization of the World, Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

³⁰ Ina Merdjanova and Patrice Brodeur, 2009, *Religion as a Conversation Starter: Interreligious Dialogue for Peacebuilding in the Balkans*, New York: Continuum, 108-124.

³¹ The catalogue of human rights norms and standards is a part of the legal system of BiH, which consists of basic international and European conventions, declarations, and protocols.

³² BiH was internally divided according to the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995, with half of the territory established as the Federation of BiH, populated mostly by Bosniacs and Croats, while the other half, Republika Srpska, has primary ethnic Serbs as residents.

ethno-national political parties with religious communities and churches in pursuing their common agendas.³³ Many citizens who declare religious identity (more than 90 percent) did not want to bring religion into the conversation on peace because of the marriage between politicians and religious authorities.³⁴ Religious authorities were preoccupied with re-establishing control over their destroyed and impoverished congregations and with getting their nationalized property back from the state after the war.³⁵ Religious communities were not prepared for working on peace issues and did not have enough human resources to undertake peacebuilding activities. Religious leaders “are generally locked into positions taken with regard to the perspectives and issues in conflict. They are under tremendous pressure to maintain a position of strength vis-à-vis their adversaries and their own constituencies.”³⁶ Finally, foreign donors sought partners among secular civil and human rights organizations and not among faith-based organizations and religious communities. After 2000, the scenario changed, and faith-based organizations began to receive foreign funding for peace activities, primarily through the offices of the Interreligious Council of BiH.³⁷

³³ Neven Andjelic, 2003, *Bosnia and Herzegovina, the End of a Legacy*, London: Frank Cass; Michael A. Sells, 1996, *The Bridge Betrayed: Religion and Genocide in Bosnia*, Berkeley: University of California Press; Paul Mojzes, 2011, *Balkan Genocides: Holocaust and Ethnic Cleansing in the Twentieth Century*, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

³⁴ Dino Abazović, 2006, *Za naciju i Boga*, Sarajevo: Magistrat Sarajevo; Alen Kristić, 2009, *Religija i moć*, Sarajevo: Rabic.

³⁵ Ivan Cvitković, 2012, Ivan Cvitković, 2012, *Sociološki pogledi na naciju i religiju* Vol. II, Sarajevo: Center for Empirical Research on Religion in BiH.

³⁶ John Paul Lederach, 1997, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace, 40.

³⁷ See Merdjanova and Brodeur 2009.

Methodology

I have employed the biographical method in working on this book because it has provided a useful structure with which to interview individuals who have lived through traumatic life experiences, such as war and genocide,³⁸ and to understand the significance these people give to the stories they tell,³⁹ or to describe the turning-point moments that cause individuals to change themselves and their world.⁴⁰ These moments or epiphanies often come during crises that “alter the fundamental meaning and structures in a person’s life.”⁴¹ In the case of our women peacebuilders in BiH, these epiphanies resulted in positive effects and changed not only their lives, but also the lives of those they reached out to.

Some scholars use the life story technique both as method and as final product.⁴² Some refer to this as the biographical method with the life story as the key instrument. From life stories we can learn how women create and interpret the life conditions and events they are narrating. In this way it is possible to see, as Theresa Iles says, “the fabric of life which often slips through the net of quantitative research.”⁴³ We can also learn how these women create meaning and interpret parts of their lives within the social contexts in which

³⁸ Amia Lieblich, Rivka Tuval-Mashiach, and Tamar Zilber, 1998, *Narrative Research: Reading, Analysis and Interpretation*. Thousand Oaks: Sage; Gabriele Rosenthal, 1993, “Reconstruction of Life Stories: Principles of Selection in Generating Stories for Narrative Biographical Interviews,” in Ruthellen Josselson and Amia Lieblich (eds.), *The Narrative Study of Lives*, Vol. 1, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 59-91.

³⁹ Max van Manen, 1997, “Phenomenological Pedagogy and the Question of Meaning,” in Donald Vandenberg (ed.), *Phenomenology and Educational Discourse*, Durban: Heinemann Higher and Further Education, 41-65.

⁴⁰ Norman Denzin, 1989, *Interpretive Biography*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁴² Svenka Savić, 2001, *Vojvođanke (1917/1931): životne priče*, Novi Sad: Futura Publikacije i Ženske studije i istraživanja.

⁴³ Theresa Iles (ed.), 1992, *All Sides of the Subject: Women and Biography*, New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 94.

they live.⁴⁴ In addition, we note what they do not say, or name—some of it unspeakable.⁴⁵ Some women spoke about war, crimes, and expulsion, and even named the perpetrators, while others spoke more generally.

