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**WORKING PAPER SERIES**

**ISSN 2399-5130 (Online)**

*Navigating Research on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence in the Post-Yugoslav Space*

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**NAVIGATING RESEARCH ON CONFLICT-RELATED SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN THE POST-  
YUGOSLAV SPACE**

**By Emily Mitchell-Bajic**

**ABSTRACT**

This paper examines two focal conceptual elements of understanding how survivors of sexual violence are interpreted in the post-Yugoslav nation states of Bosnia & Herzegovina, Croatia, and Kosovo. By offering an explanation of social identity theory in practice, prevalent perceptions of gender within the region highlight dominant perceptions of survivors. Furthermore, this paper critically examines and justifies the use of a feminist standpoint epistemology as a foundation on which to navigate the heavily gendered research topic of conflict-related sexual violence.

Keywords: Conflict-related sexual violence, post-Yugoslavia, gender, social identity theory, feminist standpoint epistemology.

# NAVIGATING RESEARCH ON CONFLICT-RELATED SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN THE POST-YUGOSLAV SPACE

## INTRODUCTION

Following the initial breakup of Yugoslavia into six Republics in 1991, while Slovenia and Macedonia enjoyed relatively peaceful secession, violent conflict erupted in Croatia (1991-1995) and Bosnia (1992-1995). Additionally, violent conflict arose from the declared independence of Kosovo (1998-1999). These three countries were also subject to mass campaigns of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) during their respective eras of violent conflict. While numbers of women subjected to CRSV during the Croatian War of Independence lack formal statistical recording, an estimated 20,000 women experienced CRSV during the Bosnian conflict (Engle, 2005: 784-785), with a further 20,000 experiencing CRSV in wartime Kosovo (Gray, 2019).

When conducting research on a topic as heavily examined as CRSV in the post-Yugoslav space, it is necessary to understand the connection between the concept of social identity and how those identities shape interpretations of those who have experienced CRSV. 'Social identity' as a concept denotes that the self is explained through others and how people relate to one another, with levels of social identity forming through contingents including race, ethnicity, neighbourhood, and family (Pratto, 2017). A particularly popular epistemological process utilised by scholars researching a subject matter as heavily gendered as CRSV is feminist standpoint epistemology - a theory of social knowledge which is "precisely fundamental for feminism [...] for it is around the constitution of a feminist epistemology that feminism can most directly and far-reachingly challenge non-feminist frameworks" (Stanley and Wise,

1993: 189): it is the conceptualisation of scholarly knowledge through the lens of women's oppression, with an ultimate view to enabling social change through the practical application of research findings (Brooks, 2007).

In this paper, I argue that diverging concepts of social identity make achieving a linear and all-purpose understanding of how CRSV survivors are viewed by society largely obsolete. As social identity is multi-faceted and highly personalised as a result of how people interpret their place and the place of others (based on ethnicity, locality, age and other key intersections), how CRSV survivors are perceived by society as a whole is also multi-faceted and highly personalised. However, I assert that perceptions of gender are deeply patterned through dominant social narratives. Thus, perceptions of gender link how CRSV survivors are interpreted in a relatively linear and structured discourse. This makes gender focal to the process of researching CRSV, and creates space to both rationalise and justify approaching the topic through a feminist lens. As such, I seek to justify the use of feminist standpoint epistemology in tandem with social identity theory. The main themes of discussion in this paper are as follows:

- a) How social identity theory conceptually frames perceptions of CRSV survivors in post-Yugoslav society. This is focalised through a critical examination of gender and the role played by the concept of national identity. To demonstrate how social identity theory manifests in the post-conflict, post-Yugoslav space, I also discuss restitutorial apparatus available to CRSV survivor, and I seek to delineate how socially-saturated concepts of identity affect survivors' access to these services.
- b) An examination of feminist standpoint epistemology, justifying its utility when navigating the research process on CRSV. I also address core critiques of feminist

standpoint epistemology and assess their impact on navigating research on CRSV while utilising a feminist standpoint.

I have picked these themes for discussion because, as I argue, social identity theory conceptualises how people perceive themselves and others within groups. As CRSV is a heavily gendered research topic, patterns emerge in how survivors are interpreted by post-Yugoslav society as a whole, *based on gender* and prevalent gender narratives. By demonstrating how this is the case within this paper, I also assert that feminist standpoint epistemology deals primarily with gender and how gender is constructed in social narratives. As such, prevalent conceptual issues surrounding gender *link* social identity theory and feminist standpoint epistemology. This link promotes the need for an epistemological blueprint with which to navigate the research process on CRSV. I argue that feminist standpoint epistemology is foundationally able to provide this.

