



Innocence and Victimhood: Gender, Nation, and Women's Activism in Postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina (Critical Human Rights)

Elissa Helms

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The 1992–95 war in Bosnia-Herzegovina following the dissolution of socialist Yugoslavia became notorious for “ethnic cleansing” and mass rapes targeting the Bosniac (Bosnian Muslim) population. Postwar social and political processes have continued to be dominated by competing nationalisms representing Bosniacs, Serbs, and Croats, as well as those supporting a multiethnic Bosnian state, in which narratives of victimhood take center stage, often in gendered form. Elissa Helms shows that in the aftermath of the war, initiatives by and for Bosnian women perpetuated and complicated dominant images of women as victims and peacemakers in a conflict and political system led by men. In a sober corrective to such accounts, she offers a critical look at the politics of women’s activism and gendered nationalism in a postwar and postsocialist society.

Drawing on ethnographic research spanning fifteen years, *Innocence and Victimhood* demonstrates how women’s activists and NGOs 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.

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