Innocence and Victimhood: Gender, Nation, and Women’s Activism in Postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina

Elissa Helms, Associate Professor and Head of Gender Studies at Central European University in Budapest, Hungary, participated in REEEC’s Noontime Lecture Series on December 2, 2014. Professor Helms’ visit was funded by sources independent from the university in keeping with the boycott of the university in connection with the unhiring of Steven Salaita. Professor Helms is a cultural anthropologist whose research focuses on gender and nationalism, post-conflict and post-socialist transformations, women’s NGO activism, and representations of the Balkans and Muslim societies. The topic of her talk was her most recent book, *Innocence and Victimhood: Gender, Nation, and Women’s Activism in Postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina*, which demonstrates how women activists responded to, challenged, and often reinforced essentialist images in affirmative ways, utilizing the moral purity associated with the position of victimhood to bolster social claims, shape political visions, pursue foreign funding, and wage campaigns for postwar justice. Deeply sensitive to the suffering at the heart of Bosnian women’s (and men’s) wartime experiences, this book also reveals the limitations to strategies that emphasize innocence and victimhood.

Dissertation research done in 1996 and 1997 sparked the initial interest in her project on innocence and victimhood, but the bulk of the research for her book was gathered in 1999 and 2000, while Helms was working with antinationalist and feminist organizations and NGOs. She describes her work not as an ethnography of place, but as an ethnography of a mobile group. For the purpose of this talk, she focused specifically on the victimhood and innocence of Bosniak women.

Professor Helms displayed two main images of female victimhood: (1) The “Srebrenica women” – women weeping for lost men or protesting in order to seek justice for genocide; (2) Female victims of wartime rape – women depicted as silent and wounded. A romanticized view arose around these victimized women, often represented as creatures of innocence who would have rather chosen death over interrupted purity. The power of this victimhood distanced women from responsibility, attributing to them a higher standard of moral purity.

Of course, this narrative of war and violence as inherently masculine and innocence and victimhood as inherently feminine is ultimately damaging to both genders. Men were also sexually assaulted during the war; however, the images of Bosniak men in Serbian camps are the only ones depict the male victim in a context other than death. The men are seen as failures in that they have not adequately done their job in protecting both the land and the women. This rhetoric is also damaging to female empowerment as women are given no agency in the war. While men are always political and violent, women are innocent and pure, unable to change society or take responsibility.

As shown from the short presentation of her book, Ellisa Helms sheds new light on a controversial topic and explores the concepts of agency and responsibility in the lives of Bosniak women during and after the war.