I treat the post-Yugoslav conflict states as the 'post-Yugoslav space'. I do this in order to categorise historically and culturally intertwined, yet currently separate, societies as one trans-national, post-conflict space, in order to generate a sense of the congruencies in the position of women within these respective societies. Hurd et al. comment on the interplay between narrative, and its context in geographical location and time, as a way in which community history is anchored to a certain time and space (Hurd et al., 2017). As such, 'space' is generated as contingency reliant on location and time. Foremost, I identify how diverging notions of social identity in the post-Yugoslav space shape interpretations of CRSV by society at large. In order to do so, I make considerations towards fundamental social structural conditions exclusive to the space: I focus on the interplay between stigma and the silencing of CRSV survivors, as well as access to legal, financial and financial restitution on a practical

level. Additionally, I apply theoretical perceptions of gender in post-Yugoslav social narratives to intersections of age, ethnicity and locality. I do this in order to identify patterns in how women are perceived within these parameters. I subsequently critically assess the presence of 'national identity', in order to ascertain a sense of how historical narratives of national identity in the post-Yugoslav space have framed CRSV survivors. As such, I go on to provide a defence of utilising a feminist standpoint on scholarly knowledge, as a foundation from which to assess the role and scope of social identity and its impact on perceptions of CRSV survivors within the space.

## **SOCIAL IDENTITY: POST-YUGOSLAVIA'S INTERPRETIVE NEXUS**

In aiming to capture how distinctive social processes shape interpretations of CRSV survivors in the post-Yugoslav space, it is necessary to identify patterns of social identity within the region. By doing so, I argue that historical narratives have an all-consuming impact on the way in which national identity, gender, and consequently CRSV, are interpreted within the space. I also attest that prevalent interpretations of collective identity and CRSV have a tangible impact on the progress of reconciliatory apparatus available to CRSV survivors. I argue this by drawing on established themes emerging from the complex nexus of existing research on CRSV in the post-Yugoslav space, and interlinking common findings to provide a foundation for expanded debate.

### **Introducing Social Identity Theory**

To apply and assess the role of social identity on interpretations of CRSV survivors in the post-Yugoslav space, it is first crucial to define, functionalise, and address criticisms of social identity theory. Social identity theory is based on the concept that “human beings are, by nature, a pattern recognition species and that the human ability to distinguish between objects, circumstances, and behavior is a functional cognitive process necessary for survival” (Brown, in Cudahar and Dayton, 2011: 274). In other words, people instinctively rely on categorisation into social groupings to generate a sense of who they are and where they belong. As pattern-orientated creatures, people have come to seek familiar social groups comprising both large, collective demographics or smaller “task-oriented teams” (Hogg, 2016: 6). Social groups demonstrate a shared identity as a blueprint for the essence of who they are, what they ought to believe, and the manners in which they behave. Social identity as a concept is also responsible for distinguishing between the ‘in-group’ (the social grouping in

question) and 'out-group' (comparatively divergent, converse or 'other' social groupings) on these parameters (Cudahar and Dayton, 2011; Hogg, 2016). Furthermore, Jenkins comments on the existence of a hierarchical organisation of identity and identifying factors. For instance, person A and person B may have differences, but both belong to 'meta-category' C (Jenkins, 2008: 6). As such, in the situation of my research, it is important to be aware of the concept that person A may be a man, and person B a woman, but both belong to the Bosnian meta-category (this will heavily liaise later in this paper with particular discussions on gender, national and ethnic allegiance, and the role of social identity in forging nuances in the experience of theorising CRSV's legacy in the post-Yugoslav space). From a social psychology perspective, social identity is defined as "those aspects of the self-concept that derive from an individual's knowledge and feelings about the group memberships that the person shares with others" (Pettigrew, 2007: 35). Thus, social identity is an individualised approach to how people understand and emotionally identify with their perceived or real belongings to groups and communities.

As "identification is often most consequential as the categorisation of others, rather than as self-identification" (Jenkins, 2008: 15), the capability for people to identify behaviours and belongings of others is easier to come to terms with, compared to their ability to do objectively with their own selves. Having said that, this alleged diminished plausibility of personal agency essentialises the notion that people are most rationally identified through the interpretations of others rather than through their own perceptions of self. Social groupings are most conscious of the elements of their collective identities which they in turn identify as under threat (Cudahar and Dayton, 2011). For example, feminist groups identify patriarchy as a threat to the wellbeing of women. This has been identified as a function of the fundamental and binding link between social identity and emotions. For example, 'pride' in

or 'love' for one's nation becomes intrinsically tied to one's perception of self (Pettigrew, 2007). It is here that Jenkins' nod to subjective self-identifications becomes clearer as a concept of the *function* of social identity. According to Pettigrew, the social sciences' wide use of social identity as a concept "attests to its fundamental importance" (Pettigrew, 2007: 34) in the understanding and theorising of knowledge surrounding human behaviour. Theorising the knowledge of "the collective "we" as opposed to the internal "I"" (Pettigrew, 2007: 34), social identity is a lens through which how people relate to each other is examined. Recent and ongoing criticism of the concept of 'social identity' is that it is not as crucial to the social sciences as historically professed (Jenkins, 2008). Yet, perhaps it is necessary to reframe the idea of social identity rather than decimate it completely: by depicting identity and identification as a process, rather than a living or inevitable entity, focusing on what a person or grouping does/do, rather than what they have in terms of characteristics, social identity theory retains its value as a core of understanding how interpretation of the self and others affects perceptions of events in a particular space.

