

Women's Court for the Former Yugoslavia: Seeking Justice, Truth, and Active Remembering

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The wars in the former Yugoslavia—in the 1990s—caused destruction of lives, violence, pain and suffering on a large scale. As geography of violence, these wars constituted the lived experience of many women and men across different collectives of the former Yugoslavia. Despite the human toll, such geography is seen by some as an historical episode of a past. For many more the memory of atrocities, massacres, expulsion, forced displacement, sexual violence, and destruction of property, is ever present—embodied in their selfhood and carried in memory. War and memory are, however, not the only trope in the present time; it is the survivors' thirst for justice.

As mechanisms of retributive justice, tribunals and war crimes trials are important in dealing with wrongdoing in war. Restorative approaches to justice are significant too, not only because they involve a greater number of people but because they entail remembering, commemoration and public staging of suffering and loss. And all these elements, it may be argued, contribute to healing, a precondition for a future without violence. In this vein, the Women's Court for the former Yugoslavia—undertaken by the Women's Movement(s) in the post-Yugoslav states (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo [the Kosova Women's Network as the lead organization for/from Kosovo], Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia)—was held last month in Sarajevo. It represented the first Women's Court in Europe. It was a feminist intervention towards restorative justice. In this endeavor for justice and truth, the Women's Court stood against oblivion of violence in the wars in the former Yugoslavia, which has been perpetuated by multiple criminal systems, with state and non-state actors acting against the civilian population, especially women. The Women's Court is about public consciousness, ethics and morality over human loss. The underlying political motive was to help ensure that the past will not be repeated. It Court sought to bring to light the link between the individual and the collective in the experience of war and violence; to problematize the risks entailed in transmitting trauma to the next generation, and last but not least, to stress the importance of remembering for the sake of not repeating such violence in the future.

Premised on the feminist conceptualizations of justice, responsibility and care as foundations of lasting peace, the Women's Court provided a public space for women's voices to be heard. It was a venue where women could stage their experiences of injustice induced in war, enduring pain and suffering, as well as resistance to war and their activism for peace. Hence, the politics of the Women's Court is about women survivors'. It opposes the meta-narrative of women as victims because when such narrative is thought and applied it takes away any agency from women. The structure of the Women's Court consisted of panels on five broadly defined themes and forms of violence experienced by women. They included violence against civilians; sexual violence; economic violence, militaristic violence; and ethnic violence.

At the Women's Court, which was held at the Bosnian Cultural Centre in Sarajevo, the women survivors of war violence took centre stage. They spoke to an audience of

hundreds of women who stood there in silence, listening attentively, and often in tears to what women from places such as Srebrenica, Drenica, Krusha e Madhe, Deçan, to mention just a few, remembered about the war violence they survived, of family members they lost in wars, of their shattered lives and crushed hopes, but also of their struggles for justice and strategies they deployed to reconstruct their lives. Women witnesses were not alone. They were joined by women activists and supported by women mediators of the Women's Court who expressed solidarity and analyzed the broader social and political context of the wars in the former Yugoslavia in front of panel of judges and the public.

Five Kosovar Albanian women spoke of their personal experiences of war and violence they had lived through. They stood up as survivors of wartime violence whose testimonies speak for the hundreds of thousands of women in Kosovo and elsewhere for whom their testimonies represent their lived experience of war and violence. Their testimonies are stronger than stigma, silence and amnesia. The violence they described is more complex than that conceptualized in traditional justice. Their testimonies are individual, yet they point to methods of violence that were institutional and part of an political economy of war and systems of criminality encompassing multiple actors: state military and police forces, paramilitaries, mercenaries and mafia, yet with blurred lines of engagement, directed primarily against civilian populations: women, children, young men, and the elderly.

The Women's Court constituted an intervention for justice, truth and against forgetting of war and the effects war had on the lives of women and their collectives. Moreover, it contributed to acknowledgement of women's survival and enhanced a plural understanding of how and war violence is gendered. Three days of testimonies showed that for women witnesses, the loss and pain is immense, but it is outweighed by their struggles for justice, active remembering, and against the cultures of impunity. They have struggled to rebuild their lives, the lives of their families, and their communities. Moreover, they have tirelessly sought justice. At the Women's Court, women witnesses made clear once more that the struggle for justice and peace must continue.