

SHINING HUMANITY. LIFE STORIES OF WOMEN
PEACEBUILDERS IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

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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.

My research was carried out in cooperation with my associates Aida Spahić, Elmaja Bavčić, Sedžida Hadžić, and Natalija Petrič, who helped me with interviews and, in part, with the preliminary 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 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 pričati).⁷ And then they would go on with accounts that took over fifty pages to set down in print.

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.

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* Johannesburg, Sweden: The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, http://www.peacewomen.org/assets/file/Resources/NGO/kvinna_tomakeroomforchanges_2006.pdf (accessed September 3, 2011).

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.

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 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:

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

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

⁹ Ibid.

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.

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.

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 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 peace workers 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, the 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 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

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 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.

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.

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 rebuilding relationships, but were also determined to share power and responsibility for 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 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 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

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.

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

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.

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/believers, 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 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

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.

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.

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

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 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

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.

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, 20011, *Vojvodanke (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.

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 Čengić 2013, 74-75.

⁴⁶ Barry 1992, 33.

⁴⁷ Rosenthal 1993, 60-61.

check meanings and interpretations with these women, who fortunately were there to authorize the final story shape.⁴⁸ It 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.

Perhaps even of one's own family's tradition."⁴⁹ In confronting their own communities, these women employed different strategies to protect others' lives and dignity; some of them reported that during the war one could easily be killed if issues like war crimes were raised. Some women have openly criticized war and ethno-national politics, while others avoided direct confrontation in order to protect themselves and their loved ones because human life can have little meaning in the midst of war. Instead, they decided to do what could be done in those circumstances. But all of them were determined to connect people despite the divisions and to help them rebuild their lives and good interpersonal relations after the war, believing wholeheartedly in their decisions and efforts to leave a legacy of peace for future generations.

Theoretical Framework.....

Ordinary Women with Extraordinary Life Journeys

The eleven women who dared to show the light of humanity in a time of disgrace and evil are not saints. They are, as most of them would say, ordinary women who had the courage to stand against injustice, oppression, ethno-national divisions, and exclusion. Their stories do not portray an idealized image of women or of perfect peace activists; rather, they tell the tales of ordinary women—with all their advantages and disadvantages, successes and failures—who bore witness to horror but chose to live in hope.

Their lives, like the lives of other engaged persons, are subject to assessment and criticism in terms of what they have done or failed to do, particularly in times of great political pressure when every act might not have been consistent with the peace path they opted for. It can be difficult to understand the personal dilemmas and situations in that shape specific choices but the social and political contexts greatly influence the decisions and strategies of each woman individually and as a leader in her community. One should have in mind that the topics of dialogue and reconciliation in BiH are still not generally accepted while public dialogue and culture of peace are not encouraged. Promoting such concepts is therefore difficult.

Peacebuilders in this book are not perfect women, they are as entitled to mistakes and fear like anyone else, but what makes them stand out is the strength to stand tall and do things to make life better for other people. When it comes from the soul, as Rumi explains, "you feel a river moving in you, a joy." Their deep belief that the light of humanity exists in every person and just needs encouragement gave them the strength to continue on their peace paths. They knew that when a spark of humanity appears in the eye of one person, it is possible to see the whole universe sparkle. They have done it countless number of times and that makes their stories special and important.

I hope that in their stories the readers will recognize the capability of ordinary people to drive change and achieve results in circumstances in which people must dare to imagine lives beyond the imposed social, ethnic, political, and/or gender frames. These women dared imagine a different world, one without fear and imposed divisions and this makes their stories worth hearing.

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.

⁴⁹ David Hampton. 2012, "The Fog of Religious Conflict," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 41, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 56.