Furthermore, Malašević criticises not the cruciality of identity to social sciences scholarship, but of the function of 'identity' as a concept, stating that generated categorisations of identity are a false knowledge which can be utilised by elites to manipulate political landscapes to their advantage (in Jenkins, 2008: 14). Like Malašević, Pettigrew identifies national identity in particular as a useful function for nation-states, marrying concepts of the self and the wider community with morale, national pride, and patriotism (Pettigrew, 2007). Yet the creation and definition of ingroups and outgroups does not itself result in intergroup conflict or violent conflict according to Cudahar and Dayton (2011). Instead, agendas to maintain group formations and orders leads to the creation of prejudices towards outgroups. Thus, processes of othering embody responsibility for violent conflict, and while 'identity' may have its malign

functional capabilities, social identity as a theory continues to retain its utility as a way of understanding *why* this may be the case.

### **Restitutorial Apparatus for CRSV Survivors in Context**

It is important to discuss the availability of, and access to, legal, financial and government healthcare apparatus designated for CRSV survivors in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Croatia, and Kosovo, to contextualise how the three post-Yugoslav countries in question materially repatriate CRSV survivors. I make reference to these financial, legal and government healthcare mechanisms as ‘restitutorial apparatus’, as they are designated to offer types of compensation to CRSV survivors. In doing so, crucial themes emerge regarding if, when and how CRSV survivors are supported by their governments and communities to rebuild their lives and seek normality and healing following their experiences. In turn, the tone is set to examine wider shortcomings, namely the prevalence of stigma and the associated social silencing of CRSV survivors, in the overall reconciliatory process within the post-Yugoslav space. Within the nexus of social identity, the existence of supremacist in-group hierarchies leads to an inflexibility “that prevent actions needed for the nation’s welfare” (Pettigrew, 2007: 44): this links to the slow progress indicated in the examination of the post-Yugoslav space’s formulation of material repatriation mechanisms available to CRSV survivors, in that CRSV survivors’ needs have been evidently marginalised and directed away from the spotlight in the years succeeding violent conflict in the region. Therefore, I examine the *impact* of divergent identities on the availability of restitutorial devices for CRSV survivors.

In post-conflict BiH, survivors of CRSV who have successfully applied for, and been granted, Civilian Victim of War status in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) receive a monthly stipend of 560 Bosnian Marks (BAM) (Clark, 2016: 135). It is important to note here that the stipend is not guaranteed for CRSV survivors living in the Republika Srpska (RS) region

of BiH, as RS institutions have developed exclusive legislation for CRSV survivors which has been deemed “overly restrictive” by Amnesty International (in Rose, 2017). Clark argues that, while a decent stipend is available for CRSV survivors in FBiH, access to vital medicines is subject to financial availability, and that even with health insurance many are unable to afford to cater to their healthcare needs (Clark, 2016). In Croatia, a bill was passed effective from January 2016, which entitles ‘verified’ victims of CRSV to a one-off payment of 100,000 Kuna (HRK) and a monthly stipend of 2,500 HRK. Those with CRSV victim status are also eligible for free counselling, and legal and medical aid (Associated Free Press, 2015). The Croatian War Veterans Ministry is responsible for granting official victim status to CRSV survivors, and had received 185 applications by December 2016. An element of disparity is greatly evident here however: in 2016, an ethnic Serb pursued legal action against the Croatian War Veterans Ministry after having their application for victim status rejected, despite allegedly experiencing CRSV by Croatian soldiers during the Croatian War of Independence (Milekic, 2017). Out of the 48 negative decisions given by the Croatian War Veterans Ministry at this time, it is not impossible that decisions are greatly impacted by the social identity of the applicant, in terms of ethnicity. It is also worth noting that by 2015, only fifteen people were convicted of wartime rape in Croatia (Associated Free Press, 2015).

In Kosovo, repatriation is offered in the form of a monthly stipend of 230 Euros (Amnesty International, 2017: 6). Yet, within Kosovo’s legal system by 2017 only three prosecutions for wartime rape have been completed, with each resulting in acquittal following conclusions by courts of insufficient evidence in accurately identifying perpetrators (Amnesty International, 2017: 7). As such, Amnesty International conclude in a recent report the necessity of authorities to ensure that survivors are able to access healthcare, rehabilitation facilities and employment opportunities, as a development in freedom from “the stigma which has

overshadowed their lives, to enable them to rebuild lives so brutally interrupted by war” (2017: 56). While it is “encouraging that [Croatia’s new law] contains measures to avoid/minimize the re-traumatisation of survivors” (Clark, 2016: 140), scholars have explicated time and again that stigma of both CRSV survivors and women in general is rife in the fabric of post-Yugoslav society: for example, during fieldwork in BiH, Clark witnessed several interviewees disclosing ongoing verbal abuse by their husbands and local communities, with the term *kurva* (‘whore’) being used most frequently (2016: 142). Likewise, while legal developments offer the promise of progression, CRSV survivors who did not demonstrate non-consent and instead froze while they were subjected to sexual violence may feel that they do not meet the requirements to qualify for victim status (Clark, 2016). This indicates diffusion in the social meta-category of CRSV survivors, in that personal interpretations have the *capacity* to impact survivors’ abilities to perceive themselves as survivors.