Biographical research enables us to “search for women’s subjectivity, where the subject becomes known to us through her actions and her history.”⁴⁶ Bosnian women peacebuilders were driven by an ethics of care and compassion and a deep faith in humanity, but they did not want their existence to be limited to their private lives. Most of them make strong references to their families as an important foundation and inspiration for their work and feminism, but some skip that part of their life and consciously narrate their stories beyond their personal lives, emphasizing only their actions and accomplishments in the public sphere.

This work is based on biographical thematic analysis⁴⁷ with microanalysis of the text, but to write a monograph with compelling stories and make visible each of the eleven women peace heroines described here, I decided to pick up several themes from each of the analyzed interviews and create a story that does not follow the chronology of the storytelling, but rather highlights the peacebuilding activities of these women.

The entire process of analysis, writing, and checking details and interpretations was a combination of the insider’s view of the narrator and the researcher’s analytical skills. In this dialectic it was crucial to check meanings and interpretations with these women, who fortunately were there to authorize the final story shape.⁴⁸ It

⁴⁴ Julia Chaitin, 2002, “How do I ask them about the war? Collecting and Understanding the Stories of Soldiers and Victims of War,” *Social Science Research Network Electronic Library*.

⁴⁵ Ćengić 2013, 74-75.

⁴⁶ Barry 1992, 33.

⁴⁷ Rosenthal 1993, 60-61.

⁴⁸ Every woman signed the consent form for the final version of her story, which had been sent to her via email. The forms were also signed by the author of the book and the research assistant, Aida Spahić. All consent forms signed by the women were transmitted electronically and hardcopy to the author.

was also important to decide together what to keep in the story, because some of the women still live under political pressure and one would not want to jeopardize their safety. I also learned that our understanding of someone's story, even if we personally do the interview and analyze the transcript, is limited by our own views of certain phenomena and events. Clarifications are thus crucial to avoid misinterpretations.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this book rests on the concepts of care ethics and feminist ethics of compassion and justice, as well as peacebuilding theories and the scholarship on feminist leadership. Care ethics scholars⁴⁹ portray women as key leaders in their local communities and as active advocates for peace. However, they go beyond gender stereotypes in describing both women and men as caring persons, while claiming that women are not inherently peaceful and can in fact have the same warmongering tendencies as men. Still, much research indicates that women are more involved in peacebuilding than men, particularly in their local communities.⁵⁰ Elise Boulding explains this by saying that women's traditional social roles allow them to be less bound by conventional definitions of security and military necessity, and that they also have access to people in local communities to create networks and opportunities for acquiring new skills.⁵¹ Fiona Robinson⁵² underlines the idea that caring qualities are not

⁴⁹ Carol Gilligan, 1983, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press; Nel Noddings, 2002, *Starting At Home: Caring and Social Policy*, Berkeley: University of California Press; Fiona Robinson, 2011, *The Ethics of Care. A Feminist Approach to Human Security*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

⁵⁰ Porter 2007, 3.

⁵¹ Elise Boulding, 2000, *Cultures of Peace: The Hidden Side of History*, New York: Syracuse University Press, 71.

⁵² Robinson, 2011, 32-33.

exclusively female, and together with Nel Noddings,⁵³ claims that a more substantial reduction of the overwhelming poverty in the world could be achieved if care-oriented ethics came into play instead of traditional justice-oriented approaches. Motherhood is also closely linked with peacebuilding, but as Sara Ruddick⁵⁴ warns, proper linkage is possible only when maternal thinking is a part of a “rationality of care,” meaning that a woman is attentive to the needs of others and behaves in a protective and supportive manner. Both women and men can employ maternal thinking in the public realm, and if they do so, they will not risk the nurture of their children at the expense of the victory of their nation.

The scholarship devoted to feminist ethics of care and justice⁵⁵ pays more attention to care and justice as mutually interdependent and important elements for peace and security: “Part of the linkage between feminism and peace is about breaking down the logic of domination,”⁵⁶ Elisabeth Porter explains, adding that the politics of compassion is the third important element in delivering peace on both an individual and a societal level, and it consists of attentiveness to suffering, active listening, and quick responding.⁵⁷ In trying to overcome the existing dichotomies between proponents of justice and compassion, she points out: “It is not care alone that enables compassionate responsibility, but a merging of the compassionate drive with a search for justice, equality, and rights that is more likely to address people’s needs.”⁵⁸

The women identified as peace-seeking heroines in this book have embodied the concept of compassion as an important part of the ethics of care and justice that they practice, and some of them

⁵³ Noddings 2002.