In compiling information on legal and financial apparatus available to CRSV survivors, it is clear that sources identify stigma as a prohibitor to further progress for survivors. As a stark example, many CRSV survivors still live in the same neighbourhoods as perpetrators of sexual violence (Turton, 2017): while this may be through individual choice, to stay connected to family and friends or as a symbol of defiance, it is also likely that CRSV survivors continue to inhabit the same neighbourhoods as perpetrators because it is simply financially unviable to move away. This dynamic introduces the idea of very real threats to health, livelihood or life, if CRSV survivors decided to identify or speak out against perpetrators. With reference to ethnic Albanian women in Kosovo who survived CRSV, it is argued that knowledge of ongoing stigma was an “intended consequence” of CRSV, which is perpetuated in 2019 as a result of a pervasive “culture of shame generated by unequal gender relations, which condemns those,

especially women, who are perceived to have broken social norms” (Amnesty International, 2017: 46).

In examining the availability of material restitution for survivors of CRSV in post-conflict BiH, Croatia, and Kosovo, it becomes clear that while governments are readily addressing the impact of sexual violence during conflict on people’s lives, the extent to which survivors are supported depends greatly on national and subnational jurisdictions, and the differing criteria used to officialise victim status. This demonstrates that the *importance* of CRSV is interpreted insecurely by national and subnational jurisdictions, which is likely a reflection of equally diverse, yet unstable, attitudes *towards* CRSV survivors. Therefore, examining concepts of why that is the case is crucial to understanding why CRSV survivors as a whole are interpreted depending on notions of social identity in the post-Yugoslav space.

### **Interpretations of Gender in the Post-Yugoslav Space**

A 2019 pilot fieldwork trip to BiH by the author included a visit to the ‘Žene BiH’ (*Women of BiH*) exhibition at the National Gallery of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo. The exhibition was accompanied by a crowd-funded illustrative book raising awareness of, and celebrating, fifty iconic Bosnian women from throughout the ages. The trans-era, trans-ethnoreligious, and trans-space exhibition included biographies of the women and accompanying contemporarily imagined portrait artwork. The acclaim of this exhibition indicates that in the contemporary post-Yugoslav space, people are becoming more interested in the nuances of women’s lived experiences, achievements, and identities. As such, this is an ideal time to discuss how gender is interpreted in the post-Yugoslav space, and how those interpretations affect the lives of CRSV survivors.

Olujic argues that the individual body and its sexual capacity are utilised as receptacles of “everyday domination and aggression”, so that institutions manipulate “the individual social body into the body politic” during violent conflict (1998: 31). This indicates that everyday symbols of the body are subject to manipulation to validate social status quo: during the chaos of violent conflict then, the sexualised elements of the individual body become elevated and subject to chaotic interpretation. In terms of gender, Olujic identifies a complex of honour and shame which is particular and distinct to the region. While the post-Yugoslav space is certainly not the only region in the world which operates on these parameters, researching CRSV requires an understanding of the fundamental structure of the space (Olujic, 1998). In the region, men – historically, culturally, and contemporarily – are expected to perform the duty of protecting female honour, and this is “embedded in the complex traditional cultures of the Slavic peoples in Southeastern Europe” which operate contemporarily (Olujic, 1998: 33): while ‘honour’ denotes fertility, submission and virginity, ‘shame’ is typified in narratives of oppositional attributes. Traditional practices inherently display gendered and sexualised symbolism, for instance gonga singing in Croatian folk culture, which utilises heavy symbolism to characterise meaning: ‘ploughing’ refers to sexual intercourse, wool as the vagina, and the gun as the penis (Olujic, 1998: 34). The juxtaposition between the softness and natural qualities of wool, and the brutality and killing capacity of the gun, symbolises men as intrinsically dangerous and women as naturally vulnerable. This interplays with the concept of CRSV as a form of communication through women’s bodies: Nikolić-Ristanović refers to women’s bodies as battlefields, as places for men to express rage at other men. Women subjected to CRSV therefore take the narrative role of tarnished property (Nikolić-Ristanović, 2000). CRSV also became a method of communicating punishment for historical antagonisms and abuses – the rape of Muslim women as punishment for Ottoman reign in the region, and

the rape of Croats as punishment for crimes committed against Serbs and other 'degenerate' groups by the Ustaše during the Second World War (Wilmer, 2002).

In seeking patterns of family life, it becomes apparent that the post-Yugoslav space is an enormously culturally nuanced area. Thus it is important to seek patterns rather than generalisations, while paying attention to the very tangible and specific cultural conditions that pave the way for interpretations of gender within the space (Simic, 1999). As such, patterns emerge in the conceptualisation of women as related to others. Distinct narratives are placed on the bonds between mother/son, husband/wife, and mother-in-law/daughter-in-law in Yugoslav culture: all place women on a spectrum which is rife with stereotypes and emergences of interpretive 'natural orders' in familial relationships (Simic, 1999). Substantiated in the widely-known Serbian phrase, '*Majku i bog ima*' ('God even has a mother'), and popular terminology of grandmothers as all-seeing and all-knowing 'crows', Simic's research highlights a significant pattern of placing both values *and* values on women based on intersections of age, perceived wisdom, and traditional placements within the family hierarchy (which of course, must be earned through compliance) (Simic, 1999).

Familial structure aside, the wider othering of ethnic groups when discussing social identity and CRSV is evident in prevalent discourses of a progressive, liberal West, and a cloaked, exotic East. This paves way for the possibility that women who herald from a typically 'Western' ethnoreligious background may not believe in their own oppression, making comprehending and disclosing their experiences of sexual violence difficult and problematic (Scharff, 2011). This is further exacerbated by the lack of research on the rural experience of CRSV in the post-Yugoslav space, which creates an inherent imbalance in the understanding of processes of urban and rural violence (Bergholz, 2016). In the study of CRSV's impact on

the post-Yugoslav space, a marked lack of research on the rural experience of CRSV therefore skews the understanding of nuances based on intersections of gender. Narrow understandings of 'national identity' in the post-Yugoslav context also create an environment of unsound perceptions that all women who have experienced CRSV process these experiences in the same way (Hromadzic, 2007): whereas the CRSV experience of an elderly woman from a rural locality is entirely different from an urban teenager, constrained concepts of national identity prohibit this understanding in wider discourses. As a hypothetical example, previously discussed interpretations of grandmothers as 'crows' lend to perceptions of elderly women as too wise and unattractive to experience CRSV, whereas perceptions of rural people as physically strong may also impinge the reality of fight/flight/freeze responses, in that the physically strong are expected to 'fight back' as an immediate response to danger (Simic, 1999). As Hromadzic expands, "there is no "typical Bosnian woman"; there are only Bosnian women who differ tremendously" in their representations of ethnoreligious, locality, age, and social-political intersections (Hromadzic, 2007: 177). The essentialisation of women's specific situations and experiences of CRSV creates paradoxes in understandings of the array of gender interpretations in the Bosnian space in particular, as gender is both needlessly divided and with misunderstood nuances as a concept. Resultantly, there is a need to identify how senses of national identity impact perceptions of CRSV survivors in the post-Yugoslav space. It is important to understand the challenges arising from national identity in multicultural spaces, as the seamless integration of norms, cultural values and gender roles is not without challenge (Stathi and Roscini, 2016).

## **The Legacy of National Identity in post-Yugoslav Society**

Lendvai attributes strong commitments to national identity in the Balkans to the legacy of nationalistic communism which manifested in the Yugoslav era, stating:

*“Nationalism, in both its “traditional” form and its “new” Communist version, is stronger than communism; the quest for national identity is more powerful than ideological bonds. Nationalism has many faces and is full of ambivalence. It can be simultaneously conservative and revolutionary, sterile and creative, reactionary and progressive” (Lendvai, 1969: 10).*

Vuckovic expands on this by theorising ‘ethnic cleavages’ in the post-Yugoslav space as the result of constant exposure to the ‘brotherhood and unity’ ideology perpetuated during the Yugoslav period, which made way for divergent ethnonationalist politics following the death of Josip ‘Tito’ Broz in 1980: offering criticism of both Croatian and Bosnian wartime presidents Franjo Tuđman and Alija Izetbegović’s hard-line ethnonationalist stances, Vuckovic highlights the seismic nuances of national identity in the post-Yugoslav space as vulnerable to political exploitation (Vuckovic, 1997: 131-2). Stathi and Roscini assert that the ‘acculturation’ process, which is “relevant to societies that are cultural plural” (Berry, 1997; 2003 in Stathi and Roscini, 2016: 57) is the result of different cultural groups cohabiting space with each other, leading to cultural changes to all involved cultural groups. This explains why post-Yugoslav notions of national identity rely so heavily on historical narratives of ethnic discord. Likewise, as Bosnia has been historically ethno-nationally Slavic, with a Bosnian, Serbian and Croatian speaking population, and a heavy Muslim presence, the world is presented with a series of new paradoxes by the space, previously unheard of and unimagined (Lendvai, 1969).

Maloku et al. provide exemplified commentary on the marked attempts by Kosovar Serbs to maintain the distinctiveness of their ethnic group in the region (Maloku et al., 2016). Their

research indicates that this is accompanied by widely negative stereotypes of, and attitudes towards, Kosovar Albanians, with Kosovar Serbs considering themselves to be unfairly subjected to inequalities and lower on the scale of social hierarchy. Garcevic offers critical review of how, through the commemoration of arts and architecture in modern-day Serbia, fondness of “history-based narratives that allow us to feel special or which justify our actions” (Garcevic, 2017). Garcevic attributes this to pervasive narratives on the 1389 Battle of Kosovo, which is widely referred to in Serbian culture, and which presents a discourse of heroic Serbs attempting to bravely defend the Kosovo region to which they laid claim, against scheming Ottoman aggressors (Garcevic, 2017). Bergholz asserts that historical narratives routinely “propose divergent and mutually incompatible versions of the past, even when dealing with the same locations and time periods” (Garcevic, 2016: 7): this makes space for deviating social discourses and the scope for demonization – or conversely, unduly positive portrayals - of ethnic groups, by those who document or contribute to historical narratives. Furthermore, as the defeat of Serbs as a result of the battle of Kosovo did lead to five hundred years of oppression, it may be wise to understand clinging to narratives of historical battles as one manifested through fear of survival, rather than of tyranny or prejudice (Duijzings, 2000). The heralding of the Battle of Kosovo’s historical narrative in the Serbian cultural imagination indicates that violent conflict is interpreted as a paramount pinnacle of history. Therefore, CRSV takes precedence as an inherent utility of violent conflict, and this in turn verifies the concept of women’s bodies as devices from which to ‘naturally’ express rage (Nikolić-Ristanović, 2000).