⁵⁴ Ruddick 1992, 46.

⁵⁵ Porter 2007; Martha C. Nussbaum, 2000, *Sex and Social Justice*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pankhurst 2009; Uma Narayan, 1995, “Colonialism and its Others: Considerations on Rights and Care Discourses”, *Hypatia* 10.2, 133-40.

⁵⁶ Porter 2007, 56.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 103-104.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 117.

have even essentialized Bosnian women as special human beings able to surmount the highest barriers for the sake of their families and communities. They use what what Gayatri Spivak calls “strategic essentialisms”⁵⁹, and Elissa Helms in her study with Bosnian women reveals that the alignment with motherhood and other affirmative characteristics of women and men was strategic, what she recognized as strategic use of affirmative essentialism.⁶⁰ Most of them, however, believe that women are not inherently peaceful, but that their socially constructed roles have made them more oriented toward peace. Only when women have the same amount of power as men, will we know if they are genuinely better peacebuilders.

In contrast to the “great man” theory and its emphasis on charismatic individuals with inborn traits of leadership, some scholars have elaborated both a feminine and a feminist style of leadership. Bernice Lott notices that femininity as a quality is more attributed to nature and to socially constructed gender roles, while feminist leadership styles are about equal opportunities for all. They place a specific emphasis on those who are vulnerable and disadvantaged, but the approach is also about empowerment, change, and peace.⁶¹ Other scholars have tried to offer a more comprehensive definition of feminist leadership as “transformational in nature, seeking to empower and enhance the effectiveness of one’s team members while striving to improve the lives and conditions of all.”⁶² Many authors emphasize the

⁵⁹ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, 1993, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*. New York: Routledge.

⁶⁰ Elissa Helms, 2013, *Innocence and Victimhood, Gender, Nation, and Women’s Activism in Postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 9.

⁶¹ Bernice Lott, 2007, “Discourses on Women, Feminism and Leadership” in Jean Lau Chin, Bernice Lott, Joy Rice and Janis Sanchez-Hucles (eds.), *Women and Leadership: Transforming Visions and Diverse Voices*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 25-28.

⁶² Natalie Porter and Jessica Henderson Daniel, 2007, “Developing Transformational Leaders”, in Jean Lau Chin, Bernice Lott, Joy Rice and Janis

collaborative style,⁶³ empowerment, coalition building,⁶⁴ and an egalitarian approach.⁶⁵ Feminist collaboration is also said to be inclusive and not ethnocentric, not focusing on one race (white), ethnicity, and region. It is reflective and depends on context, enabling women of different social, political, and cultural backgrounds to develop their own style of leadership that can change according to their particular society. Finally, feminist leadership perspectives also support the premise of shared knowledge.⁶⁶

Another approach to women's leadership combines feminine and feminist approaches through the concept of IDEA-based leadership traits.⁶⁷ Mary Lou Décosterd uses feminine characteristics for the four key leadership traits, describing women as being as capable as men in combining the left and right sides of the brain to embrace the whole picture with vision, intuition, empowerment, and focus to finish tasks. Bosnian peacebuilders showed both traits, feminine and feminist, but some emphasized the more feminine side of women's leadership and did not necessarily include values of

Sanchez-Hucles (eds.), *Women and Leadership: Transforming Visions and Diverse Voices*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 249.

⁶³ Carol J Singely and Susan Elizabeth Sweeny, 1998, "In League with Each Other. The Theory and Practice of Feminist Collaboration", in Elizabeth G. Peck and JoAnna Stephens Mink (eds.), *Common Ground. Feminist Collaboration in the Academy*, Albany: State University of New York Press; Judith Worell and Norine G. Johnson (eds.), 1997, *Shaping the Future of Feminist Psychology: Education, Research and Practice*, Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association.

⁶⁴ C. Cryss Brunner (ed.), 1999, *Sacred Dreams Women and the Superintendency*, Albany: State University of New York Press.

⁶⁵ Joyce K. Fletcher, 2001, *Disappearing Acts: Gender, Power, and Relational Practice at Work*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

⁶⁶ Mary Lou Décosterd, 2013, *How Women are Transforming Leadership. Four Key Traits Powering Success*, Santa Barbara: Praeger.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* There are four IDEA-based leadership traits: Intuition is about looking at life with vision and embracing the whole picture instead of just a piece of it; directive force refers to an innovative spirit that can get the task done while focusing on the outcome; empowerment means giving authority to make others more confident; assimilation is about bringing people together in constructive ways as well as transforming situations in the sense of solving conflicts.