In examining the role of historical narratives on national identity, divergences in interpretation of CRSV in the post-Yugoslav space is fundamentally evident in the outrage/indifference dichotomy presented by the fully operational Vilina Vlas spa hotel,

located just outside of Višegrad in the RS region of BiH. This dichotomy is further muddled by the argument that “the memory of horror is being deliberately erased” (BBC, 2016): it is alleged that during the Bosnian conflict, Vilina Vlas served as both the Serbian paramilitary White Eagles headquarters, and as a rape camp where at least 200 women were imprisoned. It is attested that a number of women committed suicide by jumping from the balconies out of desperation. It is also alleged that the current swimming pool was once used to torture people and store bodies (BBC, 2016). A Guardian exposé explicates that the same bed frames are found in hotel rooms even today (Graham-Harrison, 2018). It is possible to leave Trip Advisor reviews for Vilina Vlas, and while only a couple mention the hotel’s rape camp legacy, there is evidence that tourists are unaware of the hotel’s dark past (Graham-Harrison, 2018). This is patterned, as during a fieldwork trip to the region in March 2019, I note that when the topic of Vilina Vlas was raised with local people, they were consistently either unaware of, or in denial about, its existence. Not easily accessible via Sarajevo, Višegrad itself is isolated and foreboding, despite its scenic beauty. As the demography of Višegrad has changed from majority Muslim to majority Serb since the conflict, it has been argued that the community “erase any trace that [Vilina Vlas’ past] ever happened” (Graham-Harrison, 2018).

Rieff describes remembering as an apparatus that holds individuals to “be responsible – to truth, to history... to the traditions of one’s own people or gender” (Rieff, 2016: 59). There are two ways to apply this. Firstly, Rieff infers that collective historical memory has served and does serve as a “toxic adhesive” in historical grudges (Rieff, 2016: 87). This is best substantiated in Serbian nationalism’s enduring memory of the 1389 Battle of Kosovo, which is still heralded as a triumphant historical manoeuvre of defending Serbia. Applied to the context of the Balkans, it is here that an argument is made for the reconciliatory benefits of moving on from the past. However, blanketing historical memory in the Balkans as a

perpetuation of toxic attitudes denies CRSV survivors the right to remember and engage with their experiences. Furthermore, praise of 'forgetting' as a counterbalance to collective memory's roots in performing the norms of one's gender community is incompatible with sensitive research on CRSV.

It is also at this stage worth noting that pre and post-conflict intra-ethnic conflict is evident in the space. For example, blood-feuds between Kosovar Albanian clans halted only when the threat of violent conflict with Serbs became a reality (Duijzings, 2000). When minorities exist within a group – based on differing beliefs, values and behaviours – schisms occur. More radically, those 'black sheep' who perceive themselves to be in some way marginalised from their own groups may elucidate extremist tendencies to overcompensate for their perceived marginalisation or social shortcomings. Further still, those who are undeterred or accepting of their 'black sheep' status become 'others', as deviants from their wider social groupings (Hogg, 2016). In terms of national identity in the post-Yugoslav space, this links to mixed-ethnicity marriages. Likewise, inter-ethnic violence has been met with resistance from subversive people who reject ethnic categorisation (Bergholz, 2016): considering that mixed ethnicity marriages in post-conflict BiH are common for instance, it is clear that discord and harmony between ethnicities in the post-Yugoslav space contributes to a diverse and confusing social tapestry. Applied to interpretations of CRSV survivors, this mirrors the concept that dominant narratives contribute to the stigmatisation of CRSV survivors – yet, an undercurrent of empathy, support, and divergence from prevalent social narratives also exists.

The concept of social identity in motion in the post-Yugoslav space is clearly fragmented, complex, and often contradictory: by engaging with relevant literature and conducting

fieldwork in the region, I assert that this is undeniable. Ongoing atmospheres of ethno-national and gender supremacy indicate the prevalence of unresolved ethnic tensions and a pervasive undercurrent of a gender order which is not yet challenged to a point of its feasible dismantling. As such, it is glaringly apparent that social identity's grip presents a reflectively fragmented, complex, and often contradictory nexus of interpretation of CRSV as a historical legacy – emblematic of different and competing forms of historical memory - and of CRSV survivors within the post-Yugoslav space themselves.

## **NAVIGATING RESEARCH THROUGH FEMINIST STANDPOINT EPISTEMOLOGY**

While few feminist scholars assert that there is a linear data collection and analysis method that is, or can be, utilised to conduct feminist research, feminist standpoint epistemology is a broad theory of knowledge of reality which has distinctly 'feminist' features (Stanley and Wise, 1993). Accordingly, it is necessary to make considerations towards the unique nature of the relationship between the researcher and research subjects, as well as a fundamental acceptance of the role of emotion in the research process, which has long been considered 'subversive', 'disruptive' and 'unscientific' (Stanley and Wise, 1993). While there is no "a priori right or correct feminist epistemology... each can be seen as plausible and sensible, given the particular political projects and purposes of those who hold it" (Stanley and Wise, 1993: 191).

### **Why the Feminist Position Works**

I elect to utilise feminist standpoint epistemology to conduct research on CRSV in the post-Yugoslav space for a series of logistical and situational reasons. I argue in favour of the utility of the feminist epistemological standpoint, particularly on a research topic which handles such divisive and often problematic interpretations of a sensitive social issue. While it is important to be aware of the fundamental situational differences between feminist research and feminist politics (Kelly, Burton and Regan, in Maynard and Purvis, 1994). As Maynard and Purvis state, "there is no such thing as 'raw' or authentic experience which is unmediated by interpretation" (Maynard and Purvis, 1994: 6). In a research quagmire as heavily reliant and shaped by the differing interpretations of social groupings, it makes sense to also apply this rationality to the research process itself. Stanley and Wise's perception of feminist standpoint epistemology "seeks to analytically come to grips with the cultural specificity of experience, and thus with the medium through which all experience is channelled – the

body/mind/emotions” (1993: 193), as an expansion of the traditional Cartesian dualism of a connected yet distinct body and mind. As research on CRSV is emotive, and engenders strong opinion from those researching it, feminist standpoint epistemology makes space for the researcher to exercise reflexivity about their own role. According to Neitz, “Feminist Standpoint theory contends that all research is partial, located, and interested” (Neitz, 2014: 259). It is in the destigmatisation of ‘unhygienic’ social sciences research, instead coming to terms with the inevitability that research will be produced according to interpretive and time-locality contingents that a link emerges between social identity, interpretation, and the research process itself. By reflecting on the researcher gaze, which Anderson and Stewart define as “a process of coming to know from an explicitly positioned vantage point” (Anderson and Stewart, 2016: 386), conducting research is framed as an active, objective, and interpretive process, with research output accordingly being subject to the same conditions. Therefore, it is imperative to reflect on epistemological standpoints, and to justify the use of one over the other in any given research project.

Maynard and Purvis support the use of mixed methods to accelerate both the input and impact of research. Likewise, they argue for the production of “user-friendly” feminist research which is widely available, and comprehensive, to suit the needs of an audience wider than scholars alone (Maynard and Purvis, 1994: 4). While creating space for larger and varied audiences to engage with research creates conditions for expanded conversations, I argue that research created with the *agenda* of ‘user-friendliness’ may be subconsciously created with integrity as a second thought. Yet, it is possible to combine this agenda with strong working values. Therefore, feminist standpoint epistemology affirms that while “there is no technique of analysis... that can neutralise the social nature of interpretation” (Maynard and

Purvis, 1994: 7). Therefore, creating an honest and reflexive account of this within research projects validates the human aspect of conducting and producing research.

### **Ethnicity in Focus: an Elephant in the Room**

While this paper has involved a prior analysis of the role of ethnicity and interpretations of social identity on ethno-national parameters, I now apply a focus to discussing ethnicity as an issue of contention for feminist scholars dealing with gender issues in the post-Yugoslav space. This is a separate dilemma from wider discussions on ethnicity's role in ongoing tension within the space, and as such I seek to address how interpretations of ethnicity affect scholarly discourses on regional CRSV. Despite the logistical and practical merits of utilising a feminist standpoint when conducting research on CRSV broadly, with specific reference to the subject of CRSV in the post-Yugoslav space, there exists a dominating debate amongst feminist scholars – the significance, scope, and research coverage of ethnicity as a contingent of the lived experience of CRSV. I am not the first to comment on this and yet as it is such a prevalent issue of contention within existing research, it is necessary to comment on how much of an impact the debate on ethnicity has on research processes and output.

Neitz argues that, while “Feminist Standpoint epistemologies explicitly state that understanding systems of inequalities in order to promote change is a goal of research”, it is necessary to also be aware of problematic methodological and ethical issues in conducting feminist research (Neitz, 2014: 260). The concept that there is a pervasive misrepresentation of ethnicity when confronting the issue of CRSV in the post-Yugoslav space is starkly evident in the relative neglect of writing on CRSV experiences in Croatia and ongoing scholarly denial of Serb women's experience of CRSV (Clark, 2016; Simic, 2016). This knowledge disrupts dominant discourses of Serb aggression, and the concept that CRSV was an exclusively Serb

policy, whereas CRSV enacted by Bosniaks, Croats and Kosovar Albanians was instead sporadic (Engle, 2005; Nikolić-Ristanović, 2000). This prevalent symbolic perpetuation of the Serb as rapist, and the non-Serb as victim, leads to a fundamental misunderstanding of CRSV in the context of the (post)-Yugoslav region. Irrespective of the strategist element of CRSV, this misrepresentation contributes to an ongoing and fundamental lack of understanding of both CRSV as a topic, and of ethnicity as a social identity contingent in the post-Yugoslav space. Thus, orientalist and pervasive discourses depict Muslim women in particular as “veiled, exotic and oppressed by Islam” (Khan, in Scharff, 2011: 780). Yet, the breadth of liberal and conservative variants of Muslim identity in the Balkan space challenge popular narratives. To further confuse this dichotomy, Nikolić-Ristanović argues that state-controlled media coverage of CRSV within the post-Yugoslav space contributes to the strong foundations of denial of CRSV experiences which do not fit the status quo: as the media is held responsible for the denial of Serb women’s experiences in particular, Nikolić-Ristanović also attests that it is responsible for contributing to the subconscious justification of ethnicity-based revenge rapes perpetrated by Muslims and Croats (Nikolić-Ristanović, 2000).

Conversely, the “essential ethnic differences” (Engle, 2005: 780) between survivors of CRSV in the post-Yugoslav space lends space to criticise disunited feminist scholars who *do not* consider how ethnic identity shapes the *differing* experiences of CRSV, and the interpretations of wider ethnic communities in the post-conflict era. Dealing with the case of the Bosnian conflict, Simic argues that there are fundamental similarities in how rape affects women, but that ethnic polarisation adds a unique dimension to the circumstances of CRSV survivors (Simic, 2016): giving the case examples of feminist activists who have framed CRSV as a gendered, rather than ethnic, crime and been consequently branded as national traitors, indicates this. Simic writes about receiving criticism from feminists who “did not want to

disturb the dominant narratives” of CRSV as a crime exclusively committed against Muslim women, and who believe researchers should talk only about crimes committed “in their ‘own name’” (Simic, 2016: 107). The domination of the ‘ethnic’ discourse as one which is reiterated tirelessly by ethnic rivalry in the media of post-Yugoslavia, “which has been too easily adopted by journalists and scholars from abroad” (Duijzings, 2000: 20) is therefore disempowered and interrupted by a more nuanced approach to ethnicity when dealing with CRSV as a social issue in the post-Yugoslav space: in disrupting dominant narratives around ethnicity as an impetus for CRSV, affecting only one ethnic group, it becomes clear that established gender orders within the region play a core role in the scope of CRSV occurring during the conflicts of the 1990s.

Considering that the role of ethnicity in discourses of CRSV survivors’ lived experiences is a debate contributed to by an entire web of differing arguments, it is by least a requirement to study CRSV in the post-Yugoslav space as its own complicated nexus, separated from experiences of CRSV further afield by the sheer complexity of ethnicity and ethnic difference within the region. While there is a validity in the contributions that –

1. CRSV predominantly affects Muslim women, and that Christian women’s lived experiences are under-researched as a result;
  2. There are fundamental similarities in how CRSV affects survivors irrespective of their ethnic background;
  3. Dominant narratives are largely unquestioned by media outlets and researchers alike;
- Perhaps the most sensible and logical argument to make is that feminist research on the topic of CRSV within the post-Yugoslav space need not be fragmented by the issue of ethnicity. Instead, bridging gaps in *why* these three arguments cannot be

amalgamated to create a more balanced understanding of ethnicity in context would indicate progress.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper I have sought to analyse the scope and impact of social identity on how CRSV lived experiences, and CRSV survivors themselves, are interpreted in the post-Yugoslav space. Thematic areas of social divergence are identified by approaching the concept of social identity as “the collective “we” as opposed to the internal “I”” (Pettigrew, 2007: 34). With particular prevalence, dominant social discourses surrounding gender and ethno-national difference indicate the pervasive existence of contradictory interpretations towards CRSV as a historical legacy, and of CRSV survivors as both an in-group *and* an out-group. Researchers are tasked with defying ‘interpretation’ to maintain “reasoned grounds for judging some conclusions to be stronger than others” (Ramazanoğlu and Holland, 2002: 118). Accordingly, I have identified and classified a series of common patterns emerging surrounding the question of the extent to which social identity and interpretation affect understandings of CRSV in the post-Yugoslav space, as well as attitudes towards CRSV survivors. Fundamentally, I conclude that dominant discourses in the post-Yugoslav space internalise gendered stigma surrounding women and sexual violence, leading to subconscious prohibitions on CRSV survivors vocalising and coming to terms with their experiences. I have reached this conclusion by widely collating examples of gendered narratives and demonstrating their prevalence across cultural boundaries in the post-Yugoslav space. This indicates that both historical and contemporary dominant interpretations of women and their perceived roles heavily marry into perceptions of CRSV survivors. However, the vast tangible progress made in making financial and legal reparations available to CRSV survivors indicates that these oppressive narratives are subject to change, despite restitutorial variations dependant on jurisdiction. Furthermore, in assessing the impact of social structural conditions exclusive to the space, the reality emerges that the structural complexity of the post-Yugoslav space

interweave a peculiar, divergent, yet generally unfavourable, interpretation of CRSV survivors, with historically rooted narratives of national identity and regressive interpretations of gender across all intersections.

In order to practically apply interpretations of CRSV in the post-Yugoslav space, I have assessed the research process on the topic itself. Offering the case study of the feminist standpoint as a complementary theory of knowledge to utilise while engaging with research on CRSV in the post-Yugoslav space, I argue the merits of conducting situated, gender-focused, and ethically conscious research through the feminist lens – namely, the requirement of feminist researchers to exercise solidarity with those who have experienced gendered oppression, and the practical viability of situating the self as researcher within ones scholarly practice when dealing with a research topic as undeniably sensitive and emotive as CRSV, particularly within the complex locality of the post-Yugoslav region. In highlighting an ongoing debate between feminist scholars on the significance of ethnicity in terms of CRSV, I argue that feminist research on the issue is most clearly and reasonably conducted with:

- a) An understanding of the nuances emerging in how CRSV survivors experienced their ordeals, on the basis of distinct, separate, and unique conditions emerging from their ethnic backgrounds and subsequent cultural backdrops;

And

- b) A dual awareness that the wider experience of CRSV in the post-Yugoslav space has been disproportionately neglectful of the experiences of some CRSV survivors, based on their ethnicities, with relative absences of exclusive research on the lived experiences of Serb and Croat women.

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